



ROAD

*Rules*

A *Rules of the Game* Story

BRIGHAM VAUGHN

# ROAD RULES

Rules of the Game: Evanston River Otters

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BRIGHAM VAUGHN

Two Peninsulas Press

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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I was very nervous when I wrote the original novella length version of *Road Rules*. I didn't know hockey very well but I knew I wanted to tell Zane and Ryan's story.

It's been over a year since I wrote and released it as a part of a giveaway on Prolific Works. In that time, I've become a full-fledged hockey fan and am thoroughly in love with Zane and Ryan. They had such big parts in the books that follow and I was eager to spend more time with them.

I had always planned to expand the story and I am so, so pleased with the way it all came together. I adore these two oblivious idiots even more and I could probably write a million more words about them!

Thank you to Helena Stone, DJ Jamison, and Allison Hickman for your excellent beta feedback. I appreciate you all so much. Thank you to Lynnette Brisia and Sandy Bennett for your hockey-specific feedback as well. I've learned a lot about the sport but I really, really couldn't do this without you. Trust me.

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I would be a disaster without all of your hard work!

As always, huge thanks to DJ Jamison for helping me stay on track (seriously don't know what I'd do without you). You're

the best!

And most of all, a big thank you to all of you readers who make this possible. Without you, I wouldn't be living my dream of being a full-time author.

Happy Reading!

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## BOOK BLURB

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### ***Rule #1: Hockey Comes First***

As NHL team captain, Zane Murphy's goal for the upcoming season is simple: take the Evanston River Otters all the way to the Stanley Cup.

### ***Rule #2: Only On the Road***

But an unexpectedly hot night with his best friend and teammate Ryan Hartinger throws Zane's carefully laid plans and his sexuality into disarray.

### ***Rule #3: Don't Fall in Love with Your Best Friend***

When feelings begin to creep in, Zane will have to decide if he's willing to throw out the rules and risk his career and his friendship for a chance at winning it all.

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**TRIGGER WARNING:** *Road Rules* includes homophobic and gendered slurs.

Mentions of cheating (not between MCs).

## TEAM INFO & GLOSSARY

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**The *Rules of the Game* Series is set in a fictional universe.**

All of the players and teams shown on page are fictional.

While I have done my very best to stay true to the rules and schedules of professional hockey, some minor creative license was taken writing these stories.

**While not an exhaustive list of hockey terms and slang by any means, here are some used in the series that you might not be familiar with.**

**Bag Skate** - a method of punishing a team or getting the attention of the players when the coach suspects his team is not making a good effort in games or practices. A special exercise in which players skate until exhaustion and/or the coach believes they have made their point.

**Biscuit** - A slang term for the puck.

**Black Ace** - Extra players added to a roster for a team's playoff run after their own season is over in the minor-leagues or elsewhere. The Black Aces practice with the team and are expected to be ready to step into the lineup if any of the regular players in the lineup are unable to play.

**Boarding** - the action where a player pushes, trips or body checks an opponent causing them to go

dangerously into the boards.

**Breezers** - Hockey pants. Knee-to-waist protective gear that carry a variety of padding depending on whether they are worn by goaltenders or skaters. The pants are traditionally a one-piece garment with a lace-up fly augmented by a strap belt. This slang term is most commonly used in the Midwest.

**Celly** - Slang for “celebration”. The expression of joy after a player scores a goal. Often unique to each player/team.

**Corsi** - An advanced statistic used to provide an indication of the time a team spends in the offensive zone, versus time spent in their defensive zone. This includes shots on goal, missed shots on goal, and blocked shot attempts towards the opposition’s net minus the same shot attempts directed at your own team’s net.

**Crease** - The shaded area directly in front of a hockey goal is called the crease. This is where a hockey goalie stops goals, and where opposing players are prohibited from interfering with the goalie.

**Deke** - A deke feint or fake is a technique where a player draws an opposing player out of position or is used to skate by an opponent while maintaining possession and control of the puck. The term is a Canadian abbreviation of the word decoy.

**EBUG** - Emergency backup goaltender. The NHL requires its clubs to have an emergency back-up in attendance at every home game in case either team loses both of its goalies to injury or illness. If both goaltenders on an NHL roster are unavailable, the designated EBUG will dress for the game and either sit on the bench or, more rarely, play.

**Fluff(ed)** - Miss a shot.

**Hatty (Hat Trick)** - When a player scores three goals in a game, usually earning him a cascade of

hats thrown onto the ice by fans (especially if the player is on the home team).

A natural hat trick is when a player scores three consecutive goals in a game.

A Gordie Howe Hat Trick is when a player gets a goal, an assist for a goal, and participation in a fight, all within a single game.

**KHL** - The Kontinental Hockey League is an international professional ice hockey league founded in 2008. It comprises member clubs based in Belarus, China, Finland, Latvia, Kazakhstan, and Russia for a total of 24. Based in Moscow, Russia.

**Liney** - An affectionate term for a player's linemate. Also sometimes used to refer to the linesman who works along with the referee calling offsides and icings and dropping the puck for face offs.

**Pipes** - The pipe-like bars that make up the frame around the goal.

**Poke Check** - When a player uses his stick in a poking fashion to knock the puck away from an offensive player. The most commonly used of all the stick check techniques and can be used by any player in any zone of the ice.

**Rocket** - An extremely good looking woman.

**Salary Cap/Cap Space** - The NHL salary cap is the total amount that NHL teams may pay for players. The amount set as the salary cap each year depends on the league's revenue for the previous season. The cap space is the amount of money that a professional team has available to spend on players' salaries.

**Spitting Chiclets** - Spitting out teeth that have been knocked loose in a fight.

**Tape** - A slang term for video footage of a hockey game.

**Tendie** - Goaltender. Also known as a goalie.

**TOI** - Time on Ice. The minutes and seconds a skater plays during a game or season.

**Two-Touch** - a common warmup before a hockey game. Players stand in a circle and the goal is to keep a soccer ball up in the air. The ball can be touched once or twice on each attempt, but should be passed in the air to a teammate. Players are eliminated until there is one final winner.

# ROAD RULES

ZANE & RYAN

*“You miss 100% of the shots you never take.”*

*– Wayne Gretzky*



## PROLOGUE

---

“That was a sick goal at the end of the second period, man.”

Zane Murphy looked away from the NHL game on the TV screen to smile at his new road roommate. “Thanks. Your pass was a beauty.”

“I’ve gotcha tape to tape, my dude. Tape to tape.”

Zane gave him an amused glance. He still wasn’t sure what to make of Ryan Hartinger.

They were only a few weeks into the season and Ryan was a freshman player. He was a solid winger and a great locker-room guy. He had an infectious energy on and off the ice and so far, Zane was pretty pleased to have him as a liney.

He was a little less sure how he felt about rooming with him on the road though.

Ryan reminded him of a not-very-well-trained golden retriever.

And he talked. *A lot.*

“Keep it up and hopefully we’ll have a better season this year than last,” Zane said with a sigh as he glanced back at the Boston vs. Dallas game.

Last season, the University of Michigan’s ice hockey team had been knocked out of the Frozen Four in the first round to a school that shouldn’t have been able to beat them. It still stung.

If only he'd gotten that last goal in the net instead of the puck bouncing off the post like that ...

"If we keep it up, maybe someday we'll be playing there," Ryan said, nodding at the TV.

"God, I hope so." Zane didn't even try to hide the longing in his voice.

"Hey, you've already been drafted by the Otters. You've got a great shot at it."

Zane settled back against the headboard of the hotel room bed, trying to push down the warm glow that settled in his chest at the thought of his draft day last summer. The Otters were a newer NHL expansion team in the Chicago Illinois area and Zane was itching to play for them.

He'd been watching Anders Lindholm—their top line center—burn up the league for years with Boston and a shot at playing on a team with him was *everything*.

Some guys Zane knew had called him crazy for planning to finish his degree first but his parents were pretty strongly in favor of him earning one in case the NHL didn't work out, and Zane understood that.

Besides, U of M's team was so fucking good. Zane had gotten a ton of experience, dialed in his game, and felt much more seasoned as a player than he had a few years ago. And he was looking forward to another shot at the college hockey championship this year.

It meant he'd probably have to spend less time bouncing between the Otters and their AHL affiliate. He hoped so anyway.

"Yeah, but there's no guarantees," Zane argued. "Anything could happen. I could get injured or wash out."

"Sure. That might happen. But what if it doesn't?" Ryan said, twisting to face him, crossing his long legs.

Ryan was tall—he had a couple of inches on Zane—and he looked like he could stand to put on at least another twenty pounds. Although with as hard as he trained off-ice and the

amount of food he packed away, Zane didn't doubt he'd get there.

Despite the huge, protein-heavy dinner they'd eaten, he was snacking now, shoveling chips into his mouth like someone was going to snatch them away.

"If I make it there ..." Zane contemplated the idea, picturing scoring his first goal on NHL ice. "Then I'll be really, really lucky."

"Hey, it's not *all* luck," Ryan said, unusually serious. "You work hard for it."

"I try." But Zane always felt like he could do more. Work harder. Be better.

"Everyone knows it. The team loves you, the coaches love you, the fans love you ..." Ryan waggled his eyebrows. "Sara loves you."

Zane shrugged, a little uncomfortable at the praise. He looked back at the screen. "Yeah, Sara's amazing. I'm lucky to have her."

"She seems crazy about you too. She's always at the home games cheering for you."

"She's a great girl," Zane said with a smile, but it fell as he thought about the argument they'd gotten into last night. "But we kinda ..."

"Kinda what?"

"Ahh, nothing." Zane took a swig of water from the bottle nearby.

"Naw, what's up, man? You can talk to me about anything. Whatever happens in this room won't leave it, I promise."

Ryan's tone was earnest, the covers rustling as he shifted. Zane smiled to himself as he glanced over at the other bed to see Ryan facing the TV, sprawled out against the headboard.

He must have been able to tell Zane didn't want to have this conversation face-to-face.

He was weirdly intuitive that way.

At first Zane had thought Ryan didn't have much going on in his head other than hockey, but he read guys *really* well. On and off the ice. Zane assumed that was why they'd clicked so fast on a line together. Ryan could read Zane and see what he was about to do before Zane did it.

But they hadn't talked a whole lot personally. It had mostly been surface stuff about family and what they were studying or whatever.

Zane definitely didn't know Ryan well enough to have this conversation, but he found the words spilling out anyway, comforted by the promise that what they discussed wouldn't spread to the rest of the team.

"She got pretty upset with me last night because she feels like I'm not around enough and—"

"Dude, you're playing hockey *and* going to school. You've only got so many hours in the day."

"Right?" Zane said, grateful that Ryan understood.

"And like, you've gotta spend time with the team too."

"Exactly. And I want to spend time with her; I just can't be around 24/7, you know?"

Zane sometimes envied the guys in his business classes who weren't playing sports. They didn't get up at ass o'clock for practice and travel for games. Hell, even some of the guys on his team were less serious about it than Zane.

But he had a dream of making it to the NHL and nothing could get in the way of that.

"No, I get it," Ryan said. He crunched another chip.

"And I try to be a good boyfriend," Zane said, feeling defensive. "I send her texts and flowers to let her know I'm thinking of her. I call her when we're at away games, even if it's just for a few minutes. When I *am* with her, I turn off my phone and give her all my attention. I don't know what more she wants, but I sort of feel like I'm failing as a boyfriend and it sucks."

“That seems pretty good to me,” Ryan said with a shrug. “I dunno man.”

“She accused me of calling her clingy—which, dude, I definitely did not do. I’m not an idiot—”

“Debatable,” Ryan teased.

“Rude.” Zane threw a pillow at him, but he was laughing. “Anyway, I don’t know what else to do. You ever have that problem?”

“Not having enough time for my girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure. But I don’t really get serious much anymore. Honestly, I’m kind of the clingy one in a relationship. I’m the one whining that I’m lonely and miss them.” He let out a little laugh but it sounded awkward. “I dunno. Guys chirp me about it, but it’s just kind of how I’m wired, you know?”

Zane smiled at the TV. “No, I bet girls love that.”

“Ehh, not so much. Or at least not the ones I’ve dated. My high school girlfriend accused me of smothering her, but I *hate* being away from someone I’m with. Plus, I always feel like a relationship takes my focus off the game so I just decided I’m not gonna get serious with anyone while I’m playing.”

“Yeah, but what if you ...”

“Make it to The Show?” Ryan nodded at the screen. “Oh, I think I’ll do alright picking girls up in bars then.”

Zane laughed. He’d seen Ryan out wheeling. It didn’t take much for him to pick up. He wasn’t bad looking, with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes the girls seemed to like.

But it was his charm that won them over every time. Apparently people were into goofy golden retrievers.

Zane laughed. “Not my scene, I guess.”

“Hookups?”

“Yeah.” Zane looked down at his hands. “Before, when I was single, I did it sometimes, but it’s kind of a struggle. I always

feel awkward. I guess I'm old-fashioned or something. I want to have a connection to someone first. Guys razz me about that but ..."

"No, nothing wrong with that," Ryan said earnestly. "You gotta do what works for you. And hey, sounds like a relationship's perfect for you then."

Ryan was so *nice* about it, but Zane always felt out of step with his team. The other guys were all about the one-night stands and quick and dirty hookups but the thought made Zane's guts squirm with discomfort.

He'd never looked at a girl and thought, "I have to have her."

For him, attraction had always been slow to develop, friendships that turned into crushes and eventually dating. He'd tried the bar hookup thing a few times but it never went very well and both he and the girl he was with always left the encounter a little frustrated.

It was good with Sara though. They'd been dating for almost a year now and while their sex life had taken a little while to find its groove, it only got better the longer they were together.

Zane hated that she felt neglected.

He sighed. "Maybe I'm just bad at being someone's boyfriend."

"Aww." The bed creaked as Ryan stood, then walked over to take a seat beside Zane. He slung an arm around Zane and pulled him in for a quick hard hug. "No, don't think that, man. You're *great*. Any girl would be lucky to have you."

"Thanks," Zane said, a little more roughly than he'd intended, but Ryan's earnestness was kind of sweet and it felt way less awkward to unload his feelings to him than it did with most of his teammates. "I bet you'll make someone really happy someday too, man."

"You know it." Ryan shifted, pulling away and getting comfortable beside him. "I'll be the best boyfriend ever."

Zane snorted at Ryan's confidence though he felt chilled with the weight of Ryan's arm gone.

A moment later, Ryan shifted closer, their hips touching, his body a warm, long line beside Zane on the bed as they watched the game.

Zane relaxed, a little of the tension in him unspooling.

He looked over and studied Ryan's profile, taking in his strong jaw, the proud slope of his nose, and the wild mess of his curly hair for a moment, smiling at the fact that the world seemed a little lighter than it had ten minutes ago.

But when he turned back to the game, he shook his head at the score.

God, it was boring and Zane rarely said that about anything to do with hockey. There was always something he could learn from it but this one was six minutes into the second period and still scoreless. Neither team had any energy and they looked like they were just going through the motions.

His thoughts wandered back to their conversation about relationships.

"So you do want something serious someday then?" Zane asked, curious.

Zane knew guys who claimed they were never going to settle down but Ryan didn't really seem like the type.

"Sure." Ryan glanced over. "I want a family and kids and all that in the future. But that's ... way in the future. After hockey. For now, I'm just gonna focus on the game and having some fun. I don't want to fall in love with someone I have to be away from all the time, you know?"

Zane could see that. It made sense, although he'd never really considered the idea before. He assumed that if he and Sara could figure out the stuff that wasn't going well right now, they'd probably end up engaged.

He felt bad he wasn't there for her more though. And his life was only going to get crazier. He'd have to focus *more* on hockey.

All he could hope was that she'd understand how important the game was to him.

---

“We should grab a drink tonight,” Ryan said as he and Zane left their apartment.

“We have a game tomorrow,” Zane reminded him.

Zane had been reminding Ryan of things like that for the past year and a half.

But Ryan had gotten pretty good at coaxing him into having a little bit of fun. Left to his own devices, Ryan’s team captain *could* be a little boring.

Zane was Ryan’s best friend but he was also kind of a stick-in-the-mud sometimes. It made Ryan unreasonably fond of him.

“One drink,” Ryan countered.

“With you it always turns into two,” Zane said with a laugh, jabbing his elbow into Ryan’s ribs. “Or six.”

Ryan grinned, dancing away. “I’ll be good. I swear.”

“Hmm.” Zane’s tone was skeptical as he walked around to the driver’s side of his car. “Yeah, okay. I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“Hey, you wanna grab coffee this morning?” Ryan asked ten minutes later as they approached downtown Ann Arbor.

“I need to call Sara real quick,” Zane said with a grimace as he glanced at the time. He always liked to get there early. “Meet you at the rink?”

“Sure. Drop me off at the coffee shop and I’ll walk the rest of the way?” Ryan gestured to their favorite cafe coming up on the right.

“Sounds good. Get me a—”

“Flat white with skim. Dude. I’ve got it. You order the same thing every time,” Ryan said with a laugh as Zane slowed to a stop, someone behind them honking in annoyance but there was no way to pull over with all the curbside parking taken. “See you at the rink in a bit.”



The coffee shop was pretty busy and Ryan waited in line, trying not to fidget with impatience as he half-listened to the conversations around him. There were a couple of guys talking about some engineering project and some dude in a suit, whispering heatedly into his phone about closing a deal.

“God, you are so playing with fire, Sara,” a girl said with a giggle, her voice loud enough to cut through the buzz of conversation around Ryan. It sounded like she was right next to him, and her voice was vaguely familiar but when he glanced over he couldn’t see through the back of the nearby booths. “Juggling *two* guys at once! What if they find out about each other?”

She snorted. “They won’t. Zane’s so wrapped up in hockey he barely knows I exist.”

Ryan froze, his whole body going numb. He hadn’t recognized the first girl but he definitely knew Sara’s voice. She was over at their apartment often enough.

And well, that last sentence left no doubt.

Ryan’s stomach sank as he realized what her friend had said.

“Why are you with Zane anyway?” she continued. “Didn’t you say he was kind of a dud in the sack?”

“No, it just took him a while to warm up to the idea,” Sara said with a little laugh. “He took so long to get me in bed I was starting to think he was more turned on by hockey than me.”

“It’s better now though?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely. But I’m still sick of feeling like I always come second to the damn game.”

Anger rose in Ryan, sharp and hot. He wanted to storm over and lay into her but he was paralyzed by the horror of hearing his best friend’s life falling apart. Ryan could do nothing but stand there, heart pounding, listening to Sara spill her guts.

“Sometimes I just need to feel *wanted*, you know? Like I’m actually a priority.”

“So why not just date someone else then? You seem pretty into Mike.”

*Mike who? Who is she talking about?* But it was impossible to guess. There were probably dozens of guys on campus with that name. Maybe hundreds. It was a huge school.

Hell, there were two on the team roster.

“Mike’s *definitely* not the kind of guy you settle down with, May. He doesn’t have the kind of future Zane does. He’s just ... fun. It’s nice to have a dude who will drop everything for me, you know? I mean, his schedule’s still a pain in the ass but he makes me a priority. Zane is just so damn serious about his training and being a good captain and all that shit. The team and the game always come first for him and Mike’s just way more chill about everything.”

“Sure, I get that.”

“I dunno, May. Like, yeah, I want a guy who is going to be a great husband and father someday. Zane is the super-smart choice. He’s responsible and committed and all that. But fuck, I’m only twenty. It’s like Zane is all determined to lock me down and get me wifed up before he heads to the NHL and I just ... want to have fun, you know? He never wants to go to parties and he never has more than a drink or two because there’s always a game and he’s just so fucking uptight and rigid about *everything*. He won’t even let me sleep over on nights before the game.”

“But you do want to marry him someday?”

“Oh sure. I mean, I think we’ll probably have a super long engagement or whatever but once I’m *actually* ready to settle down I’ll already have the perfect guy, you know?”

White-hot fury erupted in Ryan’s chest as he rounded the corner of the booth, staring at Zane’s soon-to-be ex-girlfriend, unable to hold his temper any longer.

“Yeah, you just blew any chance of that,” he said coldly, narrowing his eyes. “He’s gonna be pissed when I tell him about what you just said.”

“Shit.” Sara sprang to her feet, scrambling to get out from behind the table. “It wasn’t what it sounded like, Ryan.”

“So you’re not cheating on my best friend?” he snarled. “And stringing him along until you’re ready for commitment?”

“I mean ...” She laughed weakly. “It was all totally a joke, right, May?”

May shot an uneasy glance at Ryan. “Right.”

“I’ll be sure to mention that to him. Somehow, I don’t think he’ll find it very funny.”

Without another word, Ryan stalked out of the coffee shop, the jangle of the bell over the door setting his teeth on edge. He jogged down State Street, blindly dodging people walking slowly down the sidewalk, then nearly getting hit by a car when he crossed a side street.

He was flushed and a little sweaty by the time he approached the arena, the fifteen-minute walk cut in half by his quick pace.

Zane was waiting outside the arena, staring at his phone. He glanced up, his look of concentration melting into a warm smile, which slowly fell.

“Hey, what’s up?” Zane tucked his phone in the pocket of his sweats, frowning at Ryan. “Where are our coffees? And why do you look like we just lost the most important game of our lives?”

“Fuck.” Ryan paced, agitation building in him as he tried to figure out how to tell Zane what he’d overheard. “I have shitty news and I don’t know how to break it to you.”

“You’re leaving me to go play in the KHL?” Zane joked, though the edge of worry lurked around the corners of his eyes and his half-hearted smile.

“Uh, way worse than going to play for the Russian League.” Ryan rubbed the back of his neck. “I was waiting in line to order the coffees when I overheard Sara and May talking.”

“Oh, that’s why she didn’t answer.” His expression fell, brow furrowing. “Shit, is she okay? Did something happen to her?”

Zane sounded so genuinely worried about her that Ryan’s heart broke at having to destroy all his illusions about what

kind of person she was and how she felt about him.

“Uhm, she’s fine. But ... I ... look I don’t know how to say this but she’s been hooking up with someone else behind your back.”

“What?” Zane’s voice went hoarse. “I don’t ... *what?* Did you see them?”

“No. She was just talking to May about it.”

“Are you sure you heard right? Maybe she ...”

Ryan shook his head. “I didn’t mishear. And uh, it gets worse.”

“Worse? How does it get *worse* than finding out my girlfriend has been sleeping with some other dude?” Zane asked bitterly.

“Well ...” Ryan told him what she’d said about their future and the shuddering sigh Zane let out made Ryan’s heart ache for his friend.

Zane scrubbed his hands across his face. “God, I never thought she was like that. I mean, I knew our relationship wasn’t perfect but I loved her. I trusted her and ... how could she *do* this?”

He sounded so hurt and betrayed that Ryan wanted to run back to that coffee shop and lay into Sara all over again but not hold back anything this time. Tell her exactly what he thought of her.

Maybe Zane *was* a little stodgy and boring sometimes but that was totally part of his charm. How could you not love a guy like that?

Besides, he cared more than anyone Ryan had ever met.

Zane had loved Sara and thought she was the real deal.

He worked so hard at everything he did and Ryan knew how much he’d wanted this relationship with Sara to be good. He’d tried so hard to make her happy. And she’d treated him like shit.

She should feel *lucky* to be with a guy like Zane. He deserved someone so much better than her though.

“I don’t know man,” Ryan said softly. “I don’t get it.”

“I’ve heard guys talk about that happening but I thought it was like ... dudes just being dicks, you know? I didn’t really think there were people who actually strung you along that way.”

Ryan nodded. He’d thought the same thing. No one was really that callous and uncaring, were they?

“I’m sorry, man,” he said aloud, feeling helpless, hating that he didn’t have the right words to say to make this better for Zane.

Zane swallowed hard and gave him a half-hearted shrug. “It’s ... I don’t know. At least it was you breaking the news. I don’t even know what I’d have done if I’d overheard their conversation.”

He sniffed, looking up at the sky.

Ryan stayed quiet, giving him a moment to pull himself together.

“Probably embarrassed myself crying in public,” Zane said with a rough laugh, blinking a little.

“No shame in crying in front of me, man.” Ryan said, giving him a one-armed hug. “I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks.” Zane smiled weakly, then sagged against him, leaning his head against Ryan’s shoulder for a moment, the tickle of his soft, thick hair brushing Ryan’s neck sending a little shiver down Ryan’s spine.

“Anything for you,” Ryan promised earnestly. “You know that, right?”

“Of course.” Zane straightened, his palm warm as he patted Ryan’s back. “I’m lucky to have you, man.”

“You wanna head home? I can tell coach you’re feeling under the weather.”

“Nah.” Zane stepped away, mustering a weak smile. “It’ll be good to be on the ice. I can put this shit out of my mind and just focus on hockey.”

“Sure, okay,” Ryan said slowly. He was surprised Zane wasn’t more pissed. But maybe he was in shock and it hadn’t sunk in quite yet. “We better book it then or we’re gonna be late.”

“Right.” Zane cleared his throat. “We’ve got some hockey to play.”

---

“Fuck her,” Zane said venomously, tossing a pile of designer clothes off the balcony, feeling a surge of satisfaction as they flew through the air, fluttering to the grass below from the second story. The moment they’d gotten out of practice, white-hot fury had taken over and he’d stormed over to her apartment to beg for an explanation.

But she’d had none.

At least none that he would buy. She’d cried and pled and tried to argue it wasn’t true. She’d eventually said that Ryan had lied about the whole thing and made up the entire conversation.

But that was ludicrous.

No, Ryan had nothing to gain by telling him about what happened. And Sara had everything to lose.

The betrayal was bad enough but to throw Ryan under the bus that way, to try to lay the blame on *him* disgusted Zane.

He was still furious when he came back to the apartment and he’d ripped open the closets and dresser drawers, clearing Sara’s stuff out. She hadn’t been living with him but she had a hell of a lot of clothes here.

“What the fuck?” he continued as he tossed more of her crap off the balcony. “Who *does* shit like that?”

Ryan shrugged and handed Zane another pile. “Someone who doesn’t deserve you.”

Zane paused and looked at Ryan, his breath catching at the earnestness in his voice. “You think so? This isn’t my fault because I—”

“Dude, *no*. You did nothing to deserve this.”

But Zane wondered. Maybe if he'd been a better boyfriend, Sara wouldn't have been tempted to hook up with someone else. Maybe if he'd been more exciting ... maybe if he'd wanted to go out more or paid more attention to her ...

“I dunno. Maybe if she'd been happier ...”

“Fuck no. That's on *her*,” Ryan said, as stubbornly loyal as always.

A surge of gratitude went through Zane. If he'd ever wondered if Ryan was the best friend a guy could ever have, he didn't doubt it now.

“She could have broken up with you,” Ryan continued. “She was trying to *use* you and that's shitty. I know tons of amazing, loyal girls who would never dream of pulling shit like that. *She* was just a horrible person.”

Zane swallowed hard. “Did I tell you I was thinking about proposing before I left for the Otters?”

Ryan stilled. “Shit, really?”

“Yeah.” Zane let out a bitter laugh. “Hadn't bought a ring or anything yet but I was gonna ask if you'd help me pick one out. Guess I was playing right into her little plans.”

He half-heartedly tossed another pile of clothes in his hands onto the sidewalk below then turned back, hating the stricken look on Ryan's face. It made his throat go thick and he sighed and slid to the balcony floor, his back against the railing.

“*Fuck!* I feel like such an idiot.”

“Hey, no. Look at me.”

Zane tipped his head back as Ryan crouched in front of him, taking his hands, his palms warm and a little rough from callouses, just like Zane's were.

“This isn't on you. I swear to God, if you blame yourself, I'm gonna drop you over this balcony to knock some sense into you.”

Zane sniffed, laughing a little despite the heaviness in his chest. “You won’t. You need me in one piece to win.”

Ryan laughed. “You’re right. I won’t. But man, don’t beat yourself up over someone who isn’t worth it. And trust me, she definitely isn’t.”

“Guess not,” Zane said dully.

“Now, c’mon. We’re gonna go make sure all her shit is out of here and then we’re gonna get our drink on.” Ryan stood, tugging on Zane’s hand to follow.

“I don’t feel like going out,” he admitted, but he let Ryan pull him to his feet.

“Duh. I know you, man. Who said anything about going out? I picked up a fifth of whiskey and I figure we can order pizza and watch some dumb movies or something.”

“That’s not exactly on the training plan,” Zane protested weakly, but it actually sounded pretty good.

“Fuck the training plan. This is *therapy*.”

Zane laughed and let Ryan pull him to his feet. “Yeah, okay. But if I play like shit at practice tomorrow, I’m blaming you.”

“Deal.” Ryan slung an arm around his shoulder and Zane leaned into him, soaking up Ryan’s warmth.

In the nearly two full seasons they’d played together, Ryan had packed on muscle and was bigger than Zane. It felt good to lean on him and let the rest of the world disappear.

At least Zane never had to worry if he could trust *Ryan*.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do without you when I go to the Otters,” Zane muttered.

They were rapidly approaching the end of the season and after they played in the Frozen Four, he’d join the Otters and begin to burn out his entry-level contract. He’d finish the rest of his classes online over the summer.

Some teams—including the Otters—had expressed interest in Ryan but his December birthday had made him ineligible for last summer’s draft.



They wouldn't really know what Ryan was doing until the draft at the end of this coming June.

"Hey, wherever we end up playing, I've got you," Ryan promised and pressed a kiss to the top of Zane's hair. He did it all the time in the locker room after a good game, but Zane was usually wearing a hat and feeling it in this situation was different.

It was warmer ... more personal.

Zane ducked his head, his face heating at the feeling, the anger fading away in the face of Ryan's steadfast loyalty.

Sara's betrayal had cut deep but thank God he had Ryan. Zane had no idea what he'd do without him.

"Okay, man," he said with a sigh. "Gimme a drink. I don't want to remember any of this tomorrow."



The following morning at practice, Zane wanted to curl up in a ball and die.

The anger had disappeared with the clothes he'd tossed and now he was numb with a throbbing head and queasy stomach.

Ryan's version of therapy had helped though.

Zane had huddled up with Ryan on the couch, drinking steadily, eating greasy pizza and watching stupid action movies. Zane hadn't been able to forget what happened but it had taken his mind off shit for a while at least.

Now, he was grateful for hockey.

On the ice there were no cheating ex-girlfriends. Just his team and the game. That was what he needed to focus on.

Maybe Ryan was onto something with the whole not-dating thing.

The guys milled around the ice, warming up a little as they waited for their coach to come out.

Ryan was across the ice talking to a trainer about a blade issue when Mike MacCormack skated up to Zane.

“I’m sorry, man.” Zane looked at the defenseman in confusion “About Sara I mean.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Zane said dully as he made a slow loop around Mac.

He was surprised any of the guys had said anything. He was pretty sure Ryan had told them all to keep their mouths shut, knowing he’d hate the pity.

“No, I mean it. I had no idea. I shouldn’t have ...”

Zane’s head snapped up and he stared at Mac, dread pooling in his stomach as the pieces tumbled together, revealing an ugly picture of what had happened.

“What?” he asked hoarsely, hoping he was wrong.

Mac looked miserable. “She said you guys were breaking up and ...”

Fury rose in him. “*You* were the one who slept with her? What the fuck, man?”

“I’m sorry. I fucked up and—”

Zane lunged at Mac, knocking them both to the ground.

They grappled and as they rolled on the ice, Zane got Mac’s helmet off. He reared back and landed a punch on Mac’s jaw. He hardly felt the pain in his knuckles over the roaring in his ears.

Dimly, he heard their teammates yelling and the bellow of their coach in the background. He pulled back again but Mac rolled at the last second and Zane’s fist connected with the ice.

Needle-sharp pain shot from his hand up his arm, stealing his breath and making his vision go white.

Someone clasped their arms around Zane’s chest and hauled him to his feet. He fought the grip off, letting out a frustrated grunt at being pulled away.

“I’m gonna fucking kill him!” he shouted.

“The *fuck* you are,” Ryan snarled, his breath hot in Zane’s ear. “I am not letting you screw up your NHL chances.”

“Shit.” All the fight went out of Zane at that and he sagged back against Ryan’s body, his hand throbbing with pain. “Shit. What did I do?”

---

Ryan unlocked the door to their apartment later that night, stomach twisted with apprehension. He hadn’t wanted to leave Zane home alone after the trip to the hospital for x-rays but he’d had an exam that night.

He knew he’d bombed it but it was done and at this point he didn’t care one way or another.

He was more concerned about Zane. He had a broken right metacarpal, and a three-game suspension. His agent had warned him that since he wasn’t signed yet, the franchise would want to review the situation. They wouldn’t have cared if he got into an on-ice fight during a game but going after a teammate during practice made them worried Zane would be an ongoing disciplinary problem.

He was a top prospect with a stellar record but there was always the chance the league would want to make an example of him.

Zane was terrified of losing his future and Ryan wasn’t going to be walking into a pretty picture tonight.

Ryan’s only consolation was that after he’d pulled Zane away from Mac, Ryan had landed a solid punch that was sure to leave Mac with a broken nose and what would probably be two black eyes.

A reminder to him that if he fucked with Zane, he fucked with Ryan too.

Ryan’s hand still ached a little but he was a better fighter than Zane would ever be and ice and over-the-counter painkillers would take care of it. The asshole deserved more of a

beatdown but Ryan wasn't about to screw up his pro hockey chances either.

He hadn't gone through the draft yet so as long as he kept his nose clean until then, he'd probably be fine. If he got called out about it, he'd have to do some fast talking but he'd deal with that later.

In the meantime, he felt good about having his buddy's back.

Now, the apartment was dark and Ryan softly called out Zane's name as he crossed through the empty living room.

Zane's bedroom door was open but Ryan knocked on it anyway. "Hey, you in here?"

There was a quiet groan and Ryan stepped into the room. Light streamed in through the open blinds and Zane was slumped on the floor, leaning against the bed, head tilted back to rest on the mattress.

A half-empty whiskey bottle lay beside him, the room thick with the sharp smell of alcohol.

"Oh, buddy what did you do?" Ryan whispered, praying Zane hadn't also taken the painkillers the hospital had given him. He didn't think he'd intentionally hurt himself but if he was feeling really low or just wanted to numb out ...

When Ryan clicked on the light on the nightstand, he spotted the pill bottle.

It was closed and Ryan twisted the lid open, carefully counting out the pills. Just one missing. The one he'd taken hours ago.

Relief washed through Ryan and he set the bottle down and crouched beside his best friend, smoothing his thick dark hair off his sweaty forehead.

Just drunk then. Thank God.

"Ryan?" Zane lifted his head with what appeared to be great effort. His eyes were red-rimmed and bleary.

"I'm here," Ryan croaked, heart still beating way too fast. "You doing okay?"

He clearly wasn't but Ryan didn't know what else to say to someone who'd been through so much in the past 24 hours.

"It's broken, Ryan," Zane said, cradling his cast against his chest.

His breath reeked of whiskey and when he looked up at Ryan with pleading eyes, the pain in them made Ryan's heart ache.

"I know, buddy." Ryan cupped Zane's cheek and brushed his thumb across the wetness there.

"What if I never play again?" Zane's eyes were so big, the blue nearly swallowed up by the dark of his pupils. "What if I never make it to the NHL?"

"You will," Ryan promised, still cradling his face, rubbing his thumbs in soothing little circles, desperate to make Zane feel better.

"You promise?"

"I promise," Ryan said firmly. He'd move heaven and earth to make it happen.

"Thanks." Zane let out a shuddering sigh, his eyelashes dipping, dark and spiky from earlier tears. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Hey, you're never gonna have to find out," Ryan promised. "It's you and me, Murph. Always."

"But—"

"Shh," Ryan soothed, trailing his thumb down Zane's face, the stubble tickling. "No matter what, okay? I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen. You trust me, right?"

He brushed the pad of his thumb across Zane's lips and he parted them, staring up at Ryan with such an aching, needy look that Ryan felt a strange tremor go through him.

"Always," Zane said hoarsely. "You're the only one I trust."

Throat thick, Ryan leaned in, tilting his head until their foreheads rested together, swallowing hard at the strange energy buzzing through his body.

“We’ve got a great future ahead of us, okay? We’re gonna play in the NHL someday. We’ll be together on a line just like we are now.”

“Hartinger and Murphy,” Zane whispered, his voice slurring a little, his whiskey-laced breath gusting against Ryan’s mouth.

“Exactly. Hartinger and Murphy,” Ryan repeated like a promise and Zane let out a shuddering little sigh. “You and me until the end.”

Zane reached up with his uninjured hand, grasping the front of Ryan’s shirt. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“I know.” Ryan swallowed thickly. “I love you too, man.”

“You’re the only person I can trust,” he repeated. “I can’t lose you.”

“I’ll never let you down.”

“I know. You’re ... you’re so good, Ryan. You’re the *best*,” he said thickly. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’re never gonna have to find out.” Ryan pressed a kiss to Zane’s forehead, letting his lips linger a moment, the action as much of a promise as his words had been.

## CHAPTER ONE

---

“Fuck yeah that was a good game, Murph!” Ryan bellowed. He grabbed his fellow winger and team captain and pulled him into a hug, lifting him off his skates.

Laughing, Zane hugged him back, slapping his shoulder. “Hell of a goal there in the second period, man.”

“And your assist was a beauty. Dude, we’re a hell of a *team*.” Ryan grabbed his best friend’s shoulders and shook him. “Fucking *unstoppable* together.”

Zane just grinned and tapped their helmets together before he turned away.

“It’s only the fifth game of the season,” Anders Lindholm reminded them as he skated past. “Don’t get too excited.”

Their center was right. A lot could change in the remaining seventy-seven games, but Ryan wasn’t letting anyone or anything bring down the high of the night. Last season, Ottawa had repeatedly kicked their asses, then gone on to take home the Stanley Cup. This season, the Evanston Otters had already beaten them in a preseason game and one in the regular season, which meant they were off to a good start.

Soaked in sweat and exhilarated, Ryan skated off the ice and let an equipment manager slide guards onto his blades. He tromped to the dressing room with a smile, anticipating the questions the media would have for them.

*Do you think the Otters have a shot at the Cup this year?*

Fuck yes.

Ryan was fired up by Zane's determination that the Evanston River Otters would take it home this season. Ryan had promised him that no one and nothing would get in the way of their win. So what if the expansion team had only been around for ten years and seven of those years they'd made it to the playoffs but never clinched the win?

*This is our year, baby.*

When the media shit was done and Ryan had showered, he swiped some product through his hair and shot a glance at Zane. His already dark hair was nearly black from the shower and his short, neat beard was tidy and groomed.

He always made the rest of them look like slobs.

There was a reason he was often listed as one of the Top Ten Hockey Hunks on the *JockGossip* site, and Wade Cannon, the agent they both worked with, made sure Zane's endorsement deals capitalized on that.

"What do you want to do to celebrate our win tonight?" Ryan asked.

"It's not all the Hartinger and Murphy show out there you know," Trevor Underhill grumbled as he tugged on his dress shirt, covering his extensive tattoos. "If I hadn't gotten the puck off the boards, you never would have been able to score that final goal."

"Aww, are you not feeling the love?" Ryan asked. He wrapped his arms around the twenty-three-year-old defenseman for the Otters. "You did good too. You totally undertook tonight."

Underhill squirmed away. "That's not a word, you dumb shit."

"Sure it is." Ryan grinned. "You're The Undertaker, and it's past tense, so you undertook."

Jack Malone—another of their D-men—snorted and rubbed Ryan's head, mussing up his hair. "Aww, you shouldn't strain your little brain with thinking, Hartinger. You're just not cut out for it."



“Hey, fuck you,” Ryan protested with a laugh. He turned back to look in the mirror and fix his curls. “I’m smart. Aren’t I, Murph?”

“The smartest,” Zane said with a grin over his shoulder. “Or at least that’s what your momma says.”

“See.” Ryan shot a look at Malone. “Murph thinks I’m smart.”

“Doesn’t count if your boyfriend says it,” Malone retorted.

“Shit, dude, you’re just jealous cause your wife says if you were any dumber, you’d have to be watered twice a week,” Murphy shot back, earning him a middle finger from Malone.

Ryan laughed at Zane’s chirp and turned back to rummage in his bag for socks.

That old boyfriend joke wasn’t Malone’s most original. Ryan was used to the taunts about how close he and Murphy were. And maybe they did spend more time together than most teammates.

But fuck them.

On the ice, they were a dream team. They’d probably never have the stats that some of the top NHL pairs had achieved, but their dynamic had earned them frequent comparisons.

The ability to read each other’s minds. The almost unconscious way they were aware of the other’s position on the ice put them up there with the elites.

They had always been magic together. From their days playing college hockey up until their pro careers.

And they were both determined that by the time they left the NHL, Murphy and Hartinger would be a duo who were held up to rookies as an example.

They’d already been through so much together.

Hell, they’d come close to losing their shot to play on an NHL line together.

Zane’s punch and three-game suspension had nearly become a self-destructive downward spiral until Ryan had dragged his ass back onto the ice and into fighting form.

Zane had been an anxious mess leading up to the conference call with the Otters' GM and head coach so Ryan had sat out of view of the camera, jaw clenched, vibrating with anger at the idea that they might not be willing to sign Zane.

No, Zane probably shouldn't have punched his teammate but Jesus, it was asking a lot of a guy not to lose his temper in that situation.

Thankfully, when Zane calmly explained the situation, and assured them it was an isolated incident, they'd been willing to give him a second chance.

Ryan had thought it was bullshit of them to even ask but Zane had said he'd understood. "No, you don't understand! They should review me!" he'd argued. "There should be a code of conduct for players."

Ryan had just rolled his eyes because that was so *Zane*. More concerned about what was right than his own future.

But thankfully it had all worked out in the end.

That situation had cemented things between them.

They'd been friends and teammates before that, but after that ... they'd become something else.

Ryan had felt pretty lost after Zane graduated and headed to play with Evanston.

His apartment had felt too empty and their line combos had been all wrong.

So when Ryan had been drafted by the Otters, he'd jumped on the sweet contract they'd offered. He'd been psyched to play with Zane again and they'd picked up like they'd never been apart. When Zane suggested Ryan move into his swanky two-bedroom apartment in Evanston, Ryan had said hell yes.

Living together earned them more chirps about how joined at the hip they were, but Ryan hated living alone. He'd grown up with two siblings, so the idea of sharing space was normal to him. Besides, Zane tolerated his messes and fed him, so why wouldn't he want to live with him?

No one would ever understand how much they mattered to each other.

Their teammates had never seen their best friend whiskey drunk and cradling his broken hand, wondering if he'd ever play hockey again.

That night, Ryan had grabbed the back of Zane's head, stared him straight in the eye, and made him promise that he'd never let anything come between them and hockey again. No girl, no shithead player who didn't know how to keep it in his pants, *nothing*.

Ryan had also silently sworn to himself he'd never let Zane get that low again.

Zane Murphy might be their team captain, but it was Ryan's job to look out for him.

He didn't give a shit if Malone or anyone else teased them about how close they were.

It would always be Murphy and Hartinger until the end.

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Several hours later, Zane was feeling no pain. Drinks had flowed, fans had flocked to congratulate them on their win, and he and Ryan were reminiscing about their college days.

"Fucking loved U of M," Ryan slurred. "You remember that pizza place? And the drive-through liquor store?"

"Hell yes," Zane said. He wrapped an arm around Ryan's shoulders. "The best. And the Indian buffet."

"Duuude." Ryan groaned and rested his forehead on Zane's shoulder. "I could totally go for Indian buffet. We should hit up the place here soon."

"We should. Tomorrow?"

"Definitely."

They fist bumped and Zane set down his empty beer glass. Shit, when had he finished his drink?

“Get me an—” He trailed off as Ryan slipped away, already anticipating what he needed. Shit, the dude really could read his mind sometimes.

“I like Indian,” the blonde woman in front of him said with a smile, tossing her long wavy hair over her shoulder. “There’s a great place over on Elgin. Ever been there?”

Shit. Zane had forgotten about her. Candace? Cristina? He couldn’t remember.

“Yeah, it’s good stuff.” He smiled. She and her friends had quickly joined the small group of them at the bar and she had been sending out signals all night that she was into him. Touching his arm a lot. Playing with her hair. He should probably be more into it, but he preferred keeping things low-key.

Some of his teammates were always out there trying to pull in women. Guys like Underhill cleaned up. Even if the D-man had a chip on his shoulder and spent as much time in the sin bin as he did on the ice, he was a hit with the ladies. The tatted arms and bad-boy image reeled them in, and he knew how to lay on the charm.

But that wasn’t Zane’s style. It hadn’t been in college and it still wasn’t now.

Casual sex was not his thing and dating seemed impossible with the life he led.

Other guys managed it, but while Zane knew some great women, hockey had always been his priority.

Zane had goals. The Otters had come *so close* to the Cup last season, and he was going to get them all the way if it killed him. As team captain and one of the veteran players, he had a lot riding on his shoulders.

Besides, at thirty-one, he was beginning to feel the wear of the game. He hoped he had a few good seasons left in him but an injury could take a guy out in the blink of an eye.

This could be his last shot.

However great they were, women were a distraction. They made him lose focus and the last time that had happened, it had put his entire career in jeopardy.

A soft touch landed on his arm, and he realized the woman—Cristina, he was pretty sure—was talking to him again. “I was thinking about getting out of here. You want to walk me home? It’s just a couple of blocks away.”

Zane blinked. “Um, look, I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got a pretty big game coming up and I’ve gotta”—he cleared his throat—“save up my energy for it.”

She raised an eyebrow and flicked her hair behind her shoulder again. “A few blocks is going to wear you out?” Her voice was gently teasing as she stepped forward, resting a hand against his chest. “I didn’t say I was going to invite you up or anything.” She tilted her head back, her blue eyes twinkling in the low lights of the bar.

Zane laughed, his head spinning a little from the drinks. “Hey, I’m not assuming anything.” He shot her a grin. “Look, I’d like to take you up on the offer of a walk, but I really am wiped from our game tonight.”

“Fair enough.”

He gestured toward the exit. “How about I walk you out, then pay for your ride home? You won’t have to worry about any creeps bugging you on the way there.”

“Deal.” She smiled. “Looks like I met one of the only gentlemen in the NHL.” She shot a pointed glance at Hartinger and Kelly O’Shea who were balancing shot glasses on their chins.

Huh, and there was Zane’s beer waiting on the table nearby. A wash of affection for his best friend swept over him. Fuck, he was lucky to have Ryan in his corner.

Zane chuckled at the guys’ antics and turned back to Cristina, leading her toward the door. “Nah. They’re good guys. They just like to blow off steam and our season is off to a great start so they’re feeling extra ... *extra*.”

She laughed and pressed a little closer when they slipped out the front door of the bar. “Well, I still think I stumbled across the best of the bunch.”

“You’re sweet.” Out on the sidewalk, he kissed her cheek, then stepped back with a regretful frown. “Look, I’m going to be honest. You seem great and you’re gorgeous but—”

She sighed. “You’re into someone else?”

“What? No.” He laughed and jammed his hands into his pockets. “I’m not seeing anyone. It’s just ... hockey is kind of my sole focus. I have a plan to get us to the Cup and I’m”—he nearly said ‘not letting anyone get in the way of that’ but that would be harsh, and he wasn’t trying to be a jerk—“focused on that,” he finished lamely. “I can’t afford to get distracted.”

She grabbed his lapels. “You think I’d be distracting?”

“I think you could be.” He smiled to soften the blow.

From the little they’d talked, she seemed smart and funny and he could definitely see himself *wanting* to get to know her better. But he was no good to his team or to the women he dated when his attention was divided and he needed to be all in on hockey this season.

“Fair enough.” The disappointment in her eyes was clear, but she held out her phone. “How about this? Let’s swap phone numbers. Text if you feel like it. And when you win the Stanley Cup, you can take me out on a date. If I’m not already taken by then, of course.”

“Deal.” He liked her confidence so he tapped her number into his phone.

He ordered her a ride, waited until she was safely stowed in it, then slipped back into the bar. The people in line at the door protested, but the bouncer waved him in. The place was close to both the stadium and the apartment he shared with Ryan, so the staff knew him well.

The bar was warm after the chilly October air and he quickly found the team, though they’d moved to a booth. A couple of the guys—Underhill and Cooper—had left, and so had the redhead Ryan had been flirting with earlier.

“Hey,” Ryan greeted Zane as he slid into the seat next to him. “Thought you left with the girl. I was kinda surprised actually, you never do that but I thought maybe you’d made an exception.”

“Just walked her out,” Zane replied. “Figured you’d be going home with the redhead.”

“She had an unreal ass,” Ryan said with a wistful expression. “But I’m not feeling it tonight.”

Neither of them were in a hurry to settle down.

Relationships would come for both of them someday. When the time was right.

For now, the promises they’d made to each other were their priority. To let nothing and no one get in the way of a Cup win.

“Looks like we’re both going home together then, buddy,” Zane said, draping an arm over his shoulders, less disappointed by that thought than he probably ought to be.

“I’ve gone home with worse,” Ryan said with a grin, resting his temple against Zane’s.

“Tell me about it.” Zane had more fun on evenings in with Ryan than all the hookups he’d ever had combined.

“Dude, you two are lame. It’s not even that late,” Malone said when Zane stood.

“Isn’t your *wife* looking for you to get home?” Ryan said with a snort. The brunette practically sitting in Malone’s lap looked up in confusion.

Jack Malone was married but based on the way he acted, he had a difficult time remembering that. If there was one thing that pissed Zane off, it was shit like that.

“C’mon, let’s head out, Hartinger,” Zane said tightly.

“You’re *married*?” Her voice carried behind them and Zane caught a glimpse of Ryan’s smile as they pushed through the crowd. He liked to fuck with Malone’s game when he could.

As team captain, Zane probably should do more to stop it, but he knew that half the time Ryan did it for him because

cheating bugged Zane so much.

“You really shouldn’t antagonize him that way,” Zane reminded Ryan as they turned left out of the bar to head back to their place. “I know he gets on your nerves, and you know I don’t like the shit he gets up to either, but—”

“We’re a team and sometimes we have to put our personal differences aside for the greater good of the season,” Ryan said with a laugh.

“Hey, that was a good speech,” Zane protested. “Don’t knock it.”

“You *would* say that. You give it to me all the damn time.” Ryan bumped shoulders with him, his blue eyes twinkling brightly even in the low light of the streetlamp. His smile was wide, his face happy.

“Well, maybe if you’d learn your lesson, I wouldn’t have to keep giving it,” Zane teased, hooking an arm around Ryan’s neck.

They grappled playfully for a moment, the people walking down the sidewalk giving them a wide berth. Two big men in suits, wrestling like overgrown children.

Laughing, they eventually broke apart and Zane gripped the front of Ryan’s jacket. “I mean it. Malone can be ... well, you know what he’s like. But we’re a team. And this year is—”

“I know.” Ryan reached up and cupped his face, staring him in the eye. “I know how important it is to you, Zane.”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Ryan almost never called him Zane. It was always Murphy or Murph. It was rare to see him with that serious expression on his face. He was usually playful. Occasionally immature. But as much as their teammates liked to give him shit for being dumb, he was anything but.

“I wouldn’t be here without you.” Zane’s throat felt a little tight all of a sudden.

Ryan shrugged like it was no big deal, but it was. Zane could never forget how close he’d come to losing it all. That he



*would* have lost it if not for Ryan.

“Really. I couldn’t do this without you,” he added. He didn’t know if it was the alcohol or what, but a strange, heavy energy settled over him as he stared into Ryan’s eyes.

“You’re not gonna have to.” Ryan rested his forehead against Zane’s, grasping the back of his neck with a warm hand. “You and me, Murph. You and me.”

## CHAPTER TWO

---

“Dude, you have got to see this!” Ryan bellowed. The bathroom door flung open, and he popped his curly blond head around the corner.

Zane dragged a towel over his wet skin, raising an eyebrow at his roommate. “Um, kinda naked here, dude.”

“Shit, that old thing? I’ve been staring at your junk for years.” Ryan rolled his eyes.

“Oh really?”

Ryan scrunched his face up. “Wait, that didn’t come out right.”

Zane snorted. Ryan might be one of the best right wingers in the Central Division and Zane’s ride-or-die best friend, but he was really bad at thinking before he spoke. “Anyway, what’s so urgent you had to bust into the bathroom?”

“Dude, Noah Boucher is holding a presser tonight. It’s coming on soon.”

“Oh, shit.” Zane hastily hung up his towel and dragged on a pair of clean sweats. “Wonder if he’s retiring. That knee of his has been acting up on and off the past few seasons.”

“He still blocked that shot of yours during the playoffs last year,” Ryan said, turning to walk out the door. “You thought the net was wide open, but that dive and reach with his paddle ...” He whistled. “It was a thing of beauty.”

“Yeah, fuck you,” Zane called after him.

Noah Boucher was one of the best goaltenders in the NHL, and Zane had faced the French-Canadian player on the ice plenty of times over the years. The game against the Toronto Fishers had been brutal last year and had ended in a complete shutout.

A post-game press conference with Boucher meant something *big*.

A few minutes later, when Zane slid onto the leather sofa next to him, Ryan held out a beer.

“Thanks.”

“What if he’s getting traded?” Ryan mused.

“This early in the season? It’s only October.” Zane took a sip, considering the idea. “Seems unlikely unless he requested it. He’s been with Toronto since the beginning and doesn’t seem to have any interest in leaving, but I guess anything is possible.”

“My money is still on retirement.”

“Why would he go out now when his knee has been holding up and he’s been blocking like a beast?”

“Dunno.” Ryan thwacked Zane’s thigh. “Look, here we go.”

Zane glanced at the TV screen again and turned up the volume.

Noah Boucher was seated at a long conference table in Toronto’s press room. He was flanked by team management while the captain and his alternates stood nearby on the small stage.

The team’s owner stepped forward. “Welcome. This evening, Noah Boucher will read a prepared statement and there will be a limited number of questions allowed after. Hard copies of the statement will be made available by the door as you leave.”

“Maybe he got hooked on painkillers and he’s going to rehab,” Ryan said, bouncing a little in his seat.

Zane shook his head at both Ryan’s excitement and the idea. “Does that look like a man struggling with addiction?” Not

that you could always *tell*, but Noah's blue eyes were bright and clear, and he looked relaxed and confident as he leaned slightly forward, an easy smile on his face.

"Yeah, true," Ryan muttered. He fell silent when Noah cleared his throat.

"Thank you for joining me tonight. I am sure you're all speculating about why we're here, so I won't bore you with a drawn-out intro. The long and short of it is, I'm coming out as bisexual." His voice was deep and resonant and there was a brief moment of silence before noise rippled through the assembled press.

"Oh, shit," Ryan muttered.

"Huh," Zane responded, his gaze locked on the screen. "I mean, we all kinda knew but ..."

Ryan shifted in his seat again. "Sure, but players knowing is a little different from announcing it to the whole world. I never thought he'd come out as an active player. Like, not without getting photographed with some dude with his pants down or something."

"Yeah, I hear you."

They fell silent as Noah continued. "This isn't a recent realization. I've known it since I was a teenager, and I was open about it in college. Here in Toronto, my team, my coaches, and all of management have known from the beginning, but they respected my wish to keep it private." He lifted his head, gaze scanning the crowd. "Let me make it clear. I have never felt pressured by anyone in management or my fellow teammates to remain in the closet. It was *my* choice. I wanted the focus to be on my playing, not my sexuality."

"Why'd he decide to come out now then, I wonder," Zane said.

"Well, goalies are weird." Ryan took a long drink of his beer. "We all know that."

Zane chuckled. Goalies *were* weird. A superstitious bunch who were known for their odd behavior. But Boucher was probably the *least* weird of them.

Noah took a deep breath and folded his hands. “I’m sure you’re wondering if I’m being forced out of the closet. If someone has threatened to leak this information. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. The truth is that I think it’s time for there to be an out player in the NHL. I kept waiting for someone else to step up and make that leap but eventually I realized if I wanted there to be change, I needed to be the one to make it. I am not ashamed of my sexuality. I never have been. I am proud of who I am, and I want to be a role model for the kids out there who need to see that they aren’t alone. That you can play hockey at the highest level and still be true to who you are.”

“Huh,” Zane responded again. “Well, that makes sense.” It was a ballsy-as-hell move. He understood it though.

“Yeah. Damn. Wonder what that’s going to be like for him.”

Zane wondered too. Every person in the NHL had known this moment was coming. Not necessarily with Boucher, but no one was naive enough to think that there weren’t any LGBTQ guys in hockey. Hell, there were a few who weren’t all that discreet about it, but while there had been rumors, for the most part, their teammates kept their mouths shut and focused on the game.

It had been years since the first college hockey player had come out. But that had been postseason, so while the press had been all over Nathan Rhodes’ story, it had been pretty quiet after that. Since then, a handful of active college players had poked their heads out of the closet and a couple of AHL guys had done the same, but no one in the NHL had made a peep about it.

The world of sports was changing though, and eventually, someone had to be the first. Looked like it was going to be La Bouche.

Zane winced.

Though the English meaning of Boucher was “butcher,” Noah’s creative chirps had led to his nickname of The Mouth, or La Bouche in French.

That was probably going to come back to bite him in the ass.

Zane was glad hockey was becoming more inclusive, but he knew not everyone was going to be so accepting and the shit talking would only ramp up.

So much depended on how their fan base reacted. And how that impacted the bottom line.

“Should be interesting,” Zane murmured as the Fishers’ owner and GM gave brief speeches about their support and hope for tolerance and understanding.

After that, they opened up the floor to questions. Noah’s expression was earnest as he rubbed at his short red-gold beard, his blue eyes intent as he listened to the reporter’s question like it was the most important thing in the world.

“Are you currently in a relationship, Mr. Boucher?”

“I’m not.” He flashed a smile at the crowd. “I’m a free agent, so to speak.”

The crowd laughed.

“You know, of anyone who could do this, he’s probably one of the best choices,” Zane mused.

Ryan shot him a curious glance. “Why’s that?”

“Well, he’s an established player. He’s got years of experience and skill behind him. Everyone knows he’s a damn good goaltender and his record speaks for itself. No one is going to say he’s just doing this to get some attention.”

“True.”

“And I mean look at him. He’s good-looking, charismatic, and he knows how to work a crowd.” Zane gestured at the screen where Boucher shot a charming smile at a reporter.

“Aww, you’ve got a little crush on him,” Ryan teased. He slung an arm around Zane and leaned in. “Well, he said it there, he’s single and so are you ...”

“Fuck off,” Zane said with a laugh, shoving him away. “I don’t have a crush on Noah Boucher.”

La Bouche had always been a bit of a hero to Zane, though.

Noah had already been playing for Toronto for a couple of years when Zane joined the Otters. Zane had grown up in New York state and even though he'd hoped to sign with one of the original six teams, he'd felt damn lucky to be offered the contract from Evanston and hadn't hesitated to take it. Ryan joining the team the following season was the cherry on the sundae. With Hartinger at his side, Zane had always felt unstoppable.

But Zane had faced off against Toronto's goalie a number of times and Boucher was a talented, aggressive, confident player. He wasn't arrogant or self-serving. Although he wasn't team captain—NHL regs didn't allow goaltenders to be—he was captain in all but name. Every guy who played with him spoke of him with respect, saying that he knew how to work with the team and inspire them with his leadership. Zane had always admired that about him. It wasn't a sexual thing, just professional appreciation.

Sure, Noah's smile was easy, and he had all his teeth and a surprisingly straight nose for a hockey player, but that wasn't what Zane liked about him. He liked that Boucher seemed to love hockey as much as Zane did and led by example. Although they played vastly different positions, he was the type of player Zane wanted to emulate.

Zane glanced up at the screen to see that the presser had wrapped up and the screen had switched to the commentators.

*Toronto Fisher's Noah Boucher Makes NHL History as First Openly Gay Player*

"Think he minds that?" Zane gestured to the words scrolling across the screen. "The calling him gay when he's bi, I mean."

Ryan shrugged. "How the fuck would I know?"

"Oh, right. You weren't there that night."

Ryan gave him a blank look. "What night?"

"Last season. We were in a bar in Toronto one night after a game. Some of the Fishers ended up there too. They were

feeling generous after their win, I guess, and they bought us a round of drinks.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I remember that now. I was meeting up with a friend.”

Zane snickered. “Yeah, I remember hearing about that friend.”

Ryan shot him a sidelong glance. “Look, when a hot woman with a French-Canadian accent is fucking killer in bed *and* is happy with a no-strings-attached thing? I’m gonna hit that whenever I can. Which means she gets a text whenever I’m in the area.”

“Yeah, fair.” Just because they’d sworn off serious relationships years ago didn’t mean they were celibate. Though Ryan was the one who usually took advantage of that.

Zane’s hookups were sporadic at best.

“Anyway, so the team bought you drinks?” Ryan prompted. He leaned back, his biceps bunching as he rested his head against his clasped hands.

Zane shot him a glance. Damn, he’d really been packing on the muscle this year. *Ha*. And to think Ryan had been kind of a string bean when they met.

“Yeah. So we all got sloppy drunk and toward the end of the night, Noah and I got to talking at one end of the bar. At one point, he had some people come up wanting autographs and he seemed pretty ... flirty with this one guy. He kinda shot me this look like, ‘You going to make a big deal of this’? and I kinda shrugged because, dude, I don’t give a shit, you know?”

Ryan nodded.

“So we talked about it after the fan left and he brought up the whole being in the closet thing. That he was out-ish but he wasn’t like ... *officially* out. He said he didn’t mind the idea of it but the whole bi thing made it more complicated and he just knew if he came out, he’d have people calling him gay when he isn’t.”

“Huh. I’m still kinda surprised he came out at all,” Ryan said. “I mean, if he’s into women too ...”



“Yeah, I can see how it would suck to get stuck in the closet, though.”

“I hear you. Hopefully no one is too much of a dick about it.”

“Seriously.” They clinked their nearly empty beers together.

“How do you think the team will take it? The Otters, I mean. Obviously, Toronto knew it was coming. I’m thinking Malone will be a dick.”

“Yeah, but Malone is a dick about everything,” Zane said with a sigh. Jack Malone was a hell of a D-man but he threw around slurs like they were going out of style.

It was a constant source of low-key friction in the locker room that Zane hadn’t figured out how to manage.

“True.” Ryan shrugged and held up his bottle. “Another beer?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

When Ryan popped off the couch and disappeared into the kitchen, Zane reached for his phone and thumbed through his contacts until he found Noah’s name and shot off a quick text. It felt right to reach out to him. He needed to know people had his back.

***Saw your news conference. That’s awesome, man. Proud of you. I’m here if you ever want to talk.***

No response, but he wasn’t surprised. Boucher’s phone was probably blowing up tonight.

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Ryan pulled two beers out of the refrigerator but rather than head back to the living room, he set them down on the counter and leaned against it.

He couldn’t get over all the questions people had been asking Boucher at the press conference. It must be weird as hell to have everyone talking about your sexuality.

Shit, he and Zane got crap all the time for being too close. Half the team called them boyfriends and teased them about how

much time they spent together. To have literally everyone who paid any attention to hockey questioning every little thing you did?

Jesus. That would suck.

To be fair, absolutely everything everyone on the team did was fodder for teasing. That was how the game worked. How you showed your love. So, it had never bothered Ryan that the guys gave him and Zane shit. But now, thinking about what it must be like for Boucher, he felt a weird stirring of unease.

Did people think he and Zane were actually hooking up? Would they start questioning it now?

And was it Ryan's imagination or were Zane and Boucher a lot closer than he'd realized? What if something had happened between them that night in Toronto last season?

And why did the thought make Ryan's stomach flip that way?

"Hey, you coming back with that beer or what?" Zane called.

"Thinking about making popcorn," Ryan said, reaching for the air popper. Zane had bought it for him for Christmas last year. Zane had also delivered a forty-minute lecture about how bad microwave popcorn was for your health and how, if they wanted to operate at peak condition, they had to watch what they put into their bodies. Ryan had nodded and zoned out halfway through, but he hadn't bought the bags since.

And he had to admit, the air-popped stuff was pretty good.

"Cool, bring me some?"

"Done."

A short while later, when Ryan took a seat on the couch next to Zane in their usual spots, he realized how close they sat. Funny, he'd never noticed that before. But Zane pressed right up against him, automatically reaching into the bowl balanced on Ryan's lap.

"Damn, this is good," Zane said a few minutes later.

Ryan laughed. "Starting to think you bought the air popper for you, not me."

“Nah.” Zane scooped up another handful, his shoulder pressed tight to Ryan’s. “Just looking out for you.”

Ryan swallowed hard as their fingers brushed, slick with butter, while they chased kernels around the bowl.

“Besides, what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is yours, right?” Zane said.

“Right.” He crammed some more popcorn in his mouth.

That was the way they’d always been.

They’d both known, of course, that things would change, eventually. One of them would retire. Someone would get traded. Eventually, after hockey was over, they’d meet women, get married. Have families.

Ryan didn’t like thinking about that time. It was stupid; they’d have to grow up *eventually*. But for now, he liked times like this. Sitting in front of the TV watching ESPN. Eating popcorn. Drinking beer.

Shit, maybe Boucher was onto something after all.

“I wonder if it’s easier,” he said aloud.

“Hmm?” Zane looked away from the screen.

“Dating dudes.”

Zane snorted. “Not when millions of people are analyzing every little thing about it.”

“Yeah, I know *that*,” Ryan argued. “I just mean ... like ... wouldn’t it be nice to have *this*?”

“Beer, sports, and salty snacks? Um, we have that already.”

“Yeah. But I mean with the person you’re banging.”

Zane shot him a sidelong glance. “I guess. There are women who are into that too.”

“True. Never mind. It’s dumb,” Ryan said. “I was just thinking that it might be a perk, you know? Like hanging out with my boys, but with benefits.”

Zane laughed. “No, I hear you. You’d have to be into guys though for that to work.”

“Right. Yeah.” Ryan had never thought about it. Not really. Not *that* way.

A clip from the presser flashed onto the screen and he studied Noah.

*Hmm.*

Sure, La Bouche was built under the tailored suit he wore. And not bad to look at, if you were into the well-groomed Viking thing.

But did it do anything below the belt for Ryan? Nope. Nope. Boucher didn't do a damn thing to make his cock stir.

*Welp, guess that answers that.*

“What has you thinking so hard?” Zane said with a laugh, nudging Ryan's elbow. “You look like you're trying to solve a quantum physics equation or something.”

Ryan turned to look at him. “Nothin'.”

“Okay.” Zane glanced back at the TV. His lips were slick from the buttery popcorn, and he absently licked his fingers as he listened to the commentator discussing Boucher's save percentage from last season.

Zane's tongue peeked out to lap at the tip of his finger. Ryan swallowed hard and shifted in his seat, a warm flush rushing through him then settling low in his belly.

Jesus. Okay, so maybe some stirring there?

Maybe there was a weird tingle in his balls and his sweats were beginning to lift a little as he thought about being on the receiving end of that curl of tongue. But that was probably just because it had been forever since anyone had put their mouth on him and he was thinking about Boucher being into guys and ... he wasn't ...

Zane reached out and grabbed his beer off the coffee table, tipping his head back, his throat working as he swallowed.

Ryan let out a weird, strangled noise and Zane lowered his bottle, turning to look at him with a quizzical smile.

“You sure you're okay, dude?”

“Yup, I’m great,” Ryan said faintly. He shifted the bowl of popcorn onto his lap to cover the chubby he had in his pants.

It was the first time he’d ever lied to Zane.

But how the fuck did you tell your best friend you were suddenly questioning if maybe you weren’t just a little bit turned on by him?

Shit.

Goddamn French-Canadian goalies.

## CHAPTER THREE

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Ryan turned away from the check-in desk at the Tampa hotel, keycard in hand.

“Meet you back down here in ten, Hartinger?” Anders Lindholm asked. A trace of the center’s Swedish accent remained but Ryan never had any trouble understanding him. Some of the Russians and Czechs on the other hand ...

Though, to be fair, some days Ryan struggled with English, and he’d been born and raised in Indiana.

“I’m in.” Ryan clapped Lindholm on the shoulder when he passed him. “Be down in a few.”

Malone, O’Shea, and Murphy were already by the elevator and Ryan jogged over to catch up with them.

“You coming out with us tonight?” Ryan asked.

Malone and O’Shea nodded but Zane shook his head. “I’m pretty wiped, I think I’ll just stay in. Rest up.”

“Don’t be a pussy,” Malone said. “You didn’t skate that hard.”

That wasn’t true. Murphy had busted his ass tonight. They all had. But it hadn’t been enough. Cleveland had just plain outskated them. Weird, because they were usually pretty fucking terrible but these things happened.

And, well, there was always the game against Tampa tomorrow.

The elevator doors slid open.

“Aww, come out tonight,” Ryan said with a smile at his best friend as they stepped inside. “We can drink away our sorrows.”

Zane leaned against the wall with a sigh. “Nah, I’m not really feeling it.”

Ryan frowned. “Or I could stay back with you. We could just chill and watch a movie or something.”

“No, go. Have fun.”

Ryan took in the shadows under his eyes and nodded. Damn, Zane always got like this. He took every loss hard.

“Cool. Get some rest. I’ll get laid for the both of us.” He threw Murphy a wink, who gave him a weak smile.

“Didn’t know you two were into that,” O’Shea teased. He was a young defenseman who had come out of Boston University.

Ryan ruffled his red hair, trying to ignore the weird twinge in his belly at what he’d said. “Don’t go getting any ideas there, O’Shea. We’re not *that* close.”

O’Shea ducked away, laughing, and Malone snorted as the elevator stopped on the seventh floor. “Yeah, right.”

“You wish anyone liked you as much as Murph likes me,” he chirped back, wheeling his suitcase out of the elevator.

Malone’s upraised finger was his only answer.

“You sure you’re okay?” Ryan asked quietly after Malone disappeared into his room.

Zane jammed his keycard into the reader. “Yeah, just tired and frustrated. You know how I get when we lose.”

“I do,” Ryan said earnestly. “Which is why I offered to stay back. If you want company or ...”

“No, no. It’s fine. I’m going to go over game highlights and take some notes for tomorrow, then get some sleep. There’s a couple of suggestions I want to make to Coach for tomorrow’s game.” He pushed his door open.

“You and Coach Tate spent the whole flight talking offensive strategy already,” Ryan pointed out.

Zane shrugged. “You know I can’t turn it off.”

“I know but ...”

“I’ll be *fine*, Ryan.” Zane tilted his head toward the elevators. “Go have some drinks. Get laid. Whatever you want to do. Just make sure you’re back in time to get plenty of rest.”

“Yeah, okay. Promise you’ll get plenty of rest too?”

“Yes.” Zane’s grin was still a little weak but there was a light in his eyes that reassured Ryan. “Now go. I don’t need you hovering. You’re worse than my mother.”

“Fine, fine. Don’t wait up for me, *Dad*.” With a laugh, Ryan walked down the hall to his room, threw his suitcase inside, then jogged to the elevator where Malone and O’Shea stood.

Ryan rubbed his hands together. “C’mon, guys, let’s get our drink on.”

“We were waiting for you,” O’Shea said.

“Is it just me or is he awfully smart-mouthed for a rookie?” Ryan teased.

Malone smirked. “I think you might be right.”

O’Shea groaned. “God, it’s like being out with my brothers.”

He was from a hockey dynasty, with a father and brother retired from the NHL, and two brothers currently playing.

“Well, let’s see if you can do better tonight than you did last week,” Malone said with a laugh. “That puking-in-the-bushes thing was a total rookie move. Thought you Boston Irish could hold your liquor better than that.”

“Oh, fuck you,” O’Shea said with a laugh.

The elevator doors opened to the lobby and Ryan spotted Anders Lindholm and a few other guys waiting.

“Where’s the captain?” Brett Cooper asked. Coop was another of the rookies, with Canadian-farm-boy good looks and a laidback demeanor.



“Taking it easy tonight,” Ryan said.

“Surprised you left him. Aren’t you two like ... hand in glove?”

Ryan ignored the chirp and turned to look at Lindholm, who had fallen into step with him. “Is it just me or these rookies getting younger every year?”

The big Swede grinned, pushing a hand through his shaggy golden-blond hair. He kinda reminded Ryan of those long-haired dudes on the cover of his grandmother’s ancient romance novels. “I think we’re just getting old.”

“Speak for yourself, Grandpa,” Ryan said with a laugh. “I’m only twenty-nine.”

Which was getting up there for hockey, but nothing compared to Lindholm’s thirty-six. Seven years didn’t seem like much, but in this sport, it could feel like decades.

Lindholm was a lot like Zane. A little reserved. A little more serious than the younger guys. Good traits in a top line center. Together, Ryan, Lindy, and Zane helped guide the team, but while Lindholm got along well with everyone, he rarely partied with them.

“Surprised you’re coming out tonight,” Ryan said. “I’m glad you’re here, but you don’t usually join us.”

Lindholm shrugged as they stepped out of the hotel into the muggy Tampa air. “It beats sitting in the room and feeling sorry for myself.”

Lindy’s game had been rough tonight, with an easy pass he’d completely missed in the first period and a slapshot off the rails that had set up the perfect rebound that Cleveland had run with in the second.

“I hear that!” Ryan agreed. The truth was, he always had a lot of energy to burn off after a game, whatever the outcome. He was amped up whether it was a win or a loss.

Guys like Lindholm and Murphy just went quiet.

Ryan’s mind went back to the thoughts he’d had about Zane the other night. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that he

hadn't come out with them tonight. A little space between them might be good.

An SUV glided up, ready to take them to the bar, and Ryan rubbed his hands together and put everything else out of his mind. "C'mon. Let's do this, boys."

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"Murphy, open up!" Loud pounding dragged Zane out of sleep. Disoriented, he looked around the dark room. "Muuuuuuuurph!"

*Fuck.*

Ryan definitely wouldn't go away if he ignored him. Zane threw back the covers and flipped on the light. Squinting at the brightness, he staggered across the hotel room and pulled open the door.

He scowled at the sight of the asshole he lived with. His teammate. His best friend. His biggest pain in the ass.

Ryan had a duffel bag slung over his shoulder and his suitcase rested on the floor next to him. "I need a place to sleep."

Zane stared at him through half-open eyes. "You *have* a room, assbag. It's two doors down."

"Ceiling leak. I got back from the bar, lay down, and found a wet spot in the bed."

"There's probably a joke in there somewhere." Zane yawned. "Too tired to come up with it though. Why don't you just get another room?"

"I called the front desk. They're fully booked. Some huge-ass conference here or something. Practically everything in the city is taken right now." Ryan batted his long blond lashes. "Please, Zane, you're my only hope."

"Whatever, Leia. Get your ass in here. I'm tired." Zane turned away, leaving Ryan to fend for himself.

“And pissy, apparently.” Ryan dumped his bag on the floor. “It’s not even that late, dude.”

“Yeah, well, I just got to sleep.” Zane flopped back onto the king-size bed, arms and legs spread wide. “Took me a while.”

“Worrying about the game?”

“Dunno.” He rolled onto his side, burrowing into the pillow, sleep beginning to pull at him again. “Maybe? Probably, yeah.” He’d spent a couple of hours staring at game footage and trying to figure out where it had gone wrong.

“I’ve gotta take a shower.” Ryan stripped off his shirt and tossed it on the chair nearby. “I don’t know where that water was coming from, and I don’t want to find out.”

“Go.” Zane pulled the pillow over his head. “Just wash the jizz off, man.”

“One time,” Ryan said, laughing. “You forget to wash away the spunk in the shower one time and you never live it down.”

Something soft bounced off Zane’s hip. He batted the pillow away, then stuck up his middle finger at his best friend. “One time too many,” Zane muttered, face still buried in another pillow.

These days, veteran players like him and Ryan got single rooms, though the entry-level guys still had to double up. For years, he and Ryan had shared.

Apparently, they were doing it again.

The bathroom door closed behind Ryan, and Zane yawned again, wiggling to get comfortable. He should probably turn off the light on the nightstand or something, but fuck it, Ryan would take care of it when he got out of the shower. Probably.

Whatever. At this point, Zane was so tired he could sleep through anything.

Some time later, the shrill ring of Zane’s phone dragged him out of sleep again. Groggily, he fumbled for it, knocking it to the floor. *Nope, apparently not anything.*

He blindly groped for the phone on the floor and snarled, “*What?*” in answer.

He rubbed at his eyes. The shower was still going so he hadn’t been asleep long. Either that or Ryan was drowning in there.

“Where the fuck is Hartinger? I’ve been banging on his door for a while and he’s not answering,” Dean Tremblay asked.

“The fuck am I, his keeper?”

“Well, you two are usually glued to each other so I figured you might know. Oh, maybe he hooked up with that brunette he was flirting with earlier. I swear he came back with us to the hotel though.” The Canadian forward sounded genuinely confused. And drunk.

“He’s in my goddamn shower,” Zane said with a sigh. “Why? What do you need?”

“Idiot left his phone in the ride share.”

“Bring it down to 702.” Zane groaned as he staggered out of bed, nearly tripping and falling flat on his face when his feet got tangled in Ryan’s jeans. Damn it, he hadn’t missed that part of rooming together on the road.

Sure, they lived together in an apartment when they were home, but at least Ryan usually kept his mess contained to his bedroom. The last time he’d left shit strewn around the living room, Zane had threatened to donate it all to charity.

A pounding on his door—Jesus, it was amazing no one had called security on them yet—urged Zane to answer it.

“Do I wanna know why Hartinger is in your shower?” Tremblay asked, handing over the phone, a wrinkle creasing his warm brown skin.

“Ceiling leak in his room,” Zane muttered. “I took pity on him.”

“I thought maybe he got lonely and came down to cuddle.”

That whole thing had started because Ryan had regularly passed out on the plane with his head on Zane’s shoulder and his arm draped across Zane’s lap.

Clearly their teammates had never had to sit next to him on a long flight. He was like a koala in his sleep, impossible to pry off. Zane had given up even trying and accepted the fact that Ryan was just going to treat him like a body pillow.

“Yeah well, if he interrupts my sleep again, I’m fucking sending him down to your room for snuggle time,” Zane said. He closed the door in Tremblay’s face.

Zane turned just as Ryan stepped out of the bathroom, releasing a cloud of steam. His curly blond hair was dark from the water, and he liked his showers hot, which meant his broad shoulders and tight pecs were flushed red. He sauntered into the room wearing nothing but a towel around his waist and another one draped around his neck.

“What are you doing up? I thought you were going to sleep?”

“I was fucking trying, but you left your phone in the back of the car. Tremblay brought it.” He dropped onto the bed with a sigh and tossed the device on the sheets beside him.

“Oh shit.” Ryan sat too, reaching out to grab his phone. “Sorry, dude.”

“It’s alright.” Zane rubbed at his eyes, no longer sleepy. Tired as fuck, yes. But not sleepy.

“You want me to turn the light out and let you crash?” The genuine concern in Ryan’s voice made Zane smile.

“Nah, I think I’m up for a bit,” Zane admitted. “Want to watch something?”

“Sure.”

Zane reached for the remote and found an episode of *Saving Hollywood*. It was an awesome first responder show about firefighters and paramedics in L.A. that they were obsessed with. They were both glued to the screen during the episode but when it ended, he switched to ESPN.

Ryan stood and rummaged through his bag, letting his towel drop to the floor before he slipped on flamingo-patterned briefs. For a moment, Zane could see a glimpse of his crack and he slammed his eyes shut.

“Damn, did not need to see that,” he said with a laugh. “Not into dude’s assholes.”

Ryan snorted. “Nothing you haven’t seen before in the showers, my man.”

“Could go my whole life without doing it again though.” He flopped back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. “Especially yours.”

Ryan craned his neck. “Hey, what’s wrong with it?”

“The fact that it’s *yours*.”

“Ehh, fuck you.”

“No thanks. You’re not my type.”

Ryan’s middle finger appeared in his face, but a moment later he held up a couple of tiny bottles of whiskey from the mini-fridge.

“Hey, if you’re worried about falling asleep, we should have a drink.”

Zane raised up on one elbow. “You just want an excuse to get drunk.”

“I mean, kind of.” Ryan’s grin was sly. “I’m already halfway there and ... C’mon, *please*.”

“Yeah, alright,” Zane said. Maybe it would help him sleep. “But only one,” he cautioned. “I want us both to be sharp tomorrow.”

“Sweet. I’ll get some ice.” Ryan walked toward the door.

“Dude, put some pants on!” Zane called after him. “You don’t want to get in trouble. *Again*.”

Ryan snorted but reached for a pair of shorts. He dragged them up over his muscular thighs and did a little shimmy to get them up over his ass. “God, you’re the worst buzzkill ever.”

“I know. That’s why you love me.”

“Mmm, something like that.” Ryan walked out the door, carrying an ice bucket, and Zane flopped back on the bed.

He was going to feel like shit tomorrow, but he never was any good at saying no to Ryan Hartinger.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Ryan slipped out of the room and into the hall, using the bar to keep the door propped open a little. It wasn't that late, and he could hear rhythmic banging in the room next door. Sounded like Malone was partying tonight too. Gross. His wife didn't deserve that shit.

It was ballsy doing it in one of the team rooms, though. Usually, guys who were stepping out on their wives or girlfriends kept it away from the hotel. Malone was their top defenseman though and no one from the head office seemed too inclined to rein him in.

As Ryan walked down the hall, he spotted another teammate heading into his room and a cluster of teenage girls in pajamas hanging out by the ice machine. They giggled as they snuck glances at him, and he suddenly regretted going shirtless. Jesus, at least he'd listened to Zane when he told him to wear pants.

After a lot more giggling and whispering, the girls left, and Ryan filled the bucket with ice, grateful they hadn't recognized him.

By the time he returned to the room, Zane had already set out glasses on the dresser. On TV, the ESPN commentators were still obsessively analyzing Boucher's coming out. Poor dude. It had been a week and they were still talking about it like it was the most interesting thing in hockey.

Jesus. No wonder no one else had wanted to come out before now.



“Wonder how he’s doing,” Ryan said, plopping onto the bed beside Zane.

“He sounded alright when we texted a few days ago.”

Ryan shot him a surprised glance. Damn, they *were* closer than Ryan had realized. “I didn’t know you were that good of friends with La Bouche.”

Zane shrugged. “We text occasionally. Mostly about hockey.”

“Sure. Makes sense.” Ryan had friends on other teams too. Guys he’d played with in college or who’d been traded from the Otters, retired, or sent down to their AHL affiliate. Some from international tournaments or all-star games.

“So Boucher’s okay? He’s not taking too much shit?”

“They had some season tickets get turned in. Lots of commentators speculating about his ability to play hockey—”

“Cause telling the world he likes dick clearly impacts that.” Ryan rolled his eyes.

“Right?” Zane shook his head. “I dunno. He said there’s been more support than he expected, though of course some trash talking from loudmouth fans and some chirps on the ice from opposing teams and stuff, but it hasn’t been as bad as he expected.”

“Really? Cause Theriault has been coming up swinging every game they’ve had lately,” Ryan pointed out.

Gabriel Theriault was a defenseman for Toronto and since Boucher’s coming out last week, he’d been taking a lot of heat on and off the ice. He’d been acting like a fucking goon and had gotten in more brawls and spent more time in the box this week than he had in the entire previous season. Tonight, he’d spent more of the game glowering from the bench than playing on the ice.

“Well, they’re roommates. Maybe not as close as we are but \_\_\_”

Ryan nodded, then grinned at Zane. Theriault had a reputation for being a man-slut and rumor had it he didn’t discriminate who he shared a bed with.

“You never know. Maybe they’re *closer*. I’ve definitely heard rumors that Theriault is into guys too.”

Zane snorted. “Yeah, maybe. Boucher has never said anything to me about them being involved and I’m not gonna ask.”

“No, I hear you.” Ryan fixed their drinks, then held one out to Zane. “To Noah,” he toasted.

Zane shot him a surprised glance but raised his drink. “To Noah.” They clinked and Ryan took a long drink. Damn that was good.

“What a weird time for him,” Zane said, gesturing to the screen. “Can you imagine? The whole world thinking about who you fuck.”

Ryan snorted. “At least the man gets laid. Unlike you.”

“Hey! Just cause I’ve been focusing on hockey instead of getting my dick wet ...”

“You don’t have to be, you know?”

Zane raised an eyebrow. “You comin’ on to me there, Hartinger?”

“No.” Ryan laughed, leaning back against the headboard. Despite his thoughts about Zane lately, he hadn’t meant it that way. “I mean, if you’d come to the bar with us more often, you’d meet someone, is all. You’re not ugly.”

“Yeah. Thanks, asshole.”

They watched the recap of the Montreal vs. New York game in silence for a while.

When Ryan drained the last of his glass, he held it out to Zane. “Top me up?”

“Top yourself up, you lazy fuck. You’re as close to the mini-fridge as I am. And I thought I said only one.”

“Fine.” Ryan sat up, realizing the booze was hitting him hard. “Shit, should have eaten something before we started drinking.”

“You know the drill.” Zane sounded resigned. “Help yourself.”

“Yesss.” Ryan slid off the bed, weaving a little as he set the glass down. “Raiding your stash.”

This was their routine. Ryan was perpetually hungry. He forgot to pack snacks. Zane kept some in his duffel. Ryan ate most of them. Zane filled the bag up again.

Zane was the best.

Ryan bit into a chocolate mint protein bar and plopped onto the bed again. “Fuck that’s good.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. Fucking starving.”

“If you weren’t built like a brick shithouse, you wouldn’t have to eat 24/7.”

Ryan grinned. “Aww, you’re just jealous you’re not huge like me.” Ryan had three inches and nearly forty pounds on Zane, and Zane was not the smallest guy on the team by any means. Although for all his bulk, Ryan could hold his own with speed.

“Yeah, fuck off.”

“Love you too, boo.” Ryan leaned over and laid a smacking kiss on Zane’s forehead before he stood. Zane wiped it off, expression vaguely disgusted. But his smile was lazy and happy.

While Ryan was up, he topped off his drink, then Zane’s.

“You know ... I might actually believe that you love me,” Zane said, taking a healthy swallow of it. “This is damn good whiskey.”

“Only the best for you.”

“Now I know you’re full of shit.”

Ryan laughed and leaned forward, catching a glimpse of the familiar teal, black, and white uniforms. He reached for the remote and turned up the volume on the TV.

Zane groaned. “Turn it off. I’ve watched our game too many fucking times tonight and it’s making me crazy.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ryan flipped through the channels until he found a dumb comedy they’d been talking about recently and settled back again.

Zane let out a little groan and Ryan glanced over to see him stretch, his abs rippling, shorts hanging low on his hips. Jesus, maybe that extra time they’d both been spending in the training center was worth it. When Ryan snuck another peek at the soft dark hair that crept down from Zane’s navel, he realized he wasn’t just looking at Zane. He was full-on checking him out.

He turned back to the screen.

*What the fuck?*

It was weird. After the whole Boucher thing, the idea of being with a guy had definitely been in Ryan’s head. It wasn’t like he thought about it a *lot*, but he’d found himself staring a little more at Zane. Thinking about all those hard muscles.

The look in his eyes every time he got fired up on the ice did something funny to that spot low in Ryan’s stomach and he couldn’t seem to shake it.

He and Zane had always been close, but now he’d begun to wonder about a lot of things. Like what Zane’s short beard would feel like against his balls.

Ryan had spent the past week trying to ignore those thoughts that kept creeping into his head, but it was kind of impossible. One minute he was pretty sure he only liked women, and the next, he was looking at his best friend in a totally different way.

Which meant what, exactly?

Fuck if he knew.

The worst part was, he couldn’t talk to Zane about it. He’d never kept anything from him before, but this was big. Like ... really big. And the potential for awkwardness was high. But maybe there was a way Ryan could slowly work it into conversation. Feel Zane out.

And he was probably imagining that there was anything between Zane and Boucher, right?

God, when had things gotten so *weird*?

Ryan set down his glass on the nightstand and glanced over to see Zane snoring, arms and legs splayed wide, his empty glass resting on the bed next to his relaxed fingers. Ryan smiled to himself, moved the glass to the nightstand, then carefully rolled Zane onto his side. His snoring stopped but he breathed deeply and evenly, so Ryan turned off the TV and lights and crawled in beside him. He pulled the covers over them both and closed his eyes, quickly dropping off to sleep.

The room was still dark when Ryan awoke a while later. Zane had one arm draped over Ryan's midsection and his hips were snuggled up tight against Ryan's ass.

"The fuck are you dry humping me for, Murphy?" he rasped.

"Sorry," Zane muttered, the heat from his body disappearing as he rolled away. "Guess it *has* been too long."

"Guess so. Quite the hard-on you're sporting there. Thought you were gonna start going at my ass like a horny dog," Ryan joked.

Shit. Maybe Ryan shouldn't have been so quick to tease him about that though. Trash-talking had always been their go-to but now ... well, he hadn't hated the feeling of Zane's dick pressed against him, that was for sure.

"Fuck off." But there was no heat to Zane's voice and Ryan wasn't worried he was pissed.

That was the great thing about him. He didn't hold grudges.

Though Ryan had to wonder how Zane would react if he knew Ryan was sporting a hard-on too.

Under the sheets, Ryan lazily adjusted his dick, still buzzed and sleepy enough to not care. Besides, who was he kidding? It was Zane. He'd just laugh it off.

Damn, Ryan *was* hard though. Painfully so.

“Seriously, we’re taking you to the bar tomorrow,” he muttered. “You need to get laid, dude.”

Zane snorted. “You know I hate hookups like that. It always feels like I’m forcing something that isn’t quite there yet. But ... yeah, sometimes my hand gets old.”

He let out a frustrated sigh.

Ryan frowned. He didn’t dislike hookups the way Zane did. He’d had plenty of fun ones in his past. He’d gone out tonight, figuring he’d find a woman there, but although there had been plenty of interest, his flirting had been half-assed at best, and he hadn’t gone home with anyone.

Was it because of Zane? Was it because he’d pictured being in bed with him instead of the brunette with the pretty eyes? That was crazy, right? But God it nagged at him.

Of course, Zane also had dark brown hair and pretty eyes too.

“You ever think about it?” Ryan asked softly.

“Hmm?” Zane sounded half-asleep. “Think about what?”

“Dudes.”

“No. Why, you gonna go all La Bouche on me?” He yawned.

“No, I just ... I dunno. Seems easier in a way. Especially when you’re around guys all day every day.”

“You back to your theory that he hooked up with one of his teammates?” Zane sounded clear and awake now. “Guess anything’s possible.”

“I dunno. Maybe. For all we know, he and Theriault had a thing. Maybe that’s why he’s been punching everyone out lately. But even if it’s not him, there’s probably *someone* else on the team who is also into it. Or just, you know, flexible enough to get their dick sucked and not care who did it, right?”

“I s’pose.”

“So you’re telling me you’d never do it?” Ryan flipped over onto his other side, facing Zane.

“What? Let a guy suck me off?” Zane jerked and looked toward him. “Dunno. Never thought about it.”

Ryan hadn't either. Until last week. “I mean, a mouth is a mouth, right? In the dark, you'd never know the difference.”

Zane's gulp was clear as day. “*I'd* know.”

“You sure about that?” Ryan's voice went husky as he moved a little closer.

“Why, you offering to suck my dick, Hartinger?” he asked with a low laugh.

“What if I was?” Ryan held his breath.

Zane drew in a sharp breath. “Um. What the fuck, man?”

Ryan laughed softly, trying to play it off like a joke. “Dude, just fucking with you. I wasn't serious, man.”

“Right.” Zane punched his pillow and closed his eyes. “Well, keep your hands off my dick and let me sleep.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

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But half an hour later, Ryan snored beside him, and Zane was still wide-awake. Still hard too.

He hadn't been able to stop thinking about Ryan's words.

He hadn't *meant* it, had he? Guys didn't just ... offer to do that for a friend, did they?

Okay, so maybe they did. He'd heard stories about shit happening at hockey camp or double-teaming a girl and lines getting crossed, but damn. He'd never considered it.

Zane surreptitiously slipped a hand under the covers and adjusted himself. It didn't matter how many times he did it, the damn thing didn't want to go down.

That was weird. He had a pretty healthy sex drive but because of his weird hangups, he'd learned to make do on his own.

For him, sex with another person just wasn't good unless there were feelings involved. A connection.

Of course, there was no one in the world he was closer to than Ryan.

But much as the guys chirped them, it had never been like *that* between them.

Had it?

Zane swallowed hard.

Maybe ... maybe he'd noticed Ryan over the years in that way. Just a little bit.



Maybe Zane had felt a little spark of something or felt his skin heat when Ryan was close. Maybe Zane had looked at Ryan and felt something huge and overwhelming bubble up in him.

But Zane had thought it was just admiration and friendship and trust. And that was definitely all there.

But something felt murky now, fuzzy and unclear. Like there was more lurking under the surface that he couldn't quite see.

Zane wasn't gay. He was sure of that. He'd loved Sara and once they'd gotten to know each other, the sex had been great. Her betrayal had cut deeply and made him wary of trusting anyone, but he was attracted to women for sure.

That wasn't a question.

If he pictured some random guy putting his mouth on his dick, it did nothing for him.

But if he imagined letting Ryan do that?

His body broke out in goosebumps.

Which was crazy.

Zane's heart pounded, imagining Ryan sliding under the covers and wrapping his big palm around Zane's dick. And then his mouth, wet and warm as it slid down over him.

Zane's cock gave a jerk at the thought. Fuck.

He rubbed his hand slowly up and down his shaft, over the fabric of his shorts, imagining it.

"What are you doing over there?" Ryan muttered.

Zane jolted guiltily. "Ahh, nothing."

"You sure about that?" Ryan flipped over and slid a little closer, his hand landing on Zane's thigh, large and warm.

Zane flinched in surprise but he didn't pull away. "I'm fucking horny," he admitted.

"I could tell."

"You really meant it, didn't you?" Zane asked. He turned his face, jerking in surprise when he realized he was close enough to feel Ryan's warm breath against his cheek.

“I don’t know.” Ryan’s voice was quiet. Unusually serious. “I was kinda kidding around, but I guess I have been thinking about it lately.”

“Because of Boucher?”

“I ... yeah, I guess. Dunno. It’s like an itch in my mind.”

“Think you’re supposed to get the doc to look at any weird itches you have.”

Ryan slapped his thigh and Zane let out his breath in a woosh when he realized it put Ryan’s hand even closer to his cock. What if he could tell Zane was hard?

“No, I’m serious.”

“Okay. I don’t know what an itchy mind means but—”

“It’s like ... when you really, really want something and you can’t get it out of your head?”

“Sure,” Zane said slowly.

“It’s dumb.” Ryan laughed. “You won’t—you won’t tell the other guys though, right? I know they joke we’re close but ...”

“Nah. Promise.”

“Thanks, man.” Ryan rolled over, facing away from Zane now. His breathing evened out but he didn’t start snoring again.

If Zane changed his mind, he was pretty sure Ryan would go for it. Neither of them were drunk. Buzzed maybe. Just loose enough that the inhibitions were a little lower. Did that make it better or worse?

God, was he really considering this?

It felt insane but right in a way he really didn’t want to get into right now.

“What if I said yes?” The words left Zane’s lips before he could stop himself.

“What?” Ryan’s voice was shockingly loud in the quiet room. “Sorry.” He got quiet again. “You serious?”

Zane swallowed. “I’m ... I’m thinking about it.”

“Shit, dude.” Ryan turned to face him again and propped his head on his arm. “Really?”

“I mean, you know I don’t really do hookups but ...”

“Sure but it’s *me*. You can trust me.”

“I know.” Zane’s heart beat fast but there was literally no one he trusted more. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but now you’ve got me curious and—”

The covers were flung back, and Ryan’s hand landed on his hip. “I want to.”

“Christ.” Zane’s voice creaked and he drew in a shaky breath. “Yeah, okay. If you want to.”

Ryan didn’t answer with words, but he did shift until he rested between Zane’s splayed legs. His hand was huge and hot as he tentatively slid closer to the aching hardness tenting Zane’s boxer briefs.

Zane held his breath, his entire body tense until Ryan wrapped a hand around him. The air left his lungs in a heavy gust, and he cautiously settled a hand on Ryan’s shoulder, equally large and warm. Different than anyone he’d been with before but Zane wouldn’t say it was bad.

“This okay?” Ryan made another pass over Zane’s dick, on top of the fabric.

“Yeah.” Zane had to lick his dry lips. Even though there was a dude between his legs—his best friend!—his hard-on hadn’t softened at all. “Yeah, it’s good. Suck me, Hartinger.”

It was all false bravado, using his captain voice like that but it worked.

Ryan laughed softly. “Whatever you say, Cap.” He was a little clumsy when he helped Zane work his shorts off, but there was nothing hesitant when he took Zane into his mouth.

“Fuck, Ryan,” Zane breathed as he began to suck.

Ryan had talked earlier about a mouth being a mouth, but this wasn’t like that at *all*. Zane knew exactly who was doing this.

This wasn't a chick from the bar or some rando on a hookup app. This was his best friend.

His *teammate*.

That thought was both reassuring and terrifying at once and a little spike of worry worked its way through Zane. He reached for Ryan's head, intending to tell him they needed to talk, that this was stupid, that it wasn't worth risking everything they'd worked so hard for. But then Ryan's tongue flicked out, getting that perfect spot below the head of Zane's cock, and all thoughts fled.

Zane groaned and pushed deeper into his friend's mouth, sinking into the pleasure. Ryan's grip tightened around his shaft and his mouth made slick, wet sounds in the quiet hotel room.

Christ that was good.

Zane raked his fingers through Ryan's curls while he bobbed over him. He liked the way they felt between his fingers, soft and springy. And then Ryan did something new with his tongue that made Zane's toes clench. His hips lifted, almost involuntarily, seeking more.

Ryan slid off, leaving the tip of his dick cool in the air-conditioned room. "You like that?"

"Fuck. Yeah, that's good. Keep going," he urged.

Zane didn't care that it was a guy. And the fact that it was *Ryan* with his mouth on his dick only made it better. Zane wanted more of that wet heat and suction from the one person who had never wavered in his loyalty to Zane.

He closed his eyes and bucked up, clutching Ryan's hair.

Ryan let out a little hum and shoved an arm under Zane's thigh, spreading his knees farther apart so he could take more of Zane in his mouth. Zane groaned.

Ryan lifted his head off his dick. "Keep it down, asshole," he hissed. "Malone is next door."

"Shit, sorry." Zane urged Ryan back down, moaning quietly as the flick of Ryan's tongue on the underside of his cock and the

sliding motion of his mouth resumed.

“Not gonna last long,” he panted.

Ryan didn't answer. At least not with words. But he worked Zane over harder, his rough touch exactly what Zane needed. Spit dripped down onto his balls and when Ryan toyed with them, Zane shuddered, tingling heat concentrating low in his belly.

“Almost there,” he panted. “Shit.”

Ryan lifted his head at the last second, stroking fast, spit slicking the way. Zane's body curled as he clutched Ryan's arm, the muscle hot and hard under his hand. A few more strokes and all Zane could do was grit his teeth to muffle his groan, cum arcing up and spattering onto his stomach.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he whispered, trembling as Ryan worked him through the last of it, grip tight, rolling Zane's balls in his other hand. And when it was almost too much and it was about to turn painful, Ryan slowed, bringing him down easy until Zane lay back against the pillow, sheened with sweat and completely spent.

“Christ,” Zane gasped. “What the fuck was that?”

“Dunno but I'm about to bust too.” Ryan rose to his knees, shorts shoved down around his thighs. He spat into his palm and took his dick in hand. Even in the dim room, Zane could see the way his hand flew over his shaft, the corded muscles of his arms ...

*Damn.* Zane swallowed hard, surprised by the heat that flooded his body.

“Where,” Ryan asked with gritted teeth and without thinking twice, Zane reached out and grasped Ryan's cock, stroking the slick head and aiming it at his own belly.

Ryan threw his head back, abs contracting, and a few moments later his cum spattered onto Zane's skin, hot at first, mingling with the cold, damp spots from Zane's earlier release.

With a heavy sigh, Ryan shifted, falling on the bed beside him. For a few moments, they lay there, breathing hard, the sides of

their thighs pressed together.

“You sure you’ve never done that before?” Zane asked with a dazed little laugh.

“No. Fuck you.” Ryan got out of bed and for a moment, Zane thought maybe he was actually pissed, but he disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a warm cloth.

He silently handed it to Zane, who cleaned himself, then got up long enough to toss it on the bathroom sink.

“Well?” Ryan asked when Zane slid into bed again, his head spinning with everything that had happened.

“What, you expect a post-game breakdown of your blowjob skills or something?” he joked to cover how shaky and off-kilter he felt.

“Just wanted to be sure it was okay.” There was something vulnerable in Ryan’s voice, so Zane wrapped an arm around his neck and dragged him closer, feeling the steady thump of Ryan’s heart against his own.

“It was more than good, asshole,” he whispered against his temple. “I came like a freight train and now I’m gonna sleep like a fucking rock.”

What it meant, Zane had no idea, but he’d deal with that in the morning.

## CHAPTER SIX

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Ryan awoke to Zane's cock snuggled up against his ass. Again. Damn, he could get used to this. "Good morning to you too," he muttered.

Zane moved away, flopping onto his back. "Shit, sorry. If you didn't have such a bubble butt ..."

Ryan flipped over on his side and stared at his friend. He'd half expected to wake up to Zane already in the shower or downstairs, desperate to get away from him, but waking up to a hard-on he could work with. "Since when have you been checking out my butt?"

Zane laughed and threw an arm up over his eyes. "Since never, asshole. But it's hard to miss when it's all up in my face like that."

"Pretty sure I'd remember if I had my ass on your face, Murph."

"Fuck you." Zane's drawl was lazy. "You *wish* you had your ass on my face."

Ryan considered the idea. That was *not* a terrible image. He'd had chicks rim him before. The one in Montreal last year had been totally freaky. "I'll lick your ass if you lick mine," he teased.

"Gross." Zane shoved his shoulder. "Go back to your own room, you perv."

“No. Too comfy. Besides, remember the wet spot?” Ryan propped his head in his hand. “Seriously though, you’ve never gotten your ass licked?”

“No.” Zane shoved at him again and Ryan rolled on top of him, pinning him to the bed.

They grappled a minute and Ryan realized his cock had settled into the groove along Zane’s hip. It would have felt better without two layers of stretchy fabric between them, but he wasn’t complaining. *Damn.*

“Quit poking me with your hard-on,” Zane grumbled. He twisted like he was trying to throw Ryan off him.

“You’re poking me with yours,” he taunted. “And I thought you were grossed out by the idea of getting your ass eaten. Doesn’t feel like it to me.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Zane shoved harder, but he’d wound a leg around Ryan’s, not like he was trying to flip him off his body but like he was trying to get more friction. Ryan rolled his hips experimentally.

Zane gulped and went still underneath him. “Shit.”

“Yeah?” Ryan did it again.

“Fuck.”

Ryan had thought he knew what Zane’s face looked like, but he’d never seen it like this before. Intense blue eyes turned soft, brown hair messy from sleep, short beard framing full lips, inches from his own.

Forget the woman in the bar last night. He’d definitely rather have *this* brunet with pretty eyes ...

Unable to stop himself, Ryan lowered his head, wondering what Zane’s mouth tasted like.

“What are you doing?” Zane asked, his voice rough. His fingers were warm on Ryan’s face as he grasped his head holding him in place a few inches away.

Ryan licked his lips. “I was going to kiss you.”

“Shit.” Zane’s eyes went wide.



“It’s okay,” Ryan said, lifting up to put some space between them. “I didn’t mean to ... we don’t have to—”

But his words were cut off by Zane’s lips on his. Slick. Soft. The little flick of his tongue right in the center, until Ryan parted and let him in.

“Fuck, Zane,” he breathed, settling over him. “That’s ...”

“Just fucking kiss me, Hartinger.”

That was what Zane had called him last night. Ryan could see it for what it was, him feeling unsettled. That was Zane’s captain voice. The one that said you’d better do as you’re told.

So Ryan happily did what Zane ordered.

He dipped his head, deepening the kiss, teasing their tongues together, not caring about the stale hint of whiskey and sleep, only wanting more of Zane. He threaded his hand through Zane’s hair, tugging it a little as he swept his tongue into his mouth again and heard that catch in the back of his throat.

Zane kissed like he played hockey. Seriously, with intense focus. With a single-minded determination to make the most of it.

When Zane rolled Ryan onto his back, he went willingly. Zane stared down for a moment, his brow furrowed. “The fuck are we doing, man?”

“I don’t know.” Ryan ran his hands down Zane’s back, enjoying the warm, soft skin stretched over the corded muscles that flexed under his palms. “Feels good, though.”

“It does.” Zane rocked his hips and all the air in Ryan’s lungs left in a rush. “Fuck. I don’t get it but ...”

“Me either.” Ryan slipped his hand under the waistband of Zane’s shorts, clumsily pushing them down. Zane caught his mouth again, as Ryan worked his own shorts off until they hung off one ankle.

They moaned into each other’s mouths when they were skin-to-skin, a little slick from the heat and sweat between their bodies.

“Fuck that’s good,” Zane said with a gasp against his lips. “Shit, how does that feel so amazing?”

“Dunno.” Ryan wrapped his hands around Zane’s hips and pulled their bodies more tightly together. “But I like it.”

Zane leaned in, taking control of the kiss. And then there was fiery heat and rocking movement, sweat and pre-cum allowing their cocks to slide over each other. Slow at first, learning each other’s rhythm the way they had on the ice when they first skated together in college.

When it clicked, they worked to bring each other to the edge, kissing roughly. Zane dug his fingers into his hair and Ryan groaned at the tug and sting. He ran his hand up Zane’s spine, and back down, gripping the firm muscle of his ass and kneading as they rocked their hips.

When the head of Ryan’s cock dragged against that treasure trail he’d been eyeing the night before, he groaned deeply. “Shit, getting close.”

Zane propped an elbow on the bed beside Ryan’s head and let out a feral little noise as he nipped at his mouth. “Christ, Ryan. Need you.”

“Need you too. Lift up.” Ryan spat into his hand and reached down between their bodies, slicking both their cocks. Zane threw his head back, eyes closed. He stroked them a moment before wrapping his arms around Zane’s back again, pressing their bodies tightly together.

They rutted together, panting harshly against each other’s mouths as they chased their orgasms.

Ryan planted a foot on the mattress and shoved up, his fingers biting into Zane’s skin as he came with a strangled, desperate groan, shooting across his stomach and up his chest.

Zane followed a moment later, muffling his cries against Ryan’s shoulder and Ryan held on tight.

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Zane collapsed onto Ryan, his nose filled with Ryan's scent, their bellies glued together from spunk.

Zane rolled away and got to his feet, his head still swimming. "Holy fuck."

"You said it."

"What the hell was that?" He looked down at Ryan, trying to make sense of everything that had happened since last night. Jesus, what the fuck had they *done*?

"Hey, are you okay?" Ryan asked, catching his wrist before he could head for the bathroom to clean up, a little frown taking over his relaxed expression.

"Yeah," Zane said, swallowing hard, his mouth gone bone dry. "I'm just trying to figure out where all this came from."

"Just one of those crazy nights." Ryan smiled as he sat up, dropping Zane's wrist. "And, uh, mornings. I'm guessing from that face you're making that you're regretting it?"

Zane stared. "It's not that I didn't enjoy it, I just—I don't want to fuck it up. Fuck *us* up. On or off the ice."

"I get that." Ryan rose to his feet. "So what happens in the hotel room in Tampa stays at the hotel room in Tampa." He shrugged.

Zane laughed softly. "I don't think that's how that saying goes."

"You know what I mean. We're not going to like ... tell anyone about what we did or anything."

"Fuck no." Zane let out a little snort at the idea.

Ryan shot him a look and raked his curls off his forehead. They were wild this morning. A flash of heat went through Zane at the memory of *why*. At the feel of his hands in Ryan's hair. Ryan's mouth on his dick.

"Geez, I should be offended by that," Ryan muttered as he turned away.

"No, I don't mean it like *that*," Zane protested. "I mean, the guys already give us shit about how close we are and ..."

He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck uneasily. It had felt weirdly natural with Ryan last night and this morning. Weirdly right and easy and he'd gone with it. Because it felt good. Because he trusted Ryan. But in the bright light of day with cum drying on his belly—his *and* Ryan's—Zane realized the line they'd crossed.

One that they could never turn back from.

Zane went cold at the thought. Jesus, what if this fucked with their chemistry on the ice?

The one serious romantic relationship he'd had had gone sideways and nearly derailed his career. He wouldn't be where he was now without Ryan. What if this jeopardized everything they'd been working toward?

Christ, Zane was supposed to be the team captain. Lead by example. What the fuck kind of example was he setting by doing *this*?

"No, I get it." Ryan patted his back as he brushed by. "This doesn't have to be a big deal, Murph. It was fun. I enjoyed myself and you said you did too, so why make it a big thing? Hockey is hockey. It comes first. This was just a way to blow off some steam, right?"

"Right," Zane said slowly, his heart rate slowing a little at Ryan's calm reaction. "No big deal."

But sex had always been kind of a big deal to him. He only enjoyed it with people he knew well. People he trusted. People he cared about.

But Ryan was all those things. Even if he'd never considered being with him in this way before, they had the history and the connection already.

They could figure out how to handle this. Right?

"Exactly." Ryan's smile was as bright and natural as always. "And if you want to blow off some steam again, let me know."

Zane turned to look at him. "You want to do it *again*?"

"I mean, this is way easier than picking up someone at the bar. We don't even have to leave the hotel room." He shot Zane a

grin and a little wink.

Zane considered the idea. Ryan had a point.

And fuck, Zane couldn't remember the last time he'd come so hard. "I hear you," he said as he contemplated their options. "But there should be rules or something. So it doesn't get complicated. There's a lot at stake here and—"

"Sure. Lay the rules on me," Ryan said, his tone easy and unconcerned.

"Well, I think maybe you were on to something earlier," Zane said slowly. "What happens in the hotel stays in the hotel room. Maybe we don't bring this home with us."

They lived together. If he was fooling around with Ryan at home, it would make it too ... too real, or something. Too complicated. But on the road ...

"Like, only when we have away games?" Ryan shot him a quizzical glance.

"Yeah." Zane reached out to grab a water bottle he'd left on the dresser the night before. "At home we're just two bros hanging out. But we can do whatever we want on the road."

"Whatever we want, huh?" Ryan's eyes filled with something. Heat. Laughter. Promise.

It sent a thrill through Zane, and the last of the tension unwound. This was *Ryan*. His best friend. Together, they could figure out anything.

Even this.

Whatever the hell it was.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

“What did you get up to last night?” Malone asked, punching Zane in the arm as they walked through the players’ entrance of the arena.

Zane tried not to inhale hot coffee into his lungs. “Nothing much,” he said in a strangled voice. “Watched some highlights and went to bed.”

“God, you’re boring as shit.” Malone jogged off, heading toward a cluster of guys ahead of them, calling out, “Yo, O’Shea. Question for you.”

“Are you okay?” Lindholm asked as he fell into step beside Zane a minute later. “You seem very serious this morning.”

“Just thinking.” Lindholm would assume it was probably the game on his mind, but it was the memory of what he and Ryan had done last night.

And this morning.

And again, in the shower.

Zane shivered at the memory of Ryan’s mouth on his neck, their slick skin rubbing together as they used soapy hands to jerk each other off.

Zane hoped he hadn’t wiped himself out completely. He wasn’t superstitious about no sex before a game anymore. Science had proven *that* was a lie. Sex boosted testosterone and performance. But three orgasms in a row and not enough

sleep wasn't the best choice he'd ever made. Even if they had been the most intense releases of his life.

"I'm sorry about last night." Lindholm let out a heavy sigh. "I was not at my best."

"What was going on? You seemed like your mind wasn't really in the game, Lindy," Zane said softly.

Lindholm was always rock-solid with a steady game-to-game performance. He wasn't like some of the rookies, a superstar in one game and a wreck in the next. As a veteran player, he was thoughtful, measured. But last night it was as if he'd been somewhere else.

"Tonight is the anniversary of"—pain flashed across Lindholm's face and he took a deep breath—"Astrid and Elia's deaths."

"Oh, Jesus." Zane stopped in his tracks and put a hand on Lindholm's upper arm. "I am so sorry, man. I wasn't paying attention. I should've remembered what the date was."

It had been a year since Anders' wife and baby daughter had been killed in a car accident.

"It is not your fault, my friend," Lindholm said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I keep thinking the grief will end. That it will get easier, but ..." He spread his hands wide. "The memories take me unaware. There is no pain in hockey like the pain of losing those you love."

"I can only imagine." Zane squeezed. "Seriously. If there is anything I can do ..."

"There's not. Only time, and even then ..." His expression closed off.

Zane nodded. "Do you need to sit out this game tonight?"

Lindholm was up to start, and while Zane didn't love the thought of their best center riding the bench for a game like this, he'd talk to Coach about putting their second line center, Nikolai Mikhailov, in tonight if Lindholm needed it.

"I will play," Lindholm said with a nod. "I let myself get distracted yesterday, but I won't tonight. I will play for their

memory.” He touched a spot on his chest where Zane knew he wore a necklace holding his and his wife’s wedding rings under his black Otters hoodie. He almost never took the memento off.

There was raw grief etched into the lines of his face and buried in his pale gray-blue eyes but steely determination in his jaw and his voice.

“Okay. We’ll be there for you,” Zane promised. “And you let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thank you. You are a good friend and captain.”

“I try.” Sometimes Zane felt like he didn’t do enough.

But Lindholm gave him a nod and squeezed his shoulder before walking toward the training area.

Zane was lost in thought as he slowly followed.

“You okay?”

He looked up to see Ryan giving him a concerned frown. The hallway was empty, and he’d been dawdling.

Ryan lifted an eyebrow. “Is this about ... you know?”

“About?” The pieces clicked into place. “No, not about last night. I was thinking about Lindholm. It’s the anniversary and —”

“Shit.” Ryan grimaced. “It’s October. Fuck, I can’t believe I forgot.”

“I know.” Zane sighed. “I should have been on top of it, but I let it slip by me.”

“Is Lindy playing tonight?”

“He says he wants to.”

“Okay.” Ryan nodded. “We’ll get him through this. Now, c’mon. Don’t want to get our asses chewed for being late.”

Zane nodded and followed in Ryan’s wake, grateful for his straightforward approach to everything. Zane could get his head all knotted up with thoughts, but Ryan always managed to untangle them. Ryan’s approach to life was straightforward



—play hard and don't make anything more complicated than it needs to be.

Zane played hard too, but he tended to get in the way of himself.

Ryan was totally right though. All they needed to do tonight was make sure Lindholm knew they would be there for him. No fuss. No muss. Support their teammate and skate hard.

Ryan's calm attitude was the only reason Zane wasn't a fucking wreck right now.

What they'd done the night before had the potential to derail everything, but Zane would try, with everything he had in him, to let it be as straightforward as Ryan promised.

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“Guys, we all know this is an important game, so I want you to be focused. I don't want to see the kind of sloppiness I saw on the ice last night,” Coach Daniels growled.

The man growled a lot, though his bark was usually worse than his bite. Ken Daniels was a gruff red-faced guy with a balding head and in his day, he'd been a hell of a defenseman for Philly. He'd been with the Otters for five years with no cup wins and he was feeling the pressure this season. There were rumors that if he didn't get results soon, Evanston would be looking for a new head coach.

“I expect you to get out there and show me what the Otters are made of!” he finished.

The team clapped and hollered, and Ryan pumped his fist and shouted, his blood beginning to fizz with excitement about the upcoming game.

When Zane had first signed with the team, Ryan had chirped him about what a ridiculous mascot they had. They were hockey players, not cute little animals who frolicked in the water. But after he watched the documentary that Zane had sent him, Ryan had changed his mind. It turned out otters were clever, adaptable, quick-tempered fighters.

Now, Ryan glanced down at the logo in the center of his jersey. The teal, black, and white otter with its fangs bared. Otters fought hard and they played hard, which was pretty damn perfect as far as he was concerned.

Next to him, Zane rose to his feet. "I'd like to say a few words too, Coach."

Coach Daniels nodded, stepping back.

"Earlier, I spoke with all of you individually about how important this game is. For us as a team, for this season, and for Lindy."

Anders Lindholm sat, stone-faced, on the other side of the dressing room, stick clutched in his hands, but he lifted his grief-filled eyes to look at Murphy while he spoke. Ryan thought of that night last year when Lindholm had received the news about his family.

The howl he'd let out had shaken Ryan to his bones, and when Lindholm had fallen to his knees, Ryan had felt so helpless. It had been Zane who'd gone to him first and wrapped an arm around him, murmuring quietly, until he eventually coaxed him to his feet. Zane who'd helped guide him through the first few days of his grief until his sister and parents arrived from Sweden.

That was the kind of guy Zane was, the kind of captain he was.

That night, there had been tears in more than Lindholm's eyes. They had all loved his wife, Astrid, with her wide blue eyes, freckles, and bubbly personality. She'd been stunningly gorgeous and unbelievably smart.

Their baby, Elia, had been the sweetest thing with blonde curls and a personality to match her mother's. The team had loved the girl, showering her with gifts every opportunity they got. Elia had owned more tiny jerseys and stuffed otters than any one child needed.

She'd begun talking and walking before the accident, and the thought of her and her mother being gone still sent a pang through Ryan's heart that made him rub at his chest. He could only imagine what it was like for his teammate. He had no

idea how Lindholm had dug himself out of the grief and come back to play after a loss like that.

Ryan lifted his head to realize Zane's speech was over and the guys milled around, going over to Lindholm to offer him a hard, back-slapping hug, speaking a few quiet words to him. Offering their support.

Lance Tate, the offensive position coach for the team, patted Zane's back as he walked by. "Good speech," he said softly.

He was quieter than Coach Daniels. More serious. Less blustery and in your face. His style was more like Zane's, and when he went over to Anders to speak quietly to him, Ryan knew their center was in good hands.

That was what he loved about this team. About hockey. These men were *family*.

Though there was the occasional personality clash, the trash talking and jockeying was usually done with good humor. Yeah, Ryan thought Malone was a piece of shit for cheating on his wife—though he was far from the only one around—but whatever the guys thought of each other's personal lives, they were still a *team*. When things got rough, they had each other's backs.

"You ready to do this?" Zane asked a few minutes later. He stood in front of Ryan, a concerned frown on his face.

"Hell yes," Ryan said with a smile as he rose to his feet. "It's time to play some hockey!"

---

Later that night, Zane dropped onto the chartered flight with a tired sigh. They'd played well. It had been a hard-fought game, but they'd come out ahead, closing out with a 4-3 win against Tampa. Their game had been tight, with none of the sloppiness of the previous one against Cleveland.

Zane had gotten in a hell of a final goal, sneaking the slapshot in between the Tampa goalie's pad and glove in the final minute of overtime. Ryan had gotten the assist and Zane's

pleasure at scoring the game-winning goal had made him forget all about the bodycheck he'd gotten from one of Tampa's D-men in the second period. But now that the adrenaline had worn off, his hip and shoulder throbbed, despite the post-game cooldown and treatment.

It had all been worth it.

The quiet appreciation in Lindholm's eyes at the end of the game and the grasp of his hand told Zane the support and hard playing was appreciated. The mood in the dressing room had been buoyant, though a little more subdued than usual.

The guys had circled Lindy, fending off the press and letting him disappear into the showers so he didn't have to answer any questions from the media.

Now, Zane spotted Lindholm a few rows up, with his eyes closed and his hand wrapped around the necklace he wore, lines carved deep into his face, making him look far older than his years.

Everyone gave him space, which was good. He probably needed it. But Zane made a mental note to check in with him before he and Ryan left the airport. Some space was good. Too much could be dangerous for a guy.

As if he'd conjured him from thin air, Ryan dropped into the seat beside him with a groan. "I am wiped."

"Yeah, me too. Great game though."

"It was." Ryan's face glowed with pleasure as they fist bumped. "If we can keep that up, especially against a team like Tampa ..."

"God, if only." Zane yawned.

"How's your hip?"

He grunted. "Hurts. You know what it's like."

Every year they played, it seemed to Zane like his body protested more at the abuse he put it through. A check he would have brushed off and barely noticed as a rookie took longer to recover from.

Christ, how was Lindholm managing it?

A few minutes later, they were all settled, and Zane closed his eyes when they went through the pre-flight spiel, tuning it out.

He was dimly aware of the forces pushing him down into his seat as the plane raced down the runway, then the momentary buoyancy when they lifted off.

When they reached cruising altitude, he reclined his seat. “Wake me up when we land?”

“Nah, I’ll leave you here.”

“Thanks, asshole.” Zane stuck his middle finger up, eyes still closed, smile playing on his lips. Despite what they’d done last night and this morning—and Zane felt a little shudder of pleasure go through him at the memory—it hadn’t wrecked their game. He’d been so afraid it would fuck with the chemistry they usually had, but their playing tonight had been seamless.

They’d skated as beautifully as ever, maybe *better*, the hyperawareness of the other’s position on the ice ramped up a notch. Even Coach Tate had commented on how in tune they were tonight.

Why the fuck they were ... hooking up, or whatever they were doing, Zane still wasn’t sure. In the light of day, everything they’d done felt strange and surreal, but when he slit his eyes open and saw Ryan laughing at something Tremblay said, he relaxed.

Ryan’s grin was wide, his enthusiasm infectious as they played cards. He was the same old Ryan he’d always been, which was reassuring.

Yeah, Zane knew what his mouth tasted like now and he’d felt Ryan’s dick against his, hard, impatient, eager ... No, no, Zane had to stop thinking about that. He shifted in his seat, afraid if he continued, his hard-on would show through the thin fabric of his suit.

NHL regs required them to dress in suits before and after every game. Not that he minded it usually. He liked the

professionalism it implied, and Zane thought he carried off the look pretty well.

He snuck another glance at Ryan. He didn't look so bad in his gray suit either, the navy tie with little blue whales all over it making his eyes especially bright.

Well fuck, Zane really was checking out his best friend.

He wondered what Boucher would think if he told him that his coming out had inspired a whole lot more than kids feeling safe to be themselves.

He smirked at the thought. Nah, he'd keep that one to himself. What he and Ryan got up to was no one else's business.

Zane closed his eyes again and let himself drift off into sleep.

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“Feels good to be home.” Hours later, Ryan dropped his suitcase and duffel on the floor and collapsed onto the comfortable couch with a relieved groan. “Shit, I'm getting old.”

“Tell me about it.” Zane sighed, taking a seat more gingerly. “My fucking hip.”

“Aww, need me to kiss it better, old man?”

“Two years older than you, asshole,” Zane said. “Two years. And no, we're keeping it on the road, remember?”

“Goddamn it.” Ryan reached down and rubbed his cock, not even pretending to be subtle about it. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

Zane licked his lips. “Hey, you agreed to it.”

“I did, I did,” Ryan grumbled. He'd keep his word too, if that was what Zane wanted. “I'm just saying, this isn't the NHL. We can renegotiate any time.”

Zane chuckled. “On the road only. That's the rule.”

“Fine, fine,” Ryan groused. “Okay, I’m beat. I’m going to bed.” But he continued to lie there like a lump.

“Oh, I can tell.” Zane patted his shins. “One episode of *Saving Hollywood* before we hit the hay?”

“Sure, I’m in.”

They watched the firefighters battle a burning blaze in silence for a while but there was nothing weird about it, as much as Ryan had worried about that. He’d been half-afraid Zane would freak and want to call off the whole thing.

“Are you even watching this?” Zane asked halfway through the episode, craning his neck to look at him.

“Not really.”

Zane frowned. “Everything okay?”

“Yup. Just glad nothing got fucked up between us.”

With a nod, Zane turned back to the TV. His face was bathed in the blue light from the screen. “Me too. I was thinking about that on the plane.”

“I knew we’d be fine though,” Ryan said confidently. He wasn’t about to admit to his moment of doubt.

“You did, huh?”

“Yup.” He nudged Zane’s side with his foot, making him yelp. “It’s *us*, man.”

“Did you have to dig into the bruise, asshole?”

“Shit, sorry, dude.” But he did it again. Just cause.

“Quit it, you jackass,” Zane said, laughing. He shoved Ryan’s feet sideways so they dangled off the couch.

Ryan grinned. “You need some ice?” he asked, rising to his feet.

“Well, I do *now*,” Zane grumbled. “And yeah, that would be good.”

Ryan had seen the trainers ice Zane down after the game but after all that sitting on the plane, he could probably use some

more. Especially because he wasn't one of those guys who popped painkillers like they were going out of style.

Ryan walked into the kitchen, yawning. They'd played hard tonight. For Lindholm.

"Hey, was Lindy doing okay when you talked to him after we landed?" he asked, pulling an ice pack out of the freezer.

Ryan caught Zane's shrug as he walked back toward the living room.

"As okay as he can be under the circumstances." Zane rose to his feet. "I mean, that's not the kind of thing a guy gets over easily."

"No." Ryan frowned. "It isn't."

He absentmindedly handed the ice over to Zane, who patted his shoulder. "He'll be okay."

"I know." Ryan shot a smile his way. "I just want you to know you're a damn good captain."

Zane scratched his short beard, not meeting Ryan's gaze. "So you keep telling me."

"Cause it's true." Ryan grasped his shoulder. "We're lucky to have you."

"You're just trying to flatter me to get into my pants," Zane grumbled, but he reached for the remote, a pleased little smile on his face.

"Busted." Ryan grinned, then cuffed him lightly across the back of his head. "No. I'm being serious, dude."

"I know you are. And thanks."

"But I mean, if you want me to get into your pants ..." Ryan wagged his eyebrows before flicking off the nearby lamp.

Zane shook his head, laughing, and walked down the hall toward the bedrooms. "In your dreams, Hartinger. I told you, we're keeping it on the road."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Night." Zane reached for the handle on his bedroom door.



“You know where to find me if you change your mind!” Ryan called after him.

Zane laughed and shut the door behind him.

Damn.

Well, a guy could try.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

“You sure you don’t want to hang out with the boys tonight?” Zane asked.

This was their third game this week, their first on the road. They’d won tonight’s game against Edmonton, but they’d had to work for it, and they had another huge one against Calgary tomorrow. Everyone was feeling the pressure and Coach had ridden their asses about getting enough sleep.

Even Malone, Underhill, and O’Shea had planned a quiet night in playing cards.

“Nah.” Ryan closed the door behind him and reached for his tie, loosening it. “Thought I’d get to bed early tonight. Important game tomorrow.”

“Then shouldn’t you ... go to your room?” Zane’s heart beat fast at the look in Ryan’s eyes when he crowded close.

“Nope.”

A wicked smile lit up Ryan’s face as he tossed the tie onto the dresser, stalking toward Zane with an intent gaze. There was no doubting what that look meant. Ryan was getting what he wanted.

Zane shuffled until the backs of his knees hit the edge of the mattress.

“I didn’t say anything about getting sleep.” With a gentle shove of his hand, Ryan pushed Zane down.

He bounced on the bed once, bracing his hands on the covers, swallowing hard, anticipation building in his belly.

“Want to suck you off.”

Ryan was on his knees before Zane could stop him, but when Ryan fumbled with the opening of his trousers and boxer briefs, Zane was the one helping him ease his thickening cock out. He was into it, no question about it. The situation was crazy, but God he wanted this.

“Shouldn’t we ...” His words ended in a moan when Ryan licked a stripe up Zane’s cock. “Mmm, fuck.”

Zane felt suddenly lightheaded, his hand shaking a little as he rested it on Ryan’s head.

“You good with this?” Ryan mumbled, kissing his way up Zane’s shaft. “Your cock says yes, but I’m getting a little worried about the silence here.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good,” he said hoarsely. “Shit.”

“Good. Because I have been thinking about this for *days*.”

It had been way too fucking long. They’d had a long stretch of home games in a row and Zane had been about to lose his mind. As crazy as it was to have his buddy on his knees, sucking him off, Zane couldn’t deny he’d been aching for it too.

He’d tried to convince himself it hadn’t been that good before, but clearly, he’d been lying to himself. When Ryan sucked on the tip of his cock, teasing his tongue into the slit before sliding it around the head, Zane’s mind went blank. He tangled his hands in Ryan’s curls, his moans the only sound other than the quiet hum of the air conditioner.

“Fuck, Ryan.”

“You could.”

The mumbled words around his dick took a moment to process, but Zane went rigid when he worked them out. “Shit, don’t say stuff like that.”

“Why not?” Ryan licked another stripe along his cock, then looked at him through his lashes, sliding a hand up and down the shaft. “I’d let you fuck me.”

“What?” Zane said hoarsely when Ryan slid his mouth down over him again. Somehow Zane had never gone beyond the idea of blowjobs and handjobs. His brain stuttered at the thought of more and his grip tightened on Ryan’s head.

Ryan lifted off with a wet pop. “Yeah, if you wanted.”

“I—I don’t know.”

“You ever fucked a girl up the ass?”

“No,” he admitted. Sara hadn’t been into that and it felt way too intimate with the sporadic hookups he’d had since.

“Shit, what the hell have you been doing in the bedroom, man?” Ryan teased. He stretched up and kissed Zane, mouth soft but eager.

“Dunno,” Zane muttered against his lips. He was starting to wonder that himself, but mostly he was amazed at how easy it was to be with Ryan.

He closed his eyes and kissed Ryan again, way more concerned about the hand around his cock and the tongue gently teasing his than about anyone from his past.

He shook as Ryan worked him harder, the long, twisting strokes sending little zings of pleasure up through the base of his spine.

“Well, it’s fucking hot,” Ryan said with a low laugh. “Tight as hell.”

Zane shivered, but he wasn’t sure if it was from Ryan’s words or what he was doing with his hand—that brush of his thumb across the head of Zane’s dick threatened to undo him.

Ryan worked his way down Zane’s neck, pressing kisses and wet licks to his skin.

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind fucking you either, but if you’re not up for it, no big deal.” Ryan grazed his teeth along Zane’s neck.

Zane gripped his hair and pulled him away. “Watch the teeth, man. I don’t want marks.”

“Sorry.” Ryan settled between his thighs again. “Well, no rush, but think about it. We have a couple of days on the road.”

“Yeah, okay,” Zane agreed, his mind spinning with the possibilities.

Jesus, like he could think about anything else now?

But when Ryan slipped his mouth over Zane’s cock, his mind went totally blank again, the wet heat and suction pulling all his attention to what Ryan was doing. It took an embarrassingly short amount of time before he came down Ryan’s throat with a groan, thighs shaking, fingers gripping Ryan’s hair like it was the only thing anchoring him to the world.

After, Zane blinked his eyes open. The room spun a little as he stared up at the big man who stood in front of him, dressed in a custom-tailored suit, a smirk on his face, his hair sticking up all over the place, lips wet and reddened.

“You okay there, buddy?” Ryan teased. He shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it onto the chair nearby.

“Yeah.” Zane was pretty sure he was still alive. Even if his brain felt like it was filled with cotton candy.

“You sure you didn’t get concussed when you took that hit earlier?” A worried frown crossed Ryan’s face.

Zane chuckled. “I’m fine.”

He had taken a hard hit from one of Edmonton’s D-men and landed flat on his back. He’d been winded for a second, the world whirling around him as he lay on the ice, staring up at the rafters. It had been Ryan’s worried face in his line of view that had snapped him out of the daze, his outstretched hand reaching to help Zane up. Zane had gone through the whole concussion protocol with the training staff to be sure, but everything had checked out.

“Promise,” Zane said now, when Ryan’s frown didn’t go away. “It’s not a concussion. You sucked my brains out through my

dick.”

“Oh.” Ryan grinned. “Well, in that case ...” He reached for his shirt button. “I can’t fucking wait to feel your mouth on me.”

*Oh, shit.*

Zane had known this was coming. If he said he didn’t want to, Ryan would be cool about it, but fuck if Zane hadn’t been thinking about getting his mouth on him. It sent a strange flutter through his stomach, but the curiosity overrode the nerves.

“Get outta those clothes and you’ll find out how it feels to have me suck you off,” he challenged.

“Shit yeah.” But for someone with zero patience, Ryan took an amazingly long time to strip out of his clothing. With every piece that disappeared, Zane’s heart beat faster. And when there was nothing left but snug eggplant-emoji briefs struggling to contain Ryan’s dick, Zane’s mouth went dry.

“Fuck,” he whispered. He really, really shouldn’t be turned on by someone wearing those ridiculous things but it was *Ryan* and they were so perfectly him that it only made Zane want him more.

Ryan froze, thumbs hooked in the waistband. The briefs rested just below the crest of his hips. His abs were a work of art, ridged and defined above, the lower obliques carved and flat. Zane had *seen* Ryan naked a million times, but he’d never really looked at him this way before. Now he had a fleeting thought about pressing his lips to that spot by the hollow of Ryan’s hip and tracing his tongue along the ridge.

He shivered, his body going hot at the thought that he could do that if he wanted.

“Hey, you sure you’re okay with this?” Ryan asked. He took Zane’s chin in his hand, lifting his head so their gazes met. His expression was unusually serious. “Because if you don’t want to suck my cock, it’s cool, I promise. Whatever you’re good with is fine by me.”

There was nothing but sincerity in his gaze and Zane gave him a little nod. “I want this.”

He batted Ryan's hand away and reached for the waistband of the briefs, nudging them down. Zane eased the stretchy fabric over Ryan's ass and thighs, heart beating fast again at the sight of those tight blond curls framing his dick, at eye-level.

Zane hadn't really examined Ryan's cock last time, but he did now.

Ryan was only half-hard, the thick shaft with a flared head dangling between his legs. Zane licked his lips as Ryan stroked himself a few times, gentle tugs that made his dick fill until it pointed straight out toward Zane.

Zane swallowed hard and grasped the base, the skin warm against his palm. "Don't really know what I'm doing here," he whispered.

"Mmm, doesn't matter." Ryan was gentle as he cupped Zane's cheek in one large hand. "Just like the thought of your mouth and hands on me."

That was enough, freeing Zane from the gripping fear that he might fuck this up. He pulled Ryan close, breathing in the clean scent of his skin that Zane was so familiar with. That was the strangest part of this. With Ryan, it was all new and yet it was somehow familiar too.

But while Zane had never done this with Ryan—with *any* man—it felt surprisingly natural.

Zane took a deep breath and wrapped his hand more firmly around Ryan's dick and stroked, the dry rasp of his palm against the smooth skin the only noise other than their breathing. Zane tentatively brushed his lips against Ryan's shaft. Ryan settled a hand on Zane's head and let him explore at his own pace, his touch coaxing rather than forceful. For as rough and eager as Ryan could be on the ice, he was tender now.

The scent of Ryan's body filled Zane's nose and the skin of his cock was warm against his lips, the hard-soft texture prompting him to stroke more.

The ragged little breath Ryan let out made Zane explore further, and he tentatively lapped at the drop of liquid at the

tip. It was salty and bitter, but not bad. Zane opened his mouth and slid down over the head, taking him in partway.

“Fuck, Zane ...” Ryan’s voice urged him on.

Encouraged, Zane kept sucking, moving his mouth and hand in tandem after a few strokes. He reached out to grasp Ryan’s ass with his free hand and pull him in deeper. He choked and it took a moment to get the hang of breathing through his nose. But before long they found their rhythm and Zane tried using his tongue a little on the underside.

The grunt Ryan let out filled him with a strange sort of pride and he kept it up, even when his jaw began to ache a little. It wasn’t much longer before Ryan tensed, stilling Zane’s motions with his hand. “I’m gonna come soon.”

Determined not to be the one who wussed out, Zane kept it up, stroking and licking Ryan until he groaned out a low sound of pleasure and spilled onto Zane’s tongue. Zane swallowed quickly, nearly choking again, but he felt an odd sense of satisfaction when after a minute or so, Ryan trembled and pushed him away.

“Jesus, Murphy.” Ryan flopped onto the bed next to him. “That was pretty damn good for a first time.”

“Pretty damn good?” Zane protested. “That’s it?”

Ryan laughed and tugged at his shoulder, pulling him down beside him. “Fucking amazing. That better?”

“Damn right it is,” Zane grumbled. He realized he’d ended up in the crook of Ryan’s arm and he lay there a moment, his head still swimming with the strange mix of newness and familiarity in their interactions. “Can’t say I love the taste,” he admitted.

“Well, me either.”

Ryan turned his head and Zane copied his movement. Their mouths were inches apart and Zane’s gaze flicked down to Ryan’s mouth when he licked his lips.

“Let’s see if it’s better this way,” Ryan said huskily as he pressed their mouths together.



They made out slowly until Zane was lightheaded and almost drunk feeling, giddy with the orgasm he'd had and the one he'd given to Ryan. Zane rolled half onto Ryan's chest, sliding an arm under his right shoulder and bracing his other elbow next to his ribs on the far side so he was propped over his torso.

"So, was this what you had in mind for tonight?" He looked down at Ryan's familiar face, looking at it like it was the first time he'd ever seen him, examining it closely.

"This is exactly it." Ryan grinned up at him. "Who'd have thought?"

"Who'd have thought what?"

Zane rubbed his thumb across the scar on Ryan's jaw, a faint mark from a hockey injury in college.

He remembered the fear in his chest, so tight he struggled to breathe, as he saw Ryan lying still and silent on the ice in a pool of blood. It had only been a moment before he shook it off and sat up with a laugh. The injury had looked much grislier than it was, more of the blood coming from his broken nose than his cut face, but for a few heartbeats, Zane had been terrified of losing Ryan.

Leaving for his shot at playing with the Otters had been hard. Zane had been fucking ecstatic to play for the club—even if it was a new franchise at the time—and he hadn't even minded spending his rookie year bouncing between the Otters and their AHL team as the team makeup shifted and guys got injured and traded. But Zane hadn't really felt like he was a part of the team, like he *belonged*, until Ryan was there by his side, and everything clicked into place.

"Who'd have thought we'd be as good in bed as we are on the ice," Ryan said with a grin.

Zane laughed. "That part surprises me less than the, uh ... being into dudes thing," he admitted. "I guess it makes sense that if it's going to be with anyone, it's with you."

Ryan's grip on him tightened. "Yeah, that part makes sense to me too."

Zane sat up. “You really never did this with anyone else?”

“Fuck no.” Ryan snorted. “Shit, I don’t think I looked at a guy twice until Boucher’s press conference.”

“And you teased me about having a crush on La Bouche!” He thwacked Ryan’s side, keeping away from the purple-black bruise blossoming on his thigh from the puck he’d blocked in the middle of the game.

“No, not Boucher, you idiot. He’s okay, I guess, but I meant that his press conference made me see you in a different way.”

“Oh.” Zane blinked.

“I mean, I looked at Boucher and went ... ‘ehh’ and I looked at you and there was this moment of holy fuck.”

Zane laughed. “Holy fuck, huh?”

“Yup. There was stirring in the pants and that, my friend, is something I pay attention to.” He grinned.

Ryan was good-looking. Zane knew that, but it really hit him all of a sudden.

He was ... handsome.

Women loved his curly blond hair, his blue eyes, and his big, hard body.

Ryan had never had any trouble finding someone to warm his bed over the years. He’d made hockey his priority, but he’d sampled his share of willing women—from puck bunnies to waitresses to chicks from hookup apps.

Knowing that Ryan was into him was a weird little ego rush, and Zane generally cared more about how he played than his appearance. But Ryan having a ‘holy fuck’ moment over him felt damn good.

And, well, he already knew Ryan appreciated his hockey.

“What about you?” Ryan asked.

“If you hadn’t said something, it never would have occurred to me, I don’t think,” Zane admitted with a shrug.

He'd thought about that a lot lately. Looking back on his past, wondering how things had changed for him. He'd always liked women. Never questioned it. Any vague thought he'd had about Ryan had been dismissed as just something that happened between close friends.

He'd always put women in one category and men in another.

Women were for dating and future relationships.

Men were friends and teammates.

Of course, there was the occasional person who crossed that divide, but not many.

At Zane's first Olympics, he'd gone to some of the US women's ice hockey games. He'd been blown away by the skill and athleticism of one of the players and when he'd run into her in the cafeteria at the Olympic Village, he'd told her so.

She'd lit up at the compliment and they'd wound up eating together. They'd chatted hockey for hours, meeting up in the lounge the following day to talk more.

Unlike most of their fellow athletes, she hadn't been interested in hookups either and he'd liked taking his time to get to know her. Zane had enjoyed discussing game strategy and finding out what else she was into outside of the sport and by the end of the Olympics, he'd felt attraction slowly beginning to grow.

He'd felt a spark of real possibility with her, and though they'd gone their separate ways after the winter games, they'd texted for months after.

Unfortunately, their schedules were too crazy to mesh and they'd never managed to get together in person.

The Otters had been knocked out of the first round of the playoffs that year and he'd begun thinking of asking her if she'd be into meeting up in the off-season when she admitted there was someone else she was interested in.

He hadn't felt betrayed by it. They weren't dating, they were just getting to know each other. She was free to meet other people. But it had still stung and been disappointing.

With Zane's commitments as Captain and his schedule traveling with the team, opportunities to meet and really get to know women were pretty rare.

His whole world revolved around hockey.

He spent most of his time at the practice rink or arena and because he'd never wanted to create an awkward situation with any of the women working for the franchise, he'd never considered dating any of them.

His teammates and friends throughout the league were firmly in the second category. He'd never viewed them as potential romantic partners and he'd assumed he'd worry about dating seriously after his pro career was over.

But since Ryan had blasted through all his preconceived ideas of who he could be attracted to ... everything had changed.

"So that makes us what? Bi?" Ryan asked.

"Oh Christ." Zane turned away and reached for a water bottle on the nightstand. He cracked it open and guzzled some down. "I guess? Fuck if I know. I'm good with what we're doing, but that doesn't mean I want it to be a big thing."

It already felt too overwhelming.

"Dude, I'm not asking you to do a huge presser and tell the world we're fucking. I guess I'm just curious."

"Yeah, I dunno." Zane shrugged. "I like what we're doing. I don't need to have a word for it. We'll just keep doing what we're doing and it'll be good."

"Right." Ryan sat up. "I'm with you on that for sure."

"Then we're good, right?" Zane shot him a little smile. "We play hockey. When we're on the road, we do this shit. When we're home, we focus on other stuff."

"We're good." Ryan's expression lightened. "Now, how about we get in the shower?"

Zane grumbled. "I took one at the arena."

"Yeah, and it's been hours. I thought I'd show you what it feels like to get your ass eaten." He hopped off the bed and

grinned at Zane, the light in his eyes wicked and gleaming with promise before he turned away and disappeared into the bathroom.

The water flipped on, and Zane imagined it. Standing under the rushing water, Ryan on his knees behind him ... His stomach tightened. So maybe the thought didn't weird him out as much as the last time Ryan had brought it up. And the shower was definitely a plus, making the idea a hell of a lot more palatable.

"Yeah, okay," Zane mumbled to himself, a little breathless as he got off the bed—a bit slower than Ryan—and reached for the toiletry bag that he'd dug out of his suitcase earlier. Before Ryan had knocked on the door and pushed him down onto the bed.

"Hey, you coming?" Ryan called over the sound of the rushing water.

Zane sauntered toward the bathroom and shut the door behind him. "I don't know," he teased. "I guess it depends on how good you are at this rimming stuff."

Ryan let out an outraged noise and stepped into the glass-walled shower. "Get your ass in here and I'll show you."

Zane grinned. If there was one guaranteed way to get Ryan Hartinger to perform his best, it was to question if he could do it. The man liked nothing more than to prove himself.

Zane had a feeling they were both in for a hell of a night.

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Ryan smiled as Zane stepped inside the shower, bringing a gust of cool air with him.

He knew Zane would be too curious to resist.

"Get the fuck in here. It's cold," Ryan said, shivering a little. He dunked his head under the showerhead, the hot water taking away the chill.

“You are such a wuss,” Zane said with a laugh. “If I hadn’t known you forever, I’d think this was a ploy to get me closer.”

“Oh, it’s totally that too,” Ryan said with a grin. He turned to face Zane and burrowed against him. *There, perfect.* The water warmed his backside and Zane kept his front nice and toasty.

Zane put his arms around Ryan and yelped. “That water is like three hundred degrees, dude. How can you be cold?”

“It’s cause I’m so hot.”

Zane rolled his eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

“Less chirping, more making out, Murphy.” Ryan dipped his head for a kiss and Zane laughed against his mouth.

But he threaded his hand through Ryan’s hair and kissed him back.

They stood there a little while with the water streaming over them. Ryan roamed his hands across Zane’s body, dipping low to grab his ass a few times. Zane tensed whenever Ryan did it, so Ryan slid his palms along the firm muscles of his back instead.

His body was unreal, and Ryan wanted to lick every inch of it.

Eventually, Zane seemed to relax. He didn’t tense when Ryan rubbed his palms along Zane’s butt and grazed a finger between his cheeks before sliding away.

Zane kissed Ryan harder, tilting his hips and reaching between their bodies to grasp Ryan’s cock and jack him slowly.

Ryan dared to go a little deeper, rubbing the pad of his middle finger over Zane’s hole. He gasped and tightened his grip on Ryan’s cock.

“Easy,” Ryan said with a wince. “Don’t make me pop yet.”

“Sorry,” Zane muttered against his jaw.

“S’okay.” Ryan brushed his lips across Zane’s beard and down to his neck, the skin there smooth. He licked the spot below Zane’s ear and made him squirm.

For a while, Ryan pressed wet, soft kisses to Zane's skin, occasionally dragging his teeth across his earlobe while he rubbed the outside of Zane's hole.

Eventually, Zane was squirming so much that Ryan dipped a finger in lightly. Zane clenched around him, locking Ryan's finger in place, his eyes wide.

"That okay?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, fuck. It's ..." Zane clutched his shoulders. "It's good. Thought you were gonna use your mouth though?"

Ryan gave him a searching look. "You want me to?"

"Do it."

Ryan gave Zane one last hard kiss on the mouth, then turned him to face the wall. "Hands up. Brace yourself."

Zane shot him a look over his shoulder, one thick eyebrow raised, but he did it. Ryan's mouth went dry at the sight of him.

Fuck. Unreal didn't do his body justice.

Ryan ran an appreciative palm along the sculpted planes of Zane's back, then dropped into a kneeling position. The tile was hard on his knees, but he could stay down here a little while.

He kissed the back of Zane's thigh, the dark hair there tickling his mouth. He wasn't used to the hairiness of being with a guy, but he definitely didn't hate it. He even liked the hair that spread across Zane's firm pecs, covering a little more of his chest with every year.

He cupped Zane's cheeks and parted them, kissing his way up to his hole.

Water ran down Zane's back, collecting in the dip at the base of his spine before sliding down into his crack. Zane had gone tense again, so Ryan bit his cheek playfully, just to make him laugh.

Next, Ryan dragged his teeth across Zane's ass cheek.

“What the fuck?” Zane said, twisting to glare over his shoulder. “No marks, dude! Do you want the team to chirp me for having bite marks on my ass?”

*Kind of*, Ryan thought.

Ryan kinda liked the idea of marking Zane up but if Zane wasn't okay with the guys chirping him about it, he'd keep it light. Zane never bruised very easily, and he was tan enough that even if he did bruise a little, no one would look twice.

“Okay.” Ryan pressed a kiss to Zane's butt cheek, loud and smacking.

Before Zane could tense up again, Ryan dove in face first. The thick muscles of Zane's ass made it harder to get his tongue where he wanted it, but he managed it and the first swipe of his tongue over Zane's hole made Zane shout.

Ryan smirked and slapped his hip, hoping Zane would know that was a reminder to be quiet. He kept working, swirling his tongue around the puckered circle before dipping inside.

Zane's moan was a little more muffled that time, so apparently he'd read the play okay.

Ryan pulled Zane's hips back and went after him with gusto. Everything was slick from the water, and he liked the way Zane let out a strangled noise every time he pushed his tongue inside. It was kinda like eating out a girl but kinda not.

Ryan was definitely into it.

But when he experimentally sucked at Zane's hole, he let out a shudder, his knees buckling.

“Yeah, you like that?” Ryan teased, pulling back.

Zane reached back and slapped at his arm. “Don't *stop*, you asshole.”

Ryan snickered and reached around for his cock. Zane shuddered when he slid a wet hand along his hard length.

“Thought you were gonna make me come with your mouth.”

“I was *trying*,” Ryan said. He pried the thick muscles of Zane's ass apart again and swiped a flat tongue across his



crack, working his cock with his free hand.

“Are hands part of the deal?”

“Huh?” Ryan sat back, blinking up at the water that fell on his face. “What?”

“You said you were going to get me off with your tongue. Is jerking me off part of that? I say no.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. Zane was *really* making him work for it. “Fine. Whatever. I’m sure I can get you off even without giving you a handie.”

“Then do it!”

“I will if you’ll shut up and let me work.”

Ryan dove in again. He didn’t tease at all this time, just went after Zane’s ass like it was the last meal he’d ever eat. He sucked and licked and shoved his tongue in as deep as it would go until Zane was shaking above him, moaning low and long.

When Ryan’s knees had begun to ache and he was a little lightheaded from lack of oxygen, Zane let out a full-body shudder, his balls rhythmically contracting as he shot against the wall.

Ryan gently pulled his nuts closer and gave them a friendly lick too and Zane slapped the tile shower wall with the flat of his palm. “Fuck, Ryan.”

“You like that?” Ryan asked with a smirk. He was definitely going to have to suck on Zane’s balls sometime while he blew him to see how wound up he’d get.

Ryan stood with a quiet groan, his knees protesting after kneeling for so long on a hard surface, but he ignored them and pressed a kiss to Zane’s shoulder before leaning his chest against Zane’s back.

“I didn’t hear a yes,” he teased. He wiggled closer, his very hard dick sliding against Zane’s ass, settling between his cheeks, the tip dragging against his lower back.

“Yes, you asshole. I liked that. Holy shit.” Zane had braced himself on the tile with one bent forearm and his words were

muttered into his bicep.

Ryan smirked, brushing his lips against Zane's ear, making him shudder.

"Now tell me I was right," he teased, squeezing Zane's hips.

"I'll suck you off if you shut up right the fuck now," Zane said, straightening and turning in his arms.

But his smile was soft, and his eyes looked a little dazed.

Ryan smiled smugly back, then dragged a finger across his lips and made the "throw the key away" gesture.

He snagged a towel from where he'd draped it over the top of the shower, tossed it on the hard shower floor, then gently pushed down on Zane's shoulder with a smirk.

Zane went to his knees on the towel with a laugh, his hand big and warm as it wrapped around Ryan's dick.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Zane woke to the beep of his phone. He sleepily grabbed it off the nightstand and silenced it. He checked a few news sites and his social media, debating how much longer he could lie in bed before he had to get up and get ready for breakfast.

He'd thoroughly showered last night so he didn't need one this morning.

His face went hot at the memory of Ryan on his knees, eating his ass. It had been unexpectedly good. He'd never anticipated liking it so much, but Ryan had made it seem not so intimidating and he was glad he'd given it a chance.

He dragged the flat of his palm along his shaft, tempted to jerk off to the memory.

But the question Ryan had asked before he left made Zane pause, hand stilling.

"I'm kinda low on supplies, so I'd have to run out and grab some, but if you want, you could fuck my ass when we're in Vancouver, maybe."

Zane had frozen, staring at Ryan. He'd leaned against the door, smiling. Casual and relaxed like he'd asked Zane if he wanted to stay in and watch a movie and order takeout.

"Uhh," Zane had said, blinking.

He was still a little cum dumb from the orgasm in the shower and now Ryan was asking him if he wanted to fuck him.

Ryan had shrugged. “No biggie if you’re not into the idea. But I’m kinda curious about it. Thought I’d throw it out there.”

It killed Zane how casual about everything Ryan was. How easy it was for him. How everything seemed to be no big deal.

Zane had stammered out an, “I need to think about it,” and Ryan had nodded and kissed him, sliding his tongue into Zane’s mouth for a filthy kiss that had made Zane’s head spin.

Now, the sound of familiar voices in the hall outside Zane’s room reminded him that he needed to get moving so he didn’t miss breakfast. He dragged himself out of bed to use the bathroom and brush his teeth.

As Zane dragged on clothes, there was a knock on his door.

After the kiss by the door, Ryan had lobbied hard to spend the night and wake each other up with morning blowjobs but Zane was suddenly really fucking grateful he’d said no. Despite his pouting and whining, Zane had thrown him out. People were always knocking on Zane’s door needing him to fix something.

Sometimes guys got themselves in trouble but usually, they just needed advice or a listening ear.

Zane took his duties as team captain seriously and always did his best to help but he really hated when it happened before he got a cup of coffee in him. He really should be less of a pushover.

Maybe he should make that a new rule. No knocking on his door or cornering him after practice without bringing a cup of coffee as a bribe.

Zane opened the door, squinting tiredly at Brett Cooper on the other side.

He looked wrecked.

“Uh, what’s going on, man?” Zane asked with a frown. “You okay?”

“No. She’s mad at me.”

Zane stifled a sigh and motioned for him to come in. “C’mon in, man.” This wasn’t the first time Brett had needed relationship advice.

Thankfully, Zane had cleaned up a little after Ryan left last night. There was nothing weird or incriminating in the room, so he didn’t worry when Brett dragged himself through the door and collapsed onto the rumpled bed with a sigh.

“Why is Bethany mad at you?” Zane asked, leaning against the dresser. Brett’s girl was great but sometimes he was a little dense when it came to communication, and they fought.

“I didn’t answer her text last night.”

“Right,” Zane said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Why didn’t you answer her text?”

“Because I fell asleep! I played hard and then we flew here, and it was late. I got comfortable and planned to text her, but I crashed, and I missed it, okay? I didn’t *mean* to.”

“Did you try telling her that?”

“Well, I left her a text saying that, yeah. She read it but didn’t reply.” Brett heaved out a big sigh.

Sometimes Zane had no idea how to help the guys on his team with their relationship problems. He’d spent more time on the ice with Ryan than he ever had dating anyone.

But even *he* knew that was a piss-poor apology.

“Dude, call her,” Zane urged. “Call and apologize. Explain the situation. And then do something nice for her.”

“Like ... buy her gifts?”

“If you can think of something she’d really like, sure.”

“What else is there?”

Zane stared blankly, racking his brain for what he’d heard Dean Tremblay mention about stuff he’d done for his wife’s birthday. Dean and Naomi had been together for years and had a good marriage so Zane trusted that *he* wouldn’t do anything stupid.

“Well, you could, I don’t know ... plan a date for you two when you get back from this roadie?” he suggested.

“Oh.” Cooper’s face brightened. “There is this restaurant she’s been talking about wanting to go to, I guess.”

“Great. Then pick a non-game day and plan a whole date or whatever. Make reservations and send her the info. Or tell her you have a surprise planned. I don’t know. Just make it special.”

Brett grimaced. “Oh, she hates when there’s surprises. I tried that once for Valentine’s Day and she got mad because she wasn’t dressed right for what we were doing.”

Seriously, he was flying blind here. Pulling suggestions out of his ass.

“Uh, then ignore that part. Just plan a couple of things for Bethany, make any reservations you need, and let her know what the plan is.”

That seemed solid.

“Great idea.” Brett sat up with a smile. “I can do that.”

Zane let out a quiet noise of relief, reaching for his wallet and keys where he’d left them on the dresser last night. “Glad it helped. Now, c’mon. I want to get to breakfast before those assholes eat everything.”

“You’re the best, Cap.” Cooper punched him lightly in the chest. “Thanks.”

“Any time.” Zane swiped his phone off the bed, grabbed a snapback to cover his wild hair, then herded Brett out the door.

When they were out in the hall, Tremblay squinted at them.

“Are you stepping out on Hartinger with Cooper, Captain?”

Zane felt a weird jolt go through him. “What? Of course not!” he protested a little more forcefully than he intended.

Cooper and Tremblay both looked at him, blinking stupidly.

He tugged at the brim of his hat. “I mean, Coop showed up to ask about—”

“Plans with my fiancée,” Cooper said with a groan. “I pissed Bethany off and now I need to make it up to her. Murph here had some good suggestions.”

“Besides,” Zane scoffed. “I can’t step out on someone I’m not actually *with*.”

Tremblay gave him a skeptical look. “Mm-hmm. Sure.”

Zane rolled his eyes and walked off without another word.

He found most of the team in one of the conference rooms. Breakfast was set up buffet-style, with plenty of healthy options.

Zane helped himself to a mountain of scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, whole grain toast, avocado, and berries. He carried it to the table, then went back for a bowl of oats.

Ryan made a face when he sat down. His plate had eggs, waffles and bacon, the latter two drenched in syrup. “I don’t know how you eat oatmeal without sugar.”

Zane shrugged. “The bananas are pretty sweet. You know I’ve been trying to cut back on refined sugars and I feel like I need less of it now that my taste buds have acclimated.”

Besides, the almond butter and cinnamon gave it plenty of flavor.

Ryan squinted skeptically. “I know. I live with you dude. Our refrigerator is *sad*.”

“Uh-oh, Mom and Dad are fighting,” Cooper whispered.

Zane shot him the finger. “Call us that again and I will get you traded off this team so fast.”

Cooper gasped. “You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t try me.”

Zane wouldn’t. Hell, he wasn’t sure he had the pull to make it happen. The franchise liked him well enough, and he knew they wanted to keep him happy, but he’d never tried to throw his weight around and get a guy sent away.

He definitely wouldn't do it for a joke. But for a moment, he enjoyed the slightly uneasy look on Cooper's face as he wondered.

Conversation turned to the upcoming game tonight and Zane half zoned out. He really should have gotten more sleep last night. But it had been hard to convince himself to kick Ryan out.

Now, Ryan licked syrup off his fork and Zane had a flash of memory from the night before, the feeling of Ryan's tongue between his cheeks, his hands kneading them as he flicked his tongue in and out of Zane's hole.

Zane went hot and he looked down at his bowl, swirling the almond butter into the oats. *Shit*. This was bad. He wasn't supposed to be thinking about that kind of stuff when they were out at breakfast.

He couldn't really tell if Ryan was teasing him on purpose or just being Ryan and he couldn't decide which was worse.

*Focus*, Zane sternly reminded himself.

He couldn't let hooking up with Ryan divert him from everything he was trying to do with the team. He couldn't allow it to become a distraction.

But the back of Zane's neck was warm as he finished his breakfast.

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Zane seemed intense tonight.

"Dude, what the fuck happened there?" Ryan asked under his breath as they settled on the bench after a shift. "You nearly took that guy's head off."

"Webb's been a prick all period," Zane muttered, clutching his stick.

Ryan squinted. Zane usually let that shit roll right off. He *never* let it get to him. He was calm. Steady. Not at all a hothead. "Sure there isn't something else going on?"



“No. I’m fine.” Zane looked out at the ice, gaze sharp and focused on the puck battle happening at Calgary’s end of the arena.

Ryan shrugged and glanced up at the board. 1-1. He didn’t like games that were this tight, especially when they were in the third period, but he hadn’t been able to get past Calgary’s netminder, even though he’d managed quite a few shots on goal.

Lindy had the only point for the game. Not a big surprise. He was always their highest scorer, but Ryan had at least gotten the assist.

Zane was usually the second highest scorer on the team, and he was averaging around a point per game this season. He was great under pressure too and he usually came through when they were struggling.

But neither Zane’s play or the game improved that night.

The Otters had plenty of shots on goal, but it was one of those fluke matches where pucks that looked like they should go in went wide or bounced off the posts every time.

Zane had seemed especially distracted and for a moment Ryan felt a funny little flip in the pit of his stomach as he wondered if the question he’d asked him last night had made him upset.

What if Zane was regretting what they’d done? What if what they were doing was causing problems for the team?

Ryan didn’t want that.

“Get on the ice, Hartinger,” Coach Daniels shouted, slapping at his shoulder and Ryan launched himself over the boards without hesitation, annoyed that he was behind the play.

He needed to focus. He needed to prove to Zane that they could do this without it fucking up their game.

But their play didn’t improve as the minutes on the clock ticked down. Ryan tried but the entire team seemed tired from the roadie and the back-to-back games, growing listless and disjointed as no shots went in.

Ryan wasn't even surprised when Calgary's second line left winger slotted a puck in past Hajek—their new goalie from the Czech Republic.

Hajek flailed, swatting at the puck, but it was too late, and it landed in the back of the net.

After that, Calgary played keep-away with the puck and ran the last two minutes of the clock down, netting themselves a 2-1 win.

“Goddamn it,” Zane muttered as the hometown crowd cheered.

Ryan draped his arm over Zane's shoulder with a sympathetic sigh and they headed off the ice, defeat weighing heavily on their shoulders.



A reporter held out their recording device. “Zane, although you won in Edmonton, it was a near thing and after this loss in Calgary, are you concerned about how things are going for the team?”

“It didn't go the way we wanted tonight but we all know road games are tougher and this was a back-to-back,” he said, wiping at the sweat on his face, then settling his hat on his head. “We started out rough but we pushed hard in the second and third. It's just a matter of continuing to work at it going forward.”

“It seems like the team has been struggling to play a full sixty minutes. Is that something you're working on in practices?”

“Of course. We're continually trying to work on our game. We need to keep focusing on our systems.” He rattled off a couple more platitudes until the reporter was satisfied, then waited for the next question.

Another phone was pressed close to his mouth.

“It seemed like something Tommie Webb said made you angry during the first period. Can you speak to that?”

Zane cleared his throat, trying to find a tactful way to word this. “There are certain slurs that the league has banned usage of. We all know what they are and that some players continue to use them out of earshot of the refs. I let Webb know how I felt about the one he used tonight.”

Zane’s tone was a little more clipped than he usually used with the media but he was still pissed off and it was difficult to tone it down.

“Do you feel like that impacted your play tonight?” the reporter pressed.

“I try not to let it but hockey is a passionate game and at times things are gonna get a little heated,” he said as evenly as he could manage.

Yeah, it had impacted his play. Jesus, of course it had.

Zane had never liked the homophobic taunts thrown around and even in college he’d tried to keep it to a dull roar on his team.

It was suddenly hitting a whole lot closer to home now, though he certainly wasn’t going to say that to the media.

“What does the team need to do going forward?”

Zane wiped at the sweat still beading up on his neck, wanting them to *go away* so he could shower.

“We need to push forward with more urgency to our play. But to be honest, we had a lot of shots on goal in the last two periods. Calgary’s netminder was dialed in tonight and we weren’t able to get the pucks in net that we needed.”

After a few more inane questions, the media scrum ended and Zane stripped out of his sweaty base layers to shower.

From a few showerheads away, Ryan playfully waggled his eyebrows. Zane rolled his eyes and bit back a smile, grateful there weren’t too many other guys around and the ones who were paid them no attention.

Ryan could get away with shit like that because he’d always been that guy. He’d romped around the dressing room causing chaos from day one.

Every team needed someone like him. He was the energy maker for the team and Zane loved him for it. His antics in the locker room gave the guys a lift when they were down and kept them going when times got tough.

Ryan had playfully flirted his way around the locker room for years, in the way that straight hockey players so often did, the camaraderie and brotherhood of a team breaking down some of those barriers that existed in the outside world.

But though Zane had good-humoredly played along at times, he was never the one who initiated stuff and he knew if he started acting any differently, people would notice.

It left him hyperaware of everything he did.

He turned away and lathered his body, thinking again of the shit Webb had spewed at him.

Zane had heard it thousands of times before and it wasn't really pointed at *him*. Webb had no idea he and Ryan were involved. He was just trash talking.

Using homophobic language was shitty, no question, but Webb probably hadn't even meant anything by it. Or maybe he had. Zane really didn't know the guy except for when Evanston faced Calgary on-ice. Maybe he was a piece of shit all around, although he didn't have that reputation in the league.

But it had hit a raw nerve.

When Zane was already touchy about what he and Ryan had started and tonight was the night he'd have to tell Ryan if he was on board with fucking him or not, Webb's comment couldn't have come at a worse time.

The slur had made Zane's uncertainties flare up into a sharp, hot burst of temper that he now regretted.

"Hey, slowpoke, we have a bus to catch so we don't miss our plane."

A towel smacked his ass with a sharp pop as Ryan's words registered and Zane let out a grumble, rubbing the spot as he turned to face him. The wet room was empty of everyone else.

The plane wasn't going to leave without them of course but Zane had been moving kinda slow and he didn't want to hold the team up.

"I'll hurry," he promised, reaching for the shampoo.

"Good." Ryan's heated glance and lick of his lips wasn't subtle but since no one was around to see it, Zane wasn't concerned.

"Go," Zane said with a laugh. "Stop distracting me."

But nerves filled him again as soon as Ryan was gone. Were they really going to do this? Was he ready for this?

He still hadn't reached any conclusion by the time he boarded the bus to chirps from the team saying, "nice of you to join us, Cap" and "thanks for coming," from Coach Daniels.

The flight from Calgary to Vancouver was short and though Zane often went through videos on the plane with the coaches, they skipped it tonight.

They'd have the day off in Vancouver tomorrow to work.

After takeoff, Zane rummaged in his bag for his earbuds and eye mask, intending to get a little shut-eye.

He wiggled into a more comfortable position, his knee bumping Ryan's.

Around them, fabric rustled, and soft conversations filled the air as guys got comfortable. Zane connected his phone to his earbuds, popping one in.

As the team settled in for the flight, Ryan leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Hey, do you want me to pick up supplies for tonight or no?"

"Uh." Zane blinked and darted his gaze around the plane. "I guess?"

"We don't have to—"

"Yeah," Zane said breathlessly. "Um, get them. Just ... we'll play it by ear later, okay?"

"Sure." Ryan grinned. "We can always do something else if you want."

“Right.” Zane stuffed a pillow behind his head, reclining his seat a little. “We can talk more about it later.”

*When the entire goddamn team isn't sitting around us, he thought.*

But as he slipped the remaining earbud in and settled the eye mask over his face, his heart hammered like he was on a breakaway, streaking down the ice.

*Shit.*

He definitely wasn't napping now.

## CHAPTER TEN

---

Ryan turned a corner, the hotel within sight, the wind kicking up as he headed for the entrance with a bounce in his step.

While the team might typically spend the night feeling shitty about the loss, there were bigger things on Ryan's mind now.

The Otters had checked into the hotel half an hour ago, and Ryan had immediately headed out, ducking past Coach, who raised an eyebrow in question, since they were playing Vancouver the next day then flying home to play a home game the day after that.

The further into the season they got, the stricter Coach Daniels got about their post-game celebrations. Or in this case, drowning their sorrows after a loss.

But Ryan was a man on a mission tonight, and it wasn't like the team had an official curfew and bed checks. Some teams did, more often during playoffs than the regular season—but no one had questioned why he'd gone out tonight.

Ryan wasn't the type to get in trouble for boozing or women or bar brawls or drugs, so he figured they weren't too worried about what he'd get up to. As long as he played well tomorrow, no one would question it.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Malone asked when they passed in the lobby, completely disproving Ryan's theory. He looked like he was heading for the bar or—more accurately—the blonde in the short dress sitting at the far end of it.

Ryan shrugged and shook the plastic bag he carried. “Needed to grab a few things.”

Malone reached for the bag, peering inside. “A toothbrush? Candy? Dude, you know the concierge would have brought that shit up to your room, right?”

Ryan did know that. The five-star hotel’s service was top-notch.

As a dude from a middle-class family who had grown up in a small Midwestern town, it still astonished him sometimes that he got paid a shitload of money to smack a frozen chunk of rubber around some ice. He wasn’t complaining but he’d never really gotten used to having more money than he knew what to do with.

His tricked-out Jeep, a nice watch, some great custom suits, and a little bit of off-season travel was all he really splurged on. The guys gave him and Murphy shit for being so frugal but they weren’t luxury-type people, he guessed.

Their apartment was pretty swanky but with them sharing the payment, it wasn’t so bad.

Malone had grown up with heaps of money, so he was more than happy to throw it around. And he definitely expected to be catered to. He also treated waitstaff like shit, so apparently growing up rich didn’t come with having good manners.

“Yeah,” Ryan said casually. “Just wanted to stretch my legs. I was feeling restless.”

Malone nodded. “Gotcha. Well, don’t wait up for me. I have a date.” He winked and made a beeline for the bar before Ryan could reply.

*Me too*, Ryan thought.

Of course, he’d never say that aloud to Zane. He’d probably have a heart attack at the thought of dating. He was definitely a “one slow step at a time” kinda guy.

That was okay. Ryan was patient. At least when it came to shit like this.



As Ryan walked toward the elevator, he patted the inner pocket of his jacket to be sure the other things he'd picked up for the night were still there. Yep, right where he'd left them. Whatever some of his teammates said, he wasn't stupid.

Hockey players were nosy fucks and he'd known someone might peek into the bag.

*In the lobby. I'll be up in a few.* He fired off the text to Zane, and when he arrived at his room, he found the door propped open. He stepped inside, not glancing behind him. He'd have to be a hell of a lot more careful when he left in the morning, but for now, no one would think twice about him going into Murphy's room.

They could always say they were playing their own card game. He snickered.

Strip poker, maybe.

Ryan closed the door and locked it, then clicked the deadbolt into place to be safe.

"Thought maybe you'd changed your mind," Zane said when Ryan stepped into the main part of the room. He sat on the bed, dressed in sweatpants and no shirt, watching ESPN.

"Nope." Ryan tossed the bag onto the mattress beside him. Zane pawed through it, then raised an eyebrow.

Ryan reached into his pocket, then flipped the other two items on the bed.

"Oh." Zane let out a breath like someone had punched him in the gut as he stared at the lube and condoms.

"Hey." Ryan shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it on the nearby desk. "We don't have to do this if—"

"No, I want to." Zane's swallow was audible as Ryan took a seat next to him. "Just a little nervous."

"Don't be." Ryan ran a hand through Zane's hair, pulling him in for a kiss. "It's me."

"I know." Zane fell back onto the mattress, pulling Ryan with him until he was sprawled over him. "That's the only reason

I'm not totally freaking out.”

Ryan smiled, liking that Zane could take his weight. That he never had to worry about being too big or rough. Though rough was the last thing he was feeling at the moment. He felt oddly soft and tender about Zane. Wanting to reassure Zane that he had nothing to worry about. He was safe here with Ryan.

“It’s just new.” A little furrow appeared between Zane’s heavy brows.

“I know.” Ryan looked down into his eyes, smoothing a thumb across the scar that bisected Zane’s left eyebrow. He’d been there three years ago when Zane had taken the glancing blow from the Montreal defenseman’s stick and gotten back on the ice a few minutes later to shoot the winning goal of the game. “But if you want to stop, we stop.”

“Shouldn’t I be saying that to you? I mean, you’re the one who —”

“Is going to take it up the ass?” Ryan helpfully supplied.

Zane snorted. “Well, I wasn’t going to put it like that.”

“Yeah, but it’s true, right?” That was what they’d talked about anyway.

Was Ryan nervous? Fuck yeah. But he hadn’t gotten where he was by not going after the shit he wanted. Did he want to look back in ten years and wonder what it might have been like to try this? Hell no. So he was going to do it anyway.

“If you *want*.” Zane looked especially earnest.

“Look, maybe I’ll hate it,” Ryan said. Though if the little sparks that had tickled through his body when Zane had slipped a wet finger inside him while blowing him last night in the Edmonton hotel room shower was any indication, he probably wouldn’t. “If so, we put it on pause or on hold forever or ... look, don’t overthink this, dude.”

Zane groaned and stared up at the ceiling. “That’s what I do.”

“And that’s why you have me.” Ryan stole a kiss, then grinned down at him. “So we’re gonna try this and we’ll go from there.

It's not gonna make or break anything. It's just something new."

"Yeah, okay." Zane brought his hand up and coaxed Ryan's head down into another kiss. "Let's just do *this* for a while, though."

"Hell yeah," Ryan said huskily. Making out with Zane was at the top of his list of very favorite things to do. Why the fuck had they waited a decade to do this shit?

A while later, when Zane's lips were all kiss-swollen and Ryan's tingled from the soft abrasion of Zane's beard, he drew back.

He'd lost his shoes, shirt, and pants somewhere along the way. Zane still wore a soft pair of sweats, but Ryan was aching for skin on skin.

"Can we lose the rest?" he breathed against Zane's mouth, sliding a hand up and down his back as they lay on their sides.

His cock ached and this slow tease was fucking torture. Perfect, amazing torture.

"Yeah, get them off." Zane's voice was gritty, his gaze intense as he shoved at Ryan's cheetah-print underwear. Ryan rolled away, shucking them before he turned back and reached for Zane's sweats. His dick sprang out, thick and hard, and Ryan bent down and licked a stripe up the side.

Zane was leaking, and Ryan lapped up the taste of him for a while before Zane pushed him away. "You want me to last long enough to fuck you, you're going to have to hold off on that shit."

"Yeah, okay," Ryan said roughly. He straddled Zane's torso and knelt over his abs before reaching for the supplies tangled in the sheets.

He ripped open the box, scattering the foil packets across the white fabric, then grabbed the bottle of lube.

Zane lay beneath him, lips parted, and Ryan grinned down at him while he slicked up a couple of fingers. He braced his other hand on the bed and reached behind himself. The lube

was cool, and he shuddered when he rubbed fingertips across his opening.

Ryan slid one finger in, taking that easily enough because he'd been practicing—with and without Zane's help—but two sent another tremor through him.

"Fuck," he whispered.

Zane ran a hand down his back. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just ... damn."

"Good?" Zane settled a hand on his ass and squeezed.

"Mm-hmm." He closed his eyes and worked his fingers in deeper, groaning at the way it stretched him and filled him up.

"Tell me what it feels like?"

"Full." Ryan let out a desperate little noise as he began fucking himself, rocking the two fingers in and out.

Zane had both of his hands on Ryan's ass now, kneading the muscles. A moment later, Zane brushed a finger between his cheeks. "Maybe I can help."

"Fuck yeah." Ryan opened his eyes. "Do it. Add a finger."

"Don't want to hurt you."

Ryan chuckled. "Dude, I took a fucking puck to the thigh the other night. I can handle another finger in my ass."

Zane laughed too, sweeping his finger along Ryan's crack, making it slick before he pushed in beside Ryan's fingers.

It burned like hell and Ryan let out a hiss, but when Zane froze, partway in, Ryan stared down at him. "Do it."

Zane grinned and pushed forward.

Ryan felt like someone had a grip around his throat as he struggled to breathe through it, and then his body lit up like Christmas lights. He cradled the back of Zane's hand against his palm, his middle and index fingers snugged right up against Zane's middle, using both their fingers to fuck himself. Three thick digits, spreading him open.

“Shit, shit.” He let out a little shudder when they grazed against something inside him that sent a tingle through his whole body. “Oh, fuck that’s good.”

“Yeah?” Zane gripped his hip, guiding Ryan to ride their fingers.

“Christ, yes. That’s ... need your dick,” he said, heat crawling across his body as he sat up. He grimaced when he pulled his and Zane’s hands away a little too fast, but he reached for the closest condom packet anyway.

It slipped in his sweaty fingers and Zane took it from him. “I got you.”

Ryan sucked in a few deep breaths, almost shaking with need as Zane opened the foil and covered his cock. When the latex was snugly in place, Zane slicked himself and met Ryan’s gaze. “You want it like this? You riding me?”

“Yeah, at least for now.”

“Okay.” Zane squeezed Ryan’s hip with one hand, guiding him up to hover over him, holding the base of his dick in place so Ryan could lower himself. As bad as Ryan wanted to drop down over him, Zane wasn’t hurting in the size department and although the head slipped in a little way, he froze before it could go any deeper, body tightening around the intrusion.

“You’ve got this,” Zane said soothingly, like he knew Ryan was the one with the nerves now. “Look at me, Ryan.”

His gaze snapped to his captain’s and he nodded, his lungs loosening enough to pull in air. The world narrowed until there was only the soft sweep of Zane’s thumb against his hip, the warmth of his body against Ryan’s inner thighs, the caring look in his eyes.

He knew those eyes, that face. He *trusted* him.

And so Ryan breathed and unclenched and sank down a few more inches, groaning at the pressure, the fullness, the drag of Zane’s cock against his inner walls.

“Fuck.” Ryan’s voice was breathy.

A flicker of worry crossed Zane's face, but Ryan stopped it with his mouth, bending down and brushing their lips together.

They made out a while, Ryan's arms braced on the bed while he rocked his hips, slowly taking more and more of Zane into him until he was all the way down.

"Fuck yes," he breathed when Zane was balls-deep, and Zane chuckled, running warm hands up his back and pulling their bodies more tightly together.

"Good?"

"So fucking good." Ryan sat up, shifting his hips experimentally, knowing it was probably taking every ounce of Zane's focus to not thrust. Taking care of him, looking out for him like always.

Ryan's chest felt weirdly full at that thought.

But then Zane rocked his hips and they both groaned.

Ryan began to move, rocking in earnest, raising and lowering over Zane until sparks shot out from deep inside him, crawling up his spine.

"Oh God, *Zane*," he gasped, dropping his head again until their foreheads rested together.

"I know." Zane's voice was strangled and his hands bit into Ryan's hips, helping him move. The soft slap of their bodies and their quiet groans spurred them on. They went on like that a while until Zane stilled his motion, shuddering.

"Hold up. I'm close. I'm gonna bust soon if we don't slow it down a minute."

"No." Ryan reached for Zane's hand, guiding it to his dick. "Stroke me and I'll come with you."

Zane fumbled for the lube and a moment later they were back at it, Ryan's thighs burning from the earlier skate and post-game workout as he rode Zane, taking him hard and fast.

Zane's grip on his dick was everything, slick and tight, moving in time with the buck of his hips, and Ryan released a strangled yell when he shot, cum arcing out. He clenched

around Zane, who let out a raw noise of surrender, shaking under him, grip too tight. But Ryan didn't care because the world went white and every muscle tightened as he rode out the orgasm, coming apart at the seams.

A while later—a minute or a week, he couldn't have said—he dropped onto Zane's chest with a groan, burying his face against that spot on Zane's neck that smelled so good.

Zane wrapped his arms around him and rolled him onto his side, breathing harshly. They were both sweaty and panting lightly from the exertion.

“Shit,” Ryan said, his voice muffled by Zane's skin. He pressed a kiss there.

“Good shit?” Zane asked. The thump of his heart was steady against Ryan's palm.

“Fuck yeah.” Ryan clenched again but realized Zane was beginning to soften inside him. “You?”

Zane eased away and stripped off the condom, tying it off before tossing it into the trash nearby.

Ryan pulled away when Zane didn't say anything. “Hey, we good?”

Zane gave him a smile and cupped his cheek, pulling him in for another kiss. “Oh yeah, we're good.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Zane woke up in the morning with Ryan sprawled half on top of him, still out cold.

Or warm, in this case. He ran hot, always had, and Zane had to slip out from under him before he roasted to death.

He slid out of the bed without disturbing him and reached down to pull on his discarded sweats. They'd fucked twice last night, Ryan taking it both times and swearing he wasn't too sore, though Zane had caught a glimpse of his wince when he washed in the shower after round two.

Zane wondered why he didn't feel different.

The fact that he'd had his dick up another guy's ass should have changed everything, but it didn't. It was him and Ryan, the way it had always been. Hell, it was less weird than the times in his life when he'd woken up next to a woman he'd met at a bar the night before.

Zane went to stand in front of the window, twitching back the curtain to see the gray dawn skyline of Vancouver. The hotel was right on the water, the city to the left, the harbor to the right, and straight ahead, in the distance, the Cascade Mountains spread out in front of him.

Zane swallowed past a lump in his throat, not sure why he was getting choked up about all this. He'd stayed here before—plenty of times. It wasn't the spectacular view. It was something tight in his chest that had been there since the night before.



Maybe things *were* different after all.

He glanced back at the bed, staring at Ryan's sprawled-out form.

Zane's body heated with the memories of Ryan riding him, Ryan under him, Ryan's surprised gasp when he released, coating both their bodies while Zane shuddered inside him. It had been so good it was like he'd somehow taken sex to the next level. It wasn't so different from how he'd felt early in his pro career, playing for the AHL team, then getting called up to the Otters.

Like something that had been missing before had clicked into place.

There was this tickle of fear in the back of Zane's mind, though, the ever-present worry that something would derail their progress, their march toward the playoffs. Toward the Cup. His head kept going around in circles, thinking about how fucking complicated things had gotten in the past. Just because he and Ryan were doing well now didn't mean it couldn't go wrong later.

If Zane had been a smarter man, maybe he would have told Ryan no that first night. Or last night.

But there'd been something perfect in the way they'd tumbled into bed last night, damp from the shower, unable to stop kissing each other. They'd fallen asleep, bodies tangled together, and it had felt right.

Zane could spend the rest of the season worrying that this thing between them was going to fuck things up or he could spend it enjoying what they were doing.

And if it was a choice between head-spinning orgasms and heated kisses and his best friend asleep in his arms ... or going back to the way things had been before, well, he knew which he'd pick.

Zane heard the rustle of sheets and a moment later, Ryan wrapped warm hands around his waist. He bent in, kissing the spot where Zane's neck and shoulder met, sending a pleasant shiver through Zane's body.

“We good?” Ryan’s voice was low and sleep roughened as he checked in. Making sure Zane was okay.

Zane let out the air he’d been holding and nodded, threading his fingers through Ryan’s. “We’re good. I promise.”

---

For a moment there, Ryan had been sure that Zane had regretted what they’d done. But he breathed easier when Zane turned in his arms, touching his face, expression relaxed.

“How do you feel?” Zane asked.

“Fucking amazing.” Ryan smiled and heard a quiet laugh when Zane leaned in, pressing his lips to Ryan’s throat.

“Yeah, me too.”

“You could fuck me again,” Ryan whispered, arching his back to press his hips to Zane’s lower body, morning hard-on pushing at the underwear he’d put on a few moments ago.

“Or you could get your ass down to your room so no one discovers we spent the night together,” Zane said against his mouth.

“We could say there was another ceiling leak,” Ryan offered hopefully.

Zane chuckled and turned away. “We could, but I’m not sure people would buy it. We’re not in the junior leagues and staying in shithole motels.” He gestured to the luxurious room around them.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryan grumbled, but he was too happy to complain. Truth was, his ass was a little sore. Didn’t mean he wouldn’t happily take a pounding again, but Zane was probably right. Ryan slipping into Zane’s room last night wasn’t anything anyone would take notice of. Him slipping out of it in the wee hours of the morning ... that they might question since it had been happening a lot lately. “Fine, I’ll go back to my room.”

“Makes you wish for the days of guys doubling up, huh?” Zane said wistfully, gathering the condoms and lube and tucking them into an inner pocket of his suitcase.

“Seriously.” Ryan scratched at his stubble. “Okay, I’ll get out of here. Give me a kiss before I go?”

“You’re going five rooms down and across the hall, not off to war,” Zane grumbled but he slid a hand around Ryan’s back when he stepped close.

The kiss turned lingering and deep, and Ryan was just about to drop to his knees when Zane stepped back. “Go,” he said with a laugh.

Ryan slipped on his clothes from the night before—*shit, really should have thought that through. How am I going to explain why I’m in a suit from the night before if I run into anyone?*—as Zane reached for his phone.

Ryan grabbed the bag of candy and the unused toothbrush on his way to the door, but he froze with his fingertips on the handle as he heard male voices approaching.

“I think someone is coming,” he hissed.

“I know they are,” Zane hissed back, closer than he’d realized. Zane tugged on his arm and Ryan stumbled away from the door.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

“It’s Daniels and Tate,” Zane said under his breath, pushing Ryan toward the bathroom. “Tate texted me about a strategy meeting.”

“At this hour?”

“Maybe he’s still back on Central Time. I don’t know. I’m going to try to distract them and get them out of the room. You stay in there and don’t make a fucking noise.”

And then Ryan was being shoved into a darkened bathroom and the door was closed in his face. He blinked, heart beating fast with the fear of discovery. He groped his way through the black until his hands hit the glass wall of the shower and he

sank down onto the still-damp floor mat outside of it just as he heard the quiet rap of knuckles on a door.

“Coach Daniels. Coach Tate.” Zane’s voice sounded weird, even through walls and a door.

“We catch you at a bad time?” Daniels asked.

“Uh.” Zane cleared his throat. “Just woke up and saw your text. What did you want to discuss?”

“Well, I’m thinking about switching up the lineup for tonight’s game. We’ve been working your line hard the past few days and despite last night’s loss, we’re in a pretty good spot for the season.”

Ryan had to strain to hear the low rumble of Coach Daniels’ voice. He shifted, but the crinkle of the bag in his hand made him freeze.

“Vancouver ... should be a fairly easy win,” Tate said. “We were discussing the idea of starting Mikhailov, Tremblay, and Sharp tonight. Give the first line a bit of a rest and you can hit it hard when we’re home again.”

“Yeah, yeah, that sounds good to me.” Zane sounded a little rattled. So unlike him.

“I was also thinking—”

“Coach,” Zane interrupted, clearing his throat. “Could you, uh, give me a few? I was ... well the truth is I was about to use the bathroom before you knocked and—”

“Oh shit.” Daniels laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, do your thing, Murphy. How about you meet us in the conference room in twenty? We’ll rustle up some food and coffee for you.”

“Perfect, Coach,” Zane said, the relief in his voice clear. A few moments later, their voices disappeared and the hotel room door closed.

A lock clicked into place and a moment later, Zane pulled the bathroom door open. Light flooded in, making Ryan blink.

He stood, plastic bag still clutched in his hand. “You handled that well.”

“Fucking thought I was going to have a heart attack,” Zane grumbled.

“Same,” Ryan admitted.

Zane reached out to grasp Ryan’s wrist, tugging him toward the door. He followed obediently. “Okay, c’mon. Let’s check to be sure the coast is clear again.”

“Enjoy your meeting,” Ryan said as Zane peered through the peephole.

“Thanks.” He sounded distracted.

“Hey.” Ryan tugged at Zane’s shirt, forcing him to turn and look at him. “Thanks for last night. It was pretty fucking amazing.”

Zane’s tense expression softened. “It was.”

“Looking forward to testing the beds in Carolina in a couple of days,” Ryan teased. “Think we can fuck hard enough to break them?”

“Jesus, keep your voice down,” Zane hissed, but he crowded Ryan up against the wall and kissed him. When he drew back a minute later, his hands lingered on Ryan’s hips. “And no. There will be no bed breaking. That’s *asking* to get caught.” He looked away. “And look, maybe we should skip Carolina. I need some sleep and you probably need a few days to recover anyway.”

“No pain, no gain,” Ryan joked but Zane rolled his eyes.

“Shut up, you idiot.” But his tone was filled with affection. “Let me see if there’s anyone coming.”

There wasn’t, so Ryan dropped one last kiss on Zane’s lips and slipped out into the hall. His heart beat a little fast as he hurried to his room and the card reader seemed to take forever to scan his key and let him in. But when he was safely inside, he breathed easier.

And then he wondered. Was it *really* such a big deal if someone saw?

What was the worst that would happen? They'd know he and Zane were fucking? Ryan smirked. Hell, half of them probably assumed it already.

But his smile slipped when he considered what it would be like to have everyone actually know about them. Zane had certainly acted freaked out about the coaches finding them together and Ryan could understand that. But why was he suggesting they skip a hookup in Carolina?

*Ugh.*

Wasn't it safer for them to hook up at home where no one would find out? They lived together, for fuck's sake. No one was going to notice if Ryan slipped into Zane's room *there*.

Shit, they were doing this backwards, weren't they?

Maybe once they got home, they could talk about it.

Or Ryan could beg Zane to let him ride his dick again. He smiled at the thought.

Yeah, that sounded even better.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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They didn't talk when they got home, but they didn't skip Carolina either. In fact, the weeks blurred together in a haze of hockey and sex that had Ryan sporting a permanent grin and all-too-frequent hard-ons when he thought about what was to come after every away game.

They went out with the team to dinners and to grab drinks with a few of the guys.

They even had a big celebration for Ryan's thirtieth birthday, which was a blast.

They enjoyed their time out but they didn't even have to discuss it to know that neither of them was going to leave with anyone else. No flirtatious bartender or fan could compete with the way it felt to have Zane fuck him until he shot all over the headboard.

Not even the freaky French-Canadian chick.

And they were winning. Not every game—the Otters weren't invincible, and Ryan and Zane weren't the only ones on the ice—but with their top line on fire, the team racked up a streak of victories while they played Los Angeles, Minnesota, Washington, and Winnipeg. They lost to Montreal and Tampa, then had another winning streak against Pittsburgh, San Jose, Nashville, and Dallas.

Colorado was a loss, but considering what a bitch adjusting to the altitude was, Ryan wasn't surprised. The team often won their home games.

When the Otters' flight landed back in Chicago, the airport was decked with trees, garlands, and lights and Ryan was abruptly reminded that it was nearly Christmas. Tomorrow he'd head home for four days while Zane flew to Ithaca, New York, to see his family.

"Four whole days," Ryan complained when they drove from the airport to their place in Evanston. He was fucking exhausted, his body ached, and he was still fighting a low-key headache from the altitude and dry air in Colorado, not to mention on the plane.

Zane laughed, downshifting his Audi. "You can go without sex for four days, man. I've seen you go a lot longer than that."

"But *why*?" Ryan settled his hand on Zane's thigh. "We're ten minutes from our place. I could have you coming down my throat in fifteen."

"Christ." Zane cleared his throat, shifting in his seat.

Ryan leaned over. "Or I could suck you off now."

"In the car? Fuck no. I can see the headlines now. *Evanston River Otters Players Die in Fiery Crash Caused by Gay Blowjob.*"

"Nah, some PR person from our agency will make sure the gay blowjob part stays out of the headlines," Ryan joked.

But Zane shook his head. "You're not blowing me in the car, Hartinger."

"Back at the apartment?"

"No," Zane said with a laugh. "On the twenty-ninth. When we're in Colorado again."

"Shit, that's *eight* days," Ryan complained. They had a few home games between Christmas and New Year's. Most of the time that was better than being on the road, but this year, he hated the idea. "Seriously. What the fuck, man?"

"I know it seems arbitrary, but ..."

"But what?" Ryan asked. He crossed his arms over his chest. "This is ridiculous, Zane. If it's the risk you're worried about,



it's way riskier to do it on the road.”

Zane's hands flexed on the steering wheel. “It's not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“If we're living together and fucking, it'll feel too ...”

“Too much like we're actually dating?” Ryan asked bluntly.

Zane cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

“Would that be the worst fucking thing in the world?”

“No.” He cleared his throat again. “I'm worried it'll screw things up for us. Sex is simple. You start putting feelings into it and it gets complicated.”

Ryan bit his tongue to keep from pointing out that no matter *where* they had sex, feelings could creep in either way. And maybe they were already there.

The sex was blistering hot, and they already had a friendship. Wasn't that pretty much dating already? Or at least, the best version of dating he'd ever done. And it wasn't like either of them had hooked up with anyone else since the season started. But Ryan could see that this was a big deal to Zane. And given the way Zane's past relationship had imploded, he could understand why he was wary of commitment.

“Yeah, alright,” he grumbled. “But you owe me an epic night in Colorado. And I mean *epic*. I don't care if it requires Viagra.”

Zane chuckled. “Colorado is the place to take it, too. There are still those rumors that it helps increase oxygenation and improve athletic performance.”

Ryan snickered. Zane would never resort to that sort of thing. He would feel like he hadn't earned the win if relied on that sort of thing to do it.

Not every guy cared but Ryan definitely felt the same. Well, mostly.

“We'll beat Colorado's ass this time with or without erectile dysfunction drugs. And right now, I care less about your athletic performance than your sexual performance.”

“Hey, fuck you.” Zane laughed as they turned into the garage under their building and he waved his pass at the reader. “My playing is top-notch, and other than not fucking you 24/7, you should have no cause to complain about my performance in the bedroom.” He pulled into his spot beside Ryan’s tricked-out Jeep. “And besides, I told you, hockey comes first.”

Ryan thought about those words while they unloaded the vehicle and carried their bags up to their fourth-floor place.

Zane’s words shouldn’t have stung. He was always single-minded about hockey. Always had been, always would be. Oh, he had a plan for after retirement. They both did. They weren’t stupid. Hockey would end eventually, and they both knew that the guys who didn’t have plans often wound up broke and fucked up when hockey disappeared from their lives.

But until then, nothing would come before hockey for Zane. Not even Ryan. And that was a sucker punch of a feeling.

“Hey, you still pouting that I won’t fuck you?” Zane asked a while later when they sat on their couch, watching the latest episode of their favorite show.

Ryan had to admit he was enjoying the scenes with shirtless male firefighters a whole lot more this season. Preston Graves and Jay Morton were fucking *hot*.

How had he never known this about himself before? He knew he could be a little oblivious but he wasn’t that dumb, was he?

“What?” Ryan looked over at Zane. “No. Just tired from the game.”

Honestly, he should have headed to bed, especially since he’d be driving to visit his parents tomorrow and needed to be alert on the road, but he kept thinking about the time he’d be away from Zane. It was pathetic. It had never mattered before. He’d always loved going home for Christmas and seeing his family. But this year, he’d rather have stayed holed up in the apartment, just the two of them.

Zane patted his thigh. “Get some sleep, dude.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ryan sat up and repressed the urge to grab Zane and pull him in for a kiss. Hell, Ryan wouldn’t have cared if

Zane wanted to keep sex for on the road if he was still up for making out or sharing a bed at home. But he wasn't.

Ryan didn't know how Zane kept things so separate. Ryan was no fucking good at it. Sure, on the ice, they both had a single-minded focus. But off the ice? Ryan couldn't see how he was supposed to suddenly *not* want Zane.

He always wanted him. In a lot more ways than he knew what to do with. And maybe that was exactly what Zane was running away from.

Without another word, Ryan got up and walked down the hall to his bedroom.

Maybe Zane was right. Maybe the time apart would be good.

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Zane was bleary-eyed in the morning as he fixed coffee, glad all he had to do was hop on a plane and nap until it arrived in Ithaca. He'd slept like shit and most of it was because of Ryan's hangdog expression at being denied last night.

In the end, Zane was pretty sure it wasn't about getting laid though.

He knew Ryan was into this for more than blowjobs and a good fucking. And hell, Zane was too. A part of him could admit that, even if it made him feel all squirmy inside. He just couldn't seem to shove away the thought that everything would go to hell with their game if they changed things up. Sure, they'd had a great season. They'd been more in sync than ever.

But what happened if they let it become *more* than sex? What if they had their first fight? What if their personal relationship fucked up the best professional relationship Zane had ever had? And it wasn't only the money on the line or the bragging rights he was worried about. It was that he'd already spent twenty-five years pushing himself to be the best hockey player he could be, and he couldn't lose it all when he was so close to having what he wanted within reach.

Zane had a plan for his future, and he wasn't going to be that washed-up player who did nothing but talk about his glory days in the NHL. But he wanted to end it on a high note. He'd never regretted staying with the Otters—which had as much to do with being on the same team as Ryan as anything—but goddamn it, he wanted a Stanley Cup win. He wanted to go out knowing he'd achieved his ultimate goal.

He wasn't the highest-scoring guy on the team—that was Lindy—and he'd never be flashy on the ice like Tremblay and Malone, but his numbers were damn good, and he could be the solid, dependable captain who led his team to the win.

Zane had finished fixing his coffee and preparing a travel mug for Ryan when Ryan wandered into the kitchen, yawning. He was shirtless, dressed in his usual uniform of brightly colored briefs and nothing else.

Zane went dry-mouthed, staring at him.

If Ryan thought Zane didn't want him all the time, he was crazy. Hell, that was the problem. Sometimes Zane thought there was finally something he wanted more than hockey, and that was terrifying. He'd never felt anything like it before.

“Coffee?” Zane rasped, holding out the mug to Ryan.

He smiled. That slow, sweet smile that made Zane's heart stop every time.

“Thanks, Murph.”

Zane smiled at the nickname. “You're welcome.” He glanced at the clock on the microwave and his bags by the door. “My ride to the airport should be here any minute.”

“We should have stayed at a hotel near O'Hare last night,” Ryan said with a yawn.

“Why, so we could have fucked?” Zane considered the idea. Would he have gone for it? Maybe. Probably. He'd nearly caved last night.

“Well, that would've been nice but no, not what I meant.” Ryan scratched his head. “I meant so you didn't have to get up so early this morning for your flight.”

“Yeah, we probably should have then. Might have slept better too. I’m getting pretty used to having you next to me in bed.”

“Yeah?” Ryan set down his mug and stepped forward. “That so?”

“Yup.” Nerves fluttered in Zane’s stomach at even admitting that much.

“Well, you know how to fix it.”

Ryan’s tone was neutral, but it still sent a little pang through Zane.

“Yeah, I do,” he said softly. “How about this? I’ll take Christmas to think about some things.”

Ryan shot him a wary look. “What kind of things?”

“You and me things.” He looked Ryan in the eye. “I’m not saying I know what I’m doing here or even what I want to be doing, but I know the only-on-the-road thing is chafing at you. I’ll think about a renegotiation when we get back.”

“Yeah?” Ryan’s face lit up. “I’d be up for some long, hard bargaining sessions.”

Zane chuckled and stepped forward. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He glanced at the time again. “I really do have to go though.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ryan twitched, like he was going to reach out to Zane or something, but subsided. “Drive safe. Watch out for deer.”

After having lived in the Midwest for all his adult life, Zane knew that was code for ‘I love you.’

“Deer? On an airplane? When I’m flying thirty thousand feet in the air?” he teased because that was so much easier than admitting the way the words sent his heart rate soaring.

He knew Ryan loved him. They’d loved each other for years. But he’d always thought it was in that platonic way good buddies and teammates loved each other. The “I’d do anything for you, man” kind of way.

But maybe ... maybe it really was more. Maybe it always had been.

Ryan grinned. “Well, it is Christmastime. You never know. There could be a reindeer or two.”

Zane chuckled and closed the distance between them, sliding his hands along Ryan’s waist. “I’ll watch out.” He pressed his lips to Ryan’s, tasting coffee and mint on his tongue.

Aww, he’d brushed, hoping for a kiss.

Zane let it linger, making it slow and hot as he teased his tongue against Ryan’s. How could this be *so good* every time?

He didn’t pull away until his phone buzzed on the counter. Probably his ride letting him know they were five minutes out. Shit.

“Gotta go,” he said regretfully after he drew back.

The heated look in Ryan’s gaze faded to one of disappointment. “Yeah, okay.”

“See you soon,” Zane said. He turned away and walked toward the entrance of their apartment. “Merry Christmas.”

“Wait!”

Ryan’s urgent tone stopped Zane in his tracks, and he turned back with a frown. “What’s up?”

“I have a Christmas gift for you. Hang on.” Ryan jogged down the hall, muscles in his broad shoulders flexing.

“I thought we were exchanging them when we both got back,” Zane called after him as he shrugged on his favorite brown leather jacket.

“We are!” Ryan’s voice was muffled now. “But this one you’re going to need before then.”

Zane’s phone buzzed again, alerting him that his ride was there, and he tapped out a quick message, telling the driver he’d be down in a few and that he’d tip extra if he waited.

***Sure thing***, he got back, so he stuffed his phone in his pocket.

Ryan jogged back toward him, carrying a garishly wrapped gift. They didn’t have a tree—they never did, what was the point when they were never home to enjoy it?—but they had a

stack of gifts for each other under the TV. *This* was apparently something other than their usual.

“What is it?” Zane asked.

“Well, I’m not going to tell you,” Ryan said with a laugh. “You’ll have to open it.”

“Now?”

“No, not until Christmas.”

“Damn it,” Zane said, laughing too. “Any more rules?”

“Yes. Don’t open it in front of your family.”

Zane raised an eyebrow. Ryan was known for his gag gifts and Zane could only imagine what he’d come up with this year.

Oh hell. Zane was in trouble, wasn’t he?

“Okay.” He stuffed the package in his backpack. “How about this? Christmas night, after the festivities wind down, I’ll Skype you and open it on cam.”

“You could Skype me before then,” Ryan said with a little grin. “Show me how damn much you miss me.”

“I’ll think about it,” Zane said. He grasped the back of Ryan’s neck and pulled him in for another quick, heated kiss. “Now, I really do have to go. Merry Christmas, Ryan.”

Ryan gently knocked their foreheads together. “Merry Christmas, Zane.”

“Watch out for deer,” Zane said as he stepped back and turned away, but not before he saw the flicker of surprise cross Ryan’s face and a light in his eyes that made something in Zane’s chest feel funny.

It wasn’t like they’d never said ‘I love you’ before, but it had always been a ‘love you, man’ because most of the time, straight dudes—especially of the hockey-playing variety—didn’t really open up about their feelings for each other a whole lot. But he supposed he and Ryan weren’t exactly as straight as they’d once thought they were.

And maybe ‘watch out for deer’ was the coward’s way of saying it, but Zane *did* care. He cared a whole hell of a lot. So much it twisted him all up inside.

But saying how he really felt, using the word love, that felt so much more weighted now than it had in the past.

He snagged his suitcase and wheeled it out into the hall, raising a hand to wave goodbye to Ryan. He stood in the doorway to their apartment, shirtless, sporting bedhead and clutching his coffee like it was the only thing keeping him upright.

Zane had the sudden urge to cancel his ride, his flight, and his Christmas, and lock himself in his apartment with Ryan for the next four days.

Instead, he turned away and walked down the hallway, aware of Ryan’s gaze on his retreating back until he turned the corner.

*Just give me a little more time, Ryan, he silently pleaded. Don’t give up on me yet.*



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The drive to Indiana was boring as hell.

Better than the time Ryan had driven home for Christmas in a snowstorm a few years back, but it still sucked.

Though when Ryan let himself into his childhood home and was greeted by the scent of pot roast and mulled cider, he decided it was more than worth it.

“I’m here!” he called out as he let his suitcase clatter onto the floor, then set down a box of wrapped gifts a little more carefully.

His mom called back, “Oh, you made good time!”

Ryan kicked off his boots, lining them up on the mat to drip dry as the snow on the treads melted. “Yeah, roads were great,” he said. “No slowdowns or accidents.”

“Glad to hear it!”

When Deanna Hartinger appeared in the doorway, Ryan smiled.

The entryway was still the same buttery shade of yellow it had been when he left for college and his mom’s shoulder-length blonde hair hadn’t changed either. It made Ryan’s chest tight with affection. Sometimes, it was nice to come home and know everything was exactly the way he’d left it.

“I was worried we were going to get a storm.”

*That* hadn't changed either. His mom still worried about him being out on the road. Just because he'd gotten a couple of speeding tickets as a teenager and slid into a ditch once ...

"Nope, it's all good," Ryan said with a bright smile as he hugged his mom, picking her up off her feet until she laughed and told him to put her down.

"Well, come in. Get your coat off," she urged. "Are you hungry?"

"*Obviously*," he said, hastily unzipping his red parka.

She smiled. "Well, then get your butt in the kitchen. There's a pot roast in the slow cooker for dinner that you have to keep your paws off but I have some leftover roast chicken you could make a sandwich with."

"Perfect." Ryan reached for his suitcase. "I'm gonna run this up to my bedroom."

"I'll start getting food out."

After Ryan was done stashing his luggage in his childhood room, he jogged down the stairs. He scooped up the large box of wrapped gifts and carried them into the living room. A live tree stood in the corner, the lights on its branches twinkling merrily.

"Tree looks nice," he called out.

"Thanks."

The kitchen was open to the sunken living room and his mom glanced over as he began arranging the presents under the tree around the ones already there.

"Oh, honey, you didn't need to bring quite so many," she gently chided.

He shrugged. "Well, you won't let me do anything else!"

His parents wouldn't let him pay off their mortgage or anything so he usually went a little overboard with gifts to make up for it. He wanted them to know how much he appreciated everything they'd sacrificed for him. All the early morning trips to rinks and handling his stinky gear. All the

family vacations they never took and all the hours sitting in a cold rink, drinking crappy hot chocolate and cheering for him.

“How’s Zane?” his mom asked.

“Good. He flew to New York this morning.” Ryan stashed the last gift under the tree and decided he’d take care of the box later.

“It’s such a shame you two don’t get a longer break,” Deanna said as Ryan ambled into the kitchen, the tile cool under his thick warm socks. “It would be so nice if he could come with you and you could go to his family celebration.”

Ryan shrugged and bumped his mom’s hip to slide her out of the way. She’d already gotten out all the ingredients and sliced up an avocado. He could take the sandwich making from there.

“We’re getting a longer break than we do some years,” he pointed out as he slapped some mayonnaise and pickles on the whole wheat bread, then added bacon and slices of roast chicken.

“Oh I know. And believe me, I’d love to have you here for the whole time. I just think it would be nice if you two didn’t have to be apart at the holidays.”

“Zane and I will be fine,” he said with a laugh as he piled his sandwich high with avocado, lettuce, and tomato, then sprinkled it with salt and pepper. “We do this every year.”

Though, to be fair, it had never seemed quite so hard to be apart before.

Gah, *see*, this was what happened every time when he got involved with someone. He got clingy and needy.

He had just lifted the sandwich to take a bite when he heard the garage door open. He set his food on the cutting board.

“Oh, I was wondering where everyone else was.”

“Matt came over to help with the Christmas lights but he and your dad ran out to get a few things at the grocery store. Alyssa and the kids are at a birthday party. And Sam should be home from work soon too.”

A few minutes later, Matt ambled into the kitchen. He was two years older than Ryan, and had been a college football player at Notre Dame. He now worked as an assistant coach at the high school and taught PE. He'd hoped to go pro but he'd blown out his knee and any chance of that his junior year of college.

"Hey, if it isn't my baby brother," Matt said with a broad grin.

He engulfed Ryan in a huge hug, hard enough to hurt and they wrestled for a moment. When they bumped into the refrigerator, sending a few papers and magnets flying to the ground, their mom let out a sigh.

"Take it outside or at least to the basement if you're going to do that," she said sternly as she bent down to pick their mess up. "You two broke my favorite vase the last time you wrestled."

"Sorry." Ryan worked his way free of Matt's grip and gave his mom a sheepish smile.

She shook her head.

"Is anyone gonna help with the groceries or am I going to have to do it myself?" Jerry called out and Ryan hastily made a beeline for the laundry room that connected the house to the garage.

"Sorry, Dad," he said, taking the bags from him. "Matt distracted me but I'll be a good son and help."

His dad laughed. "Good to see you, Ry." He gave Ryan a one-armed hug. "I'm glad we raised one thoughtful child."

Matt let out an outraged noise. "I went to the grocery store with you and I was coming back to help! I got sidetracked. Totally Ryan's fault!"

Ryan and Matt bickered good-naturedly for a few minutes as they helped their dad unload the minivan and Ryan's feet were freezing by the time he was done, chilled from the cold garage floor.

"Hey, can we start a fire?" Ryan asked when they were done.

“Sure, honey,” his mom said absently as she unloaded the groceries and put them away.

Grateful for the gas fireplace, he opened the chimney flue and pressed the button to turn on the gas. Flames roared to life immediately and he warmed his fingers and toes near it for a few minutes before his rumbling stomach reminded him he was hungry.

But in the kitchen, he found Matt sitting at the island, half a sandwich hanging out of his mouth.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Ryan protested, grabbing for it.

Matt ducked. “Mine now,” he mumbled around the food.

“Matt,” his mom said, sounding exasperated. “You could have made your own.”

“Why would I do that when there was one already here?”

Ryan made a noise of outrage and lunged for his brother but his mom stopped him.

“Oh, would you two *behave*? I swear, you still act like children. I’ll make you another sandwich, Ryan.”

“No it’s fine.” Ryan glared at his brother. “I can do it myself. I wouldn’t want to make extra work for you.”

“Maybe go lighter on the mayo next time,” Matt said, patting his belly. “It was a little heavy.”

Ryan grumbled under his breath and debated if killing his brother would be justifiable homicide. Probably, but Zane would kill *him* if he got arrested so he probably shouldn’t risk it.

“You’re a jerk,” he muttered instead.

“Boys!” His mom said. “Seriously! How old are you again?”

“Old enough to know better,” their father said with a shake of his head. “But it’s good to have you both home.”

Ryan grinned. “They mean *me*. I bet they’re sick of you always being here.”

Matt and Alyssa lived on the other side of town with their two kids and the entire family was over at their parents' house a lot.

"Not all of us are off gallivanting around North America in a private jet," Matt shot back. "Some of us have normal lives with responsibilities."

"It's a charter plane," Ryan argued around a mouthful of sandwich. "And that's my *job*."

They bickered a while longer before his mom cleared her throat. "Boys, if you could stop arguing for ten minutes, could you please help your father finish putting up the lights? I don't want him up on a ladder after that fall he took last year."

Jerry frowned. "I slid off the bottom rung because my shoes were slippery, Deanna. I just twisted my ankle a little when I landed funny. I'm not some old man who can't hang some lights on the house."

"Well, fine. Then have them help you because I want them out of my kitchen," she said with a laugh.

"Rude." But Ryan pressed a kiss to his mom's cheek anyway.

He crammed the last of his sandwich in his mouth and put away the ingredients while he chewed, sweeping the loose crumbs into his hand, then dumping them in the sink.

He ran upstairs to grab a few more layers of clothes and shot off a quick text to Zane. *Is your family driving you nuts yet?*

Ryan spent the rest of the afternoon helping his dad and brother hang lights.

When it got too dark for them to do any more, his fingers and toes were thoroughly frozen but the house looked great. He went inside and took a hot shower. He checked his phone after but there was still no reply from Zane.

***Dude, did the reindeer get you or what??***

He sent the message but when there was no reply, he stuffed his phone into his pocket and jogged down the stairs.

“Sammy!” he hollered when he saw his other sibling in the entryway. They were still in high school and working at the library part-time. “You’re here!”

“Ryan!” Sam’s face lit up and they threw themselves into Ryan’s arms. “Missed you.”

“I missed you too. How’s school? Is there anyone I need to go beat up?”

Sam laughed and ducked their head, brushing their short dirty-blond hair out of their eyes. “Nah, it’s been okay lately.”

“Good.” Ryan hugged them close.

Sam had come out as nonbinary last year. School had been a little rough at first and Ryan was glad to hear it was going better.

A part of him wished he could tell Sam about Zane. If anyone would get it, Sammy would.

But for now, he and Zane were keeping this a secret.

He snuck another peek of at his phone and found a message waiting.

***Made it safe. They’re not driving me nuts yet but give it a few days ...***

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“You okay, Zany?”

Zane laughed and bumped shoulders with his sister, Ashley, as they peeled sweet potatoes for their mom on Christmas Eve. “Yeah, I’m good. Why?”

“Dunno. You seem quieter than usual. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” he assured her. “Just a lot on my mind.”

“Let me guess, hockey?” Her tone was dry.

He shrugged, knowing her question was probably rhetorical. He usually *was* thinking about hockey and since he never

really dated, no one ever asked much about his love life.

“Yeah, that’s part of it,” he admitted. “Just ... lots to think about lately.”

Like Ryan. And their future together.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Nope,” he said truthfully. “But I’ll tell you if I do.”

“Okay.”

“What about you? You good?”

“Yeah, I am,” she said with a bright smile. “Work’s going well.”

“And the divorce thing?”

She made a face. “It sucks but whatever. I’m mostly glad Dan and I don’t work together anymore. That was painful for a while.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

Zane considered the idea. God, what if he and Ryan broke things off?

How would Zane stand Ryan being there all the time? Could he handle seeing his face in the locker room and across the ice? Could he go out with the boys and watch Ryan pick someone else up?

Zane’s heart clenched at the idea and he tightened his grip on the peeler.

That sounded like the worst torture. He cared about Ryan too much to watch him with someone else. The best they could hope for was probably one of them moving. They both had no-movement clauses in their contracts, which meant they had to sign off on any potential trade.

Zane had never felt his job was in any real jeopardy so he’d never really thought much about going anywhere else. He was part of the team’s core, though the longer they went without a Cup win, the more the thought crept into his head.

But if he requested a trade ...



God, Zane couldn't imagine going to another franchise. Leaving Evanston, leaving the team, leaving *Ryan* ... He'd always planned to retire an Otter with Ryan by his side. They'd promised each other that years ago.

Of course, if it got bad enough with Ryan, maybe it would be less painful to start fresh.

Zane groaned to himself.

Why was he borrowing trouble? He and Ryan were doing fine. They just had to figure out how they were going to handle being together. He didn't need to leap to the worst-case scenario.

"Are you *sure* you're okay?" Ashley asked, her expression doubtful.

"Yes," Zane said firmly, trying to ignore the fact that his phone was burning a hole in his pocket with a couple of unanswered messages from Ryan earlier today.

Zane had been slow to respond yesterday too. They'd texted a little bit before bed but Zane still felt guilty.

He wasn't trying to ignore Ryan but he wanted a little space to *think*.

When they were in the middle of the season and Ryan was always around, it was impossible for Zane to do anything but be swallowed up by Ryan's energy.

He didn't usually mind, but it was like when Ryan was there, he couldn't focus on anything else. It could have been terrible for his hockey but Ryan *was* hockey. They were so linked that Zane couldn't separate the two.

Ryan burning bright meant that Zane played better.

He wasn't a distraction but an inspiration.

There was no world in which Zane wouldn't want to win but having Ryan there fueled him to be even better. To work harder.

Every time Ryan got close to a contract negotiation and the media began to speculate about him signing with another

team, Zane's brain had turned to static. He couldn't picture a life where Ryan wasn't playing beside him. He couldn't imagine a world where Ryan wasn't on the same team. Where he wasn't beside him in the locker room, backing up every decision he made.

Zane sometimes got paralyzed by trying to figure out what the right decision was. He was always trying to smooth over ruffled feathers and bruised egos and get everyone working smoothly together. When trades and new acquisitions made the team dynamic wobble, Zane sometimes struggled, not knowing what he needed to do to steer the ship.

But Ryan always cut through the tangle of his thoughts and made the path ahead feel smooth and clear like freshly resurfaced ice.

The thought of navigating his role as Captain without Ryan was unfathomable.

A part of him wanted to believe that the rest of their lives could be like that too. That being together could be so simple and straightforward. If it was just the two of them, it probably would be.

But it wouldn't just impact the two of them. It would impact the team, hell, the entire franchise. Zane cringed at the thought of every person in the league, every *fan*, discussing how they'd gotten together and how long they'd been dating.

There would be intrusive questions about their love life and speculation that this would impact their playing. Zane did the postgame media because it was his job, but it wasn't like he enjoyed it. Now there would be more questions and God, the *interviews*.

There would be *so many* interviews.

They'd be approached by every sports media outlet in North America. Wade Cannon, Zane and Ryan's agent, would get requests from every LGBTQ+ publication and their relationship would be major headlines on the nightly news for weeks.

Of course Zane wanted to be with Ryan. It was everything that would come with it that he dreaded.

And while he'd like to think that he could handle that level of scrutiny, he wasn't sure.

He needed some time to get his head together about it before he made a decision that would change his and Ryan's lives forever. And he needed some peace and quiet to do it in.

"Zane?" Ashley said.

He blinked, then looked over. "Hmm?"

"You've pretty much killed the whole sweet potato there."

He looked down to see he'd been peeling on autopilot and it was about half the size it had been when he started. "Whoops."

"You don't *have* to talk about anything you don't want to," his big sister said softly, "but I'm here if you do."

"Do you regret being with Dan?" Zane asked impulsively. "I mean, knowing it ended the way it did, do you regret it?"

"Of course not," Ashley said, setting down her peeler. "I ended up with the kids."

"Right. But what if you hadn't had them? Do you think it would have been worth it?"

"Of course," Ashley replied without hesitation. "I mean, it hurt like hell to hear him say he no longer loved me. God, it gutted me. But I think about all he did to support me over the years and I don't know if I'd be who I am now without the relationship we had, you know?"

And Zane nodded because he knew exactly what that felt like.

---

Ryan sprawled on the couch with a tired groan.

He had spent the morning and afternoon of Christmas Eve helping his brother and sister-in-law wrangle their kids and now he was exhausted. They were celebrating with the

Hartinger family today, so they could celebrate with Alyssa's family on Christmas Day.

Cody and Amber had been wound up all day about the idea of opening gifts. They'd squirmed through brunch and the living room had been a mess of wrapping paper by the time they were done tearing them open.

Ryan *really* regretted that he'd given them so much candy in their stockings and such loud toys as gifts.

Thankfully, the kids were now out in the backyard playing in the snow with their grandfather and although Ryan could hear them shouting outside, it was muffled, the house finally peaceful.

Ryan probably should be out there getting some exercise too but he was stuffed full of delicious food and half-napping on the couch while he and his brother watched the NFL game.

Besides, he'd done a workout this morning in his parents' basement using their treadmill and weights so he'd gotten in enough exercise that Zane wouldn't yell at him for being lazy.

Ryan was glad he'd always had Zane there, pushing him to be better. He wouldn't be half the hockey player he was without him.

Deanna and Alyssa were relaxing in the craft room with wine and some quilting project or something and the house was quiet except for the game playing.

Ryan brought up his latest chat message with Zane and frowned at it. They hadn't talked much in the past couple of days. Zane wasn't ignoring him exactly, but he was less chatty than usual and it took a long time for him to reply.

Ryan didn't usually worry about stuff like that.

Zane was busy and he didn't get to see his family a ton during the season, so Ryan would have chalked it up to that. But it was so different than it had been last year. Last Christmas, Ryan and Zane had messaged each other so much, Ryan's mom had threatened to ban phones at the dinner table.

And now ...

“Hey. What do you think about La Bouche’s big announcement this season?”

Ryan looked over at Matt and shrugged. “I don’t give a shit. He’s a good hockey player and who he sleeps with doesn’t change that.”

Matt’s forehead wrinkled. “I wasn’t saying otherwise. I was just curious about how it’s going over within the league.”

“Ehh, we all mostly knew anyway. I dunno how bad it’s been for him though. We haven’t played them since before his announcement. And we won’t again until spring.”

“You think more guys will come out after this?”

“Dunno. Could be. Why?” He was baffled by Matt’s sudden interest in the subject.

“Just curious. I mean, most fans like me, we don’t care. Just wanted you to know.”

“I know you don’t care,” Ryan said with a puzzled frown.

The Hartingers had always been pretty chill about that sort of thing. Especially after Sam came out as nonbinary.

The whole family had definitely had a lot of questions about what that meant, but they’d immediately been supportive of Sam. Within their close family, there had been a few slipups with pronouns but they had been accidental and everyone had adjusted pretty quickly.

Their extended family had been a little more difficult but Ryan’s dad had been very firm with his older sister about respecting Sam and even she’d gotten used to it.

If Ryan came out, he was sure his family would be great about it.

But while his family was open-minded, they didn’t usually spend a lot of time talking about stuff like this without a reason.

“Why are you telling me?” Ryan probed.

Matt fidgeted while Ryan stared at him, the NFL game on the screen fading into the background. “Just thought if you and

Zane were ... you know, thinking about it, we'd support you."

Ryan blinked. "You're telling me you'd support Zane and me coming out?"

"Yeah, you know." Matt looked increasingly uncomfortable, and he tugged at the neck of his football hoodie. "Course I would."

"When exactly did you get the impression that was something that we'd want to do?" Ryan said slowly. "Neither of us have ever dated guys."

"Yeah, but you're ..." Matt cleared his throat. "Super close, and we all ... well, we figured you two were keeping your relationship under wraps because of your career. No one in the family will care."

Surprised, Ryan laughed. "How long do you think we've been together?"

"I dunno. Since college, I guess?"

Ryan shook his head.

Jesus, even his family had thought he and Zane were dating. If only Zane knew that.

Ryan winced. Or maybe not.

His instinct was to text Zane and have a laugh about it, but right now, none of it seemed particularly funny. Zane might not be so amused.

"Hmm." Ryan made a noncommittal noise as he turned back to the game. "Well, I'll keep that in mind."

It had been a good couple of days. He'd gotten some great gifts and spent a lot of time relaxing with his family and helping wrangle his nieces and nephew.

The only dark spot was Zane being unusually quiet.

It wasn't so much that Ryan thought he was being completely shut out, but enough that he was starting to wonder about those "contract negotiations" that they'd been joking about before he left.

He stared down at his blank screen and the last unreturned message from Zane, then sighed and stuffed his phone in his pocket.

Despite Zane's "watch out for deer" comment, Ryan had begun to think that he was about to end up with no play for the rest of the season.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“You know, Zane, you could have brought Ryan with you, if you wanted,” Zane’s mom said as she cleared the table after their family’s Christmas Day dinner.

“What?” he said hoarsely.

Laura Murphy looked up, brushing her dark hair off her face with her free hand. “Well, I mean, I’m sure it’s hard for you two to be apart at the holidays, and he’s always welcome here.”

“We see each other pretty much every day,” Zane said, still bewildered. “It won’t kill us to be apart for less than a week.”

“Well, I know, but I imagine it must be hard when you can’t be open about your relationship.”

He stared at her, perplexed for a moment, before his instincts kicked in and he stood to help her stack plates and gather the silverware.

This year, it had been him and his parents and his sister and her kids around the table for their celebration. His dad was outside helping Ashley get the kids into the car so she could take them to her ex-husband’s house so they could celebrate with him.

Zane had stayed back to help his mom, but now he was wondering if he’d accidentally stepped into an alternate reality or something.



“Open about our relationship?” he asked blankly. “But everyone already knows we live together and play together.”

“Well yes, but that’s a little different than being able to go out on a date and be freer with your, ehm, affection.”

The stacks of plates in Zane’s hands clattered when he set them down on the nearby counter a little more clumsily than he’d intended. “You think Ryan and I are dating?”

It was his mom’s turn to stare blankly. “Well, aren’t you?”

Zane didn’t even know how to answer that. “He’s my *best friend*.”

“Well, of course he is.” His mom smiled brightly. “Your father was my best friend too. We worked together for years before it developed into something more, and I’ve always said that’s the best basis for a romantic relationship.”

“Right.”

Zane’s brain whirled at the idea.

“I just thought that since that Canadian player had come out, it might be easier for you two now. You would have to hide less. It’s so lucky neither of you have been traded to another team since you’ve been together. I can only imagine how difficult that would be trying to maintain a long-distance relationship with the kind of schedules you have.”

Jesus Christ.

His own mother had thought he was in a relationship with Ryan and had been for years. It got weirder by the minute. Zane wasn’t sure if it was better or worse that they had actually been fucking for a few months now.

Some part of his brain screamed that he should get out while he was ahead, and another part wondered if it wasn’t already too late.

Zane cleared his throat. “Could you excuse me for a few, Mom? I need to go take care of something.”

“Sure.” She smiled. “Let me know if you’d like to watch a movie in a bit. I’m sure your father will be in shortly.”

“Yeah, definitely. That would be nice.”

Zane fled to his old bedroom, taking a seat on the bed, and staring blankly at the posters of the hockey greats he'd had plastered all over his walls growing up. His mom really needed to redecorate.

Zane dragged his backpack toward him and pulled out the package from Ryan. It was roughly wrapped—clearly, he'd done it himself—and the paper had a penguin on ice skates with a stick and puck and said *Hockey Christmas*.

Despite the confusion churning in his gut, Zane smiled at the sight of the silly paper. He rattled the package, wondering what was inside, then remembered his promise to video chat with Ryan tonight. Ryan would be hurt if Zane didn't call, but Zane's stomach twisted as he wondered if this conversation would be better in person.

Maybe he should go home and sit down and talk to Ryan about the fact that they were getting in over their heads and that he had never planned on this being a serious thing and ...

Zane closed his eyes.

No. He'd fucking hurt Ryan if he did that.

And Zane couldn't stomach the thought of it.

This was the teammate who'd thrown his body in front of countless pucks and sticks and enforcers to protect him. The friend who had been by his side for more than a decade. Someone who knew him better than anyone else in the world. The one person he never, ever wanted to let down.

And, apparently, the man his family assumed he was already dating.

“Christ,” Zane muttered under his breath, but he grabbed his phone and typed out a message. *Video chat in a couple of hours?*

*I'm in*, was the swift response.

Zane nodded once, set the package on the bed, and sent one last message before he left the room to watch a movie with his parents.

*Looking forward to it.*

---

Ryan was jittery waiting for Zane to join the Skype call. But the minute Zane's face filled the screen, a thrum of excitement zinged through him.

Zane was dressed in a gray sweater and his hair looked a little wild, like he'd been running his fingers through it. His beard was short and neat, his eyes were that gorgeous shade of denim blue, and fuck if Ryan didn't want to press his lips against Zane's and kiss him stupid.

"Hey," Ryan managed, his voice sounding weirdly breathy.

"Hey." Zane's smile was a little tight and tentative. "How was your Christmas celebration?"

"Pretty good. Nice to see the fam. You?"

"Yeah, same."

*I missed you though*, Ryan thought, but he wasn't sure if he should say it aloud.

"Get anything good?"

"Yeah, definitely."

They spent a few minutes bullshitting about Christmas gifts and dinner and all the stuff that was easier than talking about what was going on with them. Ryan had promised himself he'd wait until they were back home, and he was relieved when Zane held up a package and shook it.

"So, is it time to tear this open?"

"It can be." Ryan grinned. "Is your family likely to bust in on you?"

"Nah. Ashley took the kids to their dad's place, and Mom and Dad headed over to the neighbors' house for their traditional Christmas drinks."

“Cool.” A burst of nerves filled Ryan’s body again. “Yeah, go for it then.”

Zane settled back against his headboard, and from the angle on the screen, Ryan assumed he had his laptop resting on the bed. Zane crossed his legs and opened the gift, carefully removing the bow and peeling away the paper. Tear it open. Yeah, right. Zane was fucking way too neat and tidy to do that.

Ryan held his breath as Zane stared down at the clear plastic box and what it held.

Zane burst out laughing. “You bought me a”—he dropped his voice—“dildo.”

“I did.” Ryan grinned, the tension beginning to fade. “I tried to find a hockey one for you, but they’re harder to come by than I expected. I think I changed my plans for my retirement. Forget a broadcasting career. I’m going to make team-themed sex toys.”

Zane snorted. “Good luck getting the NHL to approve that for official merch.”

“You never know.” Ryan shrugged, grinning. “Could be a big money maker.”

“Could be,” Zane said with a laugh. “We’ll have to talk to Wade about that. See what he says.”

Ryan’s grin widened. Wade Cannon was one of the big names in Chicago, and he worked for an international agency called Premier Talent. They repped all the big names in sports and entertainment, including actors and rock stars.

Wade was all hockey, all the way though, and he represented them both. “I can just picture his face.”

Oh shit, should he and Zane talk to Wade about their relationship? If they actually decided that this was going to be more than fucking, they probably should.

“I see you still managed to find the Otters shade of teal,” Zane said, his laughing voice breaking through Ryan’s thoughts.

“Yeah, not gonna lie, I was pretty proud of that.”

Zane sobered. “So, what do you want me to do with this gift?”

Ryan’s expression turned serious too. “I guess that’s up to you. You can either use it on me when we’re in Denver. Or ...”

“Or?”

“You could try it on yourself?” Ryan felt strangely hesitant. “Or maybe I could use it on you, or ... I don’t know. You don’t have to decide now. I mostly wanted to make you smile.”

“You did that,” Zane said. Though there was a little tension in his voice as he held up the toy. “What if I said I was curious about trying it ... on me, I mean?”

Ryan’s eyes widened, and he leaned forward. “I’d say hell yes and I hope I get to watch. Or help. Whatever. I just want to see it.” His voice was all raspy and his sweats had quickly tented at the thought.

Zane shifted on the bed, but he met Ryan’s gaze when he said, “I could probably do that.”

“Which?” Ryan held his breath.

Zane licked his lips. “I was thinking maybe I could slip out of these clothes and give it a try now, if you want. I’ve had your mouth on me.” His voice turned husky. “Your fingers. I can handle this thing, right?” He waggled the toy in front of the camera.

“Oh fuck.” Ryan’s voice turned all low and gravelly when he palmed his cock through the denim. “Oh fuck, dude, I need to see that. Like, ASAP.”

Zane chuckled. “Give me a minute to go wash it off and get the lube out of my kit.”

“Shit, good thing you have it. I should have tossed a bottle in the package with the toy. Let me see if I have some here.” Ryan leaned over to rummage through his luggage next to his bed.

“Oh, you think you’re going to need some too?” Zane teased.

“Fuck yeah,” Ryan growled, head still down, pawing at the messy contents of his suitcase. “I am going to bust so hard

when I see you push that into your hole.”

“Meet you back here in a minute.”

“I’ll be here,” Ryan promised.

---

Zane’s heart pounded as he walked into the bathroom, glad he could access it from his bedroom, though he twisted the lock on the door to the hallway, just to be safe. He was pretty sure he was home alone, but his parents walking in on him washing a dildo was way too fucking awkward to risk. He scrubbed it, unable to meet his own gaze in the mirror.

Was he really doing this? Was he really going to fuck himself with a toy on camera for his boyf—

Zane blinked. Shit, it was fucking contagious. Now *he* was thinking of Ryan as his damn boyfriend.

The toy slipped from Zane’s fingers into the sink, and he had to grip the counter.

Maybe it shouldn’t matter. Maybe he shouldn’t care. But fuck, Zane couldn’t nonchalantly go from being a straight guy to being in a relationship with his *male* best friend without having a minute or two to freak out. This was everything he thought he knew about himself turned upside down, and good for Ryan for not appearing to have an identity crisis about it, but damn, Zane needed a minute to adjust to the whole thing.

Most of the guys in the NHL married young and popped out a couple of kids before they were twenty-five. Zane had always planned on meeting someone—a woman!—after he retired, and marrying her. Settling down and having a family then. And that wasn’t to say he couldn’t do that with Ryan ...

*Him and Ryan, teaching a couple of kids to play pond hockey, then carrying them inside for hot chocolate and snuggling up on the couch and watching movies together. Reading to them before bedtime, then curling up together by the fireplace and*

...

Zane went lightheaded at that mental image and his grip tightened. Jesus. Where had *that* come from?

Ryan would be a great fucking dad, but it wasn't the future Zane had ever pictured. It wasn't necessarily a bad one. Hell, maybe it was *better*, because Zane had never had a relationship with anyone that felt as natural as it did with Ryan but ... Zane groaned and dropped his head. There he went again, thinking what he and Ryan were doing was dating.

It kinda was though, wasn't it? They'd done everything backwards—though his mom's voice rang in his head, reminding him that good relationships often started with friendship—but damn, being with Ryan felt easy.

Okay, so maybe he and Ryan were pretty much dating already and Zane thought he could be okay with that *eventually*, but he still needed some time to wrap his brain around the shift.

And yeah, thinking about marriage and kids was like eighteen steps ahead of where they were now, but that was why he was so good at hockey. He wasn't the guy who leapt into the fray without thinking, operating on some killer instincts and knowing how to get the puck between the pipes. That was Ryan.

Zane was the guy who saw six plays ahead and calculated the fallout of each one. Ryan was always ready to leap, but Zane needed to be sure that he'd played through all the possibilities first. The balance of both was why they were so good together.

"Hey, you coming back, Murph?" he heard from the other room.

"Shit, sorry," he called back. He took a few deep breaths while he hastily dried the toy and shut the bathroom door behind him, before checking the hallway door to his bedroom, just to be sure that was locked too. "Yeah, I'm here."

He took a seat in front of his laptop. Ryan had stripped off his clothes and was sitting naked in front of the screen. "Damn, you don't waste any time," he said with a laugh.

"You expect anything different?"

“No, not really,” Zane admitted. But wasn’t that what he loved about Ryan? His fearlessness. His surety that it would all work out. His unwavering confidence.

“You complaining about looking at my dick?” Ryan moved his hand up and down his shaft, and Zane’s gaze was drawn to the motion.

“No,” he admitted, his voice going a little hoarse. Christ, he wanted to lick the tip of Ryan’s cock, taste that liquid there, then suck him deep.

“What are you thinking?” Ryan asked. His strokes were slow and lazy, and Zane could hear the squelch of lube.

“About sucking you,” he admitted. God, it was harder to say things like that aloud than when they were in the quiet anonymity of a hotel room. It was so much easier when the lights were low and they were skin-to-skin.

“Oh shit.” Ryan’s throat bobbed as he swallowed noisily. “Fuck, man.”

“You like that thought?”

“Jesus, yes. Your mouth is amazing.” Ryan stroked a little harder, his abs contracting, but a moment later, he tore his hand away and shook his head. “But this isn’t what we’re supposed to be doing. This is about you using that toy I got you.”

Shit. Zane was really doing this.

“You got lube?” Ryan prompted.

“Got it.” He held up the bottle.

“Wanna see you finger that hole open first. Can you do that for me, Murph?”

“Yeah.”

Zane had to shift the laptop to the nearby desk before he stripped off his clothes. His bed was in the corner of the room, and he propped himself against the wall and splayed his legs wide. Christ, this was a weird position to be in. It made him feel vulnerable as hell, and he had the fleeting thought that if



shit like this ever got out to the public, he'd have to run away to the middle of some remote rainforest where no one had heard of ice hockey or ever seen the internet, or he'd die of embarrassment. But it was Ryan on the other side of the screen, and the eagerness in his eyes was the only thing that kept Zane from slamming the laptop closed.

"Slick yourself up," Ryan coaxed. "Just a little on the outside and rub it."

Zane's whole body went hot, but he did it, sliding a lubed finger along his taint and circling his hole. The little tingles of pleasure helped his tense shoulders relax, and when Ryan told him to slide the finger inside, he did.

He slid a second one in too, and he had a flash of memory of the time Ryan had guided him to fuck him open, their hands moving together in tandem.

"Fuck, I wish you were here," Zane growled, staring at the screen while he pushed his fingers deep. The angle was awkward, but every time he hit that bundle of nerves, his body lit up like the lamp over the goal.

"Damn, man, I know." Ryan licked his lips.

"Tell me what you'd do," Zane begged, twisting his fingers as he went deeper.

"Shit, I'd kiss the hell out of you first and get my hands all over you." Ryan stroked along his dick and his whole body shuddered. "Stroke that fat cock while you fingered yourself."

"Mmm." A shiver crawled over Zane's body, hot, then cold.

"You ready for the toy?" Ryan said in a low growl. "I need to see you work that into your hole so bad."

"Yeah," Zane said breathlessly. He reached for the lube and dildo, fingers shaking while he slicked the toy.

"You got this," Ryan whispered when Zane paused, dildo frozen at his puckered entrance. "You can totally take it. Show me how you do it."

Zane closed his eyes, his stomach clenching when he pushed in. It hurt. Christ, the thing felt like it was tearing him open,

and he paused, breathing raggedly as he tried to relax.

“Jesus, look at you.” Ryan’s tone was awed. “That’s so fucking hot. Watching your ass swallow that toy.”

Zane shuddered.

“How does it feel?”

“Hurts,” he choked. He’d skated with a cracked rib during a playoff game a few years back and had nearly passed out from the pain when he’d gotten checked mid-way through the second period. This was almost worse, if only because he didn’t have adrenaline coursing through him.

“Push out,” Ryan said.

Zane did, and the pain eased, his body relaxing around the intrusion, and he let out a shuddering breath. “*Oh.*”

“There you go,” Ryan murmured, and for a moment it was almost like Zane could feel Ryan’s hands, big and warm as they slid up his torso. Zane could taste the phantom sweetness of Ryan’s kiss, and he suddenly wanted that more than anything. “Can you move it? Just a little bit. Go slow and it’ll start to feel so good.”

Zane did it, slowly sliding the toy in a little farther, then pulling back.

“Mmm, fuck yeah,” Ryan said. “Like that. Can you stroke while you do it?”

Zane nearly lost the toy when he slicked his hand, but when he was pushing the dildo in and stroking at the same time, the pleasure hit him hard, snaking up his spine to skitter across his shoulders in a rush of need. “Fuck, Ryan.”

“Mmm, God. Did I ever tell you how hot you are, Zane? How good you taste?”

“No,” he whispered, pushing the toy in a little deeper, going faster.

“Well, I’m telling you now. I can’t wait to get my hands and mouth on you again.”

“What about your dick?” he asked. “Would you like that?”

Ryan froze. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

“Yeah.” Zane’s heart picked up speed. “Want you to fuck me, Ryan.” He shoved the toy deeper, pulling a strangled groan from his chest.

“Oh Christ.” Dimly, Zane heard the wet slap of Ryan jerking himself. “You are going to feel so good around my dick. Fuck. I need that. I need to be in you.”

“Yeah,” Zane managed. “Yeah, I want that.”

He braced his leg against the headboard and sped up, fucking himself harder and faster.

That tingle began, the one that signaled he was about to come, and Zane gripped his cock harder, hand flying over it in tight, fast strokes. He wanted to open his eyes, watch what Ryan was doing, but he was too far gone. Ryan was silent too, both of them chasing their orgasms.

“Wanna come with you,” Ryan said a few minutes later, breathless and strained. “You gonna come, Zane? You gonna shoot all over with that toy in your ass while you think about me fucking you?”

Zane did shoot then, his whole body going tight as licks of pleasure tore through him and he exploded all over himself, muffling the desperate groan that ripped from his chest. He shuddered his way through it, faintly aware of Ryan’s strained breathing and the slick, hard strokes coming through the speakers. He pried his eyes open in time to see Ryan go off too, cum arcing out and his mouth opening in a silent howl.

After, Zane sagged against the wall, letting the toy slip from his body, glad he’d had the foresight to put a towel down.

“That was the fucking hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” Ryan said. His face was red, his hair wild, and he had a lazy, contented smile on his face.

“Better than the time you hooked up with those two crazy blondes in LA?”

Ryan grinned. “Way better than that. C’mon, man, it’s you and me. How can *anything* beat that?”

Zane felt something then, something that filled his chest and squeezed tight, but he didn't know how to respond, so he steered away from the subject. They talked for a while longer about nothing important, until it was time for Ryan to play board games with his family.

But Zane was still thinking about what Ryan had said when he hopped in the shower and cleaned himself. He was sore, and his face felt a little hot at the memory of what he'd done. But maybe Ryan really *was* onto something.

It scared Zane shitless to imagine what would happen after this. He was gripped with a very real fear of this change between them fucking with their game. Their *team*. Their chances at the playoffs ... their friendship most of all.

The thought of that made Zane sick, but the thought of not having this with Ryan anymore ... well, that was so much worse.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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The moment Ryan heard the key in the lock, he vaulted up off the couch and over the back of it like he was heading over the boards to get on the ice. He skidded to a stop, his socks sliding on the wood floors as Zane stepped into the entryway.

“Hello to you too,” Zane said with a laugh. He shut the door behind him and locked it.

Ryan had offered to pick Zane up at the airport, but he’d declined. Ryan had spent the past few hours pacing the apartment and anxiously waiting for him to arrive. He might have refreshed the flight info half a dozen times to make sure he’d landed safely. Give or take a thousand.

“Hi,” Ryan whispered.

Zane set his bag on the floor, tension crackling in the air. “You need something?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Why was even *that* sexy? It had only been a day since that fuck-hot video call—not even twenty-four hours—but now Ryan could barely breathe for wanting to touch Zane. He was dying to get his hands and mouth on Zane. Slide his palms up under his clothes and touch his warm bare skin.

He needed to reassure himself that he hadn’t dreamt the conversation they’d had.

“Just need you,” Ryan admitted. He balled his hands into fists. “But I’m not sure what the rules are. And I’m trying not to push anything, but Jesus, Zane, a guy can only take so much after—”

He let out a startled ‘*mmpfh*’ when Zane’s lips crashed into his, cutting off his anxious ramble. “Oh fuck yeah,” he breathed against Zane’s mouth, wrapping his arms tightly around him.

Zane let out a little noise in the back of his throat and tightened his grip too, his arms like a vise around Ryan’s body. And everything in Ryan’s world fell into place again as he closed his eyes and flicked his tongue against the seam of Zane’s lips.

He let Ryan in immediately, his body going soft when he slid a hand up Ryan’s neck. It sent a shiver over him that only deepened when Zane got a hand in his hair, tilting his head so they could kiss more deeply.

They made out desperately, like it had been far longer than four days since they last touched. Ryan didn’t protest when Zane let go of him, because his hands went right for Ryan’s hoodie. They got all tangled up in their clothes while they slowly moved from the entrance of the apartment toward his bedroom, shedding pieces along the way, stopping to kiss and lick and taste each other.

They paused in the hallway between the living room and kitchen and Ryan got his hand down Zane’s unzipped jeans to stroke him while they made out.

A few feet from his bedroom door, Ryan dropped to his knees, wearing nothing but his underwear. Zane still had on those damn pants and Ryan fished his cock out, sucking it into his mouth and bathing it with spit as he drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs with Zane’s scent.

“Fuck, you’re gonna make me explode,” Zane whispered roughly after a few minutes, running his hands through Ryan’s hair. “We need a bed.”

They were both naked by the time they tumbled onto Ryan’s mattress. Earlier, he’d pulled back the covers and laid everything out, condoms, lube, towel ... anything they might need. Just in case.

“Pretty sure of yourself there, huh?” Zane whispered against Ryan’s mouth, Ryan rutting up against Zane, their cocks sliding together, even though he was aching to get inside.

“Figured if worse came to worse, I could jerk myself,” he muttered.

Zane laughed, sliding a hand up his back and pulling him down until their chests were pressed together. “Not like you to think ahead.”

“I did it for you,” Ryan admitted, and there was a flare of something hot and sweet in Zane’s gaze before he pulled him in for another sinful kiss.

“Tell me what you want,” Ryan asked after a few minutes.

The slow grind and the making out were hot, but Ryan needed to hear where they were going. Because as much as he was a guy who never had a plan, he wanted one for this. If Zane was willing, Ryan would make it so good for him. So goddamn good he’d never want anyone else again.

“Need you,” Zane said, his voice still hushed. “Need you in me.”

“Tongue?” Ryan asked. He gave Zane another slow, dirty kiss.

“Yeah,” Zane breathed.

“Fingers?” Another kiss, this one even slower and more filled with promise.

“Mm-hmm.”

“What about my cock?” He didn’t kiss him this time, just stared down at Zane’s mouth, slick and reddened.

Zane shivered, but he wrapped his thighs around Ryan’s hips and rocked a little. “That too.”

“Fuck.”

Now Ryan kissed him, deep and hard, using his tongue to show Zane what it would be like when he had his dick in him.

“Hands and knees,” Ryan said, sitting back on his heels.

Zane flipped into position with a twist of his muscular body, and Ryan could only stare for a moment, looking at his firm, round ass. Ryan dragged his palm across Zane's cheeks and parted them, feeling the tremor that went through his body.

"Need you," Zane whispered and Ryan leaned in. He took it slow, licking Zane open until his ring softened under his tongue, then sliding lubed fingers in until he was relaxed and ready to take him.

It became a hazy blur while Ryan slipped a condom on and eased his way inside. He felt the tension in Zane's body and soothed it with his words, talking him down from the panic at the foreign feeling of another person inside him.

Ryan didn't know what he said, or where he touched him, just knew that the only thing in his head was the single-minded determination that Zane would enjoy this. The first moan and thrust back made Ryan go lightheaded with pleasure, and he gripped Zane's shoulder and hip, coaxing him into a slow, sliding rhythm.

The sounds Zane made then did something to Ryan, made him gasp and groan too.

"Flip over," Ryan urged, and together they shifted, separating long enough for Zane to get on his back and for Ryan to throw Zane's legs up over his left shoulder.

Ryan sank back inside him and knew the moment his cock grazed Zane's prostate.

"Ryan!" Zane screwed his eyes up tight and let out a gasp, convulsing against him. "Fuck."

"I've got you." Ryan wrapped an arm around his thighs and kissed the side of his knee. "I've got you."

Then words became impossible. There was only slick, tight heat and Zane's sounds of pleasure. Ryan could barely hold off his orgasm long enough to wrap a hand around Zane's dick and stroke a few times. The hot, urgent spatter of his cum against Ryan's knuckles registered seconds before pleasure raced up from his groin, curling his spine as his hips stuttered and he panted out his release.



The moans they both let out mingled together, and Ryan had to force air into his lungs, panting like he'd never worked out a day in his life. He disentangled their bodies, Zane's almost limp when he guided his legs down onto the bed.

Zane sprawled out, chest heaving too, body glistening with sweat as he stared up at Ryan with a heavy-lidded expression of contentment.

"Be right back," Ryan whispered. He rushed through his cleanup, and when he returned to the bedroom, Zane lay sprawled on his stomach, face pressed into the pillow.

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Zane felt the mattress dip when Ryan slipped into bed beside him, running his fingertips up and down his spine while he pressed kisses to his shoulder.

Zane shivered but didn't pull away. His ass ached and his head whirled, and fuck, he'd never felt better in his life. While what they'd done tonight probably shouldn't have been a big fucking deal, Zane knew, deep down, it was. He had to stop lying to himself about how he felt.

"What does this mean for the road rules?" Ryan whispered.

Zane turned his head, flattening the pillow with his cheek. "It means we throw the rules out the window."

"Are we gonna talk about what this is?"

Swallowing hard, Zane sucked in a deep breath and flipped onto his side, so they were almost face-to-face.

"I care about you so much."

Ryan held his breath. "I care about you too."

"Can you give me a little longer to figure out a plan for this? I wanna be with you but I'm fucking scared, Ryan," he admitted, and Ryan must have heard the quaver in his voice, because he merely settled a hand on Zane's chest and nodded. "About what it'll mean for our friendship. For the team. Can

you let me adjust to this thing we're doing before we talk about how being together is gonna impact everything else?"

"Yeah." Ryan pressed a kiss to his temple. "Of course. We'll take it one day at a time and see where this takes us."

"Thank you." Zane closed his eyes for a moment, a wave of relief washing over him.

"Course." Ryan settled on the bed beside him, arm draped over Zane's waist, body warm and heavy. He pulled the covers up over them both, then burrowed even closer. "I follow your lead. Always."

Zane's breath caught as he hoped to God he had what it took to lead them both through this.

Because he knew hockey. But relationships? He had no idea what he was doing.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

They hit the ice the following morning for practice, played two home games, and then they were in Denver again.

Ryan still fucking hated playing in the dry mountain air but they did better than they had the last time, managing a 3-2 win over Colorado.

He and Zane were both buoyant after the victory and celebrated with the kind of sex that would have broken the bed if they'd been in a cheaper hotel.

Now, they were third in their division, home for a couple of days, and playing Boston in the Winter Classic tomorrow.

Tonight they'd had a big team dinner on New Year's Eve at a private room in a swanky restaurant. It was a good night. Ryan had a couple of drinks, and he spent half the night with his knee pressed against Zane's and trying not to let his heart stop every time Zane laughed at something.

He fucking failed, but that was okay, because every time Zane leaned over to whisper in his ear, it started up again.

Ryan felt like Superman, like he could do anything. The team was riding a hell of a high from the way the season was going and this thing with Zane—unnamed but so fucking good—made him ready to take on the world.

By the time dinner was over and the guys were all slipping jackets and hats on, Ryan buzzed with energy. They all laughed and joked on their way to the bus that would take them back to the hotel, and it made Ryan smile to see

Lindholm feeling so jovial. Ryan knew Christmas had been hard on him, but he looked good tonight, and even Malone and Underhill were mellow and happy, joining in the ridiculous sing-along someone had started.

“I want asses in rooms tonight,” Coach Daniels said as the bus pulled up at the hotel twenty minutes later. “Get some sleep and then let’s go take down Boston tomorrow.”

They whooped and hollered while they jogged from the bus to the entrance. Ryan was so fired up he was sure he could have gone and defeated Boston single-handedly. He paced his hotel room until Zane sent him an all-clear text and he snuck down the hall to slip inside.

They were on each other the minute the door closed and it wasn’t long before Zane was inside him, riding him hard and fast, his knees scraping on the carpet. He swallowed his shout when he released in his hand, his whole body going hot and tight as he clenched around Zane, who came a handful of strokes later.

They lay on the floor panting for a while, then turned to each other, laughing while they kissed. Eventually, Ryan reached for his discarded undershirt, wiping the cum away, and Zane flung the used condom into the nearby trash.

Ryan tangled their legs together and dragged covers off the bed, pillowing his head on his arm while they made out for the longest time, lying on the floor.

Later, Zane glanced at the silver watch on his wrist. One of his endorsement deals. “It’s nearly midnight,” he said in a hushed whisper.

“Good,” Ryan said, mouthing at his neck. They’d moved to the bed but that was about all they’d done. “Because they say whatever you’re doing at midnight, you’ll be doing for the rest of the year.”

“Mmm.” Zane let out a little groan. “I like the sound of that.”

Ryan did too. He wanted more of this. More Zane. More kissing. More sex. More of whatever they were heading toward. He didn’t need to push Zane. He had to work through

all the steps in his head, but Ryan had a sudden, fierce thought that he could spend the rest of his *life* with this man.

Ryan had sworn he'd never settle down while he was still playing but it had only been because he had known he'd never be able to handle life on the road away from the person he loved. But this—he licked a stripe up Zane's pec and kissed his collarbone—this was what he'd needed.

This was what he'd been waiting for. He didn't *have* to be away from Zane. Didn't have to leave him behind. He could have hockey and love all wrapped up together in one perfect package.

And maybe he'd always been in love with Zane.

Maybe in the end, that was what had truly held him back before. Maybe some part of his heart had always belonged to Zane, even if he hadn't known it at the time.

Yeah, what they were doing now was risky. Coach Daniels might blow a gasket when he found out, but what the fuck was team management going to do to them? It wasn't like there was a policy against this.

There was no way he and Zane were the only two NHL players who had ever fucked. Hell, maybe over the years there had been another pair or two in love who'd kept it under the radar.

But Ryan didn't want to keep it hidden. Not forever anyway. He wanted to shout to the fucking world that he was in love with the man who had a grip on his shoulder and who made the most incredible noises when Ryan nibbled at his ear.

Zane wasn't there yet, and that was okay. Ryan could give him time. He wasn't the most patient man alive, but for Zane he'd wait.

Years, if that was what it took.

All he wanted was a little longer on the ice together and a Stanley Cup win under their belts as a reward for how fucking hard they'd worked.

That win, and Zane, were worth being patient for.

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The Winter Classic was a shitshow.

Boston was on a tear the moment they hit the ice, and the Otters' defense wasn't up to handling their aggressive offense.

Almost immediately, Underhill and Malone got into a dust-up with Boston's player that left both of them in the penalty box, and Boston quickly scored on the 5-on-3 power play. It was all downhill from there and the game ended in a 4-2 loss that left the Otters pissed off and snarly on the flight home.

Zane pored over game footage, scribbling notes and cursing under his breath every time he watched himself do something stupid.

Jesus, had he been asleep on the ice today?

"Hey," Ryan said quietly, "Why don't you put it away? We don't need to go through it all tonight."

"Easy for you to say," Zane snapped. "You didn't have a shit game like I did."

"Zane ..."

It was true though. He'd played poorly.

Not anything that directly cost them the game. But he hadn't done much to contribute either and maybe if his passes had connected or he hadn't missed the net so many fucking times, they would have done a little better.

He knew that when he was playing well, the whole team responded. It was like a spark that traveled from one of them to the other, igniting them into something that burned bright and hot.

But tonight had been a damp fizzle.

Ryan slouched in his seat, his knees splaying wide and knocking against Zane's, and he pitched his voice low. "There's a lot I could have done too but I don't need to beat

myself up over every minor error. We didn't play well. We know it. We'll work on it at practice."

"I want to go through this tonight," Zane said, knowing he was being stubborn and ridiculous but unable to stop himself.

"You're gonna burn yourself out if you're not careful."

"Would you *leave it?*" Zane snarled. "Go bug someone else and let me finish this."

The flicker of hurt that crossed Ryan's expressive face made a stab of regret go through Zane.

A couple of guys' heads popped up, clearly surprised by the sound of their captain and one of his alternates arguing.

"Okay." Ryan patted Zane's leg. He let out a sigh, unbuckled his seatbelt, and stood. "I'll go harass Lindy."

Zane nodded tightly, and dropped his head to stare at the screen, irritation and guilt swirling in him.

The remainder of the flight and landing were uneventful and the drive home to their apartment silent.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked when they were inside.

It was late and the last thing Zane wanted to do was talk, even though he knew he should apologize.

He shook his head, hoping Ryan would understand.

"Okay," Ryan said softly. He carried their bags down the hall and Zane felt a lump in his throat, wondering if he would put Zane's stuff in Zane's room, or Ryan's.

They hadn't slept apart in the past week but he wasn't sure if that would continue. Zane didn't feel up to sex either because his hip was so sore he couldn't even think about getting a hard-on but he wasn't sure how to ask Ryan if he wanted to crash together.

Zane was still standing in the entry to their apartment, staring blankly at the dark living room, when Ryan returned.

He reached out, squeezed Zane's shoulder as if he understood, then went into the kitchen. He pulled two water bottles out of

the refrigerator, shook out a couple of over-the-counter painkillers into his palm, then held a water and the pills out.

Zane took them obediently, knowing it would help him sleep.

Ryan took his hand. "Shower or no?"

"No," Zane said with a low groan as he let himself be pulled along. "I should. I hate smelling like a plane. But I'm too fucking tired."

Zane could have cried with relief when Ryan went straight for his bedroom, then shut the door behind them.

He'd sleep better with Ryan beside him too.

"C'mon," Ryan coaxed softly. "Let's get ready for bed."

Exhaustion already weighing him down, Zane let himself be led into the bathroom, where Ryan stripped him, wet a washcloth with warm water, and gave him a quick wipe down.

Zane let out a shuddering sigh as Ryan swiped the cloth across the back of his shoulders, letting his head fall forward.

Ryan dropped the cloth onto the counter, then stepped forward, his body a warm, long line behind Zane.

He pressed a kiss to the spot where Zane's neck and back met, right on the sensitive knob of his spine and Zane let out a quiet gasp. Ryan wrapped his arms around Zane, hugging him close, face buried against Zane's hair.

They stood there a moment and Zane felt absurdly and overwhelmingly grateful to have Ryan in his life.

With one final squeeze, Ryan let go and Zane found the energy to brush his teeth, then tumble into Ryan's bed.

Their bed? It felt like theirs now.

Especially after Ryan tucked a couple of pillows on the far side of Zane's body so he could prop his leg up to take some pressure off his hip.

He turned out the lights, spooned around Zane in an echo of the way he'd hugged him in the bathroom, and pulled the covers up.



Zane knew the time was coming when they really fucking needed to have an actual conversation about what they were doing.

Once they did, they'd need to decide whether they were going to come out to the team, to management, to the world.

Zane was leaning toward maybe on the first two and definitely fucking not for the third.

But he had a feeling Ryan was going to be a hell yes on all three, because that was how he was—balls to the wall with everything—and that was why Zane kept putting it off. How could he disappoint the one person who had never done anything but support him?

The game had been frustrating, yes. And Zane always took losses hard. But it was the worry over their future that had made him snappish.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I shouldn’t—”

“Shh.” Ryan patted his stomach. “We can talk about the game more tomorrow, okay? Just sleep now.”

Zane wanted to protest that it wasn’t the game, it was the way he’d taken it out on Ryan earlier, but his eyelids felt heavy and his tongue thick.

“Tomorrow,” he slurred, meaning so much more than talking about his temper.

Zane threaded their fingers together, pressing them tight against his belly and closed his eyes.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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“I kinda dig this Pride tape,” Cooper said thoughtfully a few weeks later as he wound rainbow tape around his stick. “It’s way less boring than black or white.”

“You coming out to us there, Coop?” Malone chirped.

Cooper rolled his eyes. “No, dumbass, I’m saying I like the *colors*. That doesn’t change my sexuality.”

“Yeah, I really like the Pride jersey designs this year,” Tremblay said as he slipped it over his head.

Ryan inspected his sweater.

The rainbow colors did look sharp. The black jersey had stripes around the sleeves and the chest, with the Otters logo smack dab over the top of the band of colors.

“Yeah, I’m a fan,” Ryan said with a nod. “Better than the sad little arm patches they did last year. Those were dumb.”

“Right?” Tremblay said. “People need to see that representation and not have it be some token little thing that you have to squint to see.”

“I think all the teams are doing more this season because of Boucher,” Lindholm said.

“Hmm. Probably. Did you hear he’s doing a ceremonial puck drop in Toronto for their Pride night in a few weeks?” Zane asked.

“No. But that’s cool. I’ve never seen them have an active player do it,” Ryan replied, buckling his fight strap. “Though I know he’s on IR right now with some knee shit.”

“Makes sense.” Cooper wound sock tape around his calves. “Who else would they get?”

“Well, they could have had some of the retired guys or something. Wade—our agent—he’s a former player who came out after his retirement. There are a handful of guys like him around the league.”

“True.”

“I’m kinda surprised no one else has come out yet,” Cooper said. “I mean, I figured there would be some more after Boucher but it’s been quiet.”

Ryan felt the brush of Zane’s elbow against his but he didn’t look over, afraid the guys would see everything he felt for Zane written all over his face. He tried to keep his voice casual. “I bet it takes time to feel ready. Besides, you’ve seen some of the shit that gets said on social media and heard about what’s yelled during the games. No one is looking forward to that.”

“True. Sucks, man.” Cooper frowned. “I don’t know why it has to be such a big deal.”

“Me either,” Ryan said. “But you should see the crap that Sam has to deal with sometimes.”

“Sam’s your ...” Cooper winced. “Uh, I know you said, she—uh, *they* are nonbinary. But what do you call them? If they’re not your sister or brother ...”

“Annoying pest, usually,” Ryan said with a grin. “But sibling works.”

Cooper laughed. “Cool. I guess that’s not any harder to remember, is it?”

“Not really.” Ryan shrugged. “Took the family a while to wrap our heads around getting the pronouns right but we figured it out eventually. And once I saw how happy Sam was, it was an easy thing to remember.”

“No, that’s great,” Tremblay said. “I just think it’s gonna be so good for kids growing up now to see all this. When you were a kid, would you ever have imagined that you’d see NHL players wearing Pride gear?”

“God no,” Ryan said. “Shit, this would have been wild like ... five or ten years ago.”

“Exactly. It’s great to see the progress.” Tremblay’s tone was firm.

“Not all ‘progress’ is so fucking great,” Malone said with a scowl.

“Well, *this* is,” Zane said firmly, his tone sharper than the blades on his feet. “We support inclusion here. Period.”

A couple of guys glanced over, surprised.

Zane didn’t usually take a super hard line with Malone. Everyone knew Jack was pretty conservative about stuff and there had been some friction between him and Tremblay because he wasn’t always careful with what he said about dudes who were any color but white.

Zane had never tolerated racism or homophobia from anyone on the team but he was usually a little more careful about his tone when he called someone out.

“Exactly,” Ryan said with a sharp tap of his stick on the floor for emphasis. “Now, c’mon, boys. Are you ready to get fired up for this game?”

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“Please welcome your Evanston River Otters!”

Zane’s chest vibrated with the noise from the crowd as Hajek led the team out onto the ice.

While the thunder of cheering and clapping rained down over them, the team streamed out in a wash of rainbow colors, thumping music accompanying them.

Zane's stomach fluttered oddly as he lined up for the singing of the National Anthem.

The Pride jersey had never felt so heavy on his shoulders.

It wasn't that Zane didn't like or support Pride Night. He'd been on board with it from the very beginning when the topic had first been broached.

It was just that this was the first time Zane had ever realized that this night was for *him* too.

The singer began. "Oh, say, can you see ..."

Zane swallowed hard and bowed his head.

He still didn't know exactly what he was. Was he bi?

Maybe, maybe not, but whatever he called himself, he was definitely in love with his best friend and that meant he wasn't straight like he'd always assumed.

He knew *why* Pride was important, that people needed to feel like they belonged and were celebrated but he really had no idea what his place in this community was.

He hadn't spent his life hiding this part of himself. He'd been as oblivious to it as anyone.

He'd never been taunted for loving someone. He'd never been picked on in school or felt like he didn't belong.

But his whole life had shifted now, and everything felt a little off balance. He didn't quite know where he belonged anymore.

Maybe the fact that he *wasn't* rushing to come out said enough though. Maybe the worry about the scrutiny from fans and the press or the worry about it changing the team's dynamics was why he kept hesitating to come out.

It was probably why the jersey felt heavy and this whole night felt different.

Ryan shifted back and forth on his skates, his shoulder bumping Zane's, an absent-minded motion that Zane had felt a million times before and never thought twice about it.

How *would* fans react if Zane held a presser like Boucher had and said he was dating his winger?

The thought made anxiety rise in Zane's chest and another wash of jittery tension flooded through him.

He dragged in a deep breath, then another, trying to center himself. Now was not the time for this.

Ryan leaned in like he could tell that Zane was struggling. A little of that coiling tension in Zane unwound, the familiar presence beside him reminding him that he wasn't in this alone.

Whatever Zane decided and whenever he chose to do it, he had Ryan beside him. They were a unit. Unshakeable.

Murphy and Hartinger. Hartinger and Murphy.

Their names forever linked. They had hockey to play and whatever they did in their bedrooms, whatever they felt for each other, it was the *game* that mattered.

When the anthem ended, they skated toward the red line to line up for the puck drop but Ryan stopped him before he could get in position.

He lowered his head, their bodies tucked close, his glove on Zane's back keeping them from drifting apart.

"You okay?" he asked quietly. "You seem distracted."

"Yeah, all good," Zane said firmly. He patted Ryan's hip to reassure him. "*Promise.*"

Ryan gave him a searching look, his eyes shadowed by the visor, but he nodded as if satisfied by what he saw. "Okay."

"I've got you, don't I?" Zane asked, his tone turning lighter.

"Always," Ryan replied without hesitation.

Zane smiled and gently bonked their helmets together. "Then I'm good."

They squared off against Buffalo. Leo Hawkins, their first line center, raised his eyebrow. "Have a good chat with your boyfriend there?"

“Yeah, we were deciding who was going to blow the other after we win tonight,” Zane said, tone deceptively casual.

He rarely responded to chirps like that but he was tired of the veiled taunts. Especially on a night like this.

He heard a surprised cackle from Ryan as the puck dropped.

Zane’s retort must have surprised Hawkins too. It was just enough to shake his focus and Zane easily swiped the puck from him and fired it to Cooper.

Zane put everything but hockey out of his head after that, but later in the period, as he swept the puck around the net and fired it to Ryan, his Pride jersey finally felt light and like it belonged on his shoulders.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

The team made it through the rest of January and into February with a solid points ranking. Zane was on a bit of a heater. He was on an eleven-game points streak and averaging over a goal per game.

It wouldn't last, it never did, but the team rode the high of it until bye week.

It was the midpoint of the season and they had a week off to rest and recharge.

Lindy had been chosen to attend the All-Star event and Zane had never been more grateful that he hadn't. He'd gone a handful of times since he joined the NHL and he usually enjoyed it. It was great to catch up with guys around the league and for the most part he enjoyed the skills competitions and the game itself.

But the minute Ryan found out neither he nor Zane would be attending, he booked them flights to Costa Rica.

When Zane asked why there, Ryan said. "You're too tightly wound and you need a chance to chill. Which means beach time."

"But there's lots of other places with beaches." He didn't really care, but he was curious.

A group of guys from the team were heading to Cabo, another to the Bahamas. O'Shea and Underhill were going to Miami.



When Zane pointed that out, Ryan looked him in the eye and said, “Yeah, exactly. If we go to Costa Rica, we can be alone. On vacation. Without nosy teammates around.”

And well, that made sense to Zane.

So they flew to Costa Rica and spent the week lying on the beach. Zane let the sun bake into his bones and soften the tension in him. When he got too restless from doing nothing, he swam and even coaxed Ryan into going for a few hikes. They went zip-lining too and had great food and some drinks and took full advantage of a king-size bed and lazy mornings.

By the time they flew home, Zane did feel rested. He said as much to Ryan as they walked back into their apartment and he smiled and kissed Zane’s hair. “I know you.”

“Yeah, you do,” Zane said thickly as he pulled Ryan in for another slow, lazy kiss, not quite ready to let the vacation go.

But they were back to practice the following day and Valentine’s Day crept up on them almost before Zane noticed.

He was thankful that Tremblay had brought it up in the locker room. “God, I don’t know what to get Naomi this year,” he’d said with a groan. “It’s hard when you’ve been together that long.”

“Shit, I can never figure it out either and Bethany and I have only been together for a couple of years,” Cooper grumbled. “I don’t know how you guys do it, Tremblay.”

*Hmm.*

Zane hadn’t really considered Valentine’s Day.

Should he get something for Ryan? Yeah. He probably should. Especially after the trip to Costa Rica Ryan had planned.

Ryan was being so patient with him, and Zane should do something romantic to remind him that he was all in, even if it was taking him a while to catch up to where Ryan was with their relationship.

“Hey, so, do you want to do something for Valentine’s Day this year?” Zane asked later that night as they drove home from the game, trying to keep his tone casual.

“Like what?”

“I dunno. I hadn’t gotten that far,” Zane admitted. “I know we have a game that night but I was thinking about it when the guys were talking in the locker room.”

“Sure, might be fun,” Ryan said with a shrug. “I mean, we *are* crazy about each other so it seems worth celebrating.”

Zane laughed. “Crazy about each other, huh?”

“Well obviously. Who wouldn’t be crazy about me?”

Zane didn’t have to turn his head to know Ryan was probably all puffed up like a peacock. He always got that way when he was feeling particularly full of himself.

Zane smiled out the windshield, the roads a little sloppy with the snow they’d gotten that night. “True.”

“Aww.” Ryan reached out and squeezed Zane’s thigh. “Baby, are you sure you didn’t hit your head when you got boarded earlier? You’re not usually mushy like that. I expected you to say that someone would have to be crazy to be with me.”

Zane laughed, agreeing. “It crossed my mind to chirp you and no, I’m not usually mushy, but I don’t have a concussion. I just ... I can’t imagine feeling the way I do about you with anyone else.”

Ryan didn’t say anything aloud, but he did squeeze Zane’s thigh as if to say he felt the same.



Ryan wasn’t usually in a hurry for games to be over but when they played New Jersey on Valentine’s Day, he was more than ready for it to end.

It wasn’t a bad one. They were up 4-1 at the beginning of the third period. Both teams were playing well with a pretty even number of shots on goal but the Otters’ goaltending was far superior to New Jersey’s and well, in some games that made all the difference.

But Ryan was ready for it to be done. He wanted to go *home*.

It was Valentine's Day, he was with someone he cared about, and for the first time in his life, he was excited to celebrate the holiday.

He'd always thought it was kind of dumb. Cheap and commercial and all that. But it felt different now that he and Zane were together.

They settled onto the bench after a shift and he glanced over at Zane, watching him stare at the iPad with a furrowed brow, studying the last play.

"Aww, look. You and Cap are on the kiss cam!" Cooper said a moment later, laughing as he nudged Ryan's elbow.

"What?" Ryan looked up at the Jumbotron to see him and Zane.

Zane looked up too, blinking like his brain was stuttering and he had no idea what to do.

"Kiss, kiss, kiss!" A couple of the guys chanted and behind them, Ryan heard assistant coach Lance Tate chuckling.

Ryan grinned and dove in, laying a smacking kiss on the side of Zane's helmet, nearly knocking him sideways into Keegan Truro—an AHL guy who'd been called up in January to replace one of their forwards who was out with an injury.

The crowd went wild at their silly antics, cheering. Zane laughed and playfully shoved Ryan away, face a little pinker than normal.

Ryan laughed and bumped his shoulder. He had playfully done that sort of thing a billion times before—maybe not on the kiss cam on the arena's Jumbotron—but certainly around the team before.

He'd always been affectionate with everyone, and Zane had never seemed to mind.

He did it the most with Zane, of course, but hopefully Zane wasn't mad that he'd gone for it this year in a big way.

He probably should have asked.

Ryan took off his glove, pretending to inspect a worn-thin spot for a moment before he fumbled and “dropped” it. He used leaning over to grab it as an excuse to get closer to Zane, obscuring his face from the cameras.

“Hey, that was okay, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Zane said quietly. “It was fine. Just took me by surprise is all.”

“Cool.”

Ryan straightened and slipped his glove back on. He stared out at the ice, watching the play, chewing at the ragged dry spot on his lip.

Maybe Zane *wasn't* so crazy to be wary about them coming out.

People would look at them differently when they were together. What had always been silly bro antics to fans would be analyzed and discussed.

If they got annoyed at each other, people would call it a lovers' quarrel instead of chalking it up to the usual disagreements between teammates that were forgotten almost as soon as they were over.

And if they got mad at each other about something at home, it could spill onto the ice. They'd never fought much as roommates but everything did feel bigger somehow now.

And as Ryan looked around and caught a glimpse of Malone frowning at them, he wondered if maybe Zane was right about the fact that it could permanently change the team dynamics.

Right now, the team and fans found the silly antics he and Zane got up to amusing, but would they feel the same way if they were together for real?

But when Ryan looked over at Zane and could barely breathe with how much he cared about him, all the rest of it faded into the background.

Zane was it for him. The rest of it was just details.

“Are *you* okay?” Zane asked softly as they slid down the bench, getting ready for their next shift. “Your head still in this?”

“I’m great,” Ryan said firmly and he meant it.

Because yeah, he could worry about all this shit, but the truth was, he and Zane had made it this far. There was no reason they couldn’t figure the rest of it out.

And by the time Ryan watched Zane do a gorgeous spin-orama goal in the third period that netted them a 5-1 win, all Ryan could think about was getting Zane alone.

“I am going to suck your dick so hard tonight,” he promised Zane as they slammed together on the ice in celebration, speaking right in his ear.

“Not if I suck yours first.” Zane pulled back, licking his lips and giving him a smug little smile that made Ryan’s jock feel a little bit tight.

*Fuck.*

Their teammates crashed into them, hooting and hollering, and Ryan thumped Lindy on the back.

The mood was raucous as they left the ice following their victory, and Ryan could hardly keep his eyes off Zane as he stripped down to his base layers, his dark hair damp with sweat and curling at his temples.

Ryan was in and out of the shower before Zane was done with the media and he prowled around the locker room, restless. He chucked wads of tape at people and generally made a nuisance of himself.

“Dude, what the fuck?” Truro said with a laugh as he tossed the tape ball back. “Are you that eager to get out of here tonight? You don’t even have a girl to go home to.”

Ryan was this close to firing back, “no but I have *that* man,” with a nod toward Zane but he bit his tongue.

“Just fired up from this win, baby,” he said instead, snapping a towel at Truro’s ass hard enough to make him yelp.

Zane looked up through the semi-circle of reporters clustered around and gave him a ‘knock it off’ look, but Ryan couldn’t tell if he was annoyed at him for being loud or trying to figure out what they were up to.

He didn’t think Zane was jealous. He didn’t seem like the jealous type.

And yeah, Truro was hot, Ryan supposed. But he wasn’t *Zane*.

Ryan was practically vibrating with tension by the time Zane was finally ready to leave and Ryan herded him out the door before he could get stopped by someone else who needed something from him.

“You take forever,” he complained as they crossed the parking lot.

“This is nothing new. I told you years ago that we could drive separately if you want,” Zane argued. “I have media obligations and they take time.”

“So do I!” Ryan said. “They make me do media shit too, you know? I’m just faster at getting out of here than you are.”

“Why are you in such a hurry tonight anyway?” Zane asked with a laugh as he got in his Audi. Ryan slid into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut.

“Why the fuck do you think?” Ryan grabbed the front of Zane’s gray suit and hauled him closer. “Because it’s Valentine’s Day and I have *so many* dirty things I want to do to you.”

“I can’t drive home when you’ve got me like this,” Zane argued but he was smiling, their mouths inches apart.

Ryan wanted to kiss that smile off his face but he knew they couldn’t do that in the middle of the arena parking.

“Fine.” He let go of Zane’s suit, smoothing down the wrinkles he’d left in his pale pink tie. “Drive.”

“So bossy,” Zane said, pushing the Audi’s start button.

“I’ll show you bossy,” Ryan countered, buckling his seatbelt. “I’m gonna get you home and show you what that last goal

made me want to do to you.”

“You *told* me,” Zane said with a laugh as he backed out of his parking spot. “On the ice. You better hope none of the cameras picked that up, dude.”

“Nah. It’ll be fine. But I’m not going to be if you don’t hurry!”

“You can’t possibly be that worked up.” Zane shook his head. “I swear, you have the patience of a two-year-old.”

They good-naturedly bickered as Zane left the arena and turned toward home but Ryan’s hand kept creeping higher and higher on his thigh.

“I need your dick in my mouth, Murphy,” Ryan growled after a few minutes. “Drive *faster*.”

Zane laughed. “You act like you’re going to die without it.”

“I just might,” Ryan said darkly. “Don’t test me.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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They barely made it into their apartment before Zane was slammed up against the closed door, Ryan's mouth on his, hot and hungry.

"You're so fucking good at that," Ryan mumbled as he moved across Zane's jaw.

Zane wasn't sure if he meant the hockey or kissing but Zane couldn't think straight with Ryan's thigh between his, pushing at his hardening dick.

As they'd waited for the elevator and ridden it up to their floor, Ryan's gaze had been hot enough to make Zane want to grab him by his red and pink heart-patterned tie and drag him in close.

Zane had a grip on the neckwear now and he hauled Ryan in for another brain-melting hot kiss. Ryan's hands felt huge and warm as he grabbed Zane's ass, kneading the muscles there, shoving their hips together, enjoying the rough friction of their hardening cocks sliding together, even through their clothes.

"Need your dick in my mouth," Ryan said, licking the spot behind Zane's ear that made his toes curl, then bit his earlobe.

He wormed a hand between their bodies, yanking at Zane's shirt to pull it loose from his trousers.

"So get on your knees," Zane panted.

He let go of Ryan's tie in favor of shakily undoing the buckle of his belt and easing the zipper open.



He didn't even have time to push the trousers down before Ryan dropped to his knees and nuzzled against the soft fabric of Zane's underwear.

"Is it fucked up that the smell of the arena body wash gets me hard now?" he mumbled. "It reminds me of you."

Zane didn't know whether to laugh, groan, or beg Ryan to do something beyond kissing his dick through the fabric.

"Little bit, man," he said, combing his hands through Ryan's hair, curls still damp from the postgame shower and flattened by the beanie he'd worn with his suit. The hat lay somewhere on the floor nearby. "C'mon, I thought you needed my dick in your mouth."

"I do." Ryan grasped his waistband, tugging the clothing down to Zane's thighs. "Give it to me."

But Zane barely had time to grasp the base of his dick and guide it toward Ryan's lips before he had his mouth open and was swallowing him down.

Zane let out a shouted groan and let his head thump back against the door. He closed his eyes, threading both hands through Ryan's hair to give him something to hold on to. Ryan's mouth was so fucking warm. The wet slurping sounds he made as he bobbed over Zane's cock heated Zane's blood until he felt like he was boiling from the inside out.

Zane tossed his hat off and flung it away, hearing something else clatter to the floor. Maybe his phone. He didn't care.

Not when Ryan was sucking his dick like it was the only way he'd survive the night.

Ryan had quickly learned all the tricks to make Zane weak in the knees and he didn't miss a single one as he bobbed over his cock now. He knew how much suction Zane liked and the right way to tease the tip of his tongue along the ridge of the head.

When he tapped the inside of Zane's thigh with his fingertips, Zane widened his stance as much as the constricting clothing would allow.

Ryan gave his balls a gentle tug while he sucked hard and deep and Zane let out a strangled shout and came, the orgasm taking him by surprise as he shot into Ryan's mouth.

He came and came until his legs turned to jelly, then slid down the length of the door, practically landing in Ryan's lap.

"Fuck, I should score more goals like that in the future if it gets you this worked up," he mumbled, head still spinning.

"Yeah, you should," Ryan said.

He manhandled Zane until he was flat on his back, then yanked off some of his own clothing, pushing the rest out of the way.

Ryan fumbled for something and a moment later, the wet squelch of lube clued Zane into what it was. Ryan tossed it aside with a quiet clatter of plastic, then settled on top of Zane, straddling one of his legs, braced on his forearms, sliding his cock across the groove of Zane's right hip.

"You gonna get off this way?" Zane asked, grasping his bare ass. He let Ryan set the pace as he rocked his hips, applying more pressure as he pulled their bodies tightly together.

"Uh-huh," Ryan mumbled against his neck.

The hot, damp breath made Zane shiver and he wanted to get his mouth or hand on Ryan but he seemed happy like this so Zane flexed his hips and settled into a rhythm that made Ryan groan over him.

"Fuck, Zane," he whispered after a few minutes, his entire body trembling. "I ..."

"I know. I've got you," Zane said. He brought two fingers to his mouth and licked them, then brought them to Ryan's ass. He slid them along Ryan's crack, teasing against his hole, and he'd barely worked one finger in before Ryan tensed over him.

He came with a strangled shout, the hot release of his cum coating Zane's abs as he shuddered, his hips jerking with erratic thrusts, his breath hot against Zane's neck.

When he was spent, he went limp over Zane. His dead weight was a lot and Zane let out a groan and rolled them onto their

sides.

“Sorry,” Ryan mumbled but Zane shushed him, pressing his lips to his forehead.

“S’okay.”

“I’ll get up when I have feeling in my legs again.”

“Same.”

After a minute, Ryan lifted his head enough to look Zane in the face.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, baby.”

Zane cupped his cheek with his clean hand, smiling. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

This was a little less romantic than he’d planned but he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

Ryan dropped his head to Zane’s outstretched arm and they lay there on the floor for a little bit, bodies tangled up, cum cooling uncomfortably between their bodies, half-dressed and exhausted but content.

The floor was cold under the side of Zane’s butt and thigh and his suit jacket and shirt were twisted uncomfortably, the fabric strangling his biceps and cutting off circulation.

Jesus, he still had his shoes on.

“Our dry cleaner is going to hate us,” Zane muttered.

Ryan chuckled. “Probably.”

“Think they’ll out us to *JockGossip*?”

“They better not with the way I tip them.” Ryan’s tone was dark and Zane knew he’d raise holy hell if anyone ever did out them.

Zane loved how ferociously protective of him Ryan was.

“I gotta get up,” he finally said with a groan when his hip began to protest.

Ryan flopped onto his back, staring up at the ceiling like he had no intention of ever moving again.

Zane staggered to his feet, legs weaker than they should be. “Jesus, Ryan. That was ...”

“You can say it, baby,” Ryan crooned as he looked up at him. “I know I’m the best you’ve ever had.”

Zane ripped off his suit jacket and flung it at Ryan’s face in answer.

He batted it away, grinning like a lunatic.

If Zane gave Ryan the satisfaction of agreeing, he’d be insufferable to live with. Well, even *more* insufferable. He was already way too damn cocky about his skills in the bedroom. Even if it was all true.

“You’re all right,” Zane said with a half-hearted shrug. He held his hand out. “C’mon. Up on your feet.”

“Hey!” Ryan gave him a dirty look but he took Zane’s hand and stood with a groan. They both kicked off their shoes and left them by the door, then stripped off the remainder of their wrinkled, cum-and-lube-streaked clothing.

Zane found his phone where it had slipped from his pocket and slid halfway across the floor, then gathered their clothing into a messy wad. He nodded toward the bedroom. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

“You’re not Captain *here*,” Ryan argued but he followed Zane obediently.

He always would, Zane realized with a tender pang.

Ryan wasn’t a pushover but he’d always let Zane lead when he wanted. Adding sex and romantic feelings into the mix hadn’t changed that.

That thought left a soft warmth behind Zane’s breastbone as he tossed his phone on the bed, then dumped their dirty clothes in the hamper for Future Zane to deal with.

He pushed Ryan into the bathroom and turned on the sink to warm the water. Ryan leaned against the vanity, naked, a sleepy half-smirk on his face. His hair was an absolute frizzy mess and he had a glaze of drying cum and lube on his stomach.

Zane fought off a helpless, fond smile. Damn it. Ryan shouldn't look so fucking good like that.

"Let me clean you up," he said instead.

Zane wet a hand towel and wrung it out, gently wiping Ryan's abs clean. He rinsed the cloth, then ventured lower, wiping at the soft, curling hairs at the base of his dick before gliding it along that too, gently, because Ryan always got super sensitive after.

"Zane, I ..."

Zane looked up and Ryan stood there, mouth half-open, a confused but hopeful expression on his face.

"What?" Zane asked, tossing the cloth in the sink.

"Nothing. I ... I'm glad it was you. That I—I ... feel this way about."

"Me too." Zane leaned in and kissed him slow and deep. Zane was pretty sure he *couldn't* have felt this way about anyone else. No one else knew him the way Ryan did. No one else had the same history.

No one else had been with him every step of the way.

After, when Zane's lips tingled and he was as clean as he was going to bother getting tonight, he lightly slapped Ryan's hip. "Hey, put some pants on, man. We're gonna have dinner."

"I don't need pants for that," Ryan grumbled. But he tugged open a drawer to pull out two pairs of underwear, throwing one at Zane.

He snatched the boxer briefs out of the air. "Yes, you do. We're eating at the table like civilized human beings tonight."

"You're the *worst*." Ryan shimmied into red briefs.

He had a weird thing about themed ties and underwear. Tonight's earlier pair of heart-patterned briefs had gotten significant locker room chirping.

"I ordered you a special Valentine's dinner from your favorite restaurant," Zane said mildly. "If you really want, I can eat it all myself ..."

It was an idle threat, and Zane was sure Ryan knew that, but his eyes went wide and he yanked sweats out of another drawer, protesting, "I'll be good!"

Laughing, Zane caught the pants flung at him and dragged them on too. He grabbed them both tees and hoodies and tossed a set over to Ryan. The best part of dating Ryan might be that they could wear each other's casual clothing without a second thought. Ryan's legs were a bit longer and his dress clothes were tailored accordingly but they wore the same size of sweats and tees.

Since most of it was team-branded, no one ever noticed.

Zane's phone buzzed on the bed where he'd tossed it and he unlocked it to find a notification saying his food delivery had arrived. Perfect. He'd timed it just right.

"Food's here," he announced.

"Thank God, I'm starving."

Zane laughed, shaking his head at how ridiculous Ryan was.

God and to think he was in love with that man.

Zane's steps faltered briefly. Shit. He really *was* in love with him, wasn't he? This was more than loving a teammate and best friend. This was the kind of relationship he'd thought he'd have once hockey was over, but it was here *now*.

This ridiculous, playful idiot was the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Not just on the ice but off it.

The one he could picture marrying and having a family with.

And while Zane still didn't know what it meant for their careers or how they were going to navigate that shit, he was so in.

Zane's entire body buzzed with happiness as he walked past the kitchen, swiped his wallet off the counter, then shoved slides onto his feet.

He was still buzzing as he rode the elevator down to the lobby.

“Delivery for Murphy,” a guy wearing a hat with the restaurant’s logo said with a smile, holding up two bags.

“That’s me,” Zane said as he took the bags. Shit, he’d ordered a lot of food. “Thanks for this, man.”

“Sure thing!” the delivery guy said with a lopsided smile. “Could I, uh, get an autograph?”

“For the credit card slip? Yeah, of course.”

“Oh right, I do need that. But uh, no, I meant I’m an Otters’ fan. I’d like your autograph if you don’t mind. Don’t want to bug you in your time off but I figure I’m not gonna get too many chances like this.”

“Yeah, of course. Happy to do both,” Zane said with a smile as he set the bags down.

The guy grinned and held out the receipt. Zane added a hefty tip, then signed.

As the guy took the receipt back, Zane noticed a rubber bracelet on his wrist. It was rainbow-colored and had ‘Hockey is for Everyone’ on it. There was a little Otters logo too and Zane’s heart beat double time.

“Oh, you came to the Pride event last month?” he asked.

The guy looked up, his smile widening.

“Yeah. It’s cool the team does that. My boyfriend and I are big fans and it means a lot, you know?”

Touched, Zane said, “I’m glad we do it too.”

He wet his lips, wanting to say more. Wanting to let the guy know that it had become abruptly personal for him as well but afraid to say the words aloud. Afraid they weren’t ready for that yet.

Zane wanted to trust that the guy would keep his confidence but he was a total stranger. It wasn’t worth the risk.

“Uh, let me get some paper for you,” Zane said instead. He snagged a piece from the security guard at the nearby desk.

“So, who should I make it out to?” he asked when he returned.

“J.J., please.”

Zane scribbled his messy signature, then hesitated. “Want one for your boyfriend too?”

J.J. beamed. “Yeah, that would be great. Although he’s actually a bigger Hartinger fan,” he said with a little laugh.

“Ouch.” Zane clutched his chest. “Harsh. I can call up and see if Ryan can run down and sign something though if you want.”

“Sure. That would be awesome. That’s cool that you guys live in the same building too.”

“Yep,” Zane said with a smile. “Makes commuting to the rink easy.”

It wasn’t like them living together was a secret. There had been some media piece on them a few years back with a video tour of their apartment and everything.

Just two bros, hanging out.

God, if only people knew what it had turned into.

J.J. stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Nice. Yeah, if Hartinger doesn’t have any Valentine’s Day plans I’m interrupting or anything, Kit would be psyched to get his autograph.”

“Nope, no plans,” Zane said. “We’re just taking it easy after the game and figured we’d do takeout tonight. Watch some TV or whatever.”

*Just two bros, hanging out,* Zane thought again, only this time it sent a little pang through him that he couldn’t say that he’d ordered a romantic dinner for the guy he was dating.

“Yeah, totally.”

Zane slipped his phone out of his pocket and dialed Ryan. He wandered away from J.J., waiting for Ryan to pick up.

“What did you do, get stuck in the elevator again, man?” he answered, laughing.

“Ha. No.” That had only happened once, shortly after they moved into the building. “So, the delivery guy is a fan of the team and his boyfriend is a huge fan of yours specifically. I



thought you might want to come down and sign something for him.”

“Oh. Yep. I’ll be right down,” Ryan assured him, sounding happy to do it. Zane knew he was. He’d never once turned down a fan.

“Cool. See you in a minute.”

Zane hung up, then tucked his phone in the pocket of his sweats, smiling as he joined J.J. again. “Ryan will be down in a sec.”

“Thanks, man. This is super cool of you guys.”

Zane shrugged. “It’s no big deal.”

“So you and Hartinger are ...”

Zane held his breath, wondering what the guy was going to say.

“Roommates, right? I swear I remember some media thing about that.”

Zane relaxed. “Yeah. We lived together in college and just got in the habit of it after that, you know?”

J.J. nodded. “U of M, right? God, your team was a powerhouse when you were playing there together. I mean, you still are, obviously, but it was amazing to see back then too. Love that you’ve been on a line together for so long.”

Zane probably shouldn’t have been surprised that the guy knew where he’d played previously but he was always a little taken aback when fans rattled off his stats or knew his playing history. Sometimes they remembered plays or games he’d forgotten.

“Yeah, we lived together in Ann Arbor and when Ryan joined the team here, they figured, why change it up? It was working well and ...” Zane chuckled. “Now I can’t get rid of him.”

J.J. grinned. “I think it’s great you’re so close. It’s cool to see guys being so open with their affection and stuff. I saw the kiss cam footage on Twitter tonight during my break.”

“Oh, we’re not ...” But Zane suppressed a wince, hating that he’d immediately denied it. It felt wrong. They *were*. They were together and they loved each other and it felt shitty to deny it.

Of course, he hadn’t really had the courage to say exactly how he felt to Ryan’s face either. Not in so many words, anyway.

But J.J. immediately shook his head. “No. I know you guys aren’t *dating* or anything. I know there are lots of fans who are like ... shipping you guys together but I don’t mean that way.”

Zane wasn’t *unaware* of the fact that there were in fact fans who wanted him and Ryan to be together but he’d never spent a lot of time contemplating it.

“Uh, right,” Zane managed, scratching the back of his neck.

“I just mean I think it’s like ... healthy that straight guys can show their affection for each other, you know?” J.J. continued earnestly. “I think it’s good for the sport and like, society as a whole.”

Zane nodded. “For sure.”

He hadn’t spent a lot of time thinking about that either, but J.J. had a point.

“Hey, you know,” Zane said, feeling a little impulsive. “If I *was* into guys though, I’d be lucky to have someone like Hartinger, right?”

J.J. grinned. “Totally. He seems like a sweetheart.”

“I’m not sure Kyle Keller from New Jersey would agree with you,” Zane said drily. “Ryan *buried* him against the boards tonight. But yes, he’s a good dude.”

J.J. laughed. “Yeah, it’s different on the ice. But I always like that your team has some really stand-up guys, you know? You’re easy to root for.”

“We try,” Zane said. He glanced over to see the elevator doors open. Ryan walked out, carrying a tote bag.

He grinned, holding it up as he approached. “Hey, man. Brought some merch too, if you want it.”

J.J.'s eyes widened. "Uh, *hell* yeah."

Zane and Ryan laughed and joked with J.J. for a few minutes while they signed some team gear for him and his boyfriend.

"Shit. I should get back to the restaurant. We're about to close," J.J. said with an awkward laugh when they were done. "This was super cool to chat with you guys for a bit though. I, uh, never thought I'd ever meet either of you in person."

"Great to meet you too." Zane held out a hand to shake and Ryan did the same. J.J. left, beaming, with the tote bag in hand, and Ryan grabbed the food bags.

"So what was that about?" Ryan asked when they were on the elevator heading back up to their floor. "I mean, you're always great with fans but you don't usually get that buddy-buddy with them."

"I dunno. He touched a nerve, I guess. He was talking about how much the Pride events mean to him and his boyfriend, Kit, and it made me realize we're not so different."

Except, of course, J.J. and Kit hadn't been worried about what tens of thousands of people would think about it.

"Aww, I love that." Ryan bumped their shoulders together.

"Yeah, it feels good." Zane glanced over. "And I told him that, uh, if I were into guys, I'd be lucky to have one like you."

Ryan gaped. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I mean, it wasn't like ... outing us but ..." He swallowed hard, a weird lump blocking his throat. "I kinda felt weird denying how great you are. I *am* lucky."

"Shit, Zane, you can't say stuff like that to me when we're in an elevator." Ryan's tone was mournful. "I want to kiss you so fucking bad and there's *cameras*."

"Sorry," Zane said but he wasn't really that sorry. He'd meant every word of it.

The elevator dinged, indicating they'd reached their floor, so Zane held the doors open for him.

“Damn, I don’t have my keys. We didn’t lock ourselves out, did we?” Zane asked when they were in the hallway outside their apartment.

“No,” Ryan said with a laugh. “Give me a little credit. Keys are in my right pocket.”

“Is this an excuse to get me to feel around in your pants?” Zane asked in a low voice as he reached into Ryan’s sweats.

Ryan grinned. “No, but you can cop a feel if you really want.”

Zane snagged the keys cleanly but he did cop a feel. A tiny one. Just because he could.

“I felt that,” Ryan said, but his eyes were twinkling.

“Good, you were supposed to.” Zane slid the key into the lock.

“Do you really mean it?” Ryan asked, tone turning serious when they were inside the apartment and the door had closed behind them.

“That I’m lucky to be with you?” Zane shot him an incredulous look. “Are you kidding me?”

“No.” Ryan looked oddly vulnerable, and Zane grabbed the bags from Ryan’s hands, then set the takeout on the floor. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around Ryan’s hips, tugging him close.

“I am so fucking lucky,” Zane murmured against his mouth. “You are amazing. On and off the ice. You know how much I love the way you play and you’re ... God, you’re so good-looking. I am always kind of amazed I’m the one you want to be in bed with. And you’re a good guy. You care about people and you’re so loyal and ...”

Zane was on the verge of being way too emotional, so he swallowed his feelings. “Just believe me when I say I feel lucky every day that you’re with me.”

“Shit, Zane.” Ryan slid a hand up along his back. “I don’t have the words to say all that but you know I feel it too, right?”

“I know.” Zane closed his eyes and leaned in for a kiss, dipping his fingers into the waistband of Ryan’s sweats,

feeling the warm skin there and the dimples above the swell of his ass.

Zane was tempted to take this further but Ryan's stomach rumbled loudly so he pulled away, laughing. "Let's do dinner, yeah?"

They'd had a light, high-protein meal after the game but clearly it hadn't been enough.

"Yeah." Ryan shifted a little nervously. "You said that you got us a nice dinner so I, uh, set the table and all that shit. Hope that's okay?"

"Perfect." Zane had been planning to do the same.

He turned on the oven and let it heat while he pulled aluminum pans out of the bags. He carefully read the instructions for heating everything and when it was warm, he set the food out on plates. It didn't look as nice as when they ate at the restaurant but it wasn't half bad.

He'd ordered a bottle of wine too and Ryan uncorked and poured it while Zane pulled out a little candleholder his mom had bought him when they rented the place, then lit the candle in it.

"Thought we deserved a little romance," he said with a sheepish shrug.

"Didn't know you were into that." But Ryan beamed as he pulled out Zane's chair out with a flourish.

It sent a funny little flutter through Zane.

"It's good to try new things, right?" Zane asked as he took a seat and Ryan helped him scoot in.

Ryan smiled, brushing his thumb across Zane's shoulder. "Yeah, yeah it is."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Ryan had felt the weirdest little stab of jealousy when he'd gotten out of the elevator to see Zane laughing with the delivery guy. He'd been down there a long time and he'd looked so relaxed and at ease, talking like they were long-lost friends.

But now, sitting across the table from Zane, his belly full of all his favorite foods, Ryan just felt happy.

Zane was trying.

Maybe romance didn't come super easy to either of them but Zane knew him better than anyone. He'd thought about this night. He'd made it special, even though they'd had a game.

And even if they hadn't, it wasn't like they would have gone out to eat dinner in public on Valentine's Day and stared into each other's eyes while they enjoyed their meal.

Zane had done as much as he was ready for and Ryan was okay with that. Zane said he felt lucky to be with him and damn if Ryan didn't feel the same.

"Oh, I got you a present," Ryan said, remembering.

"Yeah?" Zane grinned.

"Yeah." Ryan snagged the gift bag from where he'd stashed it next to the table. "I know you're all careful with your diet but ..."

Zane grinned as he pulled out the bottle of whiskey and box of chocolate caramels from his favorite shop downtown. "I can

probably make an exception for these. They look great. Thanks.”

Zane had already made an exception tonight with the desserts he'd ordered but knowing Zane, he'd probably limit himself to one caramel every two weeks or something ridiculous like that.

God, Ryan loved him. It had hit him like a freight train when they were in the bathroom earlier. Zane had been so careful with him. Ryan smiled rather than say that aloud. “Yeah, of course. Thanks for the romantic dinner.”

Zane leaned back in his chair, a smug little smile crossing his face. “Oh that's part *one* of the night.”

“Yeah?” Ryan gave him a speculative look across the table.

“Mmhmm. I want you to give me ten minutes, then come in the bedroom.”

Ryan blatantly adjusted himself. “I can do that.”

It was late but they had a day off tomorrow. Coach Daniels was a bit of a romantic and he always made sure they had a free day after Valentine's Day as long as they didn't have a game scheduled.

Coach liked to spoil his wife, Lena, and he always told the guys they should do the same with their wives and girlfriends.

Daniels talked about the sacrifices WAGS made throughout the season. The long road trips, the late nights, the schedules that revolved around their games.

In some ways, it was so much easier for him and Zane to be together. No one understood the life of an NHL player like a teammate.

Cleaning up after dinner wasn't Ryan's favorite thing but he knew Zane liked going to bed with the kitchen spotless so after he disappeared into the bedroom, Ryan hauled himself out of his chair and got to work.

It wasn't too bad really, since they'd just reheated stuff.

Ryan's semi had mostly gone down by the time he finished loading the dishwasher, wiping down the counters, and blowing out the candle on the table.

It roared to life again when he stepped into their bedroom.

Well, it wasn't really *theirs* officially, but they'd more or less moved into Ryan's room.

Most of Zane's clothes were still in the closet in his old room but he never slept in there anymore and his charger, water bottle, and other little nighttime things had migrated to one of the nightstands.

His dirty clothes were in Ryan's hamper and his robe hung on the back of the door.

It was as close as they were going to get until everyone knew about them.

"This okay?" Zane sounded a little apprehensive and Ryan blinked as he realized he'd been zoning.

"Yeah, this looks great," Ryan said with a smile. "Thanks, baby."

The lights were dim except for a couple of candles. There were a couple of beach towels covering the sheets and massage oil on the nightstand.

Zane had stripped his shirt off and Ryan sauntered over.

"What exactly do you have planned?"

"I thought maybe a massage? I, uh, asked the trainers for some tips and I did some research online."

Ryan smiled at the idea. Zane had probably taken notes too because that was the kind of nerd he was. "Sounds perfect."

"Get on the bed then."

"Clothes or no clothes?"

"No clothes. *Obviously.*" Zane rolled his eyes like it was the most ridiculous question ever.

Ryan stripped down, then settled on the bed, the mattress dipping as Zane joined him. He let out a happy groan when



Zane settled a palm on his back, warm and slick.

Ryan drifted for a while, just enjoying Zane's hands on him. He got massages all the time at the rink but this was so much nicer.

When Zane hit a tight spot, he groaned. "You can do that forever."

"Forever, huh?"

"If I'm lucky," Ryan muttered into the pillow.

"Pretty sure I'd be the lucky one." Zane sounded like he was smiling.

Ryan's answering smile was hidden by the fabric but he let out a happy hum. He drifted again, enjoying the slick glide of Zane's big, strong hands. When he got to work on Ryan's glutes, he shifted on the bed, dick firming up again.

The glide of Zane's thumbs on either side of his crack made a shiver run down Ryan's spine.

"You should fuck me," he muttered into the pillow.

"Nah, it's not about that," Zane said softly. "I mean, I love getting you off. I just wanted this to be romantic."

To Ryan, they were kind of the same. Romance was about making the other person feel happy and good, and he never felt better than when he was lying in bed with Zane.

But he kinda got Zane's point too.

And maybe Zane wanted to show him that it was about more than just getting off together.

"You can do whatever you want to me," Ryan said with a groan, as Zane moved lower and hit that really tight spot on his hamstring.

"Whatever, huh?" Zane bent down, pressing a kiss to Ryan's butt, and he smiled, eyes still closed.

"Yep, *whatever*."

Because there was nothing that he could imagine Zane doing that he wouldn't want.

Zane knew him, inside and out and in every way that counted. He would never ask Ryan to do something that was bad for him.

There was a guy who'd been on the team a few years back.

He'd been traded to Evanston with the idea that he'd fit in as their second line center. He really hadn't gotten the vibe of their locker room and at one point he'd sneeringly asked Ryan if Zane Murphy told him jump, would he do it.

And Ryan had nodded seriously and said yes. Because if Zane *did* tell him to jump, it would be for a very good reason.

Not everyone got Ryan's devotion to Zane. He'd been told a few times that he was stupid for not going to another franchise, where he'd be a bigger star and have a captaincy all his own. Where he could get more money.

But every time Ryan thought about going to a different team and not having Zane there with him, it felt all wrong.

Zane was hockey and hockey was Zane.

Playing without Zane in college after he signed with the Otters had been the worst time of his life. Ryan honestly wasn't sure if he would have made it in the NHL if he'd signed with another team.

Because once he'd met Zane, he'd never wanted to play without him again.

There was this constant hum in his body when Zane was on the ice, this awareness of where he was. He didn't have to see Zane or even hear him. He knew where he was as surely as he knew where the end of his skate was.

Zane was a part of him and he was a part of Zane and that was all there was to it.

It wasn't his fault no one else could understand that.

"You okay?" Zane asked softly. "I can feel your mind working overtime from here."

"There smoke coming out of my ears?" Ryan joked.

Zane's chuckle was quiet. "No. Just want to be sure you're enjoying this."

"Totally am," Ryan said with a contented sigh. "Just thinking about you and hockey and how lucky I am to have them both."

Zane was silent a moment, his hands going still. "Me too," he said, and if he sounded a little choked up, well, Ryan would never tell anyone.

---

After the massage, Ryan lay on the bed like he'd never move again.

Zane chuckled to himself as he wiped his hands on a towel. They should probably shower and Ryan's comment about Zane doing anything to him had sparked an idea.

So he went into the bathroom.

As he flipped on the light, he squinted at the brightness, eyes used to the soft candlelight. He turned it off again, then used the light filtering in from the bedroom to start the shower and get the water warming.

He carried a couple of candles in, set them on the vanity, then went back to the bedroom.

Ryan lay exactly where he'd left him, sprawled out, skin glistening with the massage oil. Zane bit his lip, staring at him a moment.

He looked so good. Zane had the urge to pinch himself to believe that it was real. That this guy was the one who'd chosen to be with him.

And to think, he could have missed out on this.

"Babe?" Zane said softly, resting a hand on Ryan's shoulder. "Want to come shower with me?"

"Pretty comfy," he said drowsily.

It was late as hell. They usually crashed way sooner than this after a game and Zane couldn't blame Ryan for being tired.

But he had one more thing he wanted to do.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Zane teased as he took a seat on the edge of the mattress, hip pressing against his thigh.

“I’m listening.”

Zane smiled, rubbing his hand across Ryan’s broad back, trailing his fingers down to where his torso narrowed and then to the swell below, teasing at the cleft of his ass with a single finger. “My tongue. Here.”

“I’m up,” Ryan said, staggering out of bed so fast he nearly clocked Zane in the head with his elbow.

Laughing, Zane stood a little more slowly. “Thought that would do it.”

Ryan squinted, hair mussed and one eye half-open like it was too much work to bother lifting both lids all the way. “You better not be messing with me just to get me in the shower.”

“No. I’m going to mess with you *in* the shower,” he promised, lightly smacking Ryan’s ass.

“Sold.”

In the end, Ryan was the one who dragged him toward the bathroom. Laughing, Zane followed.

In the warm shower, Zane pressed him up against the wall. They made out for the longest time, hands gliding over soapy skin, trading lazy kisses and smiles.

After a while, Zane turned Ryan to face the wall and dropped to his knees. He wondered why he’d been so nervous about this. Nothing he and Ryan did could be wrong.

He parted Ryan’s cheeks and licked a slow, wet stripe up his crack.

“Oh, *fuck*, Zane,” Ryan said with a strangled groan.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Zane whispered against his skin.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

“Hey, did you get a chance to put away everything on the nightstands?” Zane called out from the kitchen. “And check that everything’s in the hamper?”

Ryan glanced around the bedroom. “No, I pulled all the lube, condoms, and dildos out of the drawers and set them up to look as incriminating as possible.”

He grimaced as he stuffed some more clothes in the hamper. They *really* needed to do laundry.

“Ryan! Be serious!”

He shook his head fondly. Zane was in paranoid mode today.

Their apartment was nice but not really designed for entertaining groups.

They rarely had the guys over here, usually renting out private rooms in restaurants or bars or whatever if Zane wanted to organize a whole-team thing like they did for Thanksgiving or the Super Bowl.

But tonight was the start of March Madness and Zane had invited some of the guys over to watch a basketball game. None of them were hugely into college basketball but it had been a while since they’d done anything as a group and Zane had been feeling guilty about it.

Thankfully, a lot of the team already had other plans or they never would have figured out how to squeeze everyone in. As

it was, there were only about a dozen guys coming over tonight.

Still, during halftime, the hall bathroom was usually in demand and guys wandered into their en suite bathrooms.

Zane had been super paranoid about people figuring out that they were sleeping together and was really wound up about it.

He'd carted a bunch of his game day suits back to the closet in the bedroom he never used anymore and cleared his products out of *this* bathroom and put them in his old bathroom.

He'd even rumples the bed, then pulled it back together like he'd slept in it and made it.

Ryan was pretty sure it wasn't just stress about the team discovering their secret that had him so anxious.

Zane was worried about the team's current standing in the conference, and waiting for the results of some tests he'd had on his hip recently.

Ryan was trying to humor him.

"Ryan!" Zane called.

"I promise, it's clean," he yelled back as he took one last look around the room, even checking under the bed a final time.

He left the door open, then went into the main living area. Zane stood at the island, stirring the ginormous pot of chili he'd made.

"Mmm, that smells good," he said, sliding behind Zane and wrapping his arms around his waist. He nuzzled into Zane's neck, which made him squirm just the way Ryan had hoped he would.

Zane laughed, relaxing a little. "Me or the chili?"

"Both." Ryan playfully bit at his neck. "Although, I was talking about the chili."

"You think the guys will like it?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I don't know. Do you think we have enough food?"

“You’ve got chili, cornbread, two kinds of salad, a whole veggie tray, and tons of snacks,” Ryan reminded him with a laugh. Thank God Zane hadn’t decided to make all that himself. He’d only cooked the turkey and bean chili and cornbread. “There will be plenty to eat. Besides, most of the guys coming today are old enough they’re past the eat-everything-not-nailed-down phase that happens when you start playing in the NHL.”

Zane chuckled. “*You* never outgrew it.”

“Well, I’ve always been special.”

“You sure are.”

Zane’s tone was dry and Ryan was pretty sure he didn’t mean it as a compliment so he blew raspberries onto Zane’s neck in retaliation.

He laughed and shoved Ryan away. “Quit it.”

“Nope.” Ryan latched on again, wrapping his arms around Zane’s waist and hanging on.

“Let go. I need to check that we have plenty of ice.”

“Nope.” Ryan squeezed tighter. “We have plenty. You’ve checked three times.”

“God you’re like a friggin’ koala. You latch on and won’t let go.”

“You like it,” Ryan said confidently.

“I like *you*, although God knows why,” Zane grumbled.

Ryan smiled and pressed a kiss to his temple. “Clearly it’s because you have the best taste in men.”

“Mm-hmm. Something like that.”

Zane’s phone buzzed on the counter and he muscled his way out of Ryan’s arms, absently smoothing down his clothes as he checked the message. He was dressed in jeans that made his ass look fantastic and the fanciest hoodie Ryan had ever seen.

One of Zane’s endorsement deals was with a men’s clothing company and this was from one of the shoots he’d done a

while back. It was an off-white pullover sweater with a waffle-y texture and a hood.

Zane glanced up. "Some of the guys are on their way up."

"Cool." Ryan tugged on the strings of Zane's hoodie, playing with the little leather tabs on the ends. "I like this."

Zane smiled. "Yeah?"

"Yep. Looks good on you." He licked his lips as he eyeballed Zane's chest, shoulders, and arms in it.

"We really don't have time for you to look at me that way," Zane muttered, but he grabbed the front of Ryan's team hoodie and hauled him in for a kiss.

When he pulled back, Ryan stared at him. God. He was so good-looking it was ridiculous. Ryan brushed his thumb across Zane's lower lip, pink from the hard kiss.

*I love you*, he thought for what was probably the thousandth time in the past month. They hadn't said it aloud yet but he was pretty sure Zane felt it too.

He had to, right?

That soft look in his bright blue eyes, the way he clutched Ryan's hips in his strong hands, they had to mean something like love.

"Everything okay?" Zane asked quietly.

Ryan let out a breath and nodded. "Yeah, everything is great."

And it was.

He leaned in for one more kiss, pulling away and pushing some of Zane's dark hair off his forehead before the making out could get heated again.

Zane gave him a soft, slightly perplexed look with a tilt of his head but the ring of the doorbell made them pull apart.

"You're *sure* you got everything in our room?" Zane asked as he walked toward the door.

"Yep. I even checked under the bed," Ryan assured him, trying not to smile at him calling the bedroom that.



Zane paused. "I know I'm being weird about this. I just ..."

Ryan shrugged. "It's all good. Whatever makes you feel better."

"Dude, let me in!" Someone pounded on the door.

"You do," Zane said softly as he reached for the doorknob.  
"You always have."

But he pulled the door open before Ryan could respond.

---

"Dude, what took so long?" Brett Cooper grumbled as he pushed his way past Zane, carrying a six-pack of beer. "What were you two doing, jerking each other off?"

"Why, you need some love, Coop?" Ryan asked before Zane could even put together a response. "What did you do to piss Bethany off and put you in the doghouse this time?"

"Nothing, asshole," he shot back. "She loves the shit out of me."

They were off, bickering at each other as Ryan led Cooper farther into the apartment. Zane shook his head and turned to face Dean Tremblay, who had been patiently waiting by the door. "Come in, man."

Tremblay laughed and kicked off his shoes. "Mmm, something smells good. Is that chili?"

"Yep."

The oven timer beeped and Zane hustled into the kitchen and grabbed potholders. "And cornbread, assuming I didn't burn it. I almost forgot the second batch was still in."

The doorbell rang again and Ryan called out, "I've got it."

There was a steady stream of guys coming in after that, including Lindholm, O'Shea, Truro, and a couple of the rookies who still seemed a little awed at being invited over.

Thankfully, drinks and food quickly loosened them up and it wasn't long before they were inhaling bowls of chili as they watched the basketball game.

"You can sit down, you know," Ryan reminded Zane during halftime.

"I know. I just want to make sure everyone has enough of everything."

"You're worrying for no reason, Murph," Ryan assured him, patting his hip, then gently pushing him toward the living room where the guys were sprawled out across every piece of furniture and the floor. "C'mon. You need to relax."

"Fine."

Zane grumbled but let himself be pushed toward the sleek brown leather chair that was actually a super comfy recliner.

"Out," Ryan said to the rookie. "That's Cap's chair."

"Shit, sorry." He scrambled out of it so fast he tripped over his feet and nearly face-planted.

Zane rolled his eyes. "It's fine. I could have sat on the floor."

"No, your hip's bugging you, you need to be comfortable," Ryan argued.

"Oh my God, I'm not an invalid. Stop fussing."

But it did feel better to sit with his feet up. It had been bad lately. Ever since he'd had the scans on his hip done, there had been this clutching fear running through him that the news was going to be so bad he'd be out of play permanently.

It probably wasn't. It was probably something that could be treated but God, the thought of losing hockey before he'd ever had a chance to prove to the world that they had a championship-winning team left him breathless with fear.

"Would you two shut up and let us watch the game?" O'Shea asked with a laugh.

"No," Ryan shot back, flicking O'Shea in the back of the head. "Mind your business."

“Your business is loud.”

“And you’re too smart-mouthed for your own good,” Ryan shot back.

“Would you all be quiet?” Zane said, exasperated.

“No,” they both said in unison and Zane rolled his eyes.

He only half-paid attention to the game, mostly letting the sound of everyone’s laughter and chirping wash over him as he sipped the beer Ryan had handed over to him.

“Hey, Murph.”

A while later, Zane blinked to see Ryan resting his head on his knee, eyes big and pleading. Zane curled his hand into a fist to stop himself from reaching out to touch Ryan’s curls. “What?”

“Tell O’Shea I’m right.”

“About what?”

“That the fruit was named after the color orange.”

“I say it’s the opposite,” Kelly insisted. “The color was named after the fruit.”

“But the color had to have come first, right? There are other things that color.”

“Like what?” Kelly argued.

“I dunno, like ... birds and flowers and shit,” Ryan said. “C’mon. Tell them I’m right, Murph.”

He shook his head. “Nope. I’m with Kelly on this one.”

“But ... but how can you pick his side?” Ryan gave him an outraged look. “I’m your b—roommate and alternate.”

Ryan’s eyes widened, clearly a little panicked at his slipup.

It was so minor that probably no one else had noticed but Zane swallowed hard, pretty sure Ryan had been about to say ‘boyfriend’.

Zane played it off with a laugh and flick of his finger against Ryan’s forehead. “Still doesn’t mean you’re right. I read about

this one time. Pretty sure the color comes from the Spanish name for the fruit.”

“Rude.” He turned away from Zane with a huff. “You’re supposed to take my side.”

“You’re ridiculous, man,” Zane said with a laugh.

With Ryan pouting and refusing to admit defeat and Kelly crowing about being right, Zane was free to look around. No one was paying them much attention but Cooper, who merely grinned at Zane.

During the short break between the third and fourth quarters, Zane brought out dessert and guys got up to grab fresh drinks and use the bathroom.

While Zane was up, he decided to put the turkey chili into containers. He’d put some in the freezer for later, and keep some in the refrigerator for the next couple of days to hold them over until they left for a road trip.

He was just scraping the last of the chili into a container when the big pot slipped from his damp hands. He caught it but not before it hit the glass container. Zane watched in slow-motion horror as it shot off the counter and onto the floor below.

Chili splattered all over the kitchen, covering Zane’s jeans and sweater.

“Shit,” he swore.

Ryan hurried over. “You okay? Did you step on glass or anything?”

“Nah.” Zane stared at the mess on the floor with a grimace, inspecting the container. “It’s pretty sturdy. It looks like there’s just a little chip in the rim. We’ll have to get rid of it but it’s not too much of a hazard, I don’t think.”

He carefully picked his way past the mess, trying to avoid stepping on it.

Ryan put a hand on his back. “You didn’t burn yourself did you?” He tugged the sweater up, inspecting Zane’s skin like he was looking for marks.

“No.” Zane laughed. “It was barely lukewarm. I’m fine, Ryan.”

Absently, like he didn’t even realize what he was doing, Ryan ran the back of his fingers across Zane’s abs.

Zane sucked in a breath at the soft, tickling sensation but when he caught a glimpse of Cooper studying them intently, Zane twisted away from Ryan.

“I’m gonna go get changed. I’ll be right back to clean up.”

“I’ll get started.” Ryan was already reaching for the trash can.

“Don’t forget to rinse out the glass container and put it in the recycling,” Zane called out and he could practically hear Ryan roll his eyes.

“Yes, dear!” Ryan shot back.

“It’s like listening to my parents,” one of the rookies whispered and Zane huffed in annoyance.

“I will get you all traded if you don’t shut it,” he called as he walked down the hall.

“No you won’t,” O’Shea shouted after him. “You need us to win a Cup.”

Zane snorted quietly and ducked into the bedroom. It wasn’t until he reached for the hem of his shirt that it occurred to him that he’d gone into the wrong room. It was so automatic by now that he’d gone straight for Ryan’s room.

Their room.

Zane hadn’t slept in his own bedroom in months.

It was too late now to switch without making it weirder and more obvious. Hopefully no one had noticed.

He snagged a towel from the bathroom, then carefully stripped off the dirty clothes and piled them on it.

Zane rooted around in the dresser for a pair of boxer briefs, groaning when he realized how low on laundry he was. He’d meant to do a load this morning but Ryan had distracted him

by sucking his dick and he'd had to skip washing clothes in favor of getting ready to have the guys over.

He grumbled as he pulled open Ryan's drawer, rooting around until he found the least obnoxious pair of briefs in there.

Zane made a face at the black pair with green dinosaurs on them before putting them on.

Why in the hell anyone had ever thought signing Ryan up for an underwear of the month club was a good idea, he didn't know. But a few years ago, some guy who was no longer on the team had done it as a joke.

That had backfired because of course Ryan had loved them. He gleefully paraded them around the dressing room and now had themed ones for every holiday, not to mention cartoon prints, superheroes ...

*At least they aren't thongs*, Zane thought with a rueful smile as he rummaged through the laundry to find a pair of previously worn sweats that didn't smell too bad. After he was dressed, he carefully gathered the chili-covered clothes in the towel, then carried the bundle to the small laundry room off the hall. He dumped it all in the washer with some detergent and cold water and let it soak, crossing his fingers that the very expensive sweater Ryan liked so much wouldn't get stained by the red chili.

By the time he made it into the kitchen, the game was over. A few of the guys were heading out and Zane said goodbye to them and made sure the ones who'd had a lot to drink were taking ride shares home.

By the time he was done, it was just Cooper and Lindy left and the kitchen was nearly clean.

"Thanks, Ry," he said.

Ryan looked up and grinned. "No prob. You're usually the one cleaning up my messes."

Zane grinned back, squatting down to help him gather up the last of the damp paper towels he'd used.

Cooper whistled. “Damn, Cap. Did Ryan convert you or what?”

Zane craned his neck to look at him. “Convert me?”

“You’re wearing dinosaur underwear. I thought that was Ryan’s thing.”

“Oh. That.” Zane laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, I was just out of clean clothes so I borrowed some of his.”

“Mm-hmm.” Cooper’s look was skeptical. “Sure.”

“Seriously! I’m just behind on laundry.”

“Dude, no one cares if your relationship has progressed to the point where you’re sharing underwear.” Cooper gave him a knowing wink and Zane’s guts squirmed, not sure if he meant their friendship or he’d guessed that it was something else.

“I swear to God,” Zane protested with a laugh. “You will not catch me wearing these things in the future.”

“Hey, I get it,” Cooper teased with a wink. “You gotta keep things spiced up after you’ve been together for so long.”

Ryan threw a balled-up piece of paper towel at him. “Dude, what are you even talking about? Seriously, neither of us has clean clothes right now.”

“Sure, whatever you say, lovebirds,” Cooper said with a little snort.

“Do you want to put on the Vancouver game?” Lindy asked. “We can leave if you’re ready to call it a night but if you’re interested, we were thinking we’d all watch it together.”

“Sure,” Zane said, grateful for the change of topic. “That sounds great.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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“Can’t sleep?” Ryan whispered, his lips tickling the back of Zane’s neck.

“No.” Zane swallowed hard. “Sorry if I’m keeping you up. I can sleep in the other room, if you want.”

Ryan ignored that because he didn’t want Zane to go anywhere.

“You’re worried about the meeting with the ortho tomorrow?” he asked instead.

“Yeah.” Zane shifted, rolling onto his back. “Pretty sure that’s actually today though now.”

“Probably.”

Neither of them glanced at the clock.

Ryan let Zane wiggle into a more comfortable position, draping his left calf over Ryan’s shins. He settled his arm across Zane’s midsection, squeezing his right hip. The one that wasn’t sore all the time.

“We’ll deal with it. Whatever it is,” Ryan assured him.

“I know. I just ...” Zane’s swallow was audible. “What if I can’t—”

“Don’t say it.” Ryan pressed his forehead against Zane’s hair, the familiar smell of his shampoo comforting. “Don’t go there.”

“I know I shouldn’t. But I ...”



“We. Will. Deal. With. It.” Ryan repeated it because Zane wasn’t listening. “But we can’t deal with it until we know what it is. And we won’t know until we talk to the orthopedic doctor. It’s not gonna do you any good to get all freaked out about your future when maybe it’s something that either isn’t that bad or can be fixed.”

“I know you’re right.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

Zane’s laugh was only a quiet little huff, but it made Ryan feel better, knowing he’d gotten Zane to lighten up some.

“Look,” Ryan said, lifting up on one elbow, squinting to see Zane’s face in the dark. “We’re gonna go to practice tomorrow morning. After, I’ll drive you to the appointment with Dr. Lynch.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’m going. Stop trying to tell me I’m not. If you think it’s too weird to have me in the room with you, I’ll sit in the waiting room or the lobby or whatever. No one is gonna question what a hockey player is doing at an orthopedic doc’s office.”

Zane let out another little huff, this time, less amused sounding.

Ryan ignored it. “But I’m gonna be there for you whether you like it or not, Zane.”

“You’re so stubborn.”

“Oh, *I’m* stubborn?”

Zane grumbled under his breath. “We’re both stubborn, okay?”

“But you said I’m right about this which means you need to listen to me. I am gonna take care of you. I promised you that in college and I’m gonna promise it again. Whatever you have to deal with, I deal with too.”

“I can’t ask you—”

“Who’s asking?” Ryan argued. “I told you what I’m gonna do. If you didn’t actually want me there, I’d back off but I’m

pretty sure you're just being all 'I'm the captain and I've gotta handle this shit on my own' about it."

"I don't sound like that," Zane protested, but he was laughing.

"You kinda do sometimes. So ... stop it. Stop thinking you're alone in this shit. You haven't been alone in it for the past decade and I'm not gonna let you start now. You're ... you're my *person*, Zane. And I'm not gonna let you push me away. Even if the worst thing happens, I'm not going anywhere."

"But what if ..." His voice went a little rough. "You don't like being away from someone you're with, right? What if I can't —"

"Shush!" Ryan laid his palm over Zane's mouth. "Don't tempt fate."

He wasn't going to tell Zane that if he was forced to retire because of this hip issue, he would too. Because Zane would flip his lid and they'd *actually* get into an argument.

Zane let out an annoyed grumble against his palm, trying to squirm away.

"Please," Ryan said more seriously, letting go. "Please let me be there with you at your appointment. You don't even have to do it for yourself. Do it for *me*. Because I'll go fucking nuts worrying about how you're doing if I'm not there."

"Yeah, okay," Zane said quietly and Ryan let out a huge breath, flopping onto the pillow beside Zane with a relieved groan.

"Fucking finally. I don't know why you make me out-stubborn you about shit like this."

Zane reached out, threading their fingers together. "I don't know either. But I'm glad you do."

Ryan smiled as he rolled over to rub his nose against Zane's cheek. "Well, that's good because I'm definitely not going to stop."

---

“Mr. Murphy,” Dr. Lynch said with a smile as he held out his hand, greeting Zane warmly. “Good to see you again.”

“Ahh, just Zane,” he reminded the surgeon. He shook, hating the pleasantries. He wanted answers. Wanted the news, good or bad, before he drove himself nuts wondering what his future held.

Dr. Lynch glanced over at Ryan. “And Mr. Hartinger?” There was a hint of a question in his voice, though as the orthopedic surgeon for the team, he knew exactly who he was.

Ryan gave him a warm smile. “Ryan, please.”

They shook and then Dr. Lynch glanced between them. “Will you be sitting in on the appointment then?”

Ryan looked over at Zane, a question in his gaze as if he was waiting for Zane to boot him back to the waiting room.

But Ryan had made it clear that he wanted to be there for Zane when he got the news—whatever it was—and Zane was suddenly, absurdly grateful.

However it looked to the doctor and the staff, he wanted Ryan here beside him.

And well, there was always doctor-patient confidentiality, right?

“If you don’t mind. Ryan is my emergency contact so ...”

Dr. Lynch nodded. “Of course. Friends and family are always welcome to sit in. It’s entirely up to the patient. I just have to check.”

He gestured to the chairs in front of the desk. “Why don’t you both have a seat?”

Fear flooded over Zane, making his mouth go dry. He cleared his throat when they were all seated.

Dr. Lynch slipped a pair of glasses on. “I won’t keep you in suspense. I took a look at your scans and I have some encouraging news for you.”

Zane reached out blindly and found Ryan already holding out a hand. He took it, and in that moment, he didn’t care *what* the

surgeon thought about the gesture.

He was grateful to have Ryan's fingers gripping his tightly.

"You have something called Femoroacetabular Impingement Syndrome."

"And that's *good* news?" Zane's voice cracked a little.

"The good news is that it isn't a career-ending condition."

Zane let his breath out in a noisy rush, the bones of his fingers creaking as Ryan squeezed tighter.

"That is good," he managed.

The doctor held up a model of a hip. "Let me begin by explaining exactly what it is."

Zane listened closely as the doctor spoke, using a pen to point to where the issue was on both the anatomical model and a tablet that showed Zane's actual scans.

"FAIS developed because your hip is shaped abnormally. You weren't born that way. It's something that develops later. Extra bone is now growing along the top of your femur and as the bone spur rubs against the socket of your hip, it wears away at the cartilage that lines your hip socket here."

"But it's treatable?" Zane held his breath.

"It's *manageable*."

Worry returned, twisting in his gut. *That* didn't sound encouraging.

"The great news is, your FAIS isn't very far advanced. I'll send over the results of the scans to the team and together we'll come up with a PT plan for you. There are exercises you can do to improve your hip's range of motion and strengthen the supporting muscles. That will buy you playing time. Along with over-the-counter anti-inflammatories, you should feel quite a bit of pain relief."

"Okay. That's good, right?" he asked.

"It is. That being said, as a professional athlete, you know the wear and tear you put on your joints in a season."

Zane nodded. “We’re hoping to make a Cup run this year too,” he said, his mind whirling with what that meant for his ability to play through it.

“Of course. And I see no reason you can’t be on the ice for it. We’ll monitor your pain of course, but a corticosteroid injection should help you make it through the rigors of the post-season, if that’s what you choose to do.”

“Will I need surgery in the off-season?”

Dr. Lynch hesitated. “I’d rather not say at this point. That’s dependent on many factors. My suggestion would be for you to get through the end of this season before we make any decisions.”

“Okay.” His palm was sweaty against Ryan’s.

“If anything abruptly worsens, we’ll re-evaluate sooner, of course. But if your pain levels lessen or remain steady, we’ll do another round of scans whenever your season ends and assess it all then. We’ll be able to see how far the condition has progressed and how the joint is holding up.”

Zane nodded, the tightness in his chest easing a little.

Dr. Lynch set the tablet on his desk. “But at some point, we *will* need to discuss it. If you continue playing, you will need surgery. That I can unequivocally say.”

Zane nodded. “How long would I be out after?”

Dr. Lynch hummed. “It varies. At this point, you appear to be a candidate for an arthroscopic procedure and that means six to nine months.”

“Damn,” Zane whispered. If he got it done this June, that would put him out until at least December of next season. Maybe March. He’d lose half a season.

Dr. Lynch gave him a sympathetic smile. “Let’s take it one step at a time, Zane. For now, our best course of action is to monitor the bone growth for a while. I’ve seen guys who do very well with the proper PT and pain management. If the bone growth continues to be slow and you don’t injure the

joint further, you may be able to play comfortably for a few more years before surgery becomes necessary.”

“A few years,” he repeated, breathing a little easier. That wasn’t so bad.

“I will be frank though. Eventually, the bones will wear away at the cartilage until there’s nothing left. That will be extremely painful. I’d strongly advise surgery well *before* you get to that point so you aren’t suffering from unnecessary pain and don’t cause permanent damage to the joint that requires a full hip replacement. You have some time before we seriously need to discuss surgery but you cannot put it off indefinitely.”

“A few years is good though,” Zane said. “I can work with that.”

“It is good.” Dr. Lynch gave him a smile. “Now, would you like a few minutes to digest all that? I don’t have another patient for at least ten or fifteen minutes so I can give you and Ryan a little time to discuss this, if you’d like.”

Zane realized he and Ryan were still gripping each other’s hands tightly but he didn’t pull away. He let out the breath he’d been holding in a noisy woosh of air. “That would ... that would be great. Thanks.”

“I’ll be back in about ten minutes and I’ll have some informational pamphlets for you to take home before you leave.”

“Okay, thanks.” Zane still felt a little dazed as he watched Dr. Lynch walk to the door.

He and Ryan both rose to their feet and when the doctor had closed the door behind him, Zane turned to look at him.

Zane didn’t really have words at the moment so he stepped forward and pressed his forehead against Ryan’s, their clasped hands trapped between their bodies, Ryan’s free hand coming up to splay against his back.

Warm.

Strong and steadying.

“I’ll still be able to play,” Zane muttered, voice thick with relief.

“Yeah, you will.” Ryan sounded equally gruff.

They stood there, breathing together, not saying anything for a few moments.

Ryan had been right to come with him. Even though he hadn’t gotten the worst-case scenario news he’d feared, he was glad to have Ryan here.

Zane wanted him here for the good news and the bad. How did he ever think he could go through this alone?

“I’m glad you came,” he whispered.

“I’m glad you let me.”

“Did I have any choice?”

Ryan smoothed his hand up and down Zane’s back. “No.”

Zane chuckled quietly, letting Ryan’s soothing touch settle him.

After a minute, Ryan wiggled his hand. “Think you could let go now? Cause I can’t feel my fingers anymore.”

Zane laughed and stepped back, letting go of Ryan’s hand, skin prickling with sensation as blood returned. “Yeah. Yeah, sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.” Ryan flexed his fingers. “I think I’ll still be able to stickhandle and shoot a puck.”

Zane laughed again and then his eyes were watering and Ryan’s arms were around him, holding him tightly.

“It’s gonna be okay?” he muttered against Ryan’s neck.

Ryan kissed his hair. “Yeah, baby, it’s gonna be okay.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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As the team edged toward the playoffs, Zane was grateful that the physical therapy was working.

They'd totally revamped his off-ice training program and while he didn't feel anywhere near a hundred percent, for the most part, the pain in his hip had faded to a dull ache, no worse than the usual muscle soreness he was accustomed to.

After a tough game though, sometimes it flared into a sharper pain and he spent more time in the cold tubs, dutifully taking the over-the-counter painkillers the trainers gave him and letting them stretch him out.

Now, as he got off the plane on a warm April day in Toronto, he rubbed absently at his hip, annoyed by the stiffness that came from sitting for too long.

Tonight, he was definitely going to spend the evening in the hotel's spa while Ryan went out with the guys.

"I can come back to the hotel with you," Ryan offered later that night, hesitating on the sidewalk outside the restaurant where they'd had a team dinner.

Most of the guys were heading out to bars or clubs in smaller groups but all Zane wanted was to soak in some hot water and go to bed early.

"Nah. Go have fun," he protested, waving off Ryan's attempts to argue with him. "Keep an eye on the rookies and make sure they don't get into any trouble."



“Okay,” Ryan agreed but the little twist at the corner of his mouth said he wasn’t thrilled about it.

“Thanks, man.” Discreetly, Zane slipped his keycard out of his pocket and passed it to Ryan as he gave him a brief hug, grateful for the shadows hiding their movements. “Come to my room after you get back,” he whispered before he pulled away.

“See ya’,” Ryan said, his expression lightening.

Zane said goodnight to his team, then turned away, returning to the hotel.

Truthfully, Zane wasn’t sure if he and Ryan could be trusted to sit in a hot tub across from each other and not wind up making out, and he definitely wasn’t ready to come out to the world that way.

Besides, he could use the quiet time to rest his body and clear his mind before they went up against Toronto tomorrow.

By the time Zane settled into the bubbling water, he was exhausted. He slouched, tilting his head back and resting against the towel he’d folded and placed on the rim of the tub, consciously relaxing his muscles and letting the tension out.

He was half-drowsing when he heard the soft slap of flip-flops against the tile. “Mind if I join you?”

Zane cracked one eye open to see a man—roughly his age—standing nearby.

“Nope, help yourself,” Zane offered, sitting up, a little annoyed at the interruption. It had been quiet and peaceful until now and he’d hoped he’d have the place to himself the whole time. Ahh well.

The guy slipped into the water with a soft splash. “Water’s great tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s nice.” Zane hid a grimace. Great. This guy was going to be a talker. He’d met the type before.

The guy stretched out, their feet bumping before he pulled away. “Feels good after a hard workout.”

“It does.”

“I’m Kirby, by the way.” He stuck out a wet hand and they shook.

“Zane.”

“You must work out a ton too, huh? You look really fit.” He gave Zane a speculative look.

Zane laughed lowly. “Well, it’s kind of part of the job.”

“Personal trainer?”

*What kind of personal trainer can afford to stay in five-star hotels?* Zane wondered.

But then he thought about what he paid his off-season trainer and amended that thought. *Never mind.* Pro athlete and celebrity trainers made bank.

“Ahh, no. I play ice hockey,” he explained.

“Oh, shit. You any good?”

“I’m not bad.” He tried not to smile as he told Kirby what team he played for.

Kirby whistled. “Well damn, I feel like an idiot. In my defense, I don’t really follow hockey. I’m more of a football guy myself.”

“Well, no one’s perfect,” Zane shot back and Kirby laughed.

The conversation kept going and Zane relaxed into it, his earlier irritation at the interruption fading away in the face of chatting about sports and workouts.

It wasn’t until Zane caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall that he realized he’d been in the spa longer than he really should have been. The heat was good for relaxing his muscles but he wanted to keep inflammation in his hip down so he should probably ice before bed to be on the safe side.

“Well, I should get going,” he said, standing with a groan.

“Damn, already?” Kirby frowned.

“Yeah. Don’t want to turn into a prune,” he joked, the lie slipping off his tongue easily enough.

The team and his family knew about his hip issues but Zane never talked about potential injuries or health issues with people he didn't know and trust. Kirby *said* he didn't follow hockey but that was how unethical reporters and gossip bloggers got scoops and how personal stuff ended up all over the internet.

Zane definitely wasn't the kind of guy who liked thinking the worst of people but he'd seen it happen to guys he knew and it wasn't fun. Better to keep things close to the vest, especially in a place like Toronto where hockey was king.

Kirby stood too. "Yeah, I hear you."

They got out of the hot tub and toweled off in silence.

Zane felt Kirby's gaze on him and he gave Kirby a curious glance as he wrapped a towel around his wet shorts.

Kirby seemed to take that as an invitation because he smiled, stepping closer. "So, I've, uh, been enjoying our conversation. You want to have a drink with me? You look like a Scotch kinda guy. I'd love to buy you one."

"I drink it occasionally but I think the hotel bar is probably closing soon." Zane really had no idea what time it closed but it seemed like a plausible enough excuse.

He used a second towel to dry his hair as much as possible, then draped it around his shoulders.

Kirby smirked, crowding closer. "I was thinking more like ... my room."

"Oh. Uhh ..."

Zane hadn't really noticed it until now but he was getting a definite *vibe* from Kirby. He cleared his throat. "Thanks but like I said, I have a game tomorrow. I actually don't drink much during the season and I really should get to bed early."

"We can skip the drink. Getting to bed was kind of what I had in mind actually." Kirby's grin was crooked. Flirtatious.

It probably worked on a lot of people.

Zane chuckled, feeling awkward. “Right. But I, uh, meant sleep.”

“If it’s the privacy thing you’re worried about, I get it.” Kirby’s voice was low and intimate. He reached out, trailing his fingertips across Zane’s forearm. “You wouldn’t be the first closeted athlete I’ve hooked up with. I’m happy to sign an NDA if you need me to.”

“It’s not that,” Zane said, clearing his throat. There were so many layers to why this wasn’t going to happen and an NDA was the least of it. “There’s already someone I’m seeing.”

“Well, you know what they say about what happens on the road ...”

Zane stifled a laugh. He certainly did. It was weird to hear the words he’d said to Ryan parroted back at him though.

“I’m flattered but no.” His tone was firm and Kirby stepped back with a nod as if sensing a losing cause.

“Well, can’t blame a guy for trying.” He ran an appreciative look up and down Zane’s body.

“Like I said, I’m flattered.” He gave Kirby a sincere smile as he swiped his room key and phone from the nearby lounge. It wasn’t going to happen in a million years but no, he didn’t blame the guy for giving it a shot. “Have a good night, man.”

“Thanks. You too.” Kirby lifted a hand in a little wave.

They went their separate ways and Zane shivered at the cool air on his damp skin as he rode the elevator up to his floor, wondering how many closeted athletes Kirby had slept with.

It wasn’t the first time Zane had been hit on by a man but it felt a little different now. Not that he was any more tempted by a strange man than he was by the women who flirted with him in bars, but it was different knowing the potential was there, he supposed.

But Zane had Ryan and there wasn’t a chance in hell that anyone would ever mean more to him than his best friend. After everything they’d been through together ...

Zane shook his head, smiling fondly.

God, he couldn't imagine ever being without Ryan. He'd been so supportive during this whole thing with Zane's hip and if Zane hadn't already been in love with him before then, he would be now.

Of course, he hadn't quite worked up the courage to say that aloud, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe because saying it came with expectations. Maybe because it meant he'd have to decide on a plan for coming out.

They couldn't hide forever; Zane knew that much. But if he could wait until after the season, it would be so much easier than risking any disruption to the team.

Later, after a shower to rinse off the chlorine, Zane settled in bed with a book and an ice pack on his hip.

He had been reading in bed for about twenty minutes when Ryan texted him that he was on his way back.

Zane had just finished another chapter when Ryan came in wearing sweats, locking the door behind him.

"Hey." He stripped off the hoodie, then sat on the edge of the bed, leaning in to kiss Zane. His mouth was minty. Clearly, he'd stopped by his room to brush and change before he came to Zane's room.

"Hey." Zane kissed him back, smiling. "How was your night?"

"Okay. I saved one of the baby players from making an ass of himself with a waitress."

"Am I glad I missed the whole thing?"

"Yep."

Zane chuckled.

"How was the hot tub?"

"Good." Zane yawned and set aside his book, already growing sleepy. "Had company."

"Yeah?" Ryan stood, stripping out of his clothing, and tossing it on a nearby chair.

“Some guy named Kirby. I dunno. Nice enough guy but he definitely hit on me.” Zane absently checked the alarm on his phone to be sure it was set to go off in the morning, then plugged it in.

Ryan froze. “What?”

“Yeah. Offered to sign an NDA to sleep with me and everything,” Zane teased, knowing it would wind Ryan up.

Ryan stared open-mouthed at him. “What? Seriously?”

“Dead serious. Claimed to not be a hockey fan but said he’d slept with other closeted athletes.”

Ryan hooked his thumbs in his sweats and tugged them down. “How did he figure out you were ...”

“Oh, I don’t think he did,” Zane assured him. “I think he just was trying to shoot his shot.”

“Which you turned down?” Ryan lifted the covers and slid in beside him.

“Well, obviously.” Zane laughed. “It wasn’t like I was going to say *yes*.”

“Because it’s Toronto and the press is insane?”

“There’s that,” Zane agreed. He turned out the light, plunging the room into darkness. “But I also don’t like hookups. And there’s, you know, what you and I have been doing.”

“Yeah.”

Zane turned his head. In the dark he couldn’t see Ryan’s face but there was something in his voice that made him frown.

“Wait, are you seriously *jealous*?” He’d known telling Ryan about being hit on would get a rise out of him but he’d thought Ryan would find it funny. He hadn’t actually expected it to bother him.

“A little bit.”

“No reason to be. I said no and came back here to be with you, didn’t I?”

“You did.” Ryan let out a little sigh but he didn’t quite sound convinced.

Zane scooted closer. “Or are you jealous that you don’t have guys offering to sign NDAs for you?”

Ryan let out an outraged squawk at that idea and Zane shushed him because it was very loud.

“Sorry,” he muttered but the mood lightened after that, just like Zane had hoped it would.

“I didn’t want Kirby,” Zane assured him. “I wanted to be here in bed with *you*.”

“You better.”

Words crowded in on Zane’s tongue. He wanted to reassure Ryan, wanted to remind him how much he mattered to Zane. Wanted Ryan to know that he was *everything* and always would be.

But Ryan nuzzled close, his mouth seeking Zane’s, and Zane pushed the words away for another time. Choosing to sink into to Ryan’s arms and show him with his body how much he meant to him instead.

“Don’t think my hip’s up to anything too athletic tonight,” Zane whispered a while later, when his lips tingled from the deep kisses and they were naked, sweating under the covers.

“No worries,” Ryan muttered against his neck, pulling away with one last gentle bite. “There are other things we can do.”

He slid under the covers, settling between Zane’s thighs and gently shifting Zane’s uninjured leg higher on the bed to give himself more room to work.

Zane tangled his hands in Ryan’s hair as he licked and sucked, reducing Zane to shivers and panting breaths. Ryan knew every inch of his body by now, knew every way to wring a reaction out of Zane.

In the dark, quiet space, Zane drifted on the waves of sensation. He didn’t even have time to warn Ryan he was coming because Ryan hummed like he always did, going deeper and coaxing him toward the edge.

Zane came, head spinning, the world soft and hazy when it was all over.

“Can Kirby make you feel that way?” Ryan whispered after and Zane was so out of it all he could mumble was, “Kirby who?”

Ryan laughed, sliding up his body to kiss him. Zane barely got a hand on Ryan’s cock before he was coming all over Zane’s hip, mouth pressed against his shoulder to muffle his desperate sounds.

Zane was more asleep than awake as he half-heartedly helped Ryan clean up.

He only managed a muttered, “Seriously, who the hell is Kirby?” and heard the quiet huff of Ryan’s laugh before he was out.



In the morning, Zane woke Ryan with a slow, teasing blowjob as an apology for the night before.

After, Zane settled with his head on Ryan’s shoulder, their fingers tangled together, talking quietly about nothing important.

Zane felt something rise in him, huge and overwhelming.

He wanted to tell Ryan how he felt, wanted to voice the unspoken feeling between them, but his tongue was thick with the worry of how things would change after he said it.

By the time he’d worked up the courage to say those three life-changing words, the sounds of a few of the early risers on the team up and moving around filtered in. Even luxury hotels couldn’t quite dampen the sounds of a hockey team on the move.

They both sat up, grimacing at each other.

“Crap,” Ryan muttered. “I should already be in my room.”



Zane affectionately patted down his wild hair. He was overdue for a haircut and Zane's hands had made a mess of the curls last night.

"We've got a breakfast meeting too," he said sleepily, leaning his cheek against Ryan's bare back, curling a hand around his waist, liking the way he could lean on Ryan and let him take his weight.

"Damn it. Rather stay in bed with you."

"Tell me about it." Zane idly rubbed Ryan's stomach, tracing his fingers along the ridges of his abs.

"Next day off, let's ... do nothing. Stay in bed all day."

"You'll get hungry," he reminded Ryan.

"I'll pack a cooler of snacks."

"No, you'll beg *me* to," Zane gently teased, nipping at Ryan's shoulder and grazing his skin with his teeth.

Ryan laughed. "Yeah, probably."

"Okay. It's a plan," Zane said with a happy sigh at the thought. "A total rest day."

"Perfect."

Ryan turned, dislodging Zane's grip, and manhandling him onto his back. He loomed over Zane, sleepy but still full of that light and joy that Zane had always admired about him. For the longest time, Ryan looked down at Zane, gaze warm, mouth curled up in a little smile.

Zane cupped his cheek and Ryan turned his head, pressing a kiss to Zane's palm that sent a little shiver down his spine.

The slam of a nearby door jolted them out of the private moment and Ryan sat up, patting Zane's thigh absently as he stood and staggered to the bathroom.

Thankfully, a quick shower got them both moving.

Ryan pulled on his clothes from the night before, borrowing Zane's underwear and Zane had a moment of thinking that it

really *was* easier dating a guy when it came to that sort of thing.

Ryan grumbled about not having his usual hair product to tame his curls, so Zane shoved a team snapback on his head to shut him up.

Ryan made a face but took the hat, tucking his damp hair underneath.

They left the room, talking hockey, pretending like they were in the middle of a conversation, hoping people would assume Ryan had ducked into the room this morning instead of spending the night.

But the only person they encountered was Cooper, who blinked at them vaguely, muttered, “good morning,” and continued on to grab breakfast.

Zane and Ryan were nearly late to the conference room where breakfast was set up for the meeting of coaches and captains.

The assistant/position coaches—Lance Tate, Johnny Briggs, and Lamar Horton—were already there and so was Anders Lindholm.

Daniels grunted in their direction. He liked morning meetings and preferred people arrive at least twenty minutes early.

“Slow morning?” Tate asked mildly.

“Yeah, Zane was being lazy this morning. I had to drag him out of bed,” Ryan said, ambling over to the coffee, automatically grabbing two cups and preparing Zane’s, while Zane took care of their food.

Zane ignored him, trying not to overthink the way he’d worded that.

Surely the coaches would assume Ryan had knocked on Zane’s door to get him up.

That was a total role reversal from the usual, but Zane would pretend he was moving slow today if it meant they didn’t leap to the conclusion that he and his alternate had spent the night together.

Still, he put less brown sugar in Ryan's oatmeal than usual in retaliation, and after they sat down to eat, Ryan made a face, knowing exactly what Zane had done.

"Okay, let's get this rolling," Coach Daniels said when they were seated. "We're playing Toronto tonight and I can't lie, we need this win."

As captain of the team, Zane had a lot of meetings. Way more than he preferred but it was all part of the job and they ate breakfast while they talked, discussing strategy and plays and a few other relevant team-related issues.

By the time the meeting wrapped up, Zane's hip was a little stiff again.

"You sure you're feeling this game tonight?" Coach Tate asked with a concerned frown at Zane after he groaned getting out of his chair.

Zane nodded at the offensive line coach. "Yup, I've got this."

"You've been having a hell of a season," Tate said. "I just want to make sure we're not overplaying you. I want you ready for the playoffs."

"Nope. I'm good. I'm gonna skip morning skate"—it was optional today—"get the trainers to do some work on me, rest up, then kick Toronto's ass tonight. After that, maybe I'll consider a short break. Give some of the rookies a little more ice time." He winked.

"Okay," Tate said with a laugh and a slap on the shoulder. "Sounds good."

Zane glanced over at him as they walked past the room where the rest of the team had eaten breakfast.

Tate wore his sandy-brown hair short, and his neat beard was flecked with silver. His eyes were a pale blue and lines creased his forehead, a scar on his temple the reminder of the head injury that had abruptly ended his NHL career a decade or so ago.

Zane rubbed his hip absently, grateful he'd avoided major injury so far in his career. He and Ryan had dealt with their

share of the usual sprains and strains but they'd managed to get through most of their careers relatively unscathed.

Even FAIS was nothing compared to what had happened to Tate.

"You *sure* you're okay?" Ryan asked later while they rode to the arena on the bus. "Your hip seems bad today."

"Nothing a nap and a date with a trainer won't fix," Zane promised, patting his thigh.

By the time Zane left the practice facility, he really did feel better. The heat and massage had helped, and he'd go into the arena a little early this afternoon for some gentle stretching and some more work with the trainer to get him ready for the game.

He was excited to play Toronto again.

Which reminded him, he hoped to grab a drink with Boucher while he was in town. He desperately needed to talk to him about the situation with Ryan. After all, what other gay or bi dudes did he know?

There was the *You Can Play* initiative of course. People Zane could reach out to and talk about it with. But while he supported the campaign, he'd always been a private guy and talking to strangers about his sexuality felt strange and intrusive.

At least he knew Boucher and trusted him.

"Hey, La Bouche," Zane called out as he skated past the Fishers' goalie after the Otters' warm-up. "Grab a drink with me after the game?"

"After we beat your ass again, eh?" Noah teased, his blue eyes sparkling as he smirked at Zane.

Zane would have raised a middle finger to him if not for the big, bulky gloves he wore. "In your dreams."

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“What was that about?” Ryan asked as they headed to the visitors’ dressing room before the game started.

“What was what about?” Zane looked confused.

“With Boucher.”

“Oh, we’re gonna meet up for a drink tonight is all,” Zane said. His gaze slid away from Ryan’s. “Nothing big.”

“Oh.” Ryan tried not to let the thought of their friendship bother him. That was all it was, wasn’t it? Obviously, it wasn’t like Zane was going out *out* with another guy or something.

Still, that didn’t mean Ryan was going to go easy on Boucher tonight.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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“Suck that, La Bouche!” Ryan snarled, snapping the puck into the upper left corner of the net on a rebound shot, clinching the 5-4 win against Toronto.

“Jesus, what has you so wound up?” Zane asked with a laugh a few minutes later as they skated off the ice together. He was trying to hide a limp, but Ryan knew he’d overdone it tonight.

“Just one of those games,” Ryan lied. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Zane was going out for a drink with Boucher after the game.

Nothing at all.

They weren’t flying to Montreal until the following morning, so when the guys asked Ryan if he wanted a drink after the game, he agreed.

“I didn’t think you were going to come out tonight,” Malone said when they walked toward the bar a few blocks from the hotel. “You and Murph have been joined at the fucking hip lately.”

“Dude, I went out with you guys *last night*,” Ryan protested. “Besides, he’s my best friend and my roommate, and hello, we play on the same team. Why *wouldn’t* we spend a lot of time together?”

“You don’t get sick of that?”

“Nah, he’s easy.”

Malone laughed, but there was something mean that lurked at the edges. “Shit, don’t tell me you two are Boucher-ing it up?”

“Not easy like that.” Ryan cuffed Malone across the back of the head, annoyed with what an ass he always was. “I just mean it’s low-key. He’s easy to get along with, is all. Not high maintenance like Truro there.”

Keegan Truro looked up. “The fuck you say?”

“I called you high maintenance,” Ryan said, holding the door of the bar open for the rookie to go through.

Keegan shrugged and made a beeline for the bar. Clearly, he didn’t care.

“If you ask me, if I had to put my bets on anyone on this team, it would be Truro there,” Malone said under his breath.

“Bets on what?” Ryan asked with a confused frown.

“On who is secretly gay.”

Ryan snorted. It was possible, but he doubted it. And while Malone might tease him and Zane, Ryan doubted that he actually had a clue what was going on between them.

“Ehh, leave the kid alone. I think he’s just a snappy dresser.” Ryan eyeballed Malone’s too-baggy suit. “Just cause you look like you’re dressed in your daddy’s hand-me-downs doesn’t mean the rest of us have to.”

Malone smirked. “Still pull down more pussy than you do.”

*Gross.* “Yeah, well, your wife is probably not real happy about that,” Ryan reminded him with a slap to the shoulder. He squeezed, making sure it hurt. Just a little. “Might want to focus on your own relationship instead of worrying about everyone else’s.”

Malone’s jaw tightened, and he ducked out from under Ryan’s grip. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

An hour later, Ryan had a couple of drinks in him and had checked his phone at least half a dozen times. Not a peep from Zane.

“Aww, worried about your wife?” Malone joked.

Ryan looked up, confused. “My wife?”

Malone rolled his eyes. “Murphy, you dumbass.”

“Nah, seeing if I had any texts from my family,” he lied.

“Where *is* Murphy, anyway?” O’Shea asked. His eyes were a little glassy from the drinks he’d slammed.

Clearly no one was too worried about their game against Montreal tomorrow. Given how the Canadian team was doing this season, Ryan wasn’t surprised.

“He met up with Boucher,” Ryan said, sliding his phone back into his pocket. “They’re friends.”

Malone snorted. “Figures.”

“What’s that mean?” Ryan asked.

“Never mind.”

Underhill grinned. “I wonder if Theriault is regretting his friendship with Boucher.”

Gabriel Theriault’s season had been rough as hell and tonight, he’d spent more of the game glowering from the bench than playing. But whether he was pissed off about the occasional chirps about their goalie’s sexuality or something else, Ryan had no idea. Murphy was weirdly tight-lipped about the conversations he had with Boucher.

“Heard rumors Theriault’s getting traded,” Malone said. “They keep calling him a loose cannon.”

“You’re a fucking loose cannon,” Ryan muttered. “You and the Undertaker there were the ones who started it tonight.”

There had been a hell of a brawl on the ice, and Ryan was ninety-eight percent sure that it had started with some homophobic taunts from the two assholes in front of him. Now Underhill had a black eye and Malone had a split lip. Ryan still wasn’t sure how they’d pulled off a victory like that with a couple of their guys in the penalty box and a few out injured, but the Otters had been on *fire* this season.

He had to believe it was at least partly because of him and Zane. Because being together had only improved their play.



Ryan thought again of Zane, out with Boucher, God knew where doing God knew what.

Ryan shouldn't care. His jealousy was wildly irrational.

But knowing that didn't stop the twist of his stomach when he thought about them out together.

Zane loved him, Ryan knew that, even though they hadn't actually said the words 'I'm in love with you' to each other. He knew it in the way Zane kissed him, the way he held him close when they slept together. The way Zane had reached for him in the doctor's office.

Ryan knew it deep down in his bones, but without those words, the quiet tendrils of doubt crept into his brain and made him wonder.

What if Boucher was into Zane?

Why wouldn't he be? Zane was gorgeous and amazing; any guy would be lucky to have him.

Plus, Noah was available and if he thought Zane was too, maybe he'd put the moves on him tonight.

Hell, some guy in a hot tub had done it last night and a few weeks ago at a bar, a woman had been flirting with Zane big time.

What if right now, Boucher was flirting with Zane over a drink, asking him if he wanted to head back to his place?

Ryan and Zane had never talked about what exactly their relationship was or what the rules were but neither of them had been with anyone else since this started.

It was sort of an unspoken thing. But with a sick feeling in the pit of Ryan's stomach, he wondered if maybe it should have been spoken. He'd been trying to give Zane space to get comfortable with the idea of them being together. But what if he'd given him too much space?

It should have comforted him that Zane had never been someone who was interested in casual sex. But was it really casual if he was already friends with Boucher?

Ryan swallowed hard, remembering the way things had started between him and Zane.

He closed his eyes, reminding himself this was just his insecurity talking. It was him being needy and clingy, like he always was.

Even if Boucher flirted, Zane would politely turn him down, the same way he had the stupid guy in the spa last night.

Wouldn't he?

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After the game, Zane met Noah in the team parking area of the arena.

Noah drove them to a quiet little wine bar on the other side of the city from the arena. They walked down the steps into a cozy stone-lined cellar with small tables, dim lighting, and enough noise from music and conversation that they could talk without being disturbed.

Exactly the kind of place that no one would expect a couple of hockey players to hang out.

After they ordered and had glasses of red wine sitting in front of them, Noah leaned forward with a concerned frown. "So, what's up?"

Zane drummed his fingers on the tabletop, anxious about the conversation he wanted to have. "How have things been since you came out?"

Noah raised an eyebrow. "Uhh, okay, I guess. Too much press. A few guys being dicks. Some fans who are assholes. A few too many missed goaltender interference calls from the refs. Twitter and Reddit are cesspools as always but overall, not as bad as I thought it might be."

"That's good."

"Why, you thinking about signing on to play in the Queer NHL Team with me?" He winked.

Zane laughed nervously. “Ha. No. Just um, wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Pretty good.” Noah leaned forward. “But if you *did* want to talk, I would never say anything to anyone about what we discussed.”

Zane cleared his throat. “No, yeah, I know that. I didn’t think you would. You’re not that kind of guy.”

Noah’s glance was assessing. “So why do you look like you’re about to jump out of your skin tonight?”

Zane sighed and sat back. “Look, after your presser, things got a little ... weird between me and this guy.”

Boucher raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. Just sipped his glass of wine and nodded.

“We, uh.” Zane cleared his throat and glanced around to be sure no one was close enough to overhear. No one appeared to be paying them any attention. “Fooled around some. And he, uh, wants it to be a lot more. Well, I do too. But I’ve never ...” Zane hesitated. “I guess I’m just freaked out about the whole thing, you know? We’re close. We’re teammates and ...”

Boucher leaned forward. “Is this about you and Hartinger?”

Zane’s gaze darted around the room again. “Um, yeah. But don’t—”

Boucher held up a hand. “I won’t. I swear it. Your secret is safe with me. Tell me what’s worrying you.”

Zane took a fortifying sip of wine. He kinda hated it but whatever. It would do the job. “So, we made this pact years ago that nothing would come between us, and that hockey always came first. But now I’m scared shitless that we are going to fuck up what we have on the ice, not to mention our friendship.”

Noah let out a little hum. “You two are ... unusually in tune.”

“I know.” Zane swallowed hard. “And I’m feeling all this pressure. This could be one of my last seasons and shit, it’s *tough*.”

“But you don’t want to give him up?”

“God no.”

Boucher sat back in his chair. “So this is definitely more than some fooling around?”

“I don’t know.” Zane scrubbed a hand across his face. “No, that’s a lie. I do know. I ... I love the guy. He’s been my best friend for fucking years. But it’s doing my head in a little to think about how everything is going to change if we ... date. Openly.”

Noah’s slow nod was understanding. “You don’t necessarily *have* to be totally open about it. You could conceivably tell Evanston and just ... leave it at that. I did that for years. It doesn’t *have* to be a huge announcement.”

“Isn’t that kind of the coward’s way out?”

“No.” Noah’s tone was firm. “I felt like it was time for me to step out of the closet but that doesn’t mean every player has to do it. There are, what, a thousand guys in the NHL right now? You add in the AHL and various staff and coaches and trainers and ... that’s a lot of people who are not feeling comfortable with stepping out of the closet. And each and every one of them has the right to make that choice for themselves.” He reached out and touched Zane’s arm. “You don’t have to do this for anyone else but you.”

“I’m pretty sure Ryan wants to come out. Maybe not right away but eventually.” Zane swallowed. “I don’t see him as the kinda guy who wants to spend his whole life living with his former teammate and pretending like it doesn’t mean anything. Hell, I don’t either.”

“Well, when and how you change that is between the two of you. But it doesn’t have to be all in one go.”

Zane drummed his fingers on the table. “Sort of do it in stages, you mean?”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, yeah, I like that idea. It feels a little less overwhelming,” Zane admitted.

He glanced up at Noah, taking in his concerned blue eyes, and the way he rubbed his long fingers against the red-gold beard. Huh, Boucher *was* pretty good-looking. Zane could definitely see that now in an objective sort of way. But even though he liked Noah, felt comfortable with him, he didn't want to date him. The only man he wanted to have sitting across the table from him was Ryan.

Damn, they'd never even been on an actual date.

They were more the beers-at-a-brewpub type. Wine bars really weren't their thing, but Zane imagined how it would feel to walk into a nice place with Ryan and have a great night out together in public. Just the two of them. No hesitation about reaching to take his hand. No doubts about if he should lean in to steal a kiss.

Yeah, okay, so he wanted that. Maybe not today or tomorrow but definitely someday.

"I think I can do that," Zane said with a nod. "Like, work up to the idea of us going public." He swallowed hard. "But damn, the thought of letting the whole world talk about it feels weird, man."

"You've never really dated much since you've been in the NHL, have you?"

He shook his head. "No. I kind of ... struggle with that."

Noah's forehead creased. "With dating? Or dating in the public eye?"

"Uhh, dating? Meeting people?" Zane shrugged. "I know a lot of guys who are good with the casual sex thing but it's not me. And it seems like that's how so many guys in the league operate."

Noah's nod was understanding. "I can't deny that I've enjoyed the opportunities this career has given me."

His wink made Zane laugh.

"Fair enough. And I don't want you to think I'm judging you for it," Zane said with a sigh. "I'm not. Hell, there have been a

lot of times I *wished* I could hook up but it always feels *wrong*.”

Noah waved off his reassurance. “No, I know you aren’t being judgmental. Can I ask you a couple of questions though?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Just ... bear with me. It’s for a good reason, I promise.”

“Okay.” Zane took another sip of his wine, a little weirded out but willing to go along.

“Has it always been that way for you? Even before you were in the NHL?”

“Yeah.” Zane dropped his voice even lower, leaning in to tell Noah about Sara and his dating history. The way sexual attraction had always felt like an afterthought until he really knew someone.

“Zane,” Noah said slowly. “Have you ever heard the term demisexual?”

“Maybe? I feel like I saw it in some of the information the league sent out after you came out. I, uh, am ashamed to admit I didn’t read it all as closely as I should have.”

He’d *meant* to. He wanted to be a good captain for any guy who came out in the future, but he’d only gotten partway through it before the season had started to heat up and he’d had a bunch of media stuff to deal with, and then things with Ryan had started and ...

“I think you might want to read that more closely now,” Noah said. A little smile played across his lips. “Because I think maybe it would explain some things.”

“*What?*” Zane asked hoarsely. He fumbled for his phone and did a quick online search. He went very still as he read through the definition:

*“Demisexuality is a sexual orientation in which a person feels sexually attracted to someone only after they’ve developed a close/strong emotional bond with them.”*

“Holy shit,” Zane whispered. He set his phone down. “Well, I feel really stupid. I just thought I was ... kind of old-fashioned or something. I guess I have a lot more reading to do.”

Noah gave him a sympathetic smile. “You can’t be expected to understand something if you don’t even know it exists.”

“I know but ...” Zane felt like he *should* have known. He would have known if he’d taken the time to educate himself better. What if one of his guys came to him about it? “Wow.”

“Well, it’s nice to know that I can still blow a man’s mind when I take him out, even if all our clothes stay on, eh?” Noah winked.

Zane laughed and shook his head. “It’s good to know your ego stayed intact through all this.”

“Oh, it would take more than a few homophobic fans to dent that.” Noah grew serious. “But if you feel like you *are* demisexual—and that’s something you’ll have to decide for yourself, no one else can tell you if you are or you aren’t—you were already a part of the LGBTQ+ community even before things with you and Hartinger changed.”

“True,” Zane said slowly. “And it certainly explains *why* I felt good about things changing with him.”

“I’d say a decade of friendship is enough to form a solid bond, eh?” Noah said, holding out his wine glass in a little toast.

“No kidding.” Zane clinked his glass with Noah’s, even though his head was still spinning from the recent revelation.

*Demisexual.*

There was a word for guys like him. He wasn’t just ... weird and uptight.

“Anyway, I didn’t mean to derail the conversation ...” Noah said with a little laugh.

“No, you’re fine.” Zane waved it off, then laughed ruefully. “Honestly, I’m glad you said something. I probably never would have considered it otherwise.”

“But if you haven’t dated much since you’ve been in the NHL, you’re not used to having photos plastered all over social media when you so much as take a woman to dinner, eh?”

“True.” That was something else Zane had been thinking about. Maybe his reluctance to date hadn’t all been about focusing on hockey. Of course, this demisexuality thing also put a different spin on it.

God, he was dense.

“It’s unnerving at first,” Noah said. “And yeah, there’s no denying it’s only gonna be worse if you and Hartinger are the first out NHL couple.”

Zane winced.

“Look, I get it.” Noah gave him a sympathetic little smile. “But is dealing with the media bullshit and fan reactions really gonna stop you from being able to live your life the way you want to? I’ve gotta say, my regrets have always been *not* going for it.”

He glanced over Zane’s shoulder like he was seeing something in the distance.

“There was this guy in college. Simon. I was crazy about him. But I never got a chance. Just when we were about to start something, I had my shot at pro hockey, and it was too good to pass up. I don’t regret that I took it. I’ve had an amazing career. But I ... I don’t know. Sometimes I wonder what could have happened with him.”

Zane nodded.

Noah looked him straight in the eye. “I’m just saying, hockey is incredible. And a chance at the Cup is *nothing* to sneer at. But don’t be so focused on the win that you miss out on being with someone you’re clearly in love with.”

After they finished their drinks, Zane said goodbye to Boucher, thanked him, shook his hand, then pulled him in for a quick, hard hug, but all he could think about was those damn words as he took a hired car back to the hotel.



He thought of every moment since he met Ryan. Their quick connection on the ice. The deep friendship that had developed. The shift into something more.

And every part of it had felt natural. Almost inevitable. Like this was the path they were always meant to take.

Zane swallowed hard, Toronto's lights a blur as the car sped toward the hotel. Taking him to Ryan.

He felt oddly emotional. Like his skin ached with the need to be close to Ryan. To see him and touch him. To tell him how he felt.

Zane was in love with his best friend.

Maybe he always had been.

Zane had convinced himself that he hadn't met the right person. That his lack of interest in looking for a relationship was because he hadn't trusted anyone after Sara broke his heart.

But what if it was because Ryan already had his heart?

What if he'd already given himself to Ryan in all the ways that really mattered?

It had taken them a while to catch up physically, and there was no denying that it had opened up a whole new world of ways of being close.

But their lives had already been intertwined.

They'd already committed to each other. To stay together and build a team together. To pursue the thing they both loved. *Together.*

They'd promised to be together through thick and thin. They'd promised to support each other no matter what.

Zane let out a startled little sound, the air leaving his chest like he'd been boarded.

His family wasn't so far off.

Maybe he and Ryan *had* been together this whole time, even if it hadn't become sexual or romantic until recently.

Of course no other relationship had ever felt worth the effort.  
Zane had been in love with someone else all along.

### ***Newly Out Toronto Goalie Spotted in Cozy Tete-a-Tete with Rival Player***

*Noah Boucher broke barriers when he came out earlier this season as the first openly bisexual NHL player. Although he has maintained that he is single and not dating anyone, tonight's romantic evening suggests otherwise.*

*Following a 5-4 loss against the Evanston River Otters, Fisher Cats' goaltender, Boucher, met up with Otters' Captain, Zane Murphy, at local wine bar, Chez Vin.*

*Although Boucher and Murphy have been friendly in the past at All-Star games and international tournaments, and have been spotted socializing with fellow players, neither player has previously been photographed together.*

*The dreamy setting, with stone-lined walls and flickering candlelight certainly set the romantic tone for the evening and a source maintains that the duo spoke in low voices, frequently leaning in close across the small table, and touching each other's arms throughout the evening.*

*"I don't know if it was a date," the source is quoted as saying. "I've been on ones with far worse vibes, that's for sure."*

*Make of that what you will, but our money is on a romantic evening for the rival players.*

*Although Zane Murphy has never been publicly linked to dating anyone (in or out of the league) rumors have dogged him and fellow player, Ryan Hartinger, about their close relationship.*

*Has La Bouche swept the veteran forward off his skates? And does that signal trouble for the top-scoring Otters' wingers and the team's chance at a Cup win this season?*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Ryan stared at the stupid *JockGossip* post for a moment before looking at the image. If anything, the picture was worse than the words.

Zane leaned in, smiling at Boucher, expression relaxed. They sat at a small table with a candle between them and Noah's hand rested on Zane's arm. There was a rough stone wall behind them and everything about it really did look like a romantic date.

Damn it, Boucher was definitely trying to put the moves on his man.

Ryan paced the hotel room, grateful he hadn't seen the image at the bar earlier, because he would have blown their secret completely when he flipped the fuck out. But now he felt like a caged tiger, waiting to pounce on the first person who walked through the door.

He reminded himself again that Zane was the most loyal person Ryan knew. Even if Boucher *had* invited him out for a drink with the intention of it being a date, Zane wouldn't take him up on it. They were friends, that was all.

Zane cared about Ryan. Even if they hadn't put a name to it, they were crazy about each other. They loved each other. They were working toward a future together.

Zane would never throw that away or do anything to hurt Ryan.

God, Ryan *had* to be imagining this.

It was probably a casual drink between guys that the gossip pages had spun to look like something more. But Jesus, that image felt like it was seared onto Ryan's brain. All his worst fears come to life.

He sat heavily on the bed like he'd taken a slash to the backs of his knees.

"Fuck," he whispered and put his head in his hands.

He'd been so sure that he and Zane were heading in the same direction, that they were in this together and it was going to be an "I can see us growing old together" kind of thing, and now he didn't know what to think.

The uncertainty was what killed him. Zane had hinted at how he felt about Ryan, talked around it, said he wanted time before they made a plan.

But what if it was that he wasn't sure who he wanted to be with? What if since Boucher's coming out, they'd grown closer?

Zane had always valued connection over anything else, but clearly they were better friends than Ryan had realized.

He certainly couldn't blame Boucher if he was into Zane.

Who wouldn't be?

But what if it went both ways?

Boucher was handsome and charming and Zane's goddamn hero, and *fuck, fuck, fuck*.

Jealousy and uncertainty hooked their claws into Ryan's chest, leaving his heart raw and vulnerable.

He couldn't lose Zane, he *couldn't*.

When the sound of a keycard in the reader filled the room, Ryan rose to his feet.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he growled when Zane walked into the room.

Zane blinked. "Out with Noah. I told you that."

So it was *Noah* now. Not Boucher or La Bouche. “Yeah, what the fuck did he want? What did you do?”

“We got a drink. Talked. Why?” Zane’s brow furrowed. “What the hell is going on, Ryan?”

Ryan backed him up against the wall and braced his arms against it, caging Zane in. “Did he kiss you?”

“What? *Who?*” Zane frowned.

“Boucher.”

“What? No. Of course not.” He laughed, a puzzled frown wrinkling his forehead. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Because you’re ... *we’re* ...” This time it was his mouth he slammed down onto Zane’s in a quick, hard kiss. He shoved a hand into his hair, wrapped the other around his right hip, and hauled their bodies tightly together. “You’re mine,” he rasped, drawing back. “Please tell me you’re mine.”

“Jesus.” Zane scowled. “Of course I am. Shit, do you think I’d fuck up what we have with some cheap hookup with someone else? That’s *not me*, Ryan. You should know that.”

“I know! But we never nailed anything down or promised to be exclusive and there have been all of these people lately and I—”

Zane silenced him with a finger against his lip.

“Maybe it’s my fault for not actually talking about what you mean to me, but even if I wanted Boucher like that, I’d never, ever do that to you, Ryan. And for the record, I don’t want anyone but you. I’ve never wanted *anyone* the way I want you.”

“Thank fucking God.” Ryan gave Zane another hard kiss, plundering his mouth. The kiss tasted of wine and confusion, but his hands, clutching at his back, were reassuring. Steady.

“You should know how loyal I am,” Zane whispered roughly and the hurt in his voice was clear.

“I do, God, I do I just ... I lost my mind for a minute,” Ryan admitted guiltily.

Zane cupped Ryan's face in his palm, staring him in the eye, their faces inches apart. "What do I need to do to show you that you're all I want?"

Ryan spun Zane, bending him over the bed and barking at him to stay there. "Don't move."

Sometimes words were good, and they really needed to use more of them in the future, but Jesus, right now, all Ryan wanted to do was get his hands on Zane and show him what he meant to him.

Claim him.

Even if he couldn't tell the world Zane was his, he could show Zane how much he wanted them to know.

Ryan fumbled for the condoms and lube in his bag, his hands trembling. When he turned back, Zane's suit pants and underwear had been pushed down. Zane's jacket was in a rumpled heap on the floor and he clawed at his shirt, stripping it off.

"You *moved*," Ryan snarled, but Zane only laughed, jutting his ass toward him.

"You complaining?"

"Only a little." Ryan bit at the meat of his shoulder, not hard enough to mark him, just enough to remind him who was in charge at the moment. He rolled the condom on, slicked himself, then pressed inside.

Zane let out a strangled gasp and Ryan froze, worried he'd actually hurt him.

"Shit. Sorry." Ryan rubbed a hand along his side. "Need me to open you up first? Or is this too much for your hip?"

"No. Fuck me harder. I can take it." Zane shoved back against him, encouraging.

Ryan shuddered at the words and fucked into him again, losing himself in the snug, slick heat. He worked out his earlier frustration, Zane grunting with every deep, hard thrust, clawing at the bedsheets, equally desperate.

“You’re mine, you hear that? No one else’s,” Ryan reminded him.

“Yours,” Zane gasped.

Ryan couldn’t think at all, there was just the need crawling up from his belly and urging him on. He wrapped a hand around Zane’s cock, stroking it hard and fast until he bellowed out his release and ribbons of cum sprayed across the bedsheets.

Ryan came a moment later, toes curling in his shoes—*Jesus, I’m still mostly dressed*, he realized with a vague sense of amusement—but the pleasure soon washed every thought away and he bit at Zane’s shoulder again, this time to muffle his strangled shout.

After Ryan’s head drifted back down from the clouds and returned to reality, he winced at how rough he’d been.

“Sorry.” Ryan let out a sigh and pressed a kiss to Zane’s spine as he eased out, gently rubbing his left hip. “You sure you’re okay?”

Zane groaned and straightened, his back popping when he stretched.

“You fuck me like that and *then* apologize?” he threw over his shoulder with a smile. He toed his shoes off and kicked off his pants, naked now.

“Yeah.” Ryan gave him a sheepish smile back. “I was a little worked up about the thought of you and Boucher, I guess.”

Guilt filled him as he stripped out of his clothing, tossing it aside haphazardly.

Zane burst out laughing, reaching for his suit trousers. “No shit, dude.”

Ryan froze, stepping back. “Wait, why did you meet up with him anyway?”

“God, you’re a fucking idiot,” Zane said with a soft smile as he set the clothes on the bed. He reached out and pulled Ryan close, raking Ryan’s hair off his forehead. “Well, he’s a friend and I wanted him to know that I had his back with his recent coming out. Wanted to check in to see if he was doing okay.

But that wasn't all." He licked his lips. "You *really* can't figure out why I wanted to talk to him?"

Ryan shook his head. "No." It came out sounding more sullen than he'd intended.

"Because I wanted to talk to him about *you*."

Ryan blinked. "What about me?"

Zane sighed. "That I know what we have is way more than sex, but I'm scared shitless it'll cause problems for our friendship and the team ..." He swallowed hard. "I told him that I want a future with you but I don't know how to be that guy. How to be open about it. I just wanted advice, I guess. From someone who might get it. I guess this was me easing the closet door open a little."

"Oh shit." Those words felt like the sun coming out after a heavy rainstorm, brightening the world around him. Ryan grinned. "I love that."

Zane gave him a soft smile back. "I love *you*. I'm in love with you. I know I should have said that before but ... but I think I have been for a while. Years, maybe. I don't know. I just know how right it feels to be with you and I don't ever want to lose that."

Ryan let out a happy sigh. "Fuck, I'm totally in love with you too."

Zane snorted, wrapping his arms around Ryan's neck. "Maybe we should have, uh, talked about that instead of whatever the hell we just did."

"I am sorry I went all caveman on you." Ryan shot him another sheepish smile, but he tightened his grip on Zane's body, reluctant to let him go.

Zane played with Ryan's curls a little more, and Ryan leaned into the touch. "I don't know, it *was* kind of hot."

"Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm."



“Good to know,” Ryan murmured against his lips. “I got super insecure. There was that woman a few weeks ago at the bar and ...”

“Ryan, I barely even *remember* her. I was so busy thinking about how to politely let her down that I hardly noticed what she was like.”

“And the guy in the hotel spa the other night.”

“Who I turned down.”

“I know. But you add that up and La Bouche and ...” He sighed heavily. “It was dumb but I kinda freaked.”

“I know.” Zane smoothed a hand up and down his back. “Keeping this secret is making it worse for you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Ryan said, a little reluctant to admit that aloud. He didn’t want to add pressure to Zane but he should probably be honest about how he felt. Especially if it was making him all crazy possessive. “No one knows you’re taken so they assume they have a shot with you. I just ... I really love you. Like crazy.”

“I love you too.” Zane kissed him softly. “Like crazy. This is ... God, this whole thing has been so far from what I expected, but I fucking love you, man, as way more than a teammate and more than a friend. You are *everything* to me, Ryan, and I want a future with you. I do. It’s just hard for me to get past the fear of what will happen once everyone knows.”

Ryan hauled Zane even more tightly against him and rested their foreheads together, breathing him in, unable to stop smiling.

Zane pulled back eventually. “We should clean up a little.”

“Yeah.” Most of the mess they’d made was contained to the top sheet so Ryan stripped that off and wadded it up on the floor of the bathroom, making a mental note to leave a big tip for housekeeping.

“Not to make you jealous again or anything, but Noah was really helpful to me in another way tonight,” Zane said as he

hung up their suits in the closet. Those were probably going to need dry cleaning.

“Oh yeah?” Ryan raised an eyebrow, holding out a hand to tug Zane into bed.

“Yeah.” Zane settled on the bed beside him, pulling the duvet up over their bodies. “He gave me a ton of clarity about something.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you know what demisexuality means?”

“Sure. It’s well, *you’re* demi, right?”

Zane stared at him open-mouthed for a moment before he shut it with an audible click of his teeth. “Wait. You *knew*?”

“I mean, I didn’t *know* know,” Ryan protested. “You never said you were. But I kinda suspected.”

“How ... how did you figure that out? How did you know what it was?”

“Uh, I did some reading when Sam came out as non-binary? I wanted to be sure I understood what that meant for them. I guess I ran across it when I was reading that. I read it and thought ‘huh, that sounds like Zane’.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me?”

Ryan shrugged. “Well, I didn’t really figure it was my place. If you wanted to talk about it, I figured you would.”

“But I—I didn’t even know it was a thing I could be. I just thought I was weird and old-fashioned.”

Ryan softened. “*Zane.*”

He groaned and leaned his head against Ryan’s shoulder a moment. His voice was muffled as he said, “I feel so stupid.”

“Nah.” Ryan rubbed his hand up and down Zane’s back. “Not stupid. And for what it’s worth, I definitely still think you’re weird and old-fashioned too.”

Zane let out a choked laugh. “Thanks, I think.”

“But Boucher helped you figure out the demi thing?”

“Yeah.” Zane lifted his head. “He asked me a few questions, then suggested I look into it. It was like everything clicked into place and made sense once I saw what it meant.”

“Good. I am sorry I didn’t say anything before now. I ... I guess I assumed you knew what it was. And I know you don’t really like labels and stuff ...”

Zane made a face. “I guess I’m starting to see why they’re important.”

Ryan didn’t know what else to say so he kissed Zane’s temple.

“But what now?” Zane asked with a sigh, pressing closer.

Ryan slid a knee between Zane’s, hoping it would take the pressure off his hip. “We go kick some French-Canadian ass tomorrow.”

Zane chuckled and pulled back far enough to look him in the eye. “Well, that goes without saying. Man, Boucher is gonna get a laugh about this when I tell him you thought he’d asked me out on a date.”

Ryan went pale, remembering the pictures. The headlines. “Uh, speaking of that, you’re going to have to deal with some shit ...”

Zane froze. “What *kind* of shit?”

“So the whole ... thinking you were on a date thing may go further than just me,” he muttered. He found his phone, tangled up in his discarded pants that Zane hadn’t gotten to yet, and showed Zane the images on *JockGossip*.

Fuck, there were more pictures now: Zane and Noah laughing as they left the wine bar, Noah holding the door for him. A hug in front of the entrance. Ryan knew better now but even with that knowledge, it looked like a fucking date.

“Oh, hell.” Zane sucked in a deep breath. “Oh. Wow. So ...”

“Well, there’s some dick-bag comments, of course, but people are totally shipping you and Boucher,” Ryan muttered. Goddamn it, that should be *him*.

Zane snorted. “Christ, Wade is going to be up my ass about this.” He paled. “Fuck. And the team. Coach. The PR people are going to be all over this. Oh Christ.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“I don’t know,” Zane admitted, sinking onto the edge of the mattress. “I ... fuck.”

“Well, let’s figure this out. I mean, you’re friends with Boucher. It shouldn’t be a big deal to hang out with a friend, right? No matter where you are or how it looks.”

“Is it cowardly if I don’t want to deal with everyone else tonight?” Zane rubbed his hands over his face. “I wanted to come back here and tell you how I felt and figure out what we want in the future and how to make it happen and ...”

“We’ll shut off our phones.” Ryan powered his down immediately. “And we’ll lie here in bed and talk. And ignore them.”

“But what if—”

Ryan pressed a finger to his lips. “What if we let it be *us* tonight? The hockey can wait.”

Hockey had always come first. Ever since that moment in college when Zane thought he’d lost it all.

“Yeah,” Zane said hoarsely. “Hockey can wait. For you, for *us*, for tonight, it can wait.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Hockey couldn't wait.

Zane and Ryan had really tried. But while they could turn off their cell phones all they wanted, there was no ignoring the sharp rap on the door and the "Open up, Murphy, we need to talk," from Coach Daniels.

Thank God they'd cleaned up earlier and changed into sweats to watch a movie. But Daniels still raised an eyebrow when he saw Ryan in the room. He didn't say anything, though. And he didn't ask Ryan to leave. Tate nodded at them, leaning against the desk while Daniels took a seat in the chair.

He cleared his throat. "Have you seen the pictures of you and Boucher?"

Zane nodded. "Yes. And uh, I know I should have let you know right away so I could talk to the team's PR people."

Daniels waved that off. "I'm not worried about that. What I want to know is if there's any truth to it. I hate having to ask this but are you dating Noah Boucher?"

Zane laughed. It was nerves as much as anything, but it still struck him as funny that his coach was asking him that question.

"Because if you're gay, the head office has your back. It's already been discussed by the franchise and—"

"I'm not dating Noah Boucher," Zane said. He swallowed hard, growing more serious. "He's a friend. We met up for a

drink because I wanted to offer him support with his coming out and ... and talk to him about something, well, personal for me. We thought a place like that would be less likely to attract attention, but clearly that didn't work."

"It did not." Daniels crossed his arms. "So, you're comfortable with making a statement to the public that while you support Boucher, you're not dating him?"

"Very," Zane said firmly. "It's one hundred percent the truth."

"Okay." Daniels let out a relieved sigh. "Well, that makes things easier. There will still be some speculation, but I think we can work with that."

"Right." Zane took a deep breath and glanced at Ryan. They'd talked earlier about what they were going to do about their relationship. Zane was as ready as he was ever going to be to take the first plunge. "But I should probably tell you something."

Tate stood up straighter, glanced between Zane and Ryan, and nodded once like he'd figured it out. Hell, he probably had. Daniels looked more confused than ever though.

"Well, what is it, Murphy?" he said gruffly when Zane didn't continue.

"I'm not dating Boucher but I am dating Ryan. I'm ..." Zane drew in a deep breath. "Bisexual, I guess. I don't know. Struggling a bit to put a label on it, but I'm definitely in love with Hartinger and ..."

His words trailed off at the look on his coach's face.

"How long?" Daniels asked.

"Have we been involved?"

Daniels nodded.

"Just since the beginning of the season."

"Hmm. Can't say I'm shocked at the news. Truth is, there has been some talk about you two over the years."

"From the team?" Ryan asked.

“More from the head office. We’d prepared ourselves for the first out player or players, and well, guys have been laying bets on it being the two of you. Frankly, if you weren’t so damn good on the ice together, they’d probably have thought about trading one of you, but no one was willing to risk the loss to the team.”

Zane swallowed hard. “Well, as close of friends as we’ve been over the years, this, uh, romantic relationship is new.”

“Hmm.” Daniels’ tone was thoughtful. “You want to say anything, Hartinger?”

He shrugged. “Nah, not much. I love Murphy. We play a damn good game on the ice together. And it’s pretty clear we’ve only gotten better since we started seeing each other, so there shouldn’t be any arguments about splitting us up.”

There was a defiant tilt to his chin and Zane knew if it came to a fight between them and management, Ryan would be ready to come out swinging. It was oddly touching.

Daniels raised his hands in a placating gesture. “No one is talking about splitting you two up. We know how much you’ve both contributed to this team, especially this season and, frankly, it wouldn’t look good to trade away our two best players after this kind of announcement.”

“Does there *need* to be an announcement?” Zane said, clearing his throat. “I mean, Ryan and I discussed it earlier, and neither of us are dying to make a big thing of this. We’d like the focus to stay on our playing, not our personal lives, at least until the end of the season.”

“I respect that,” Daniels said and there was no denying he looked relieved. “So you’re thinking we’ll do an announcement that you and Boucher are only friends but leave your involvement with Hartinger out of it for now?”

“If the head office is okay with that,” Zane said.

He snuck another glance at Ryan, wondering if *he* really was okay with all this. He’d said he was fine waiting a little to go public and that knowing Zane loved him and that they had a plan for coming out was enough but ...

But there was nothing but love in his eyes as he looked at Zane, and something in Zane's chest eased. They could do this. They didn't have to do the big splashy coming out like Boucher. And yeah, maybe the rumors about Zane dating Boucher would dog them for a while, but he could live with that. At the end of the season, whenever that was, he and Ryan could go out in public. Be affectionate. And let people draw their own conclusions.

"What about the team?" Tate asked. "Do you plan to tell them?"

"I'd like to," Zane admitted. At this point, it felt dishonest to keep it from them. And he was supposed to be the captain. Have strong integrity. Lead by example. "I mean, if we're being honest, I think some of them have already guessed or ..."

Coach Daniels cleared his throat. "Right. Well, that's up to you. I would be prepared for some blowback from Malone and crew but we will keep an eye on that."

Zane nodded. He'd always known Malone, Underhill, and O'Shea were the most likely candidates to get riled up about it.

"Okay." Daniels slapped his thighs and stood. "Well, I'm going to go make some calls and get the head office up to speed on the situation. In the next few days, you'll both need to be available for some meetings with the PR team and God knows who else. I'd recommend calling your agent ASAP. He'll need to get on board with this."

They nodded and rose to their feet.

"Get some sleep," Daniels said with a tired-sounding sigh. He looked between them. "And in separate rooms, guys. I'm going to take a wild guess you've been bunking together for a while, but that stops now."

Ryan opened his mouth, but Daniels continued talking. "No arguments. None of the other guys on the team are allowed to bring their wives or girlfriends to stay with them on the road. Fair is fair."



Ryan subsided, and Zane nodded too. That was fair. Though it pissed him off that Malone got away with cheating on his wife on the team's dime and *they* had to sleep separately.

Daniels cleared out, but Tate lingered a moment and held out a hand to shake. "I know this can't be easy, guys, but I want you to know I support you. I think management is committed to changing the culture here, but if you ever feel like you need someone in your corner, I'm always around and I've got your back. Just let me know."

"Thanks, Coach," Zane said, surprised but pleased.

"And you can take a few minutes to, uh, talk, but after that, we really do expect you guys to sleep in your assigned rooms."

"We will," Ryan said. His expression was unusually serious.

"Good." He nodded. "And get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

The minute Tate was gone, Ryan pulled Zane into his arms. "You okay?"

Zane leaned in, letting Ryan take his weight. "Yeah. A little stunned. This has been kind of a weird day," he said with a soft laugh. "But I'm okay. I think that went better than I thought it would."

"Yeah, me too," Ryan said. He leaned their foreheads together. "Gonna miss sleeping next to you though."

"I'll miss it too," Zane admitted. "But they have a point."

"Yeah." Ryan made a face as he pulled back, but his expression cleared quickly. "And there's always home."

Zane smiled. "There is." He cupped Ryan's cheek, looking into his eyes for a minute. "I have no regrets about things changing between us. You know that, right?"

"I do know that." Ryan kissed him softly.

Zane took a deep breath. "I see a future with you, Ryan. The kind of life we both pictured having after hockey was over. We always talked about taking our kids to the park and teaching

them hockey and ... well, I still want that. But with you as my partner, you know?"

Ryan's lips curved up in a smile. "Hate to tell you this, Murph, but no matter how hard we try, you're never gonna be able to knock me up."

Zane snorted, shoving lightly at Ryan's chest. "I know that, idiot." He sobered. "And I want you to know that's something I look forward to someday. Now, we win the playoffs, we win the Cup, and then we decide if we're ready to hang up our skates at the end of the season and settle down like we always talked about. But whether we do that in a few months or in a few years, you're who I'm planning a future with."

Ryan didn't say anything, just leaned in for a kiss, but Zane didn't need words to know that Ryan was on board for that too.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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In the morning, Ryan stretched, reaching out for Zane, and scowled when he remembered he'd slept alone. So dumb. He got it but damn, he missed the feel of Zane in his arms.

By the time Ryan ambled down the hall for breakfast, Zane had been in meetings for a couple of hours and when they reconnected in the corridor, he looked gray and exhausted.

"It go okay?"

"Yeah." Zane scrubbed a hand across his face. "It's just a lot. If I never hear another person use the phrase 'image management' again, I will die a happy man."

Ryan chuckled and bumped shoulders with him. "I bet."

"Oh, and I'm playing tonight."

"What?" Ryan frowned at him. "I thought you were resting a bit before playoffs?"

"They're concerned about how it'll look," Zane said softly. "If there's these rumors about Boucher and me and then I make a statement to deny it, but I'm not on the ice ... it'll look bad."

"Ugh yeah, I hear you." Ryan grimaced. "Well, come on, let's get you fueled up before we get on the plane to Montreal then."

The flight was short but Zane spent it in meetings. On the ground, Ryan got pulled into one of the conference calls with Wade, their agent, and spent most of it rolling his eyes at Zane.

He was right. Image management was getting really old, really fast.

But in the visitors' training room, Ryan's day got weirder by the minute. First, it was Lindholm who asked if he was okay.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be, Lindy?" Ryan answered, confused.

"I just wanted to check in," Lindholm said. "I'll be around if you want to talk."

That would have been odd enough on its own, but it got worse from there. Dean Tremblay patted his shoulder and said, "I've got your back, bro."

Guy after guy had come up to him with weird, cryptic questions and concerned looks, and by the time Underhill approached him in the dressing room, Ryan couldn't take it anymore.

"What the fuck is going on?" Ryan said, standing in his stall, with his underwear, left sock, and left shin guard on but nothing else. "Why is everyone asking me if I'm okay today? You're acting like my dad died or something. Do you all know something I don't?"

Lindholm frowned and cleared his throat. "We're concerned because of the news from last night."

"What? About Murphy and Boucher?" Ryan snorted, gesturing toward the hallway to the training rooms, where Zane was.

O'Shea stared at him. "Dude. That's gotta suck to have your boyfriend looking like he's out on a date with someone else when you can't even be out together."

"What now?" Ryan said with a laugh. "What are you talking about?"

Tremblay stood. "It's okay, Hartinger. No one cares about your relationship with Zane. We're just saying, if you guys are going through a rough patch or ..."

Ryan buried his head in his hands. "I think I'm losing my mind," he muttered before he lifted his head. "Dude, how long do you think Murph and I have been together?"

Lindholm shrugged. “Since college?”

“We’ve only been sleeping together since the start of the season,” Ryan protested as Zane stepped into the room.

Zane’s eyes went wide. “Well, that’s one way to make the announcement to the team. Thought we were waiting until after the game but ...”

“Fuck.” Ryan let out a little laugh and gave Zane an apologetic look. “Uhm ...”

Zane stepped closer to him and turned to face the team, his hand on Ryan’s back. “Look, yes, Ryan and I are dating, but that doesn’t mean that anything has to change. This has been our best season so far and—”

“Wait, so you two haven’t been boning this whole time?” Coop said with a frown. “Huh. Could’ve fooled me.”

The room was sheer chaos after that as a bunch of guys shouted out how they’d known all along that the two of them had been dating. They assured them it was no big deal and that they were happy for them, congratulating them with handshakes and backslapping hugs. Ryan saw money change hands a few times too and he eventually gave up trying to argue and went back to dressing for the game.

Zane dressed too, and at one point he leaned over and whispered, “What the fuck is going on?” but Ryan shrugged.

Hell if he knew, but he supposed it could have been worse.

Malone was suspiciously silent, but otherwise, the team seemed to take it well. He’d have to wait and see what it was like on the ice. He still had concerns about what would happen after Malone had some time to chat with Underhill and O’Shea. He was good at riling the two of them up and there was no telling what would happen later. But for now, Ryan could work with it.

Besides, they had a game to play, and that needed to be his focus.

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By the end of the first period, Zane was already sick of the chirps from Montreal about his sexuality. Probably didn't help that they kept making kissy noises—presumably to taunt him about his supposed relationship with La Bouche—and if Zane had been any more of a hothead, he might have lost his temper and racked up penalties.

But he wasn't, so he kept his head down and focused on the game.

Ryan looked ready to drop gloves half a dozen times but he reined himself in and, to Zane's relief, his team rallied around them. Even Underhill and O'Shea used their words more than their fists, and the Otters finally closed out the game with a 2-0 victory over Montreal.

They had fewer than a dozen games to go before the playoffs and as they skated off the ice in a celebratory mood, Zane felt like he could take on the world.

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"There's one thing we should do soon," Zane said when Ryan drove them back to their place later that night.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Tell our families."

Ryan laughed. "Shit, mine already thinks we're together."

Zane glanced at him quickly, then looked back at the road.

"What? Mine too."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, totally. Over Christmas, my mom said she was glad it would be easier for us to come out now."

Ryan snorted. "Well, fuck. Matt gave me this awkward but nice speech about how he'd support us."

Zane grinned. “Your brother is awesome.”

“He is. And my parents will be cool about it too, but ...”

“But we’re kind of idiots for waiting ten years to figure this out?”

“Hey, speak for yourself.”

“I am.”

They spent the remainder of the ride home squabbling playfully, but when they were inside their apartment, Zane pushed Ryan up against the door, swallowing hard as he looked him in the eye.

“I want to do this, Hartinger. Tell our families, start planning a future.”

Ryan’s smile was slow, and it lit up his eyes. “Yeah, me too, Murph, me too.”



Since there was no time for them to visit home, they set up a laptop on the coffee table, propped on top of shoe boxes.

Zane’s stomach tightened with nerves as they waited for the video chat with Ryan’s family to connect. Out of view of the camera, he groped for Ryan’s hand on the cushion between them but Ryan was already reaching for him.

He squeezed tightly and Zane took a deep breath.

The video call connected and Sam beamed at them. “Hi, Ryan. Hi, Zane!”

“Hey, Sam. How are you doing?” Zane asked.

“Great! Just got my college acceptance letter!”

Zane smiled. “That’s awesome. Where are you going?”

They chatted for a few minutes with Sam while they waited for Ryan’s parents and brother to join the chat. When everyone had finished with the pleasantries, Ryan cleared his throat.

“So, this may be less of a surprise to you than it was to us but, uh, Zane and I are dating.”

An immediate chorus of, “I knew it!” sprang up and it was both hilarious and mildly annoying to think that everyone had figured it out before they had. But in the end, it was worth it. It was *more* than worth it for Zane to sit beside Ryan on the couch, their fingers wound together, and hear Matt congratulate them.

“I knew it, bro!” Matt fist pumped. “That’s fucking awesome. Super happy for you, Ryan, and I know Alyssa and the kids will be too. Oh, and welcome to the family, Zane. Officially.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

“Oh.” Deanna Hartinger gave Zane a warm smile. “I am so thrilled. I can’t imagine a better partner for Ryan.”

“I’m gonna do my best,” Zane promised.

Jerry Hartinger smiled too. “I think you’ve more than proven yourself over the years, Zane. We were always so glad to know Ryan had you there for him.”

Zane got a little bit choked up by the whole thing but thankfully Ryan took over, promising that they’d come for a visit in the off-season. Ryan reassured his mother that she could call Zane’s mom as soon as they told the Murphys.

“I always liked your family, Zane, but just think, we’ll be in-laws now.” Her eyes shimmered with happy tears. “Oh that makes me *so happy*.”

“Well, we can’t assume the boys will want to get married,” Jerry protested.

“No, we do want that.” Zane glanced over at Ryan, his heart beating a little faster at the goofy smile on Ryan’s face. “Maybe not while we’re still playing but someday for sure. We want a family.”

“Oh, *grandkids*,” Deanna said happily. “This just gets better and better.”

“Someday,” Zane said with a chuckle.



“What is your plan about coming out?” Sam asked.

“Well, we’ll probably take it slow,” Zane said more soberly. “The team and our agent and the franchise are all aware we’re together. We’ll tell my family. But probably, we’ll keep this quiet to everyone else until the off-season. We’ll start acting like a couple in public and go from there. I know there’s still going to be a big media frenzy about it.”

He made a face and Ryan squeezed his hand tightly.

“But we’ll take it as it comes. I don’t want it to be a distraction during the playoffs.”

Jerry nodded. “That seems sensible.”

“We won’t breathe a word to anyone we know,” Deanna said. “Oh, I’m so happy for you both!”

After the call ended, Zane said, “I think that went pretty well.”

“Yeah, me too.” Ryan looked uncharacteristically soft as he cupped Zane’s face, his palm warm. “God, I love you.”

Zane leaned forward, resting his head against Ryan’s. “I love you too.”

For a minute, they held each other.

Zane had warned his family he’d be calling and after a text letting them know he was ready to chat, he began the video call with his family.

“Everything okay, honey?” his mom asked the minute they connected. “I got a little worried when you said you wanted to talk to all of us. Is this about the gossip about you and Noah Boucher—oh, Ryan. Hi. Sorry, I didn’t see you at first.”

“Hi, Laura.” Ryan gave her a big smile and friendly wave. “Hey, Robert and Ashley.”

Zane’s father and sister waved back.

“Everything is fine, Mom,” Zane assured her. “And no, it’s not really about Boucher, although that kind of kicked off why I called.”

He glanced over at Ryan who gave him a big, encouraging smile. He glanced back at the screen to see his family looking at them expectantly.

“Uh, you know how long Ryan and I have been friends. And I know you thought that we’ve been dating for a while but the truth is, we just realized we had feelings for each other this season.”

“But you are dating now?” Laura urged.

“Yeah.” Zane smiled, helpless to do anything else.

“Oh, I couldn’t be more thrilled for you. All I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy and you know how much we like Ryan.”

Ryan grinned like a loon at that. He leaned forward and said, “It’s cause I’m the best, right?” with a conspiratorial wink that made Laura grin.

“You good with this, Dad?” Zane prompted.

Robert blinked. “Oh. Yes. Of course, son. I’m very happy for you. I just never really agreed with your mother about you two secretly dating. I told her she had no idea how close teammates could be.”

His father had never made it further than AHL hockey but he definitely knew what it was like to be on a team. To build those bonds.

Zane chuckled. “Guys definitely can be close. And I guess that’s partly why it took us a long while to figure out how we felt. But this new development ... it—it feels right.”

Ryan settled a hand on his thigh and squeezed.

“Ryan makes me happy,” Zane added.

Laura beamed. “I told you friendship is the best basis for a relationship.”

Zane smiled, wondering if maybe his mom was demi too. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Ashley?” Zane prompted, a little surprised by how quiet his sister had been.

Ashley smiled widely. “Of course I’m good with you coming out! But I’m not so sure about dating Hartinger there. I mean, Ryan’s all right and all but why *aren’t* you dating Boucher?” she teased. “He’s super-hot.”

“Excuse me,” Ryan protested. “I am super-hot too!”

Zane laughed and Ryan pretended to be even more outraged and Zane leaned in to kiss him, barely able to contain his chuckles.

His mom and sister said, “Aww” in unison and Zane pulled back, turning a little red from embarrassment, but glad he no longer had to hide.

They talked a little while longer, filling everyone in on their plan for coming out and their hopes for the future, until his mom was crying happy tears.

“I’m so happy you guys are together,” she said, wiping her eyes. “This is so wonderful.”

“It really is,” Zane’s dad said, clearing his throat. “It’s great to see you so happy.”

Zane had to slide his hand into Ryan’s again and squeeze tight while his mom cried a little more but eventually, she pulled herself together.

They got another quiet congratulation from Zane’s dad and they promised the Murphy family that they’d visit them this summer after they spent some time with the Hartingers.

By the time they were done, Zane was a little overwhelmed.

But it was good. He felt lighter after, though he hadn’t realized not talking about it had been weighing on him.

Zane had also gotten a handful of texts from Noah, the first few apologizing for the media coverage about the “date” they’d gone on, the rest checking in and asking how the team had taken his news about him and Ryan.

It was nice having a friend. Nice to have someone to talk to about, well, being a bi, demisexual dude. He talked to Ryan, of course, but the friendship with Boucher was good too.

And now that Ryan felt solid about their relationship, his jealousy had eased up.

Malone had been a bit of a dick, as they'd expected. Underhill didn't seem to care one way or the other. O'Shea had actually been rather nice about it, quietly telling both of them he'd have their back out on the ice. It was oddly easier than Zane had expected.

But while they prepped for their final game with Nashville, Zane wondered what the playoff season would be like. He was excited about it. He knew that they had a great team this year and a real shot at the Cup.

But one question lingered: was he ready to hang up his skates after?

It was something he kept going around and around in his head about.

If they won—and he tried not to cringe at even tempting fate by thinking about it—it might make sense for him to retire.

But so much depended on what happened with the rest of the season and how his hip held up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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The air in the arena in Evanston was electric as the puck dropped for the final game of the third series of the playoffs.

They'd swept the Central Division and were up against Nashville tonight. One more win and they'd move onto the Cup Final.

Ryan gave Zane a quick glance as they sat on the bench, watching their teammates battle for the puck. Zane smiled, knocking their knees together, anticipation singing in his veins.

It was a white-knuckle game, and Zane was filled with a searing fire to win.

He was drenched in sweat by the time the clock wound down in the third period and when they faced off against Nashville, energy crackled in the air.

They were 3-3 going into the final minutes and Zane caught a knowing glance from Ryan as they circled, watching their D-men battle in Nashville's corner, trying to pull the puck out and get it to them.

Underhill shouldered his way into the fray, swiping the puck right out from under them and passed it to Malone, who shot across the blue line with it, sweeping past Nashville on a breakaway. Malone could be a showboat when he got the puck but tonight there were no flashy moves, just focused determination.

Ryan and Zane positioned themselves.

Malone took a shot but the puck bounced off the pipes.

Blood roared in Zane's head when Ryan swept in, snatching the puck from the Nashville forward. No, damn it, he'd lost it to Nashville again. Heart in his throat, Zane watched Lindy snag it back, flying toward Nashville's goal line before passing it back to Ryan. Nashville's defense swarmed him, and Zane caught that faint flicker of movement from Ryan that urged him on. The puck shot out from the scrum and flew toward Zane. Without a second of hesitation, Zane slapped it toward the goal, snaking the puck between the goalie's outstretched leg and catcher.

For the briefest second, he held his breath, prepared for a rebound, but no, it was in! They'd done it.

They were going to the Stanley Cup Final.

The team swarmed the ice, their bodies colliding in celebration as they rattled their sticks and whooped and hollered their excitement.

Zane lost his stick in the chaos and tossed away his gloves, but when he felt the thud of Ryan's body against his and the low, rough, "God, I fucking love you, Murph," there was only one thing Zane wanted to do.

He tore off his helmet as he turned and reached for Ryan's too, unstrapping it, mouth already seeking Ryan's while he let the gear tumble to the ice.

There was no fear, only joy when he kissed Ryan, digging his hands into his sweaty hair, laughing against his mouth as Ryan picked him up off his skates.

"Well, that's one way to celebrate a win," someone mumbled, but Zane didn't care who had said it or if they were okay with it.

Hell, Zane didn't care what anyone thought. Because while this win represented all of the hard work he'd poured into hockey for his entire life, he would never have made it here without Ryan.

Without Ryan, it would never be the same.

Back on his skates, Zane ended the kiss with a fierce final stroke of his tongue and pressed their foreheads together. “I fucking love you too, Hartinger,” he whispered roughly.

“You and me until the end?” Ryan asked, his entire being so filled with joy Zane could almost taste it.

Zane pulled back, grinning. “You and me.”

### ***The Kiss That Changed Hockey Forever***

*Although Noah Boucher’s coming out earlier this season was groundbreaking, the kiss shared on ice between Evanston River Otters teammates might be a bigger deal.*

*Following the Otters 4-3 win over the Nashville Vipers, Captain Zane Murphy kissed his alternate captain, Ryan Hartinger.*

*While on-ice post-victory kisses have been shared between NHL players previously, they are typically on helmets or cheeks. In the few rare instances where two sets of lips were involved, any smooches are generally short and chaste.*

*Not so for the Otters teammates who shared a passionate kiss that left no doubt as to their feelings for each other.*

*While there have been persistent rumors about the closeness between the teammates for years, and speculation that Murphy was involved with Noah Boucher after a romantic-looking date earlier this season, both Hartinger and Murphy maintain that their relationship is a new development.*

*In a press conference following the victory, Murphy spoke about it.*

*“We’ve been very close friends for years. In that time, we’d never considered becoming romantically involved but when feelings developed, it felt like a natural progression on what we’d already built together.”*

*The Otters organization and various teammates have spoken out in support of the couple. General Manager for the team, Cliff Hines, stated, “The organization was made aware of their relationship earlier this season. Their record speaks for itself*

*and we fully support them and are confident that their relationship will only have positive outcomes for their play going forward.”*

*When asked if there are concerns about how this relationship could impact the team, Head Coach Ken Daniels stated, “These guys are professionals. They know to keep their personal lives off the ice. We have a great team whose focus is winning. This is something that the locker room was made aware of previously and will not impact their game going forward.”*

*But rumor has it not everyone in the organization is so thrilled about the news.*

*Will this prove to be the Otters downfall in what has been a stellar season so far?*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Two weeks later, Zane hoisted the Cup over his head and let out the loudest sound he'd ever made in his life.

Exhilaration at his assist on Lindy's game-winning goal made his heart beat fast and in the minutes that followed, every last trace of exhaustion was swept away, taking his hip pain with it.

A short while later, after the collision of happy bodies finally ended, they lined up to take their victory lap.

As captain, Zane went first and he bellowed out his joy as he skated around Boston's arena, triumphant.

It wasn't as good as being at home, but there were still so many Otters' fans there to celebrate and the roar of the crowd filled his chest and made his ears ring.

He'd be flying high on this feeling for *days*.

His throat went thick as he returned to the line of guys, handing the Cup off to Ryan.

They'd done it. They'd been imagining this moment individually since they were children, working together to prepare for it since they met.

They'd been chasing the same dream for so long and it felt so right to Zane that they'd done it *together*.

How could it have happened any other way?

Zane pressed his forehead to Ryan's for the briefest second as he passed over the Cup, whispering, "I love you, Ryan," as he did so.

"I love you too, Zane." Ryan was crying openly, his face wet, his eyes happy, his whole heart on display as he lifted the Cup with a shout of happiness, the crowd shouting back.

That was what Zane had always loved so much about him. He never hid anything. He was wild and open and free with all of his feelings and he loved so hard.

And Zane was the one he loved.

It was overwhelming to be on the receiving end of it. And something Zane never, ever wanted to take for granted.

"Wouldn't have wanted to do this with anyone else," Ryan said roughly before he skated off to take his victory lap.

"I am happy for you, my friend," Lindholm said, reaching out to squeeze Zane's arm as Zane watched Ryan bellow with triumph. "You have achieved something great."

"I couldn't have done it without all of you." Zane's voice was rough too. Team support was one of the things he loved so much about hockey. It was less about individual accomplishments than how they all worked together to achieve something extraordinary.

"I didn't mean winning the Cup."

"Oh." Zane swallowed hard. "All I did was fall in love."

Lindy shrugged. "Yes. But we all know it takes courage to speak the truth about it openly."

Zane nodded. Perhaps it did. But in the end, it had merely felt like an inevitable conclusion to everything that had come before it.

He knew why it had taken time for him to feel ready.

But he also knew this moment wouldn't have felt the same if he'd forced himself to hide his feelings for Ryan.

They were so big, so all-encompassing that they threatened to burst out of him. They *had* burst out of him a few weeks ago

with the on-ice kiss.

Now, he was glad of it.

Because as Ryan handed the Cup over to Lindy for his turn around the ice with the beloved trophy, Zane was glad he could hold out an arm so he and Ryan could slot together, Ryan's arm over his shoulders, his arm around Ryan's waist.

Zane turned his head, tucking his face into the crook of Ryan's neck for a moment.

He was aware of the tens of thousands of people who watched them live, and the millions who watched on the TV. This clip would circle the globe and the internet. It would be talked about for years to come.

And a surge of pride went through him.

Because this moment would matter to so many people who either hadn't had the opportunity to share their most important moments with the person they loved, or those who thought they'd never have the chance going forward.

Zane was proud of the team, of the win, and especially of Ryan, who'd had the courage to say what he felt. To ask Zane for more.

He'd risked *everything*.

And while at the time neither of them had realized where it would lead, Zane was fiercely happy that it had led here.

He had another fleeting thought that it was impossible to believe that this could have happened any other way.

It felt so right.

"You okay there, Murph?" Ryan's voice was low, for his ears alone.

Zane lifted his head, looking fondly at Ryan's familiar face. He looked thin and a little worn from the stress of the postseason. His beard was terrible and under the championship hat he wore, his hair was long. Sweat-soaked, matted curls peeked out from the edges of his cap and he had an angry red cut on his cheek from a healing wound.

Some people would say he'd never looked worse but he looked perfect to Zane. He looked like a champion. A winner.

Like the man Zane loved and would continue to love until his dying day.

"I've never been better," Zane said, his cheeks aching from the wide smile that broke across his face.

Some time later, the team burst into the dressing room. The room rang with shouts of joy, throbbing with the music already pumping through the speakers.

Trainers sprayed beer across them and Coach Daniels popped the cork on a bottle of Champagne. He handed it over to Ryan before clapping them both on the shoulder.

"You deserve this, boys."

"Couldn't have done it without you, Coach," Zane said roughly.

And though Daniels was far from what anyone would call an outwardly sentimental man, his face softened and he slapped Zane on the back. "We'll be wheels up in the morning but for tonight, enjoy yourself and try not to trash the hotel too much, okay boys?"

Zane laughed and held out a hand to shake on that but Coach Daniels abruptly stepped back.

Zane didn't have to see Ryan to know why. A moment later a fountain of Champagne spewed at him, soaking his skin.

Laughing, Zane turned and opened his mouth, drinking the sparkling wine down greedily, trying to capture every last drop on his tongue before the pressure let up. They passed the bottle back and forth for a minute before it was handed off to someone else.

But there was another bottle. And then another.

He might not like wine but he loved it like this, sweet with the taste of victory.

Zane's heart was so full as he went around to the staff and team. He thanked everyone, congratulating them on the win,

praising them for their efforts.

He loved every last one of them.

But a while later, as he dropped to his knees to take a drink from the brimming Cup, sticky alcohol sloshing everywhere, wetting his neck and chest, he looked up into Ryan's laughing blue eyes and knew without any doubt there was someone he'd found a deeper kind of love with.

In every way a person could love someone else, he loved Ryan.

He loved him now. He'd loved him for years without knowing it.

And he'd love him for decades more.

They'd achieved something amazing tonight but they still had so much more to look forward to and that filled him with a buoyant joy that nothing else could top.



Ryan was loose with drinks and happiness as the bus pulled up at the hotel, his voice hoarse from shouting.

The team had lingered in Boston's dressing room as long as they could but, eventually, they'd been herded onto the bus. They'd celebrated there too, downing beers and roaring with happiness, the volume of everything turned up as high as possible. The music was loud, the shouted celebrations and singing even louder.

Zane was noticeably quiet now.

But Ryan wasn't worried.

Zane clutched the Cup like he'd never let it go and his eyes were filled with a fierce joy that took Ryan's breath away.

Reginald Hudson, the official Keeper of the Cup, whose duty it was to be sure nothing terrible happened to the sacred trophy, watched Zane with amusement in his gaze but he hadn't attempted to pry it away from Zane yet.

When they arrived at the hotel, they were herded toward a conference room where they could continue their partying.

The team got drunker and drunker as the night went on.

Ryan lost track of time and of his boyfriend but they found each other again as some of the guys finally began to wind down, staggering off to their rooms to crash for a bit—or drink in smaller groups—before their flight home.

“I wanna take you to bed,” Ryan whispered in Zane’s ear.

“Guess I’ll have to give this back.” Zane looked a little mournfully at the Cup.

Ryan narrowed his eyes, considering his options. “Maybe not. C’mon.”

His tongue felt a little thick in his mouth but he hauled Zane to his feet.

Laughing, Zane swayed, but he reached out to grab the Cup again. As they crossed the room, Reggie cut them off.

“Hand it over,” he said, but he was still smiling.

“What if we didn’t?” Ryan said slowly. “What if it stayed with us tonight?”

“Absolutely not. This is exactly how the Cup ends up stuck on the bottom of pools,” Reggie said with a weary sigh. “I’m tired of draining pools.”

“No, we’ll be *so good*,” Ryan promised, although there was a pool in the hotel and that was very tempting. Reggie really shouldn’t give people ideas like that. “The Cup will stay in the hotel room with us and we won’t do anything that could leave permanent damage, I promise.”

“I’ve been told that before,” he said with a snort. “No dice.”

“I won’t insult you by offering to bribe you.”

Reggie crossed his arms. “Good.”

Ryan pointed at Zane. “But that man does not want to be separated from it and I love *him*. So I’m gonna be stubborn about this.”

The Keeper sighed. "I was afraid of that."

Ryan frowned, wishing he was a little less drunk or a little more clever. "What if I swore on ... *the Cup* that we'll take such good care of it. We'll treat it like a baby."

Reggie squinted. "Okay. Just ... don't make me regret this."

"We won't," Zane promised, hugging the Cup tighter. "We'll take *such* good care of it. I promise."

He was wide-eyed and earnest and so very drunk.

Reggie let out another sigh. "At least this way I can catch some shut-eye before we fly out."

They made a weird little group as they walked to the elevators. Zane weaved a little as he carried his beloved trophy down the hall. Ryan steered him. And Reggie followed on their heels.

On their floor, it took Ryan three times to let himself into his room. He got Zane and the Cup safely inside before he poked his head out the door. Reggie was hovering nearby as if he couldn't decide if he should go to his room or not.

"Thanks, man. We'll be careful, I promise," Ryan loudly whispered.

Reggie gave him a skeptical look. "I mean it. Don't make me regret this."

Ryan saluted him. "Absolutely not, sir."

He closed the door behind him to find Zane carefully arranging the Cup on the bed, arranging pillows around it. Oh God, he was *ridiculous* and Ryan loved him so much for it.

"Hey, c'mere," Ryan said.

Zane looked up at him, eyes going soft. "Hi."

Ryan smiled. Seriously, Zane was so, so drunk. "Hi yourself. Seriously, c'mere," he coaxed.

"Okay." Zane absently patted the Cup, then weaved his way over to Ryan, winding his arms around his waist. "God, I love you."

"I love you too."

Zane let out a contented sigh. “I’m so *happy*.”

“Me too. You’re pretty drunk though. You feeling up for some private celebrations with me or should we wait until morning?”

“Oh no. I don’t want to wait.” Zane’s eyes lit up and he dragged his hoodie off. He got momentarily tangled up and his cap fell to the ground, leaving his dark hair sticking up every which way, his beard scruffy and scraggly.

Ryan smiled and helped Zane out of his clothes, flinging the hoodie across the room with a little too much enthusiasm.

They both jumped when something crashed to the floor and Ryan turned to see the hoodie-draped-lamp lying on the floor.

“Whoops,” Ryan said with a laugh. Okay, he was pretty drunk still too.

“Hartinger! Murphy! That better not be the Cup I heard!” Reggie hissed through the door.

“Just a lamp!” Ryan called back. “Now go to your room or shut your ears if you’re gonna spy on us, man. I’m gonna thank my boyfriend for his game-winning assist.”

He heard a pained groan from Reggie but he ignored it. Whatever. The dude would survive. He’d probably had to deal with tons of horny straight couples over the years.

But this was about to be the gayest Stanley Cup celebration that had ever taken place.

Ryan licked his lips and pushed Zane down onto the bed. Zane reached out for the Cup to steady it but Ryan only had eyes for Zane.

He dropped to his knees, wincing. God *that* hurt but he couldn’t care, not when Zane was pulling the rest of his clothes off.

When Zane was naked, Ryan rubbed his palms across his strong thighs, the soft dark hair tickling his skin.

He pressed kisses all the way up, letting out a sigh of pleasure when he reached Zane’s cock. He was only half-hard but Ryan



sucked him anyway. He liked the way it felt to have him harden in his mouth and he closed his eyes and bobbed over him, head swimming with drinks and happiness.

Zane smelled of unfamiliar soap, beer, and sweat and nothing had ever been more of a turn-on.

Unable to take the urgent pulse of his cock another second, Ryan shoved his sweats halfway down his thighs, taking himself in his hand and slowly stroking.

“Ryan,” Zane moaned. Much louder than he’d usually be if they were in a hotel.

Ryan pulled off to whisper a hasty, “Shh,” not wanting Zane to be embarrassed in the morning if the guys chirped him for it.

He dropped down and redoubled his efforts, his head swimming as he sucked harder, focusing on that sensitive little spot that Zane liked so much. He didn’t care how long Zane lasted. He just wanted to make him come.

He was greedy to taste him, to make him feel good.

Zane dropped a hand to his hair, threading his fingers through the strands and tugging lightly. Ryan glanced up in time to see Zane’s other hand settle on the Cup beside him on the bed.

A shiver went through Ryan and he let out a moan that must have been the final straw for Zane, because he came with a strangled shout, fingers tightening almost painfully in Ryan’s hair, body bowing up.

Ryan choked but kept going, working Zane over.

His heart beat fast, painfully and overwhelmingly in love with Zane. He’d never imagined this. He’d never imagined seeing Zane falling apart as he clutched the symbol of everything they’d worked together for.

Spit and cum dripped down Ryan’s chin and his neck and jaw ached a little more than usual but the sight of Zane with his head thrown back, his chest heaving was too good to miss.

He worked Zane through the final tremors until he let out a strangled gasp and flopped onto the bed in what was clearly an exhausted sprawl.

Ryan carefully slid off with a final lick and kiss, then closed his eyes and rested his head against Zane's thigh as he stroked himself. He shivered, already so close to the edge, overwhelmed by everything this night had brought them.

"Ryan," Zane said, his voice cracking. He scrabbled at Ryan's shoulder, tugging at him. "Come here."

"Love you. I fucking love you so much," Ryan said as he crawled up onto the bed, his voice raspy from all the shouting they'd been doing and the hot, thick press of Zane's cock in his throat. He kicked off his sweats and tangled his legs together with Zane's.

"I know, Ryan." Zane sounded equally wrecked. He held on tightly, his heart beating fast against Ryan's chest. "I know. I can't believe this is *real*."

"It's real, baby," Ryan promised him. "It's so fucking real and I'm so happy."

Zane's eyes darkened and he wrapped a hand around the back of Ryan's neck to pull him in for a hot, needy kiss. They made out for a while, Ryan's cock aching, leaking sticky wetness on Zane's thigh.

Zane seemed to realize it all at once, because he sat up, untangling himself from Ryan's grip.

"C'mon. Lay back while I suck you. I want to make you feel so good."

"Okay," Ryan said. "Like this." He shifted back to give Zane more room. He immediately settled between Ryan's knees, mouthing at Ryan's cock for a moment. Ryan reached out, grabbing for something to anchor himself and landed on the smooth metal.

Ryan groaned when Zane took him inside, the wet heat and pressure quickly sending him hurtling toward release. Zane only managed a few bobs of his head before Ryan broke, spilling into his mouth.

Ryan's fingers bit into the sharp edge of the Cup's bowl, warmed from their skin, as he shouted Zane's name.

“I love you,” Ryan whispered raggedly. “I love you so much.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Zane awoke slowly, his head throbbing as he pulled Ryan closer.

It had been a hell of a night. Most of what happened after they'd lifted the shining silver Cup over their heads and taken a victory lap around the Boston arena was a blur now. There had been drinks—so many he'd lost count—and possibly a broken lamp when he and Ryan stumbled to their hotel room and decided that sloppy blowjobs were the best way to celebrate a Stanley Cup Championship win.

He groaned and heard a similar noise from Ryan, one pillow over.

“I feel like death,” Ryan muttered.

“Same,” Zane admitted. They'd probably only slept for a couple of hours at most. He blearily reached for a water bottle on the nightstand, guzzled half of it, and passed the rest over to Ryan.

“Amazing night though,” Ryan said, flopping down again, the empty bottle falling to the floor on the far side of the bed with a soft sound.

“It was.” Zane let out a happy sigh. Shame he couldn't remember much of the celebration after but damn, he'd never forget how winning had felt.

“Oh, be careful getting out of bed,” Ryan said. “There's a broken lamp on the floor we're probably gonna have to pay for.”

“I sorta remember that,” Zane said with a yawn.

“Do you remember the threesome we had?”

Zane lifted his head, alarmed. “The what now?”

Ryan chuckled, slinging an arm over his waist. “With the Cup.”

“Oh.” Zane turned his head to see the trophy carefully situated on the dresser. Ryan must have taken care of it before they fell asleep. “*That* I remember. You had me worried there.”

Ryan snorted and reached out to him, burrowing through the tangle of covers. “No way in *hell* am I letting anyone else in our bed.”

“Me either.” Zane shifted until they were plastered together. Even though it was sort of sweaty and gross from their combined body heat he loved it. “How did you manage that anyway? I vaguely remember you talking to Reggie but ...”

“I swore on the Cup that I wouldn’t damage it. I think he was snooping outside our door at one point though.”

“Oh God. So he probably heard us?”

“There’s a good chance. I tried to keep you quiet but you were *loud*.”

“Great.” Zane scrubbed a hand over his face, embarrassed. “I’m never gonna be able to look the dude in the eye again. That’s gonna make for an awkward Cup Day.”

Ryan laughed. “He’s probably seen and heard worse.”

Zane considered some of the stories he’d heard and nodded. He was too happy to really care anyway. “Yeah. Probably. *Still*.”

“Worth it,” Ryan muttered.

“Yeah.” Smiling, Zane stole another look at the Cup. He felt like he needed to pinch himself. God. They’d really done it.

He’d been waiting so long for this moment. He’d accomplished the thing he’d set out to do.

Which meant he only had one big thing on his immediate bucket list left. “You know what I want to do when we get home?” he asked.

Ryan lifted his head and squinted at him. “No. What?”

“Take you out on a date.”

Ryan let out a loud laugh, then clutched his head, grimacing. “I would love that. Once the hangover passes.”

Zane chuckled and wove his fingers through Ryan’s wild hair, rubbing softly. He let out a little groan and pushed against Zane’s touch.

“Once the hangover passes,” Zane promised.

They lay there a while and Zane’s thoughts wandered to the season they’d just had. And to his future.

“I’m not ready to hang up my skates yet,” he admitted.

At that, Ryan lifted up onto his elbows and stared at him. “Yeah?”

“I thought after we won the Cup I’d be ready, but man ... now I want to do it again.”

Ryan chuckled. “I get it.”

Ryan flopped back and they lay there in silence for a few minutes.

“What about your hip?” Ryan asked.

Zane turned his head to look at Ryan. “I dunno. I’ll have to talk to Dr. Lynch about it. I’m not sure if it’s the cortisone injection talking or what. But it’s not as bad as I expected.”

“That’s something.”

“And if I have the off-season to rest and rehab ... I could probably go another year or two.”

“Okay.”

“What do you think?” Zane asked. “I mean, obviously we don’t have to both make the same decision but ...”

“If you wanted to retire, I would too,” Ryan said. “I fucking love this game. I’ve maybe never loved this game more in my whole damn life than I do right this minute. But what I love *most* about it is playing with you. It wouldn’t feel the same without you.”

Zane smiled at him, unsurprised. “So you’re okay with another few seasons? I mean, I don’t want to be the guy who can’t get around on the ice anymore. I know my hip won’t hold out forever but Lindy’s still going strong and I had an injury-free season—my best NHL season ever, actually—and we won and I’m starting to think, ‘what if I’m not done yet’, you know?”

Ryan pushed up, shifting to sit beside Zane’s side, cross-legged. “I’ve had a hell of a season too, so yeah, if you want to keep going, let’s do this. Let’s see if we can take the Otters and win back-to-back Cups.”

Zane grinned and patted his leg. “And then we hang up our skates and start raising future hockey players?”

Ryan grinned back and tangled their fingers together. “Fuck yeah.”

“You know, you’re going to have to clean up that language if we have kids,” Zane teased. His heart was so full, imagining the kind of future they’d have together.

“Shit.”

Zane let out a little snort. “Yeah, like that.”

Ryan’s grin only widened. “But I’ve got another season or two to work on it.”

“You do.” Impulsively, Zane sat up and kissed Ryan, ignoring the staleness of their mouths. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For ...” Zane swallowed hard as he lay back, getting comfortable again. “Not being afraid to see what was right in front of our faces.”

“Pretty sure we owe Boucher big time,” Ryan said.

Zane chuckled, staring up at Ryan, overwhelmed by how much he loved him. “Yeah, we do.” He sobered. “Man, that sucks about his knee though.”

Toronto had made it to the playoffs this year, but in the second game against Boston, Noah had taken a dirty hit from a Boston player that left him writhing on the ice. They’d eventually learned that he’d be out for the remainder of the season due to a complete meniscus tear, and Toronto had quickly been knocked out of the playoffs.

The last time Zane had checked, Noah was recovering nicely from surgery, but the total meniscus replacement meant he wouldn’t be back on the ice until the middle of the regular season next year.

If he was lucky.

“Maybe we should go visit him soon,” Ryan said, shifting onto his side again. “See if he needs some cheering up.”

“I’d like that.” Zane leaned in to give him a kiss, setting a hand on his hip, his skin cool from the air conditioner in the room. “We could even go on some dates while we’re there. I know this really nice wine bar in Toronto—”

Ryan tackled him, cutting off his words with a kiss and Zane let out a muffled grunt when he landed back against the mound of pillows.

“No wine bars,” Ryan growled. “You’ve already been on a date there. And it wasn’t with *me*.”

“It wasn’t a date!” Zane protested, laughing.

Ryan loomed over him, a scowl on his face, but Zane could see the laughter in his eyes too.

“You can take me wherever you want,” Zane promised, pulling him close, hugging him tight. “I’m all yours.”

The Cup was important but win or lose, Zane had everything he’d ever needed, right here in his arms.

Murphy and Hartinger until the end.



## THE END

If you're looking for more hockey romance, don't worry. I have plenty of it!

The next season kicks off with Noah Boucher's second shot at love with his college crush, Simon. Want to learn the *other* reason why Noah's called La Bouche?

Check out his story in [\*Bending the Rules\*](#).

If you've read all six books in the [\*Rules of the Game Series\*](#) already, check out [\*The Husband Game\*](#), which kicks off my *Relationship Goals Series*.

# BRIGHAM'S BOOKS

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## **Rules of the Game**

Join the pro hockey players who fight hard and love hard in the Rules of the Game Universe.

The chronological reading order is *Road Rules*, *Bending the Rules*, *Changing the Rules*, *Unwritten Rules*, *Rules of Engagement*, and *Breaking the Rules*.

*Road Rules*: Rule #1: Don't fall in love with your best friend.

*Bending the Rules*: Rule #1: Never give up on love. Now available in audio!

*Changing the Rules*: Rule #1: Don't fall in love with your coach.

*Unwritten Rules*: Rule #1: Don't fall in love with your family's sworn enemy.

*Rules of Engagement*: Rule #1: Don't fall in love with your brother's best friend.

*Breaking the Rules*: Rule #1: Don't fall in love with your agent.

All titles coming soon in audio.

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**Pendleton Bay Books**

Visit the fictional small town of Pendleton Bay on the shores of Lake Michigan. All books set in this universe can be read as standalones but characters from other books/series may appear from time to time.

There are currently two series set within the Pendleton Bay Universe.

### **Naughty in Pendleton Series**

A complete m/m romance series set in the town of Pendleton Bay with characters exploring the kinkier side of romance. BDSM elements will appear in all books.

**Date in a Pinch:** When chemistry teacher Neil gets an unexpected delivery at the high school where he works, he's mortified when his crush, Alexander, sees the contents. Curious but inexperienced with kink, Neil has no idea how to live out his fantasies until the hot lit teacher offers a helping hand.

**Embracing His Shame:** Forrest, the town's accountant, may look uptight but he's anything but. When he offers the local mechanic, Jarod, an indecent proposal to fulfill his shameful fantasies, Forrest will have to decide if he's willing to give Jarod a chance to show him that he can have love *and* the kink he longs for.

**Made to Order:** Donovan, head chef at the Hawk Point Tavern, loves to be in charge in the kitchen *and* in the bedroom. Tyler, a former soldier, is pretty sure he's straight and definitely only into kink if he's the one dishing it out. Until he and Donovan start butting heads about who is calling the shots ...

**Flipping the Switch:** When Logan, a silver fox Dom looking for *experience* on a kinky app, stumbles across Jude, a flirty switch who just so happens to be best friend's son, *and* introduces him to a sweet cinnamon roll of a sub named Tony, their heat between them will sizzle hotter than Jude's kitchen. But they'll have to decide if three is the perfect number.

**Preston's Christmas Escape:** When Hollywood actor Preston gets caught by the paparazzi in a compromising position, he

flees to his home state of Michigan to hide out with his former best friend and ex. Reclusive potter Blake is reluctant to let Preston invade his quiet home in the woods but the heat between them can only be denied for so long ... (BDSM)

### **Poly in Pendleton Series**

An ongoing m/m/f romance series set in the town of Pendleton Bay.

**Three Shots:** Reeve, a local musician, and Grant, a computer designer, have fun in bed together but pursuing a relationship never feels quite right until they meet tavern owner Rachael and try to figure out how to be poly in the small town of Pendleton Bay.

***Between the Studs:*** Coming soon

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### **Peachtree Books**

Visit the real life city of Atlanta, Georgia. All books in this universe can be read as standalone but characters from both series do crossover.

There are two series set with the Peachtree Universe.

#### **The Peachtree Series**

Complete, continuous m/m series featuring an age gap, light kink, and found family. *Also available in Italian.*

**Off-Balance:** Coworkers Russ & Stephen meet over a spilled cup of coffee and navigate the complexities of a nineteen-year age gap, a big difference in income, and the death of Stephen's estranged father.

**Love in the Balance:** Their story continues as Russ introduces Stephen to his family, searches for his absent mother, and asks Stephen to marry him.

**Full Balance:** They navigate new challenges as they take in a teenage foster boy named Austin and decide to make him a permanent part of their family.

## **Peachtree Place**

Standalone m/m books in the same universe as The Peachtree Series

**Trust the Connection:** Evan & Jeremy find a love that will heal both their scars in this slow-burn, age-gap romance about living with a disability, believing in yourself, and building the family you always wanted.

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## **The Midwest Series**

Complete m/m series featuring four couples. Stories intertwine but can be read as standalones. Opposites attract m/m sports romance with numerous bisexual characters.

**Bully & Exit:** Drama geek Caleb is sure he'll never forgive Nathan, the hockey player who dumped him in high school, until he learns the real reason why in this slow-burn, second-chance new adult romance. Now available [in audio](#).

**Push & Pull:** Lowell & Brent have nothing in common when they leave on a summer road trip, but by the end, the makeup-wearing fashionista and the macho hockey player will realize they're perfect for each other in this enemies to lovers, slow-burn story about acceptance. Now available [in audio](#).

**Touch & Go:** Micah, a closeted pro pitcher, and Justin, a laid-back physical therapist, have nothing in common but when Micah blows out his shoulder, he'll have to choose which he wants more: baseball or love? An enemies to lovers, out for you romance. Now available [in audio](#).

**Advance & Retreat:** When fate brings Ian and Ricky together, a college swimmer will have to figure out how to reach for the gold without losing the sweet hotel manager who lights up the stage as sizzling drag queen Rosie Riveting. An age gap sports romance with a gender fluid character. Now available [in audio](#).

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## **The West Hills**

Standalone m/m series featuring three different couples

**The Ghosts Between Us:** Losing his brother in a devastating accident sends Chris spiraling into grief. The last person he expects to find comfort in is his brother's secret boyfriend, Elliot, in this slow burn, hurt/comfort romance.

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## **Tidal Series – Co-authored with K Evan Coles**

A complete, continuous m/m duology that takes Riley & Carter from best friends to lovers in this slow-burn romance featuring the sons of two wealthy Manhattan families.

**Wake:** After a decade and a half of lying to himself and everyone around him, Riley slowly come to terms with his sexuality and his feelings for his best friend, Carter, shattering their friendship.

**Calm:** Carter reaches his own realization and they slowly build the relationship they've been denying for so long.

## **Speakeasy Series – Co-authored with K Evan Coles**

Complete, standalone m/m series featuring characters from the Tidal universe

**With a Twist:** After Will learns of his estranged father's cancer diagnosis, he returns home and slowly mends fences with him and falls in love with his father's colleague, David. Enemies to lovers, opposites attract, interracial romance.

**Extra Dirty:** Wealthy, pansexual businessman Jesse is perfectly happy living his life to the fullest with no strings attached, but when he meets Cam, a music teacher and DJ, he'll find that some strings are worth hanging onto in this age-gap, opposites-attract romance.

**Behind the Stick:** Speakeasy owner and bartender Kyle has taken a break from dating when he's rescued by Harlem firefighter Luka. Interracial romance and hurt/comfort.

**Straight Up:** When hot, tattooed biker chef Stuart meets quiet and serious Malcolm, they both have secrets they're hiding. Gray ace, bisexual awakening, lingerie kink.

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### **The Williamsville Inn**

Standalone m/m holiday romances in a shared universe with Hank Edwards

**Snowstorms and Second Chances:** Erik and Seth don't hit it off at first, but when a snowstorm leads to them sharing a room at a hotel, Erik discovers a whole new side of himself and his feelings about the holidays. A forced-proximity, bisexual-awakening romance with a second chance at happiness.

**The Cupcake Conundrum:** Adrian comes face to face with the biggest mistake of his past, Ajay, a hookup who he ghosted on. He'll have to make amends and win Jay's heart back in this single dad, second-chance interracial romance.

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### **Colors Series**

A continuous f/f series featuring a bisexual character and opposites attract trope

**A Brighter Palette:** When Annie, a struggling American freelance writer, meets Siobhán, a successful Irish painter living in Boston, the heat between them is undeniable, but is it enough to build something that will last?

**The Greenest Isle:** After Siobhán's father has a heart attack, she and Annie travel to Ireland to care for him. Their

relationship is tested as they navigate living in a new place and healing old wounds.

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### **Standalone Books**

***Baby, It's Cold Inside:*** Meeting Nate's parents doesn't go at all like Emerson planned. But there might be a Christmas miracle for the two of them before the visit is through in this sweet and funny m/m holiday romance.

***Bromantic Getaway:*** Spencer is sure he's straight. But when an off-hand comment sends him tumbling into the realization he's in love with his best friend Devin, he'll have to turn a romantic vacation meant for his ex into the perfect opportunity to grab the love that's always been right in front of them in this best friends to lovers bi awakening m/m romance.

***Cabin Fever:*** Kevin's best friend's dad is definitely off-limits. But he and Drew are about to spend a week alone in a cabin the week before Christmas. And Kevin's never been any good at resisting temptation. An age gap, best friend's father m/m holiday romance.

Also available in [audio](#) and in [Italian](#).

***Corked:*** A sommelier and a wine distributor clash in this enemies to lovers, age-gap m/m romance that takes Sean & Lucas from a restaurant in Chicago to owning a winery in Traverse City.

***Inked in Blood:*** **Co-Authored with K Evan Coles** An unexpected event changes the life and death of a sexy, tattooed vampire named Jeff and Santiago, a tattoo artist with a secret. A paranormal, age-gap m/m romance.

***Seeking Warmth:*** When Benny gets out of juvie, he's lost all hope for a future for him or his sister, but the help of his ex-boyfriend Scott will show him that hope and love still exist in this m/m YA novel about second chances.

***The Soldier Next Door:*** When Travis agrees to keep an eye on the guy next door for a few weeks while his parents are out of



town, he never expects to fall in love with a soldier heading off to war. An age-gap m/m novella.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brigham Vaughn is on the adventure of a lifetime as a full-time author. She devours books at an alarming rate and hasn't let her short arms and long torso stop her from doing yoga. She makes a killer key lime pie, hates green peppers, and loves wine tasting tours.

A collector of vintage Nancy Drew books and green glassware, she enjoys poking around in antique shops and refinishing thrift store furniture. An avid photographer, she dreams of traveling the world and she can't wait to discover everything else life has to offer her.

Her books range from short stories to novellas to novels. They explore gay, bisexual, lesbian, and polyamorous romance in contemporary settings.

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Want to read more of Brigham's work, follow her on social media, or stay up to date on new releases and sales via her newsletter?

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