



Rivalries make the best foreplay...

PLAYING ROUGH

BOYS OF HOLLOWGATE HOCKEY BOOK ONE

HEATHER ASHLEY

PLAYING ROUGH

BOYS OF HOLLOWGATE HOCKEY BOOK ONE

HEATHER ASHLEY

PLAYING ROUGH

BOYS OF HOLLOWGATE HOCKEY BOOK ONE

HEATHER ASHLEY

Copyright © 2023 by user923970

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design:

[Black Widow Designs](#)

Published by:

DCT Publishing

Contact the Author:

www.heatherashleywrites.com

heather@heatherashleywrites.com

*To everyone who's ever wanted to hate f*ck their enemy.*

CONTENTS

[Warning](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Riot

[Chapter 2](#)

London

[Chapter 3](#)

Riot

[Chapter 4](#)

Riot

[Chapter 5](#)

London

[Chapter 6](#)

London

[Chapter 7](#)

Riot

[Chapter 8](#)

Riot

[Chapter 9](#)

London

[Chapter 10](#)

Riot

[Chapter 11](#)

London

[Chapter 12](#)

London

[Chapter 13](#)

Riot

[Chapter 14](#)

London

[Chapter 15](#)

Riot

[Chapter 16](#)

London

Chapter 17

Riot

Chapter 18

London

Chapter 19

Riot

Chapter 20

Riot

Chapter 21

Riot

Chapter 22

Riot

Chapter 23

London

Chapter 24

Riot

Chapter 25

Riot

Chapter 26

Riot

Chapter 27

Deck

28. Epilogue

London

Extended Epilogue

Also by Heather Ashley

About the Author

WARNING

This is a MM bi awakening/gay for you romance. The main characters will experience moments of homophobia that may make some readers uncomfortable.

PLAYLIST

[Click Here to Listen](#)

Break Me Shake Me - *Savage Garden*

Watermelon Sugar - *Harry Styles*

DEAD RIGHT NOW - *Lil Nas X*

The Way I Am - *Eminem*

PRESSURE - *Machine Gun Kelly*

CLOUDS - *NF*

Wolves (feat. Post Malone) - *Big Sean*

Don't Blame Me - *Taylor Swift*

Get Me High - *Anna Thompson & Jake Crocker*

Why Do You Love Me - *Charlotte Lawrence*

Daisy - *Ashnikko*

RIOT

THE CHILL in the air cuts through my jersey as I step onto the ice, but it's the electricity of the crowd that raises the hairs on my arms. This is it. Ravenloft versus Hollowgate. The rivalry of the decade, with scouts and fans packed into the stands for one reason—to see us go head to head.

Me and him. Riot Kensington versus London Lancaster.

I take a slow lap around the rink, breathing in the cold, crisp air. My teammates are a blur of color in my periphery, but my focus narrows to the one figure in black and gold across the ice—number seventeen, London.

We've got history, him and me. Started as soon as he stepped foot on the ice freshman year. Cocky bastard came in with his backwards hats and flashy playing style, acting like he owned the damn rink. Me, the treasured Hollowgate U legacy, versus him, the Ravenloft street rat—we were destined to butt heads.

Three years of college. Three years of grueling face-offs and post-game taunts. Three years of our schools trading championships and bragging rights. The rivalry between us never changed, always simmering and ready to explode when we faced off on the ice.

There's just something about him that gets under my skin and lingers there like a splinter I can't cut out. That smug grin when he pulls off some reckless move. The nonchalant way he brushes me off when I call him out. How he turns everything into a spectacle, never just playing the game. It's infuriating.

He doesn't belong here. Can't handle discipline or respect tradition. He's all flash, no substance. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

But damn if he isn't talented. Gotta give the bastard that.

I tear my eyes away and focus on my teammates, giving them final words of motivation before we take position. Tris claps me on the back, his eyes bright with that pre-game high he lives for. Eli gives me a silent nod, his calm presence grounding me. And Deck, steady and reliable as always, meets my gaze.

"Let's show 'em how real champions play," he says.

I smirk. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

We break and I make my way to the center line, pulses of adrenaline surging through me. The crowd noise fades away as I stare down at the dark circle on the ice, the first of many I'll battle for today. Seconds later, a shadow falls over it and I don't need to look up to know who it is. I can feel his presence like electricity up my spine.

"Ready to be put in your place, Kensington?" London's deep voice cuts through the tension between us, his words frosted with antagonism.

I lift my gaze, ice-blue eyes meeting fiery hazel. "The only one who's gonna be put in their place today is you."

The referee drops the puck without warning and we collide, two forces of nature bent on destroying the other. I grit my teeth as we grapple, knees bent, shoulders braced. He's quick, I'll give him that, snatching the puck with reflexes honed from years on unforgiving streets.

But I didn't earn my reputation by being weak. I pivot, block him, then we're off, racing and weaving across the ice. The play moves fast, both teams strategizing and reacting with practiced precision. Through it all, the spotlight stays on me and London, cutting and jabbing at each other like swordsmen in a duel.

We know each other's moves, can predict the other's thoughts before they become actions. Every maneuver is

designed to expose weakness, gain advantage. He banks left, I counter right. I charge the net, he blocks me with his body. Back and forth we battle, the space between us charged like the calm before a lightning strike.

I lose myself in the game, in the primal thrill of the hunt. My focus narrows to the puck, the ice, and him—always him, hovering at the edge of my vision no matter where I turn. I can feel his frustration building with every play I disrupt, every shot I block.

Good. Let him lose control. I'll be there to put him in his place.

With ten minutes left on the clock, the game is 2-2 and tensions are running high. Both sides are getting aggressive, but the hits between me and London have a sharper edge. He's slipping, that carefully crafted facade of control starting to crack. I can see it in the ferocity of his checks, the way his mouth twists when I steal the puck.

He tries to fake me out with a spin move at the blue line, but I see through it and smash him against the boards. He shoves back hard, our helmets knocking together.

"Getting sloppy, Lancaster," I taunt through gritted teeth.

He presses closer, our faces inches apart. His blond hair is dark with sweat and falling into his eyes. "I'm just getting started, Kensington."

A whistle blows, but we stay locked together a moment longer, breathing hard. His eyes blaze with raw fury and something else I can't quite place. Whatever it is sends an unfamiliar heat curling through me, and I have to force myself not to shiver.

Where the hell did that come from?

I push him off just as Deck skates over, brow creased. "Head in the game, Riot. Eyes on the puck, not the player."

He's right. I need to get my focus back. With a curt nod, I follow Deck back into position, trying to ignore the ghost of London's breath on my neck.

The final minutes are a dizzying frenzy of attacks and defenses. Both sides are getting reckless, throwing everything they have left into breaking the tie. London is everywhere, stealing the puck, elbowing past defenses to take shot after shot. He's a force of nature, and I'm caught in the storm despite my best efforts.

Two minutes left. London dekes around a defender and beelines for me, eyes blazing with defiance. This is it. The pivotal play to determine who reigns supreme today.

He feints left and at the last second crosses right, trying to fake me out again. But he forgets—I've got his number memorized. I mirror him, block his path, and just like that, the puck is mine. I take off, his enraged shouts chasing me across the ice to where Tris waits by the goal, stick poised for a one-timer pass.

London comes out of nowhere, angling straight for me. I should pass to Tris now, take the easy shot, but fury blinds me. I want to beat London on my terms, prove once and for all that he's out of his league challenging me.

I wind up for a slapshot just as London rams into me from behind. My knees buckle as pain ricochets through my ribs. The puck slides away as we crash to the ice in a tangle of limbs and curses.

Whistles blow and I'm dimly aware of Deck and the refs rushing over to pull London off me. He tries to throw another punch, but Deck holds him back, shaking his head in warning. London wrenches free, lips peeled in a feral sneer.

"That's right, hide behind your team like always," he spits.

My temper snaps. Lunging to my feet, I grab a fistful of his jersey, our helmets smacking together again. "You wanna go? Let's go right now!"

"Enough!" The ref forces his way between us. "Get to your benches, both of you!"

"This isn't over, Lancaster," I snarl as Deck drags me away. Adrenaline and rage still pulse through me.

London doesn't even look at me, just scoops up his fallen stick and skates for the bench. But I see the dangerous glint in his eyes, the tightness of his shoulders. This rivalry is far from settled.

We ended up tying, to no one's satisfaction. I'm still seething as I sit in the locker room, replaying each checked, stolen puck, and collision.

"I really thought you had it for a second there," Tris says, dropping next to me with a sigh. "Man, what a game."

I just grunt in response, jaw clenched.

Deck grabs his gear and comes over, his expression sober. "Things got heated out there today."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Tris snorts. "Did you see Riot and London at each other's throats? Looked ready to drop gloves right on the blue line."

I cross my arms. "He was out of line. You both saw it."

"Yeah, he was relentless," Eli agrees in his measured way. "But stooping to his level only feeds the rivalry more."

I bristle at the implication. "So what, I should've just stood there and taken his hits?"

"No one's saying that." Deck holds my gaze, his captain's composure cracking slightly. "But you're better than him, Riot. Don't let Lancaster drag you into the gutter. Eyes on the goal, remember?"

I know he's right, but admitting it grates at me. Tris seems to sense my darkening mood and jumps in, clapping a hand on my back.

"Forget about him," he says bracingly. "We've got regionals coming up and a championship to defend. Leave Lancaster in the rearview where he belongs."

I take a deep breath, feelings marginally back under control. Deck's right—I can't lose sight of what matters because of some street punk with a chip on his shoulder.

But even as I repeat those thoughts, an image of piercing hazel eyes and a cocky grin flashes across my mind. I shove it away ruthlessly. I can't afford distractions, no matter how infuriatingly persistent.

"Let's get out of here," I mutter, reaching for my bags. As I leave the locker room, muscles aching and knuckles still stinging from blows traded, my mind churns with unanswered questions. London got under my skin today worse than ever before, and I still can't pinpoint why. All I know is I want—no, need—to wipe that smug look off his face next time.

Because there will be a next time. Our paths are like two rivers that are destined to merge and crash until one of them finally overwhelms the other. I don't plan on being the one who cracks first.

My sole focus now is to break him, no matter what it takes. After today, it's not just about skill anymore. It's personal.

The rivalry's only just begun.

LONDON

STEPPING through the wrought-iron gates of Hollowgate University, I'm hit with a wave of first day jitters—and I'm not even a damn freshman. Transfers don't usually get butterflies, but most transfers aren't walking into enemy territory, either.

This place carries some serious baggage for me. Hollowgate, home of the elite. Where kids drive quarter-million dollar sports cars like it's nothing and the rest of us scrape by on hand-me-downs and part-time jobs.

But prejudices aside, their hockey program is one of the best. That rink has churned out more pros and Olympians than any other college team. And it could be my ticket to a real future, if I've got the guts to go all in.

Doesn't mean I have to like it here, though.

I adjust my snapback and throw my hood over it, keeping my head down as I walk. The last thing I need is some preppy bastard recognizing me on day one. Not until I get the lay of the land.

The campus is straight out of a brochure, all manicured lawns and ivy-covered brick buildings with white columns out front. Student sprawl on the grass, playing frisbee and tossing footballs, laughing like they're in some commercial for acne medicine. The air smells like possibility and old money.

I hate it already.

At least Ravenloft had character. Graffiti on the stairwells, worn down lecture halls with squeaky seats. Sure, we didn't have private gardens or computer labs with 3D printers, but we had heart.

This place seems sterile. Soulless. But I don't have to like it to use it. I'm here for one reason—to go pro.

The sports complex looms up ahead, all smooth lines and floor to ceiling windows. Inside there is not one but two NHL regulation-size rinks, a world-class training gym, and more high-end equipment than I've ever seen.

No more duct-taped sticks or hand-me-down pads. No more hour long commutes just to get some practice time at the run-down municipal rink back home. Here, hockey is priority number one, and the facilities prove it.

Too bad they have shit taste in banners, though. I scowl up at the Hollowgate team photos lining the halls, showing off past championship wins. Seven national titles in the last decade alone, thanks to players like golden-boy Kensington leading the pack.

Well, those days are about to end.

I'm halfway to the administrative wing when a pack of girls strolls by, all California tans and tiny shorts despite the autumn chill. One glances up from her phone and does a double take at me.

"Oh my god, Becca look! Isn't that the guy who put Hollowgate's star sophomore in the hospital last season?"

The blonde—Becca, I guess—looks me up and down. "The one from the rivalry game? Thought he got expelled or something."

I keep walking, refusing to acknowledge them, but heat prickles the back of my neck. I specifically chose a later transfer date to avoid shit like this. I guess there's no avoiding the gossip mill now that I'm here.

"Do you think he actually got recruited?" hisses a third girl, not bothering to lower her voice. "Why would Coach Willis want some thug like him on the team?"

Thug. There it is. Easier to put me in a box than see me as anything more than a Hollowgate caricature of Ravenloft. Just a street punk who got lucky and doesn't belong in their shiny privileged world.

Their whispers follow me all the way to the administrator's office. Nice welcome to my new home away from home. Nothing like walking a mile in someone else's judgments to start the day off right.

The secretary prints out my schedule and student orientation package without even glancing up. I keep my head down, shoulders tense until I'm back out in the open air.

Christ. If random girls already know enough to gossip, the team's reception isn't gonna be warm and fuzzy. Not looking forward to walking into that viper pit.

Warren Decker I'm not worried about. We've actually hung out a few times at regional tournaments, even though technically we've been rivals since Juniors. He's a good guy—solid player, loyal, cultivates team chemistry like a pro. The anti-Kensington, which is probably why we get along.

The rest though... That's a question mark. All I know is Kensington's their leader, and where he goes, the team follows.

I glance at my watch. Practice doesn't start for another hour. Time to clear my head.

I find an empty courtyard tucked between academic buildings. Mature trees offer camouflage from prying eyes. Settling on a stone bench etched with generations of initials, I pull out my phone.

My thumb automatically opens my direct messages, scrolling until I find FrozenFire's icon. My chest loosens just seeing it. In the chaos of everything changing lately, his messages have been one constant. A lifeline to sanity.

Me: Made it to campus in one piece. So far, it's like I stepped through a damn portal to a world inhabited entirely by Abercrombie models. You should see this place—it's unreal.

I shift, glancing around to make sure no one's in earshot. Text bubbles appear as Frozen types back.

FrozenFire: That shiny and pretentious, huh? ;) I'm sure you'll bring some much needed edge to the scene. Change can be good, though. A chance to reinvent yourself, right?

I snort under my breath. Leave it to Frozen to find the silver lining. He's been my voice of perspective since we started talking years ago. Started as just mutual bitching on a hockey forum, but it's grown into something more. A real friendship, closer than what I have with most people in real life.

Me: Guess it's not ALL terrible. At least the rink is state-of-the art. I'll be able to practice and train like never before.

FrozenFire: See, there you go. Focus on the opportunities this move provides, not the bullshit politics and pretensions. You've got this.

Me: You're right. Can't get distracted worrying what other people think. I know what I'm capable of. Just gotta keep my head down and do my thing.

FrozenFire: Exactly. I believe in you. You're gonna do big things, dude.

His words loosen the knots in my chest, easing the weight I've felt since stepping foot on campus. It's reassuring talking to someone outside the political viper pit of collegiate sports, whose opinion of me isn't tangled up in team loyalties or rivalries. Frozen just sees me—the raw, imperfect, trying-their-damndest me.

Me: Thanks, Fire. Don't know what I'd do without you in my corner, man.

FrozenFire: Anytime. Now go show them what you do.

“Yeah, maybe I will.” I murmur it under my breath like a prayer, a promise to myself.

Pocketing my phone, I feel centered. Ready to face this new challenge head on.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure in the distance catches my eye as I stand up. He’s wearing a Hollowgate Athletics t-shirt, his black hair stark against pale skin. Even from behind I recognize him—I’d know those ramrod straight shoulders anywhere, like he’s got a pole shoved up his ass.

Riot Kensington in the flesh.

I consider slipping away unnoticed. Our first meeting shouldn’t happen without witnesses. But the reckless part of me wants to see his unguarded reaction. Catch him off-guard for once after years facing off on the ice as rivals.

Decision made, I stride towards him with purpose, shoulders squared. He’s studying a display case, focused intently on the photos and trophies inside.

“Well, well,” I drawl, cocking my head as he stiffens. “Riot Kensington appreciating his own legacy. How modest.”

Riot turns, eyes narrowed. They widen for a split second as recognition hits, then narrow again.

“Lancaster.” He says my name flatly, lips thin. “The hell are you doing here?”

I rock back on my heels, keeping my body language relaxed to offset his coiled tension. “What, you didn’t hear? I’m your newest teammate.”

His jaw clenches. “Bullshit. Hollowgate would never recruit a wash-out from Ravenloft.”

The dig lands, but I don’t flinch. “Then I guess your coach sees something you don’t seeing as how he offered me a scholarship.”

We stare each other down. The animosity simmering between us now unchecked by coaches and refs. His blue eyes bore into me, icy and calculating.

“Scholarship or not, you’re out of your league here.” He takes a step closer, broad shoulders angled to seem even more imposing. “Go back to the streets where you belong before you embarrass yourself.”

Normally, I’d rise to the challenge. Meet fire with gasoline. But I promised myself I wouldn’t stoop to his level this time. I have too much riding on keeping my temper in check.

So I just smirk, looking him dead in the eye. “How about we settle this on the ice instead? First practice is this afternoon. Be ready.”

I brush past him without waiting for a response. His glare follows me all the way out of the courtyard, prickling the back of my neck.

Well, that preamble certainly set the tone. If Kensington reacts like that to me joining the team, I can only imagine how the others will respond. Nothing better than some good old intra-team resentment to kick off the season.

By the time I make it to the locker room, I’ve got nerves going again. Feels too much like walking into a war zone. The smell of sweat and stale gear hits me, painfully familiar. At least some things are universal in the hockey world.

Voices filter from inside, and I take a bracing breath before pushing through the door. Silence falls immediately. Two dozen eyes swing my way, all filled with the same mix of curiosity and caution.

“Uh, hey.” I nod, aiming for casual even as I track the nearest exits. “I’m London. Lancaster. Just transferred from Ravenloft. I’ll be playing left wing this season.”

For a moment, no one moves. Then the guy with the C on his sweater steps forward, offering his hand. “Good to have you, London. I’m Warren Decker, captain of this team, but you can call me Deck. Or War.” He winks. “That’s Tanner, our goalie. Those idiots over there are our defensemen Barrington, but he goes by Bear, Hawk, and another new guy, Knight Maddox.”

A huge fucking guy that makes my six-one ass feel small with an unruly beard waves at the nickname Bear. The other two just stare.

Deck gestures to a lean guy with preppy glasses. “That’s Will, our stats guy...”

He continues around the room, and some of the ice thaws as people shoot me tentative smiles or nods. Enough to loosen the breath I’ve been holding.

Until I get to the section Deck skipped—the core forward line, Kensington’s inner circle. They’re staring daggers at me, not even attempting to hide their hostility.

And then the locker room door swings open, and the devil himself walks in.

Riot Kensington in the flesh, his signature Hollowgate duffel over one broad shoulder, sweat-damp hair evidence he’s just come from the gym. His piercing blue eyes find me instantly. The animosity in them could cut steel.

My fingers curl involuntarily, itching to grab a stick and drive it right into that smug grin. But Deck’s warning look keeps me steady.

Kensington stares me down a moment longer before brushing past to join his inner circle. They close ranks, shooting more openly hostile glares my way now that their leader’s here.

Bastards. Fine, let them play petty intimidation games. I’ll show them what I can do out on the ice soon enough.

A blond guy I recognize as Tristan Moreno speaks up, arms crossed. “Let’s cut to the chase, yeah? What’s Coach thinking, recruiting you after what went down last season?”

I meet Tristan’s glare steadily. “Your coach recognizes talent when he sees it. Looked past the politics and saw someone who could help this team win.”

“Help us?” A ginger that Deck introduced as Eli scoffs. “We’ve dominated the league for years without you. All you’ve ever done is talk shit and start fights.”

Irritation prickles through me, but I bite my tongue. *Take the high road, London. Prove you belong here.*

“I know we’ve had our differences,” I say evenly. “But I want to move past it. I’m here to be part of the team.”

“Like hell.” The last guy—Sasha Ivanov, according to his locker, their right wing—speaks up in a thick Russian accent. “You should stay with your own kind.”

Before I can respond, Deck steps forward, hands raised diplomatically. “That’s enough, guys. I know this is new for all of us, but Coach made his decision. London’s a Hollowgate Hawk now. He deserves a fair shot like everyone else.”

“Preach it, Cap.”

I glance over in surprise as Luc Beaumont raises his water bottle in salute. We played together a couple times on regional all-star teams. Having a potential ally here is reassuring.

The dissenting group bristles, but Deck shuts them down with a scathing look.

“We’ll settle this on the ice where it counts,” he says. “For now, save the energy for conditioning.”

There are grumbles and dark looks, but the protests stop. Kensington’s cronies clearly respect Deck enough to stand down, even if their resentment simmers below the surface.

Practice starts soon after and I throw myself into the drills, pushing every rep to the limit. I can feel the hostile eyes judging my every move, waiting for me to slip up.

But after years of facing taunts and sneers as the scholarship kid at a private academy in high school, this is nothing new. The only difference here is instead of pity or disdain, it’s envy and resentment fueling their prejudice. I’m the street rat infiltrating the palace, and they won’t make me feel welcome anytime soon.

Fine by me. I’ve got thick skin and zero intention of groveling for these assholes to like me. All I’m here to do is play the best damn hockey of my life. These pampered dickheads will just have to get over their egos and deal with it.

As we leave the rink hours later, damp from showers and sore, Kensington gets right in my face.

“Don’t look so smug. Next practice, we’ll see if you can handle real competition.” He shoves past, ramming his shoulder into me. “Better start packing now.”

I just grin, adrenaline still buzzing through me. “Can’t wait, golden boy.”

His scowl deepens, and he looks about to spit another threat when Deck steps between us again.

“Not the time or place,” he warns Kensington, before turning to me. “Ignore him and hit the showers.”

Kensington storms off with his lackeys on his heels. I meet Deck’s eyes and give him a grudging nod of thanks. Having allies here will keep me sane, even if I’m too stubborn to admit it out loud.

After an endless welcoming dinner where I exchange stilted small talk with the few non-hockey classmates willing to approach me, I’m drained. Social exhaustion seeps through my bones. All I want is to unwind in peace.

My new apartment is on the top floor of the athletes’ dorm. I sling my duffle off my shoulder, key already in hand, when my phone dings.

It’s my mom—a text full of enthusiastic emojis congratulating me on surviving my first day. I smile as warmth spreads through me. No matter what chaos or prejudice I face here, I’ve got my family in my corner.

But as I scan the apartment number on my key fob, my smile fades. 719. That’s not what we agreed on when I signed the housing contract and sent in my roommate requests.

Unease prickles down my spine as I ride the elevator up. Maybe there was a last-minute change. Miscommunications happen, especially with oversights between the athletic and residential departments...

The elevator doors slide open and I step out, searching for number 719. As soon as I see the plaque, my heart sinks.

Right next to 719 is another familiar name—one they promised me I wouldn't be stuck dealing with in my own damn living space.

Riot motherfucking Kensington.

Of course. Just my luck. Because clearly being new team rivals wasn't enough—now we've gotta share an apartment too.

I slump against the wall, all my optimistic energy seeping away. So much for sanctuary. My one place to get away from the politics and general assholery of Hollowgate's hockey scene, and now I have to share it with their pompous king himself.

Forget awkward team bonding. This year just went from complicated to near impossible.

Sighing, I straighten up and swipe my key. As the door clicks open, I make a silent promise to myself and my family.

I don't care if I have to barricade myself in my damn room. I'm not letting Riot Kensington get under my skin this year. On or off the ice, I'm here to play my game.

And no egotistical jackass is gonna trip me up before I get there.

RIOT

TURNING my key in the lock, I'm hit by an unexpected waft of clean linen and coffee as I step into the apartment that's been mine alone for over a year now. At first, I think Tris must've crashed here again after a night out, but then the smell of food grease underlying the other scents makes my stomach clench. There's only one person who reeks of cheap food and entitlement.

I round the corner to the living room and stop short. There he is, London Lancaster, sprawled on my—*my*—Italian leather couch, wearing that goddamn backwards black hat surrounded by half-unpacked boxes and bags of takeout. He's got headphones in, eyes closed, nodding along to some beat I'm sure features zero talent or creativity.

"What the hell are you doing here?" The words rip from my throat before I can temper my outrage.

London's eyes snap open, that infuriating grin already spreading across his face. "Oh good, you're back. I couldn't find the Wi-Fi info."

It takes every ounce of self-control not to lunge across the room and throttle him right there. "Let me rephrase that. Why are you in my apartment acting like you live here?" Each word drips venom.

At that, he sits up, finally looking mildly apologetic. "No one told you? I'm your new roommate." He lifts his hands in mock surrender at my murderous expression. "It's not like I asked for this, golden boy. Apparently, there was some fuck up

with housing paperwork for transfers and this was the only unit left.”

I can feel a tension headache blooming behind my eyes. Of all the possible new transfers I ended up sharing an apartment with, it had to be him. There’s not enough money in the world to make sharing personal space with this arrogant, undisciplined dick worth it.

“This is unacceptable,” I grind out. “I’m calling the residential office first thing tomorrow to get this fixed.”

“Be my guest.” He shrugs, already turning back to his music. “But unless you know someone high up, I doubt you’ll get them to kick me out. Contracts exist for a reason.”

Hating that he’s right, I bite back another scathing retort and rub my temples wearily. Fine. If I’m stuck with him, I’m damn well going to make some ground rules clear right now.

“Since you’ll apparently be staying here, at least temporarily,” I say, unable to keep the contempt from my voice, “we’re setting some boundaries.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Boundaries?”

“Yes. First, the master is my bedroom.”

“Wouldn’t dream of trying to take your throne room, your majesty.” He bends halfway into an ironic bow that makes me want to throttle him all over again.

I clench my jaw and continue. “Second, we split the shared spaces down the middle. You keep your stuff on your side, I’ll keep mine on mine. Third, if you eat my food, use my things, or cross into my space without permission, I will end you.”

He holds up his hands again, laughing under his breath. “No problem, roomie. I’ll be sure to stay at least six feet away from you at all times.” His narrowed eyes say he’s enjoying this just a bit too much.

I resist the urge to flip him off and instead stalk away to my room—my escape from the chaos he brings. I slam the door louder than necessary, even though the satisfying bang does nothing to expel the turmoil roiling inside me.

How the hell am I supposed to focus this season with him infesting the one place that's supposed to be mine? It'll be impossible to relax or concentrate knowing he's on the other side of that wall.

This won't stand. I'll call the office first thing tomorrow and fix this, no matter who I have to bribe or threaten.

After a sleepless night spent listening for any sounds of London destroying my space, I'm up and dialing housing at eight a.m. sharp. Twenty infuriating minutes later, I'm informed in the politest, least helpful terms that no accommodations can be made. Transfers get limited priority and apparently the athletic and residential departments failed to coordinate like they should've, according to their bullshit apologies.

Useless, all of them.

I resist the urge to put my fist through the wall and take a few deep breaths instead. So he's staying. Fine. I'll find a way to manage because I refuse to be driven out of my own home. If I have to start locking my bedroom door and scheduling my time to avoid all interactions, so be it.

A knock sounds and I wrench open the door, ready to eviscerate whichever waste of space RA dares to bother me. But it's Tris's grinning face that appears, holding two cups of coffee.

"Morning, sunshine," he says breezily, sliding past me. "Figured you could use a caffeine infusion after the bombshell yesterday."

I grunt in response, but accept the coffee. Tris perches on the arm of my couch, sipping his own latte. His expression grows serious, which immediately puts me on guard.

"So about this new roommate situation..." he begins. I *may* have rage-texted him all the details last night.

My hands tighten around the cup involuntarily. "It's ridiculous, I know. But the office claims there's nothing I can do."

“True, bureaucracy sucks.” Tris shrugs. “But is it really the worst thing in the world? Having London right here might be just what you guys need to bury the hatchet.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “Have you lost your goddamn mind? This is Lancaster we’re talking about. You know, the bane of my existence since freshman year? What could possibly make you think this is a good thing?”

“Hear me out.” He lifts his hands placatingly. “You and London have mad chemistry on the ice, right? All that intensity and grit. But with him on our side now, just imagine how unstoppable you’d be if you weren’t always at each other’s throats.”

When I continue glaring, Tris sighs. “C’mon Riot. Is holding onto the rivalry worth compromising the team? Think how much stronger we’d be if our forwards could sync up.”

My instincts rebel at the thought of “syncing” with someone who’s been a thorn in my side for years. But reluctantly, I consider Tris’s words. As much as I hate to admit it, he makes a fair point about team cohesion. And my skills, combined with London’s raw aggression and unpredictability, would make us a force to be reckoned with on the ice.

Still, after years facing off as bitter rivals, that kind of trust won’t come easily, if ever.

Tris seems to read my thoughts. “No one’s asking you to be best buds or anything. Just... consider loosening the death grip a little. You might find you have more in common than you think.”

I refrain from pointing out everything we have in common could likely fit in a shot glass.

Before I can form a rebuttal, another knock sounds. This time it’s Eli slipping in with a sympathetic smile.

“Come to check on the new roomies?” Tris asks with a smirk, completely fucking unapologetic about spilling my secrets to his best friend. “Don’t worry, Lancaster’s still breathing. Though how long that lasts is debatable.”

Eli flashes me an understanding look. “I know this living situation isn’t ideal—”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I mutter.

“But the team comes first, right?” Eli finishes. “If we’re gonna defend our title, we need unity. And like it or not, London is one of us now.”

“Not you, too.” I grit my teeth, irked that he’s echoing Tris’s points. “Fine. For the team, I’ll try. But I’m not holding my breath for some magical bromance, no matter how much you two seem to hope for it.”

Tris grins and claps my shoulder. “That’s the spirit. Just put that famous Riot charm to use and I’m sure you’ll soften him up.”

“I’d rather swallow glass.”

“Baby steps then.” Tris chuckles. “Now come on, we’ve got a PR event on campus this morning and that star player smile of yours needs to be in top form.”

As we head out the door, I brace myself for surviving today. PR, practice, and now forced cohabitation with my biggest rival—it’s shaping up to be my own personal version of hell. But at least on the ice, I can hit back. And that satisfying crunch against the boards might be the only thing to keep me sane if forced to play nice with Lancaster.

This living situation just went from bad to catastrophic. But I’ll be damned if I let him run me out of my territory. As long as I can lace up my skates and keep him in my rearview on the ice, I can handle having to see his smug face off of it.

For now.

RIOT

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, London and I circle each other warily, two predators forced into close proximity. I've taken over the living room, my gear and books spread across every surface as I silently dare him to encroach. So far, he seems content keeping to his room except for occasional forays to grab food from the kitchen.

Navigating around each other is a delicate dance. I time my shower schedule around when I hear him get up to avoid any awkward bathroom encounters. I make sure to finish cooking and have my plate loaded before he can come scrounging for leftovers. In the rare moments we do cross paths, terse nods and averted eyes are the only acknowledgement given as we brush past, both unwilling to breach whatever fragile truce we've fallen into.

But the forced civility is exhausting. I find myself monitoring noises from his room when I should be sleeping, irrationally annoyed by his off-key singing in the shower or loud video game noises at two a.m. Don't get me started on his alarm—some shrill pop song I've had stuck in my head for days now despite not even knowing the words.

What the hell is watermelon sugar, anyway?

In those moments, it takes immense restraint not to storm across the hall and break his door down with an equipment check. But causing an all-out brawl would just undermine what little tolerance we've managed to build up.

So I settle for blasting my rap playlists when I know he can hear it, taking petty satisfaction in the resounding bang of his door closing.

Maybe creating some simple house rules would help establish boundaries and avoid future conflicts. But suggesting that level of civility makes my stomach roll with disgust. The thought of sitting down for some stereotypical roommate mediation session is unimaginable. What's next, chore wheels and movie nights? I think the fuck not.

I'll stick to cold shoulders over compromise, thanks. The less interaction, the better.

"He did what?" Tris almost chokes on his beer before dissolving into wheezing laughter. "Oh man, that's cold even for London. Did you find all your stuff?"

I scowl and take another swig of my IPA. "Eventually. He thought it was so damn funny to hide my gear around the apartment. Found one skate in the freezer this morning."

We're at our usual spot, a pub just off campus. I normally look forward to Thursday wings and brews with Tris and Eli, but tonight I'm wound tighter than my sticks. Between London's little prank and the mounting frustration of him squatting in my apartment, my temper is primed to blow.

"Okay, yeah, that's pretty uncalled for." Eli frowns, ever the empathetic one. "Have you tried talking to him? Maybe setting some boundaries about what's not cool?"

Tris snorts into his beer. "Riot? Talk about feelings? Might as well ask him to join the damn theater club."

"Hey, I talk about feelings," I protest half-heartedly. It's true though—the thought of having a reasonable discussion with London about anything makes my skin crawl.

"Uh huh," Tris's knowing look says he's not buying it. "Anyway, look at it this way—the fact that he's pushing your buttons means you're getting under his skin too. That's a win in my book."

Tris makes a fair point. London's clearly as on edge with this arrangement as I am if he's acting out. And I can work

with mutual hostility better than pretending we'll ever see eye to eye.

Eli just sighs at Tris's logic but doesn't argue further. We steer the conversation to lighter topics, like which underclassman might make varsity this year and how badly we're gonna throttle Ravenloft when we face them.

But my mind keeps drifting back to London, poking at the frustration like a sore tooth. I can't stand feeling so on edge in my own home. This blows any notion of sanctuary or relaxation out of the water.

My phone vibrates with an incoming text. It's FallingDown. Seeing his name eases some of the tension knotting my shoulders. What I wouldn't give for the easy support of our conversations right now instead of the constant agitation London brings.

Eli notices me checking my phone. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, it's just my friend checking in."

"Ooh, which friend?" Tris wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. "Got a hot date tonight?"

I roll my eyes, accustomed to Tris's constant teasing about my lackluster dating life. Yeah, chicks throw themselves at me and for the first couple of years I had fun with it, but now all the hookups are the same. Boring and unsatisfying. For me, not them. "It's not like that. We're just talking."

"Uh huh, sure." Tris's grin widens. "That's why you've been smiling at your phone all night, not because of a mystery girl."

"There's no girl," I insist, knowing I sound defensive.

Eli just smiles and claps my shoulder. "No pressure. You know we're just messing around. But seriously, don't let things with London ruin your night. Have another round and try to relax."

I nod, hoping they drop the conversation. In truth, I still haven't told Tris or Eli that FallingDown is a guy or that I only talk to him online. It just never came up, and my private

conversations feel too personal to share. But his identity isn't the issue. What matters is how our messages are an escape, one I desperately need from the chaos of my real life.

As I walk home later, pleasantly buzzed, but the frustration lingering, I make a decision. I'm messaging FallingDown tonight to vent. He always knows how to talk me down or offer a fresh perspective. And fuck knows I could use some of his chill right now.

Me: You ever want to just scream at the top of your lungs because everything around you is so goddamn frustrating?

FallingDown: Sounds like you've got some intense things brewing, man. Wanna tell me about it?

Even through text, FD's tone relaxes me, like a soothing balm on my frayed nerves. I sink onto my bed and start typing, thoughts flowing freely in a way I can never quite voice out loud.

Me: It's my new roommate. Total tool who's made it his life's mission to torment me since the day we met. Now we're trapped together because of a stupid administrative screw up, and he's driving me up the fucking wall.

Me: He leaves his shit everywhere and blasts his trashy music at all hours. I'm losing my mind here.

FallingDown: That really sucks. I'm sorry you're dealing with that BS. Sounds a lot like some shit I'm dealing with, tbh. Are you able to request a transfer or new room assignment?

Me: I tried, but housing claims there's nothing open. So I'm stuck with this smug bastard all up in my space.

FallingDown: Man, that's so frustrating. I feel your pain. Literally. Wish I could offer more than just listening. But for what it's worth, try not to let him get in your head too much. That's what I'm doing. Don't give him that satisfaction, you know? Focus on your own routine and goals, and tune out his antics as much as possible. I know that's easier said than done, but you've got this.

His calm words penetrate the angry haze clouding my mind. FD's right—as infuriating as London is, letting him ruin my focus or confidence will only make this situation worse.

Me: Thanks, FD. You're right, I can't control him, but I can control how I react. It just drives me crazy feeling so on edge all the time with zero escape, you know? But I need to not let him distract me. Easier said than done, but I appreciate the reminder.

FallingDown: Anytime, man. And my DMs are always open if you need to vent. Don't let the haters dull your shine.

FD's faith in me injects a bolstering warmth into my veins. With his support backing me, I feel like I can withstand whatever petty torments or chaos London wants to stir up. FD sees the best in me, even when I lose sight of it amidst the bullshit.

Me: Thanks, really. Just talking helps more than you know.

Over the next week, I throw myself into practices and workouts with renewed focus, using the adrenaline and endorphins as an outlet for my frustrations. When I walk through the apartment door each evening totally fucking wrecked, London's chaos doesn't get under my skin quite so much.

I still avoid him as much as our shared space allows, but the sharp barbs we occasionally trade lack some of their usual heat. A sort of uneasy truce forms as we settle into tense cohabitation.

But the hostility simmers under the surface, threatening to boil over at the slightest provocation. Like when I find my protein powder emptied and replaced with powdered sugar. Or come back from class to find the Wi-Fi password changed to *RiotSucks1234*.

My snide remarks about freeloaders seem to roll off London's back, only encouraging him more. And my glares when I confiscate his game consoles and lock them in my room prompt nothing but an infuriating wink.

"If that's the game you wanna play, roomie, I'm just getting warmed up."

The final straw comes after a grueling road trip. I unlock the apartment door, longing for the comfort of my own bed after a weekend crammed onto the team bus and a never-ending meeting with coach and Deck going over film. We won but I'm exhausted, and the only thing I want is to collapse and not move for an entire day before I have to go to class.

Instead, I'm met by pulsing music and loud-ass voices. I round the corner to find London and several teammates strewn across my living room, beer cans and takeout containers littering every surface. They're playing video games at a deafening volume, whooping and taunting each other like a bunch of hormonal sixteen-year-olds.

Fury surges through me, white hot. The utter disrespect and invasion of my space makes something inside me snap.

"What the hell is going on here?" My voice slices through the noise like a blade.

London glances over with a smug grin. "Oh hey roomie, join the party."

"You mean the party you decided to have in my apartment without asking?" I spit through gritted

teeth. "Everyone out. Now."

"I think you mean *our* apartment."

The others look between us warily, too buzzed to pick a side. Sensing the oncoming explosion, they start collecting

their things. I stare London down as our teammates shuffle out, tension coiling the air.

“You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?” I step closer, blood boiling. “Had to push things too far. Are boundaries a foreign concept to you?”

He drains the last of his beer, unbothered. “Aw, don’t be like that. I was doing you a favor—you clearly needed to loosen up.”

“The only thing I need is for you to get the hell out of my life.”

We’re toe to toe now, fists clenched. He tilts his chin up defiantly. “Make me.”

For a suspended, dangerous moment we teeter on the edge of violence. Every suppressed frustration and indignity fuels the fire raging inside me, demanding release. My hands tremble with the effort of holding back, lungs burning with each furious breath.

Just as I think we might actually come to blows, London steps back, hands raised.

“Chill man, it was just a joke,” he says, tone infuriatingly casual. “I’m heading to bed.”

He brushes past me, and I have to clench my jaw against a thousand seething retorts. His bedroom door slams shut, rattling the walls. I stand rigid until I hear the unmistakable sounds of his music turning on.

In his wake, I survey the debris of beer cans, abandoned controllers, and piles of disgusting smelly hockey gear. A tornado of chaos he’s entitled enough to think I should just clean up.

Something dangerous uncurls inside me, the final tatter of restraint dissolving. If London wants escalation, he’s got it. I’m taking the damn gloves off. No more civility or benefit of the doubt. He wants to play dirty? I’ll show him just how deep my grudges run.

This means war.

LONDON

THE BLAST of the coach's whistle cuts through the tense air of the gym as we line up for drills. I bend to tighten my laces, hyperaware of the looming presence just down the line. Even with my head down, I can feel Riot's icy glare aimed squarely at me.

The divide in the team is palpable. Veterans clustered on one side, sizing up us new transfers scattered across from them. And at their helm, number twenty-nine's broad shoulders angled in challenge.

Fine by me. I've got nothing left to prove to these entitled pricks. Only thing that matters now is showing the coach I deserve my spot at Hollowgate.

"Line it up!" Deck calls, stopping beside the pucks.

I shoulder my way to the front, ignoring the dissent rippling through the vets. Riot's eyes bore into me, cold and calculating, but I don't flinch. Stare down the biggest wolf long enough and he'll back down. That's the code I've lived by since I was too young to remember when I learned it.

Deck blows the whistle, and I explode forward, stick flashing as I corral the puck. In my periphery, I catch a blur streaking up on my tail. Speak of the devil. I angle left, but Kensington matches me, looming at my shoulder now.

"Not so fast, Hotshot," he growls.

I bare my teeth in a savage grin. "Scared you can't keep up?"

With a twist and flick of my wrist, the puck sails through the cones and into the net. I turn and spread my arms, soaking up the whoops from the newbies behind me.

Riot's eyes simmer, jaw clenched. "Cute trick. Let's see how you handle the next level."

We both know he means him. Fine by me—I'm just getting warmed up.

The next round I let Kensington get the puck first, content to track him from behind. He handles the cones smoothly but is too safe, like he's got something to prove. Right before the goal, I swing wide and clip the puck away, sending it through the targets quick as lightning.

Riot rounds on me, shoulders squared. "You call that teamwork?"

"Nah, I call it competitiveness. You afraid of a little heat, Kensington?"

"The only thing I'll be afraid of is how hard you'll hit those boards when I wipe 'em with you."

Tension thickens the air between us, an unspoken challenge crackling like lightning.

The coach pairs us up for passing drills next. As Riot and I face off, Deck shoots us a warning look. I widen my stance and flex my fingers, adrenaline spiking.

Riot passes first, whip-fast and brutal. But I stop it clean, send it whistling right back harder. Again, again—each blistering pass amps up the energy, until it's less practice and more battle.

I can feel eyes on us from the sidelines now. A few vets call out encouragement to Riot, eager to see the new kid put in his place. Their voices fade to white noise, narrowing my focus to the man in front of me.

Riot feints right, but I see through it, snatching the puck in mid-air with my stick. Before he can react, I send it sailing straight at his chest, putting my back into it. He catches it with a muffled thud, baring his teeth.

“Gonna play it that way, huh?”

His answering pass explodes off my hip. I grit my teeth against the blossom of pain and pass it back, twice as hard. He returns it without pause, nearly too fast to track.

Again and again we hammer it back and forth, brutal and relentless as each hit lands harder. The passes turn chaotic, control slipping as we struggle to one-up each other. All hints of practice or pacing are gone, lost in the red haze fogging my mind.

I’m dimly aware of Deck shouting at us to chill out. Vaguely feel the other guys falling back, cleared out of the warpath. None of it penetrates the singular focus zeroed in on my target.

Riot winds up with an icy glare, shoulders torquing like a cobra’s back. He launches the puck right at my head—I dart left but misjudge the angle.

It clips my brow and I stumble, fire exploding through my skull. Sticky warmth trickles down my temple. I swipe it away reflexively, fingers coming back crimson.

The gym falls silent. Eyes swing between me and Riot, ripe with anticipation.

Blood roars in my ears, every cut and blow we’ve traded over the years swelling behind my eyes. A dangerous clarity sharpens my focus like broken glass—any last shred of restraint snaps like a fraying tether.

Launching forward, I drop my stick and tackle Riot around the middle. We crash to the ice in a tangle of fists and fury. Someone’s grip closes around my biceps, but I shake them off, landing a right hook across Riot’s jaw.

Suddenly, the hands dragging me back multiply. I’m dimly aware of voices yelling, harsh breaths and thudding hearts surrounding us. But all I see is Riot’s face, bloody and savage, mirroring the tempest inside me.

“Enough!” Deck’s booming voice cuts through the chaos as he shoves between us. “I said enough!”

We're both still breathing heavily, poised for the next hit. Deck puts a hand up, eyes blazing.

"What the hell is wrong with you two? We've barely started the season and you're already at each other's throats!"

I bite my tongue against a mean as fuck retort, the copper tang still coating my mouth. On the fringe of my vision, I see Riot's chest heaving, eyes stormy beneath his disheveled dark hair.

Coach stalks over with a scowl on his face that could win awards and jabs a finger at us. "I don't care what history you have, or whatever pissing contest you're locked in. On this team, you're teammates first and foremost."

He steps closer, radiating authority. "You either get your acts together and start cooperating, or you can kiss the roster goodbye. We clear?"

His steely eyes fix on us. "You're both damn lucky to be here. But make no mistake—if I see that shit again, you're benched. No player is indispensable."

Message received, loud and clear. As the adrenaline seeps from my veins, cold reality sets in. I'm here for one reason—to go pro. I can put up with Riot's crap, as much as it makes me seethe. Got no choice if I wanna make it.

Without another word, the coach pivots and blows his whistle. "Back in position! Anyone pulls something like that again and you're doing suicides till you puke. Now move!"

As the guys scramble to comply, Riot shoulders past me roughly. "This isn't over," he grits out under his breath. "Stay the hell out of my way."

I bite back a scathing retort and skate to the opposite end of the line, emotions still churning. But beneath the anger simmers an undercurrent of unease. However satisfying it felt in the moment to land those hits on Riot, I crossed a line. It could've cost me everything if the coach decided to make an example out of us.

I can't slip up again. Whatever issues fester between me and the golden boy, I've gotta keep my cool. Can't let

Hollowgate become just another dead end.

The rest of practice passes in a grueling blur. By the end, everyone's wrecked and soaked in sweat, but the hostile tension has noticeably cooled. At least no one's gunning for outright bloodshed anymore.

After a long shower to wash off the grime and lingering adrenaline, I'm one of the last to leave the locker room. As I'm packing up my gear, Knight Maddox ambles over with an easy grin. He's one of the few who actually seems welcoming despite my chaotic start here. Helps that he's a new transfer, too.

I've seen him on the ice and understand now why they call him "Shadow." His ability to suddenly appear and disappear on the ice is insane. He's fast and sneaky as fuck.

"Hell of a first week, eh?" He bumps my shoulder. "If that's their version of a welcome, I'd hate to see what they'd do if they were hazing us."

I snort, the tension easing slightly. "Right? Nothing like good old-fashioned violence to break the ice."

"For real, though. You laid into Kensington pretty hard back there." His voice holds no judgment, just friendly amusement. "I'm gonna guess you two have some history?"

"That obvious?" I smile ruefully. "But yeah, we've been at each other's throats since freshman year. Never exactly saw eye to eye."

"The guy's wound pretty tight." Knight shrugs. "I'm sure he had it coming. Either way, if you ever need someone to grab a drink and vent, hit me up."

I nod, gratitude welling unexpectedly. "Yeah man, that'd be cool. Same goes for you—us transfers gotta stick together."

Knight claps my shoulder with a knowing look before heading out. I finish gathering my stuff, feeling uplifted by the support. If I can find some allies here, it'll make dealing with Riot's band of loyal ass kissers more tolerable.

Trudging back to the apartment, I brace for another chilling round of avoidance. But instead I find it empty. Small miracles. I've got the place to myself tonight, at least for a little while.

After scarfing some leftovers Riot labeled as his just to be a dick, I settle onto the couch and open my laptop. Navigating to my usual chat forum, I scroll through hockey highlights and team speculation threads until I find FrozenFire's icon. The knot in my chest already starts loosening.

Quickly, I type out the events of the day, not filtering or sugarcoating. The full ugly truth, straight from the source.

Me: I fucked up today, Fire. Let my temper get the best of me during practice. Almost got my ass booted right off the roster in week one.

I gnaw my lip, guilt and anger still churning in my gut.

Me: I know getting into fights won't help my position here. But this guy just knows how to push my buttons, you know? We've gotta work together this season, but I can tell he'd rather see me fail hard. Not exactly a team player.

I sigh, shoulders slumping.

Me: I know—no excuses. I've gotta be the bigger man and keep my head down. But goddamn, it felt good to finally let him have it for once.

The relief of unloading it all leaves me sagged against the cushions, head tipped back. Fire will understand—he always does. I can already imagine what he'll say.

Sure enough, the messaging bubble pops up, followed by that familiar reassurance flowing onto the screen. Fire just gets it, in a way few people do. With him in my corner, I can handle whatever petty crap Riot throws my way this season.

LONDON

THE SHRILL BLAST of the coach's whistle pierces my ear, signaling another brutal practice is done. My muscles burn, and I'm soaked in sweat as I bend over wheezing. Around me, the boys are just as wrecked, chests heaving from the hardcore cardio drills.

"Good hustle, gents," Coach bellows, skating over with a satisfied grin. "You earned a solid dinner and some beauty rest. Bus leaves at seven a.m. tomorrow for our annual weekend retreat. Yes, attendance is mandatory. Don't be late."

A few rookies whoop while the vets exchange knowing smirks. The team retreat is tradition here at good ol' Hollowgate U, a chance to bond before the season.

Could be a nice escape from the nonstop training schedule and tense-as-hell vibe with my glowering roommate. An entire weekend stuck close to the king of hostility, though? Yeah, no thanks.

Speak of the devil—I meet Riot's icy glare from across the rink. We've avoided each other since our blowout under the coach's all-seeing hawk eyes. But that hostility always simmers right below the surface, ready to ignite.

This weekend means quality time neither of us wants. I barely hold back a cringe at the thought. Here's hoping they picked somewhere with enough space so we're not breathing the same air.

After a long shower, I'm towel drying my hair and shooting the shit with Knight when Coach interrupts for

another announcement.

“Listen up! We’re doing something different this year.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “It’s a surprise destination, and you’ll be rooming with an assigned teammate for team bonding.”

The guys stir with excited whispers as Coach unfolds a sheet of paper and starts to read off pairs of roomies.

I’d honestly rather get paired with the weird goalie who snacks on Slim Jims 24/7 and hums hardcore German metal music than be trapped with Riot. My stomach drops, dreading the inevitable.

“Lancaster and Kensington.”

Motherfucker. Saw that coming.

Coach eyes us. “No swapping.”

Across the room, Riot tenses up and his jaw tics. Can’t blame him. Everyone knows Coach wants our rivalry snuffed out, and obviously he’s not above forcing us together to do it.

Yeah, good luck with that pipe dream. The bad blood runs too deep to hope it’s gonna disappear in a weekend... or ever. But I need this team too much to throw away my spot over drama.

Looks like Riot and I will have to call a very temporary, very reluctant truce this weekend, for the sake of the team.

After strategically timing my arrival last to the loading area the next morning, I find my way toward the back of the idling bus. I shove my hands into the front pocket of my hoodie. My duffel bag gets stowed in the storage compartment as I climb aboard.

Riot’s rigid in his seat up front, discomfort obvious. Guess rooming with me has him on edge. Can’t blame him there.

I wonder if something deeper’s messing with his head. This retreat seems like it’s hitting a nerve. File that away for later. Riot’s weaknesses are useful intel.

I grab a seat in back by Knight.

“Make room for Lancaster,” Knight says, gesturing to Luc to move over.

“Thanks, boys.” I claim the vacated space, settling in for the trip. Most of the team is already curled up under blankets or scrolling phones. Up front, Tristan has his portable speaker rigged up, muffled hip hop pulsing through the enclosed space.

As the bus rumbles out, I sink into my seat, pull my hat lower, and pass out, prepping for whatever bullshit’s coming.

I jerk awake when we roll to a stop. Rubbing my eyes, I stare out at the massive property looming ahead. An iron gate... winding drive... It’s like a goddamn palace.

“Holy shit,” Knight breathes, face plastered to the glass. “Is that...?”

“The Kensington estate,” Luc whispers in awe beside us.

No way. No goddamn way.

This cannot be happening.

But the proof stands before me in all its imposing grandeur. Three looming stories of brick and bullshit, surrounded by manicured gardens and an enormous lawn. One of the biggest private properties near Hollowgate, owned by one of the wealthiest families in the state.

Riot looks pissed. He clearly wasn’t given a heads up Mommy and Daddy were hijacking the team retreat.

His expression can best be described as blindsided.

Interesting power play by his parentals.

Before I can analyze that further, the bus doors fold open and we’re spilling out onto the circular drive as the driver pops open the under-bus storage so we can grab our gear.

Deck leads the way up the front steps to where a man and woman wait in the open doorway, beaming their perfect smiles down at us.

Riot’s parents. Here to greet the team their prodigal son plays for.

As we file up the steps, Riot's father pumps Coach's hand. "It's so good to finally meet properly. We're thrilled you accepted our invitation to host your retreat here."

Invite, huh? Judging by Riot's clenched fists and rolled eyes, he didn't get that memo.

"The pleasure is ours, Mr. Kensington," Coach says politely. "You have a beautiful home and my boys are looking forward to the weekend."

"Please, call me William." His smile doesn't reach his eyes as they flick to Riot. "Our home is always open to the team responsible for shaping my son into the star athlete he is today."

Ah, now his folks' angle clicks. Hosting earns them insider access and status through their golden son. Meanwhile, it's clear Riot hates being put on display.

We get the VIP tour of stuffy rooms lined with oil paintings and mounted animal heads. Riot stays subtly apart from everyone while we walk through the place he grew up. It's like a museum, not a place people live, and his discomfort reeks like shitty cologne.

After a quick tour, we're shown to our assigned rooms. When Riot and I get to ours, I see it's a fancy-ass guest room with two queen beds.

I raise an eyebrow at Riot. "We're not staying in your room?"

He shoots me a withering look. "And let you inside more of my personal space? Hell no. You're not welcome in my private rooms."

I hold up my hands in mock surrender and let the plural *rooms* go for now. "Hey man, just trying to make friendly conversation with my new roomie."

"We're not friends. This is temporary and for the coach's sake only," he growls. "So keep your crap on your side and leave me the hell alone."

“Sure thing, Sunshine.” I give him a sarcastic thumbs up. “This is gonna be *such* a fun weekend.”

Riot just glares and storms past me, his shoulder slamming into mine, to claim the bed farthest from the door.

After the world’s most awkward unpacking session, we head downstairs where the rest of the team’s gathered in Riot’s tricked out media lounge. He avoids looking at me wedged between Knight and Luc on the couch, periodically clenching his jaw, probably afraid we’re going to dirty up his couch or something.

We spend the next couple of hours bonding over rowdy games and enough greasy pizza to stop our trainer’s heart. Trash talk fills the air as we battle on MarioKart.

“Eat my dust, bitches!” Tristan crows as his Yoshi zooms into first.

“Fuck you and your blue shell!” Lucas groans as his kart spins out. “Imma plow you off the track, asshole.”

“Try and catch me now, losers!” Tristan taunts. “I’ll be across the finish line before you dickwads even see my taillights.”

“Not so fast.” Bear, our bearded giant, jostles Tristan’s arm to distract him, sending Yoshi into a banana peel as his Luigi kart zooms past.

“Hey, quit your cheating shit!” Tristan shoves him back.

“All’s fair in MarioKart, douchebag.” Bear chuckles as he maintains the lead.

Tris isn’t having it. “Oh, it’s on, dickweed!”

Their shoving escalates until Knight’s Bowser zooms across the finish line first.

“Boom, Shadow takes the win! Up yours, bitches.” He chirps. “Maybe next time, ass-clowns.”

“You just got lucky, fucker.” Tristan elbows him. “Rematch, or you’re a little bitch.”

Their creative trash talk continues, laughter and cheers filling the room. Even Riot seems to relax, cracking the occasional smile, though tension still lingers below the surface.

During a game break, I wander off to snoop, peeking at photos along the hall. Little Riot clutching a hockey stick stands out. And angsty teen Riot brooding in tailored suits that look like they were made for him even then.

Even surrounded by family, he's separate.

I find his childhood bedroom and smirk to myself as I step inside. He wanted to keep me out so bad, yet here I am.

The place is lined with trophies and sloppy gear piles. Across the hall is a badass library straight out of *Beauty and the Beast*. I never took Riot for a nerd, but here we are.

This cozy room with its fireplace seems more lived in than the cold museum vibe of the rest of this mausoleum.

I sink into a leather chair, inhaling that soothing old book scent. Rain patters against the windows as memories threaten to pull me under. Heavy family shit is stirring up again, like the last time I was in a public library trying to stay warm because our heating was out and mom couldn't afford the bill.

The creak of a floorboard jars me back. I glance up as Riot fills the doorway, looking surprised.

"Exploring?" His gravelly voice fills the cozy space.

I lift a shoulder, playing it cool. "Couldn't resist checking out the famous Kensington palace."

I don't bother telling him I took a thorough expedition through his childhood bedroom first.

He eyes me a moment, then steps inside. "Most guys head for the home theater or game lounge. But you came here."

I gesture to the shelves. "Guess I was curious."

Riot settles into the wingback chair across from me. "About?"

“Who you are.” The blunt admission slips out before I can bite it back. “You know, besides a walking bag of dicks.”

A laugh bursts out of Riot before he goes very still. Those piercing eyes study me intently. “And what do you think you’ve figured out?”

I take a moment, breathing in the room’s leather and paper perfume. “That you’re smarter than people think. And this place is your escape.”

Riot’s jaw tightens, those icy eyes cutting away. Guess I struck a nerve.

Can’t say I blame him. I’d hate it if *he* was digging into *my* personal life.

“Nothing wrong with needing space,” I add, keeping my tone casual. “Especially in a house this big, with all its... expectations.”

He scrubs a hand through his dark hair roughly. “My father expects perfection. Ivy League degree, corporate gig. Anything less means failure.”

Riot’s mouth twists bitterly. “Hockey was my act of ‘rebellion.’ My father wanted me to take over the family business, not waste time on a ‘pointless game.’ We’ve been fighting about it for years. He can’t stand that I didn’t bow down to his grand plan for my future.”

He laughs, but it’s hollow. “I don’t know why I just told you that.”

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek, considering his little confession. It reminds me of my own daddy issues. “I never even met my father. But everyone saw me as just his screw-up kid.”

Shit, now *I* don’t know why I told *him* that.

Riot lifts his gaze to mine. In the dim light of the fireplace, his eyes are almost warm. “That’s why you bust your ass? To prove them wrong? Show you’re more than some deadbeat’s legacy?”

Hearing my struggles spoken so plainly makes me pause. “Yeah. That’s part of it, I guess.”

We sit in silence awhile, two men haunted by the ghosts of fathers who cast long, useless shadows.

The patter of rain on the window fills the silence until Riot inhales slowly, scrubbing a hand down his face. “I don’t think I can handle this team dinner tonight, smiling like I don’t hate my parents and their judgment of my life.”

He pauses, looking me right in the eyes. “Will you sit with me? As a... buffer?”

I blink, certain I misheard. But Riot holds my gaze, his expression open in a way I’ve never seen. It’s the closest he’s shown to vulnerability. And I understand what it cost him to extend the olive branch.

It’s also a total mindfuck.

After a tense moment, I nod. “Yeah. I’ve got you.”

Riot’s shoulders loosen slightly. Our truce suddenly feels less tentative. This shifted something elemental between us. Whatever comes next this weekend, I’ve got his back.

I lift my snapback and run a hand through my messy hair before sticking it back on my head.

We chill in comfortable silence until footsteps echo down the hall. That’ll be the boys coming to drag us back to the festivities.

Riot’s mask clicks back into place as he stands up. But there’s a new wariness in those icy eyes now. Like I’ve glimpsed a secret part of him he keeps locked down tight.

And in a way, I have. Beyond the swagger and bullshit. It’s thrilling but unsettling, getting a peek behind that fortress door.

As we rejoin the team, the shift between us hangs thick as smoke in the air.

Whatever comes next this weekend, we’re in it together now. For better or worse.

RIOT

“ENOUGH!” My father’s voice rings through his study, cold and clipped. His blue eyes, so much like mine, are like chips of ice behind his glasses. “This childish fixation on hockey ends now. It’s time you took your place in the family business as planned.”

I bite my tongue, fists clenching at my sides. We’ve been going in circles for the past hour in his study, a familiar battle I’m damned tired of fighting.

I open my mouth to spit out an angry retort when a voice interrupts from the doorway.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt.” London leans casually against the frame, expression mild. “Coach sent me to grab Riot for a team meeting.”

My father’s glare flickers between us. I bite my tongue and nod.

“We’ll finish this discussion another time,” I grit out, brushing past my father without another glance. His stern disapproval follows me out like a storm cloud.

Hockey is my blood and breath. The ice is my true home. He’ll never understand that.

London falls into step beside me as we escape down the hallway. “You good?”

“Yeah. Thanks for the assist,” I mutter, residual anger still simmering in my blood. “Guy just doesn’t know when to let things go.”

“I told you I’ve got your back, Ri.” London bumps my shoulder lightly. His casual affection loosens the knot in my chest.

Maybe having the guys here this weekend won’t be so bad after all. If anyone can distract me from my family’s suffocating expectations, it’s my rowdy crew.

Voices echo from the patio doors leading outside. I follow them across the massive kitchen to find the team gathered around the indoor pool housed in a sprawling glass atrium. Steam rises gently from the heated water as pop music pumps from a speaker.

Laughter rings out as Lucas and Teo wrestle at the pool’s edge. Nearby, Si floats lazily on an inflatable flamingo, sipping something fruity from a hollowed pineapple. The crisp autumn rain patters against the glass walls. In Washington state, swimming’s an indoor sport.

“Cannonball!” Tristan yells, sprinting past me in his neon swim trunks. He leaps into the air and crashes into the water, drenching half the guys lounging poolside.

Spluttering cries sound as they scramble away from the tidal wave. Tristan surfaces, cackling wildly.

“You little punk!” Lucas growls, wiping water from his face. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

Grinning, he grabs Tristan in a headlock and drags him back into the churning water. I chuckle under my breath at their antics, already feeling myself start to relax.

Shaking off the self-pity, I change into some swim trunks and make my way back to the atrium to join the crew. A chorus of greetings goes up as I step into the room.

“There he is, the man of the hour!” Tristan crows, raising his solo cup with a grin. He’s always been able to read my moods freakishly well.

“Took you long enough to bring your pasty ass out here,” Deck calls out. “We’re just about to start a round of chicken fights. You in?”

“Hell yeah.” I force myself to mirror Tristan’s easy smile. “Just don’t cry when I knock you on your ass.”

A cluster of teammates whoops as I stride over and snag a beer from the cooler. The rain sprinkles down from a heavily clouded sky as pop music pulses from a nearby speaker.

Laughter echoes across the pool as the first chicken fight begins. Tristan, perched on Teo’s shoulders, grapples with Luc, who sits on top of Bear’s mountainous frame. I find myself scanning the deck for that familiar blond head I’ve come to automatically seek out.

London’s sprawled on a lounge chair in the shade like he owns this house, not me, chatting with Knight and Teddy. His hair looks almost white under the lights. Dark glasses shade his eyes even though it’s cloudy, but his mouth splits into a grin at something Knight says.

I feel a twinge of disappointment when those hazel eyes don’t immediately seek me the way I do him. Shaking it off, I twist the cap off my beer and take a long pull, let the cold alcohol soothe my earlier agitation.

“Come on, Kensington!” Lucas calls out from the pool. “Bring that fight into the water!”

I toss my shirt aside and wade into the warm water. Lucas swims over with a challenging grin and dunks below the surface, and I climb onto his shoulders. As he pops back up, I brace myself.

Across from us, Si clambers up onto Teddy’s shoulders, an eager glint in his usually placid eyes. The puck heads on either side of me egg us on as Lucas and Teddy wade into shallower water, squaring off.

“You’re going down this time, Kensington,” Si taunts me. Out of my teammates, he’s the one who comes closest to matching my competitive edge.

Well, besides London.

I bare my teeth in a sharp grin, flexing my fingers. “In your dreams, Ivanov.”

At Deck's whistle, we crash together, grappling and shoving to throw the other off balance. Lucas staggers under my weight but I squeeze my knees, keeping purchase. With a heave, I get one arm hooked under Si's armpit and yank hard, toppling him backwards into the churning water.

"Yes!" I pump my fist as Lucas whoops, parading me around victoriously. Out of the corner of my eye, I see London lift his sunglasses, his gaze intent on me. I meet it steadily across the distance, unfamiliar satisfaction swirling through me at having impressed him.

Something warm sparks down my spine.

What the actual fuck?

I climb down off Lucas's shoulders and clap his hand. "Not bad, dude. We crushed 'em."

He grins. "With you fighting up top? They never stood a chance."

As Si and Teddy come up, we all laugh and joke about their loss. The competitive energy is infectious, loosening some of the knots left over from clashing with my father earlier. With most of the guys occupied, I lever myself out of the pool and make my way over to where London and Knight are still lounging.

"Kensington." Knight nods in greeting with a sharp smirk on his face. "Hell of a battle out there."

London's expression is unreadable behind his dark lenses. "Didn't know you had those moves in you, Golden Boy."

The nickname lands differently than the usual mockery. This time it almost sounds... affectionate? I shake off that thought immediately. Wishful thinking on my part, no doubt after that weird as hell moment in my library earlier.

"I've got all kinds of moves you haven't seen," I reply, unable to keep the flirtatious note from my voice.

A surprised laugh escapes London. Before I can analyze his reaction, Coach's voice rings out.

“Alright boys, how about we get some grub going? Riot, lead the troops over to the outdoor kitchen and grill area. There should be plenty of meat and fixings in the fridges.”

“You got it, Coach,” I call back.

Gesturing for the guys to follow, I make my way over to the paved area housing the stainless steel grills and marble-topped counters. We crowd around to fire up the grills and raid the fully stocked fridges and pantry. Bear cranks up a bluetooth speaker, and unruly voices fill the air as we banter and bicker over playlist selections.

Despite the carefree atmosphere, there are still undercurrents. I notice Deck shoot a subtle glare at Knight when he thinks no one else is looking. Those two definitely have unresolved issues, though they play nice on the surface.

I make a mental note to pull Deck aside later and ask him what’s up between them. As captain, he usually tells me if there’s any bad blood simmering below the surface with our players. Whatever caused that look, it runs deep.

“Yo, catch!”

I turn just as a vegetable smacks wetly into my chest before tumbling into my hand. Laughter echoes around me.

“Who the hell just threw this at me?” I demand, glaring around with the mangled tomato still clutched in my fist. More snickers sound as Luc tries and fails to look innocent.

“My bad, bro!” He throws his hands up with an unrepentant grin. “Guess my toss was off.”

“Oh, yeah?” I retaliate by whipping the tomato right at his face. He dodges, cackling as it sails past his ear. “Your aim’s the only thing off here, jackass.”

“Quick, return fire!” Luc yells. Grinning faces turn toward me, hands filled with more produce from the cutting boards.

“No, no, no—” I stumble back with my hands up. “Truce, truce!”

An onslaught of colorful projectiles pelts me as I try to dodge the barrage. Juices explode across my bare chest and

into my hair as I slip on a stray piece of tomato, landing on my ass with a wet smack.

The backyard echoes with rowdy laughter at my colorful demise. Even London's grinning, eyes bright like I've never seen them and I get a little lost staring at him.

"Alright, alright, you animals. Help me up." I shake whatever *that* was off and grab Tris's outstretched hand, allowing him to haul me to my feet. Chuckling under my breath, I brush tomato seeds from my hair.

Maybe hosting the team here isn't so terrible after all. The guys are relaxing into the weekend, bonds solidifying. Watching London laugh so openly twists something unexpectedly in my chest. I've never felt so at ease around him.

Things only amp up as we gather for dinner. The mood is celebratory after a day of fucking around and bonding. Tris hooks his phone to a speaker, keeping the music pumping.

Happy voices fill the patio as we gorge on grilled meats, coolers restocked with drinks. Laughter echoes when Lucas dares Teo to chug an entire beer upside down. He gives in, rivulets of amber liquid streaming down his face, while the rest of the guys cheer him on.

Watching my teammates banter and clash, camaraderie layered with rivalry, I'm struck by a sense of belonging I've rarely felt outside of hockey.

Lucas rubs his hands together eagerly. "Alright gents, time to spice things up. Let's play some Never Have I Ever."

A chorus of shouts and laughs rises from the group as we settle around the firepit.

I nudge London seated beside me. "This could get interesting."

He nods, looking relaxed despite the ruckus. "Or incredibly fuckin' embarrassing. Guess we'll find out."

Lucas starts us off. "Never have I ever...kissed someone of the same sex."

Amidst hoots and jeers, Luc and Teo drink.

I speak up next. “Never have I ever...dated two girls from the same sorority at the same time.”

“What the fuck, Cap?” Tristan takes a swig of his beer to more laughter. “Why you gotta call me out like that, bro?”

More confessions get called out, punctuated by heckling.

“Never have I ever been walked in on by my parents doing the dirty,” Teddy says, wrinkling his nose. Half the circle drinks while the rest of us crack the hell up.

“Never have I ever made out with a girl in the library stacks between classes,” Lucas says, eyes darting straight to Knight.

Knight just smirks and takes a drink as wolf whistles sound around us.

“Never have I ever sexted a teammate’s girlfriend,” Tristan says, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

A few guys squirm and avoid his gaze, but no one fesses up. Smart move on their part.

“Alright, my turn.” I grin wickedly. “Never have I ever walked in on Coach Lewis in a compromising situation.”

“Damnit, Kensington!” Deck grimaces before taking a swig. “I was trying to forget about that.”

Next up is London, who grins slowly. “Never have I ever drunk dialed someone in the middle of the night to profess my love.”

I cough pointedly into my fist, cheeks warming as I take a sip of my drink. London’s grin widens as laughter echoes around us.

“Alright, alright, keep it civil gentlemen,” Coach calls over, though his eyes twinkle with amusement.

As the stars come out, drinks flow and tongues loosen. Accusations get thrown, blackmail’s gained, and sides ache from laughter by the time we finally call it a night.

Walking upstairs with London later, I shake my head wryly. “Remind me never to spill my deepest secrets around this crew.”

London chuckles, hazel eyes bright. “Where would be the fun in that?”

Empty bottles litter the tables as the guys trickle off to bed, feeling tipsy and worn out. Soon it’s just London and I still nursing our drinks. The speakers are just background noise now.

“Not a bad little team you’ve got here, Kensington.” London’s tone holds a note of grudging respect. “They really came together this weekend.”

“Our team,” I correct him. “*Our* team came together. And yeah, they’re not bad.” I take a last pull from my bottle, watching him over the rim. “Present company included.”

London huffs a soft laugh, catching my meaning, and my heart speeds up. “Don’t go getting all

sentimental on me now.” But there’s no malice there.

I stand, clapping him on the shoulder, ignoring the fire tearing up my arm where my fingers brush against his skin. “I’m heading back to the pool for a bit. You good?”

Something complicated flickers across his face before he nods. “Yeah, think I’ll go to bed.”

I leave him staring thoughtfully into his empty bottle and make my way to the softly lit pool. The water glows an eerie blue, still and smooth as glass. Stripping down to my trunks, I slide in.

The water embraces me, soothing away the last dregs of tension left over from the retreat. Floating on my back, I stare up at the emerging stars and just breathe.

Having the team here this weekend, opening up this part of myself—it wasn’t as awful as I thought it’d be. Watching the guys joke and clash in the place I’ve kept private for so long cracked open something in me. Like sunlight stealing into a quiet room, banishing lurking shadows.

And London...he isn't the arrogant jackass I've made him out to be all this time. Everything I thought I knew is shifting, my perspectives realigning. He's charismatic and unexpectedly thoughtful. Now that my resentment has cooled, I can admit he's a damn talented player.

The thought of logging into my anonymous chat with FallingDown pops into my mind. I could really use their familiar, steadying take on all this change swirling beneath my skin.

Swimming over to the side, I pull myself from the pool and wrap a towel around my waist. Settling into a patio chaise, I open up the chat app on my phone.

Me: Hey FD. How's it going? Got a sec to chat?

I gnaw my lip as the messaging bubble pops up. FallingDown's advice is always solid. If anyone can help me figure out these weird as hell feelings, it's him.

FallingDown: Hey dude, I've got all the time you need. What's up?

I huff a soft laugh. Leave it to FD to be available exactly when I need him. I debate how to even summarize everything swirling through me right now.

Me: This weekend's been... interesting. Team bonding shit. It's been good mostly, but also intense.

I pause before adding,

Me: You know how I told you about that teammate I can't stand? The one I thought was an arrogant asshole? Well... I'm starting to think maybe I judged him too quickly. He's maybe not as bad as I thought. It's messing with my head. Makes me wonder if I totally misread him from the start. Has me questioning all kinds of things.

I hesitate before hitting send. There, that sums up this inner conflict gnawing at me without getting too personal. I

scrub a hand through my still-damp hair, equal parts relieved and unsettled to have put this into words.

FallingDown: Well look who's growing up.

Me: Don't be a dick.

FallingDown: FR though, it's big of you to admit you might be wrong.

FallingDown: I know how stubborn you can be lol so this is real growth.

I huff a laugh. FD isn't wrong. I have a reputation for being immovable once I've made up my mind about someone. London smashing through those preconceived notions has left me off-kilter.

FallingDown: As for questioning things, change can be scary and confusing, even good change.

Me: You're so wise.

FallingDown: STFU :middle finger emoji:

Leave it to FD to cut right to the heart of things with that blend of honesty and compassion I rely on.

FallingDown: I'm stoked you questioned your beliefs and are open to growing. Not everyone does that.

FallingDown: Let me know how it goes.

Me: Thanks, bro. I knew you'd have some solid perspective.

Me: I really needed to get this out and hear your take.

Me: I'll def keep you posted on how it goes. Appreciate you always having my back.

I set my phone down with a strange blend of uncertainty and hope swirling through me. FD's input was just what I needed to sort through this tangled mess of new feelings about London. I feel steady enough now to face this head-on.

Yawning, I stand and stretch, ready to head upstairs for some shut-eye. As I cross the patio, a snatch of conversation from the shadows gives me pause.

"Yeah, London's a hell of a left wing," I hear Deck saying. "Still, the crap he pulled at his last school was unacceptable. Coach is taking a colossal risk letting him on the roster."

Teo makes a noncommittal sound. "People fuck up sometimes. Only matters who they are now, right?"

Their voices fade as they move off into the night, leaving me rooted in place. London did something at his old school? I wrack my brain trying to remember any rumors, but come up blank.

Unease twists my gut. Now more than ever, I'm realizing how little I actually know about his past beyond our rivalry. If something in his history jeopardized his spot at Ravenloft, I need to find out what.

Jaw set, I stride into the mansion and climb the stairs with a single-minded purpose. I don't bother knocking when I reach our shared room, shoving the door open.

London glances up from where he's sitting on his bed, scrolling his phone. His eyes widen fractionally at my grim expression.

I close the door firmly behind me, arms crossed. "We need to talk."

RIOT

LONDON MADE some bullshit excuse and practically ran from our room like his ass was on fire. I stayed up all night, but he never came back.

I barely slept.

The next morning, I find him in the kitchen brewing coffee. Dark circles shadow his eyes like he had as restless a night as me. I cross my arms, blocking his path as he hunts for a mug.

“We’re finishing that conversation from last night. No more dodging.”

London tenses, avoiding my gaze. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

I step closer, crowding him against the counter. “Cut the bullshit. I heard Deck talking about how you pulled some reckless stunt at your old school that got a teammate injured. Is that true?”

London’s jaw clenches. “You don’t know the full story.”

“So tell me.”

He shoves past me, coffee forgotten. “Just leave it alone, Kensington.”

I grab his arm. “Not a chance. If you fucked up and put one of our guys at risk, I deserve to know.”

London rips his arm away, eyes blazing. “You self-righteous prick. Don’t pretend this is about the team’s safety.”

He advances until we're toe to toe. "This is about your control issues. You can't stand not knowing every detail of my past, can you?"

His words hit like a brutal check. Because deep down, I know he's right. This fierce need to unravel his history goes beyond mere teammate's concern. I'm obsessed in a way I don't fully understand.

London must read the conflict on my face. His glare softens just slightly. "Look, it was a terrible play, alright? I got reckless in the heat of the moment and a teammate paid the price. Believe me, I fucking regret it every damn day."

He scrubs a hand down his face, looking haunted. "But that school, those guys... it was toxic as hell. Blackmail, sabotage, you name it. The shit I did, I did to survive there."

His hazel eyes meet mine, raw and resigned. "So go ahead and judge me if you want. But don't pretend you know what it was like in that hellhole."

I stare at him, throat tight. In that moment, I glimpse behind the swagger to the shadows haunting this man who keeps the world at arm's length. Something that feels a whole fucking lot like shame twists in my gut.

"I shouldn't have pushed," I say gruffly. "Your past is your business."

London studies me a beat, then nods, the fight leaching from his frame. Silence descends, thick with unspoken currents. I turn and leave before I do something stupid, like pull him into my arms and hug the fuck out of him because he looks so damn defeated.

The tension between London and me permeates the rest of the retreat. We keep our distance, interacting only when necessary.

On the bus ride back to campus later that day, London grabs a seat in the very back, forehead pressed to the window. I sit up front with Tristan, trying and failing to focus on his lively chatter.

“Dude, what’s up with you today?” Tristan finally asks, elbowing my ribs. “You’ve been spacey as hell all day.”

I just shake my head, eyes darting back to where London sits hunched in his seat.

Tristan follows my gaze, frowning. “Ah, trouble in paradise with your new roomie? I thought you guys put the bad blood behind you this weekend.”

When I don’t respond, he whistles under his breath. “Must’ve been one hell of a fight. Never seen you brood this hard off the ice. Spill it, bro.”

“It’s nothing,” I mutter, even as London consumes my thoughts. “Just ready to be home.”

Tristan clearly doesn’t buy it, but he lets it go with a knowing look. “Whatever you say, man. But do me a favor and kiss and make up soon, yeah? Last thing we need is fighting between our star players before the season starts.”

I simply nod, throat tight. If only it were that easy.

The awkwardness continues once we’re back at the apartment. London disappears while I hole up in my room, restless energy buzzing under my skin.

When he finally returns, shadows haunt his face. We maneuver around each other warily, the lingering tension suffocating. I itch to bridge this sudden gap, but don’t know where to even start.

Exhausted by our standoff, I escape to my room, London’s cryptic words taunting me...

You don’t know the full story.

I toss and turn as darkness closes in, imagination running wild with possibilities. What don’t I know? What is London hiding? Or did he tell me everything? My obsession festers until I finally slip into a fitful sleep.

Suddenly, we’re on the ice, clashing in a brutal face-off. His eyes blaze with fiery determination as we grapple, hockey sticks clattering to the ice.

Suddenly, he shoves me up against the boards. But instead of a punch, his mouth crashes onto mine in a searing kiss.

I freeze in shock before melting against him, months of simmering tension exploding. Our kissing turns hungry, all teeth and tongue. He tastes like winter—sharp and intoxicating.

We shed layers frantically until it's just feverish skin on skin. I lick along the salty length of his throat, reveling in the throb of his pulse under my tongue. London growls my name, fingers twisting into my hair—

I jolt awake, heart racing, my cock hard as fuck. Shock and arousal war inside me as I stare wild-eyed into the dark. What the actual hell?

Pulse hammering, I grab my phone with shaky fingers. I have to talk to someone before I lose my mind.

Pulling up my anonymous chat app, I start typing to FallingDown.

Me: Yo FD, u up?

FallingDown: Hey man, wide awake. What's going on?

Me: I just had the craziest dream and I'm freaking out.

I gnaw my lip, hesitating. How do I even explain this?

Me: Had the wildest damn dream about someone I've never seen that way.

Me: Now I can't stop thinking about them in a way I never have before.

Me: Idk what to do.

FallingDown: Whoa, crazy dude. Those kinds of dreams can mess with your head fo sho.

Me: You're telling me. Now idk how to act around them. Part of me wants to pretend it never happened. But another part can't stop replaying it. Losing it over here.

FallingDown: Hey don't stress it too much. It was just a dream, right?

His reassurance soothes my rattled nerves a little. But uncertainty still eats at me.

Me: Guess you're right. Just never thought I'd feel this way about someone like them.

Me: Feels like it means something.

Me: Def complicates the hell outta things.

FallingDown: Feelings and stuff can get messy af but they can also be dope if u embrace them, risks and all. Don't overthink it, just go with the flow and see where it takes u. Might surprise u.

I lean back against the headboard, tension leaching from my shoulders. Trust FD to make sense of my chaotic thoughts. I'm still unsure what to do about London. But for now, I breathe a little easier.

Me: Yeah, guess you're right.

Me: Overthinking never helps. Thx for talking me down. Will hit u up when there's more drama lol.

FallingDown: Anytime dude. Rooting for ya.
Later.

I set my phone aside, exhaustion creeping in. As I drift off, FD's words replay through my mind. Don't overthink it...

I fall asleep wondering how the fuck I'm supposed to face London tomorrow and act like nothing's changed.

LONDON

THE AIR IS electric at Puck & Pint tonight. Our latest win has spirits soaring and the drinks flowing freely. Music pumps through the packed bar as the team lets loose, fueled by the heady rush of crushing our rivals on the ice just hours before.

“Hawks, baby!” Tris cheers, holding up his beer.

A roar goes up from our cluster of teammates as we clink bottles and take deep swigs. Grinning, I soak in the triumphant atmosphere. Moments like this make the grueling practices and bone-jarring checks worthwhile.

Deck elbows me with a smirk. “That assist of yours to Riot for the winning goal? Fucking beauty, Lancaster.”

“Couldn’t have done it without your lockdown defense, Cap.” I bump his fist, soaking up the hard-earned praise.

A glimpse of blond through the reveling crowd snags my attention. Riot stands by the bar, bottle in hand as he talks to Coach. His hair glimmers like spun gold under the lights. That stubborn jawline could cut glass.

A now familiar heat stirs in my gut at the sight of him. I quickly look away before Tris notices anything amiss. Too late.

“What’s up with you two lately?” He nudges me again, eyebrows raised. “The tension on the ice this week was no joke. Figured you’d have kissed and made up by now.”

I force a rough laugh to mask my unease. “Nah, man, it’s all part of the game. Keeps us on our toes out there.”

If only it were that simple. Ever since the explosive confrontation at his family's mansion last weekend, this uneasy truce has stretched between Riot and me. We've barely exchanged two civil words since.

Something shifted that night between us. The more distance I try to keep, the more he invades my thoughts like a phantom limb.

Deck leans in, expression serious. "Whatever issue you two have going on, resolve it fast. The team dynamic is too important, especially leading up to playoffs."

I nod, jaw tightening. "You got it, Cap. Won't let any personal shit affect the team."

Truth is, I have no fucking clue how to bridge this gap with Riot. Every attempt blows up in my face, leaving us more on edge. Being around him is like handling live explosives lately.

My eyes stray back to Riot across the bar. His head is tipped back in laughter at something Teo said. The smooth lines of his throat ripple as he swallows his beer. A reckless part of me wants to trace that golden skin with my tongue, discover if he tastes as good as—

"Earth to London!" Tris snaps his fingers in my face. "Where you at, bro?"

I shake myself and plaster on a cocky grin. "My bad, got distracted scoping the talent."

Tris follows my gaze to the group of giggling sorority girls by the pool tables, giving us fuck me eyes. "Can't blame you there. Plenty of hotties to celebrate with tonight."

He waggles his eyebrows suggestively. I force a chuckle, skin crawling at the thought of indulging like I would have just weeks ago. Lately, only one stubborn blond can hold my focus, as much as I fucking hate it.

The evening blurs by in a haze of drinks and rowdy team bonding. But an undercurrent of restlessness simmers in my blood. I keep catching Riot sneaking glances my way when he thinks I'm not paying attention.

Eventually, I break away from the chaos to take a piss. As I'm washing my hands, the door swings open and Riot stalks in. We lock eyes in the mirror, tension coiling tight.

He moves to the urinal, jaw clenched. The silence between us grows heavy. I debate just making a quick exit, but stand my ground. If Golden Boy wants another confrontation, I'll give it to him.

Riot zips up and turns to the sink, rolling up his sleeves. The smooth lines of black ink tracing his forearms are distracting as hell. *Focus, Lancaster.*

"Got something you wanna say to me?" I challenge into the taut silence.

Riot's blue eyes harden to shards of ice in the mirror as he scrubs his hands. "You've been off during practices lately. Sloppy handling, bad turnover reads. What's going on?"

I bristle at the criticism. "Nothing I can't handle. Worry about your own game, Kensington."

He turns to face me, arms crossed. "When your shitty performance affects the team, it becomes my business. We can't afford mistakes this close to playoffs."

The condescension in his tone makes my blood boil. This self-righteous prick has been riding my ass relentlessly since our blowup, despite his own obvious issues. I step closer, fists clenched.

"I've got my mistakes handled. Trust me. Question is, can you handle yours?" I shoot back. Or are you too busy kissing Coach's ass and acting like you don't have any flaws?

Fiery annoyance flashes across Riot's face. He steps into my space, eyes blazing into mine. "Watch yourself, Hotshot. You have no goddamn clue what you're talking about."

We glower at each other; the air molten between us. Voices sound from the hallway outside.

Riot's jaw tightens. "Forget it. This conversation is over."

He brushes past me roughly. Losing the fight isn't an option for me right now. I follow him out and grab his arm.

“We’re settling this. Now.”

Riot glares but allows me to pull him out of the side exit into the alley. The door slams shut, muffling the noise inside.

We square off as I crowd him against the brick wall. The flashy neon “Puck & Pint” sign bathes his face in crimson light.

“The fuck is your issue lately, Kensington?” I demand. “You’ve been on my case nonstop since the retreat, just waiting for me to slip up.”

Riot’s lip curls derisively. “Maybe because I expect more from my star wing and he’s been playing like dogshit.”

The dig hits its mark. Anger and frustration boil over. I slam my hands against the wall on either side of his head. Riot tenses but doesn’t retreat.

“Keep talking shit, see where it gets you,” I growl into his face. “I’m so fucking done with your mind games and power trips.”

Riot’s arctic eyes drill into mine. “Then tell me what the hell has been up with you. Is it your past? Something going on with your family?” His gaze bores into me relentlessly. “Talk to me, London.”

My pulse kicks at hearing my real name on his lips. I search his face, thrown. Is that actual concern creeping through the frost in his eyes? It leaves me off-balance.

I step back, scrubbing a hand over my face. “Just leave it alone, Riot.” The fight bleeds from my voice. I sound weary even to myself. I’m so fucking tired of fighting.

He studies me for a long moment, body coiled with tension. I brace for another scathing retort. Instead, he sighs, leaning back against the wall.

“Truce, alright? I shouldn’t have come at you so hard.” Quieter, almost to himself, he mutters, “It’s not like I have room to judge anyone’s issues.”

Surprise flickers through me. Riot admitting he was out of line rocks my worldview more than anything so far. The

defensive anger simmering in my blood fades as quickly as it flared.

Suddenly, he's right in front of me, crowding me back against the brick wall. His eyes blaze into mine, and they're not cold anymore. No, they're hot and unrelenting. "I'm so fucking sick of this back and forth between us." His voice is a ragged growl that rakes down my spine, leaving fire in its wake. "Aren't you?"

My breaths come faster as we stare each other down. The space between us shimmers with unseen sparks.

Before I can respond, his mouth crashes onto mine in a searing kiss. Shock freezes me for an endless moment before I'm kissing him back fiercely, months of pent up tension exploding between us.

It's angry and raw, full of teeth and heat. My fingers twist into the front of his soft t-shirt, holding him against me. Our tongues clash as we devour each other's mouths. He tastes like beer and mint and *Riot*. Fucking intoxicating.

His broad hands grip my hips, pinning me to the brick wall. I bite his full lower lip and he growls low in his throat. The sound rips through me, every nerve ending suddenly on fire.

We kiss like we're trying to consume each other. Like this one stolen moment can make up for a lifetime at each other's throats. He kisses like he skates—intense, passionate, pouring his entire being into the motion.

I lose track of time and place, lost in the blistering slide of his lips on mine. We break apart gasping, flushed and disheveled. His arctic blue eyes are almost eclipsed by his blown pupils. I know I must look just as wrecked.

The weight of what just happened hangs suspended between us. I watch emotions war across his face—desire, uncertainty, defiance. Before I can speak, he turns abruptly and steps away.

I slump back against the wall, knees weak, mind reeling. I touch my tingling lips, heart pounding against my ribs. Dick

harder than it's ever been. What the fuck just happened?

Sudden exhaustion sweeps over me. I stare up at the few stars visible beyond the hazy glow of the city.

"Truce," I concede roughly. This ceasefire between us feels different from our past false starts. A layer of resentment seems to have burned away tonight, leaving behind something cautiously honest. And hot as fuck, for whatever that's worth.

Guess it's easier to go back to the conversation we were having before the kiss that tilted my world on its axis than acknowledging it happened or talk about it. For both of us.

Riot's eyes stay intent on my face. "So talk to me. What's really going on?" He asks again, softer this time, still with some of that gravel in his voice.

I glance away, warring with myself. No way can I tell him the truth. That he's the reason my head's been fucked lately on the ice. Just being around him throws me off my game in ways I don't understand.

Though now he probably has some idea.

The urge to unburden myself wars with years of learned distrust. Riot waits, blue gaze unwavering.

"Just got some personal shit going on, alright?" I finally bite out. "I'll keep it locked down tight for playoffs. You don't need to worry about me fucking up out there."

Something complicated crosses Riot's face. He looks poised to say more when the metal door suddenly swings open.

"There you assholes are!" Tris exclaims. Behind him, curious faces peer out into the alley. "Everyone's doing shots to celebrate. Your asses better be back inside in thirty seconds or I'm coming to drag you both back myself."

He aims a warning look between us, then disappears back inside. The interruption breaks the spell that had fallen over this hidden backstreet. Reality—and the memory of our blistering kiss—seeps back in.

Riot scrubs an inked hand through his hair, glancing my way. “We should get back.”

I nod, the ghost of his lips on mine still lingering. I can still taste him on my tongue. As I turn toward the door, Riot’s voice stops me.

“For what it’s worth... you’ve seemed off during practice lately. But never once have I doubted your skill.” He clears his throat roughly. “You’re the most talented wing I’ve ever played with. Don’t forget that.”

I stare at him, staggered by the unexpected confession. Our locked gazes simmer with unspoken heat. Before I can formulate a response, he slips through the door, leaving me reeling in the alley.

That’s the closest thing to a compliment Golden Boy has ever paid me. Between that and his mild truce offering, my mind spins, trying to realign this new perception of him. One now irrevocably shifted by the intense kiss we just shared.

My lips tingle at the memory of his claiming mine so fiercely just moments before. The way he kissed me breathless against this brick wall, like he wanted to consume me. Nothing will ever be the same after that explosion of long-denied desire between us. Where our story goes from here, I have no fucking clue. But everything has changed in this dark alley tonight.

That kiss knocked my world off its damn axis. Made me see the man behind the haughty mask, if only for a moment. I press my fingers to my still-buzzing lips, heart pounding out a jagged rhythm in my chest.

And I’ve never wanted a guy before. *Ever.*

One thing’s for sure—Golden Boy and I have a helluva lot left to settle between us. And that kiss was just the beginning.

I take a minute to pull myself together before heading back inside. The celebrations are still in full swing, but my path feels irrevocably altered by whatever just happened out in that alley.

The rest of the night passes in an adrenaline-soaked blur. But my thoughts keep straying back to Riot’s enigmatic

expression in the fractured neon light after his grudging admission. That brief glimpse at the man behind the haughty mask.

Something between us shifted out there tonight. The ground beneath my feet feels unsteady, like it's made of quicksand.

I have no fucking clue where we stand now. But I can't deny that for the first time in too damn long, a flicker of hope stirs inside my chest.

RIOT

MORNING LIGHT SEEPS through the blinds and I stir, groaning as memories from last night invade my sleep-fogged brain. Kissing London in that alley, all fierce desperation and white-hot sparks. Even hours later, my lips tingle where his scorched mine. I scrub a hand down my face, equal parts elated and terrified by the intensity of it all. Fuck. What have I gotten myself into?

A tempting, reckless part of me wants to burst into London's room and finish what we started against that wall last night. Another part of me, the cautious, pragmatic side that's gotten me this far, urges me to slam on the brakes before I crash and burn.

Because wanting London Lancaster goes against everything I thought I knew about myself. I've never looked twice at another guy before. Never even considered it could be a possibility for me. And of all the guys in the world to test out this unexpected attraction, it had to be my hotheaded, explosive rival. The one person guaranteed to make my life even more complicated.

With a groan, I force my uncooperative body out of bed. Maybe some distance and a cold shower will help clear my muddled head. Slipping out to the hall, I move as quietly as I can, praying I don't run into London yet. His bedroom door stays closed. The coast seems clear.

Letting out a breath, I round the corner to the kitchen — and nearly slam right into the man himself.

He's shirtless... and sweaty.

"Fuck," I mutter, stumbling to an awkward halt.

Fresh from a run, London stands dripping with sweat in the kitchen, his cut body on full display, every ridge of his abs glistening while he guzzles water from a plastic bottle. His black baseball hat is turned backwards on his head and his messy blond hair sticks out from under it. Droplets glisten along his throat as it works, mesmerizing me. His hair looks almost brown, darkened from sweat. That hazel stare bores into mine as he watches me watch him, and when he finishes the bottle, he smirks at me.

He totally caught me checking him out. Fuck.

I shift on my feet, mouth drying out. When did the sight of another guy's sweaty body start making my dick hard?

Stop drooling, Kensington.

Hoping he can't sense the fuckery happening in my head—and my shorts—I edge around him toward the fridge, acutely aware of his half-naked presence. The kitchen feels supercharged; the silence deafening. We maneuver around each other warily.

"Morning," I finally mutter.

"Hey." His voice still has that just-woken-up gravel that buzzes down my spine like lightning.

Not trusting myself to speak again, I busy myself grabbing ingredients for a protein shake—bananas, peanut butter, almond milk. Out of the corner of my eye, I sense London doing the same, grabbing the protein powder and sliding it across the counter to me so I'll make his, too.

We continue our awkward dance around each other in electric silence. I flick on the blender to drown out my riotous thoughts, fixating on the whirring blades to avoid staring at the bead of sweat trailing down London's throat and between his pecs. And how badly I want to lick it off.

Christ. *Get ahold of yourself, man.*

I rinse out the blender in the sink near London after I pass him his shake. As I raise my eyes, I catch his reflected in the window. Something hot and conflicted passes between us before we both look away.

Clearing my throat, I grab my packed gear bag off the counter. "I'm heading to the rink early. See you at practice, yeah?" I don't wait for his response before slipping out the door.

The crisp morning air helps clear my chaotic thoughts as I make the familiar walk to campus. But London still consumes my headspace, memories of our heated kiss playing on an endless loop. I lick my lips unconsciously, craving another taste of him, despite my confusion. I need to understand these weird desires inside me that are making me question everything.

By the time I reach the locker room, I've got my game face locked down, determined to power through practice without letting my inner turmoil show. The familiar smells of sweat and stale gear help ground me.

Hitting the ice first, I revel in the smooth glide of my skates, carving patterns on the fresh sheet of ice. Out here alone, I finally feel some semblance of clarity and control returning.

Until London skates out a few minutes later.

My eyes are immediately drawn to him, despite my attempts to focus on my own warm-up drills. His powerful strides eat up the ice as he circles the rink. The smooth flex of his thighs has me mesmerized in a way I've never experienced before. His blond hair whips back from the speed, cheeks already flushed from the cold. He's poetry in motion out here in his element.

I can't stop staring.

Shaking myself, I force my eyes away and back to my own prep work. Now is sure as hell not the time for distracting fantasies about my rival-turned-teammate.

But said rival seems just as determined to command my attention today.

Whenever we're paired up for drills, London dials his intensity to 100. He checked me unnecessarily hard in one scrimmage, his eyes blazing. In response, I angled him off the puck with equal aggression during the next drill.

We're both off our game, playing sloppy and impatient as that electric undercurrent sizzles between us. Frustration mounts on both sides from our lack of finesse today, fueled by our unresolved attraction.

It finally comes to a head during the last scrimmage of practice. I take the puck into the corner, London on my heels. He shoves me hard into the boards, stick wedged under my arm to steal the puck.

I see red. In one smooth motion, I spin us around and pin him to the boards with my greater weight. Our hockey sticks clatter, abandoned to the ice.

"The hell is your problem today?" I snarl into his face, our visors clicking together. Up close, the blaze of gold and green in his eyes sears into me.

"Maybe if you didn't skate like you had cinderblocks tied to your feet, this wouldn't be an issue," London fires back, shoving hard against my hold.

Adrenaline and irritation surge hotly through me. I grab a fistful of his jersey, our chests crashing together. And my cock is getting hard. Fantastic. "I seem to skate just fine when I'm not distracted by your sloppy ass plays." The words come out low and heated despite myself.

London's eyes drop to my mouth, his tongue swiping over his lower lip. My heartbeat picks up, desire and anger mingling dangerously. I'm seconds away from crushing my mouth to his right here on the ice—

"That's enough!" Deck's sharp voice cuts through the haze. He pulls me back while Knight and Sasha yank London away. We shake off their holds but stay separated, breathing hard. The rest of the team looks warily between us.

“Whatever the hell is going on with you two, work it out.” Deck points sternly back and forth at us. “We can’t have our star players at each other’s throats. Got it?”

I nod curtly. Beside me, London grunts his assent, eyes still burning into mine.

“Alright boys, hit the showers!” Coach blows his whistle, signaling the end of practice. “Rest up for our game tomorrow night. I better see crisp passes and clean plays out there, not this uncoordinated street hockey shit.”

As everyone files off the ice, I stay behind, needing to cool down after that volatile scrimmage with London. I lean against the boards, closing my eyes as my pulse gradually settles. But my mind’s all over the place.

Everything feels off-kilter and I don’t know how to right it again. I’m feeling all sorts of things right now and it’s making me dizzy, but I’m kinda into it. I want to see where it goes. It terrifies me to think of upending my worldview and identity. Not to mention jeopardizing the team’s shot at championships with all this drama between me and London.

One thing’s clear—we’re going to self-destruct if we keep avoiding this thing burning between us. As much as it rocks me to my core, I have to confront this magnetic pull I feel toward London now. I can’t pretend that kiss meant nothing, no matter how much easier it would make my life.

A flicker of hope rises in my chest that maybe, just maybe, he’s battling a similar inner turmoil. That some part of him wants to explore these terrifying, exhilarating feelings with me.

But if I’m going to do this—take a flying leap into the unknown with London Lancaster—I need to know I’m not in this free fall alone. That he’s willing to confront the secrets we’ve barely begun to scratch the surface of together.

My hands clench with determination around my hockey stick. Enough tiptoeing around the white-hot attraction threatening to burn us both. It’s time for a real talk with London, once and for all.

I just pray I'm not setting myself up for a bone-shattering crash and burn when I lay my cards on the table. But I don't know how much longer I can resist the gravitational force pulling me toward the blaze that is London Lancaster.

After the day we've had, the fallout is sure to be a category five storm. But if there's even a chance at something real between us, I have to try.

I smooth my expression into impassivity and head toward the locker room, nerves and anticipation dueling inside me for my confrontation with London tonight. One way or another, things are about to change between us. I just hope I'm not left broken in the end.

My stomach clenches at the thought of baring myself to him after a lifetime of caution and control. But some risks are worth taking. And my gut tells me London might just be the risk of a lifetime. With my heart in my throat, I walk into the unknown future waiting beyond the locker room doors.

LONDON

GAME DAY. The anticipation buzzes through my veins, my blood already pumping fast despite the early hour. I can feel it in my bones—we're in for a battle tonight against Stormbridge.

Their reputation for ruthless, aggressive tactics precedes them. We'll need to be firing on all cylinders if we want to match their intensity and secure a win on our home ice.

Rolling out of bed, I start my pre-game ritual. Downing a protein shake, blasting my pump-up playlist, visualizing the fluid precision of my shots slicing top corner. The familiar pre-game nerves coil in my gut, but underneath simmers an edge of excitement. Time to throw down.

At morning skate, the mood in the locker room is focused. Deck reviews Stormbridge's key players as we suit up, face somber.

"Let's not underestimate these guys," he warns, tapping the roster sheet. "Especially Derek Thompson. Number eighteen. He's their leading enforcer this season."

Around me, brows furrow and mouths flatten into determined lines. We've all seen footage of Thompson's aggressive hits and dirty intimidation tactics. He's sent more than a few opponents off the ice on stretchers over his career. Tonight will be a battle royale.

Coach's pump up speech lights a fire under our asses as we hit the ice to loosen up. Passing drills sharpen our timing, legs pumping to wake up our muscles. I can tell Riot is already

dialed in beside me, eyes icy, movements economical and precise. We make one hell of a forward line pairing when we're synced up. Tonight, we'll need to be a seamless unit.

As we run our final drills, the stadium starts to fill with students. The heavy beat of our goal song thunders through the speakers. Adrenaline spikes hot in my blood. Time to throw down.

We storm the ice for warmups and the crowd's insane. The energy in the packed barn is palpable, stoking our drive. We circle with purpose, passing hard and testing our edges. This is our fuckin' night.

The puck drops, and the battle begins.

Stormbridge comes out guns blazing. They set a vicious tempo from the first faceoff, bodies crashing and sticks flashing. We give as good as we get, our hits just as punishing. There's no easy ice tonight.

I feel Thompson's beady little eyes tracking me whenever we're on the ice together. Sizing me up, looking for a weak spot to exploit. The feeling's mutual, Dickface. I stare him down on my next shift, gaze promising retribution for any dirty hits on my teammates.

Sure as fuck, five minutes in, Thompson rams Riot hard into the boards away from the play. I'm moving before I realize it, ready to drop gloves and ruin this fucker's face. But Deck gets between us, urging me back.

"Not yet, Lancaster. Keep your cool," he warns under his breath. Cursing internally, I back off. But inside, I'm seething.

The first period continues heavy and contested. Both teams are dishing out bone-rattling hits, chasing down every loose puck. My shoulders ache from the abuse, breath sawing in my lungs. But our score is even at 2-2 heading into the break.

In the locker room, Coach reads us the riot act. "Too many damn penalties, boys," he snaps. "Stop retaliating and play your game. You're better than these Stormbridge pricks."

Around me, guys nod, faces screwed up in determination. Halftime pep talks from Riot, Deck and the other vets help

sharpen our focus for the next period.

I'm re-lacing my skates when Riot drops beside me, brows drawn in concentration as he re-tapes his stick.

"Thanks for keeping cool earlier," he says quietly, meeting my eyes. "Thompson was trying to bait you into a penalty."

I snort. "He's been targeting you all period. If that asshole tries it again, he's gonna find out what my fist tastes like."

Riot's lips quirk. "My knight in shining armor." The teasing tone doesn't match the heat in his eyes that makes my pulse stutter. I realize how close we're sitting, knees almost touching.

Yeah, I'm a little bit obsessed with my teammate since that kiss. Okay, more than a little.

If I'm being honest... I've been obsessed with him for years.

"Someone's gotta have your back out there," I mutter gruffly, dropping my gaze as warmth crawls up my neck.

The noise and chatter of the locker room fades around us. Riot's eyes stay intent on my face, searching. The memory of our scorching kiss crackles between us.

Slowly, he reaches out and grasps my hand, squeezing once. My breath catches at the contact, that simple touch lighting me up. His thumb brushes over my knuckles and I nearly groan.

"Two minutes, boys!"

We spring apart as Coach's warning penetrates the haze. Riot holds my gaze a second longer, eyes unreadable, before he grabs his helmet and heads for the ice. I take a deep breath, willing my pulse to steady.

Focus, Lancaster. Eye on the prize tonight.

The second period is faster, both teams trading chances as play opens up. But Thompson keeps gunning for Riot, using his bigger frame to knock him off the puck repeatedly.

My agitation mounts witnessing it. As Riot gets checked hard into the boards once again, I make eye contact with Thompson across the ice. His visor-shielded eyes gleam with malice. He wants a reaction from me. My blood boils, but I leash my temper. Not yet.

Our competitive game of cat and mouse continues, but the toll of Thompson's targeted hits is showing on Riot. He's a split-second slower to loose pucks, shoulders hunched against the next impact.

That's it. Thompson wants my attention? He fucking has it.

When he shoves Riot face-first into the boards after the whistle right in front of me, I snap.

My gloves and stick hit the ice as I beeline for Thompson. He turns just as I plow into him, my pent-up fury unleashed. We grapple viciously, trading punches as we crash to the ice.

My helmet goes flying as I wrench his jersey over his head to land furious rights to his ribs. Through the red haze, I'm dimly aware of both teams converging on us, but my sole focus narrows to making this fucker pay.

Suddenly, strong hands are dragging me off Thompson's bloodied face.

"Enough!" Riot's sharp voice cuts through my raging adrenaline. I strain against his hold on me as referees restrain a cursing Thompson.

"He's not worth it," Riot says low in my ear. "We need you out here."

I force a deep breath, glaring murder at Thompson as he's escorted off the ice. Riot keeps a firm grip on me until I stop fighting his hold. As the fury recedes, I become aware of stick taps on helmets and approving shouts from my teammates around us.

"Hell yeah, Lancaster!" Tris yells. "About damn time someone shut Thompson up."

"Five minutes, white! Two minutes, red," the referee barks out our respective penalties. I allow Riot to tug me toward our

bench, his hand warm on my back even through my pads. The contact grounds me, my pulse slowly settling.

Deck claps my shoulder as I sit. “That’s how you stand up for your teammates. Proud of you, Lancaster.”

I nod shortly, still vibrating with residual adrenaline. Coach passes me a towel for the blood trickling from my eyebrow and nose.

“Get cleaned up, son. Then make it count when you’re back out there.”

Through the mess of bodies and gear on the bench, I meet Riot’s eyes. He nods once, gratitude in his stare. Knowing I put that fucker Thompson in his place is worth any penalty minutes tonight.

The rest of the second period flies by. When I’m back on the ice, I feel energized and dialed the fuck in. Thompson doesn’t so much as glance my way, his bravado diminished.

Riot and I find our rhythm again, moving the puck seamlessly between us. Our earlier connection has magnified, senses attuned after my act of physical retaliation on his behalf. We put pressure on Stormbridge’s defense for the first time all night.

By the third period, we’ve got control of the game’s momentum. Tris buries a beauty cross-ice feed from me to put us up 4-3. The crowd is going ballistic, sensing the win within our grasp.

When the final buzzer sounds on our 5-3 victory, the entire stadium erupts. I’m crushed under the impact of my teammates’ celebrating embrace, their cheers deafening. The thrill of this hard-fought win under the lights leaves us all high.

In the locker room, celebration is in full swing. Tris busts out a secret beer stash and everyone is feeling loose, reliving the highlights from the game. This is the first time I’ve really felt like part of the team.

Across the rowdy room packed with half-naked guys, I don’t even notice any of them until Riot catches my eye. He

tips his beer at me in a silent toast, eyes gleaming. I grin and return the gesture. The heated memory of his hand at my back surfaces, and I glance away.

Deck calls for quiet, holding up his bottle. “Hells yes, boys. One of the toughest wins I can remember on this ice. Couldn’t have done it without each and every one of you.”

A roar goes up and bottles clink together. I swig my beer, savoring the bittersweet taste of victory. Deck’s eyes meet mine across the steamy locker room.

“And let’s hear it for Lancaster, who put his body on the line tonight to stand up for number twenty-nine!”

Another deafening cheer erupts as guys slap my back and shove more drinks into my hands. I knock bottles with Tris and the other forwards, their rowdy pride warming me from the inside.

The celebration eventually winds down as guys start peeling off toward the showers. Soon it’s just me and Riot left sitting in companionable silence, nursing our beers.

He glances over at me finally, eyes roaming my features. “That shiner bruising up nice?”

I probe the tender skin around my eye and laugh. “I’ve had worse, trust me.”

Riot’s expression sobers. Slowly, he reaches out and takes my chin in his hand, angling my face into the light to examine the damage. His touch ignites a simmer in my gut.

“Does it hurt much?” he asks quietly, thumb ghosting over the broken skin with surprising gentleness. I’m trying to play it cool, but he’s so close I shiver.

“I’ve had worse,” I repeat gruffly. Our faces are just inches apart, his scrutiny stripping me bare. I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows.

“Well, looks badass. Adds to your intimidation factor out there.”

His murmured compliment sinks into me, his fingers still cradling my jaw. I wet my dry lips with my tongue and his

heated stare tracks the movement.

“Riot...” I begin hoarsely.

He moves first, his mouth covering mine in a nuclear kiss. All the unsaid words and desires combust between us in this hidden corner of the locker room.

My fingers twist into the sweat-damp hair at the back of his neck as we devour each other breathlessly. The salt of his skin fills my senses. He kisses me fiercely, deeply, like he wants to crawl inside me. Like now that we’ve reached this point of no return, he intends to claim every inch of me.

I groan into his mouth as his tongue strokes mine. His hands grip almost painfully on my hips, hauling me closer until I’m nearly in his lap. Our gear is an unwieldy barrier between us that we’re both desperate to rip away.

At the sound of nearby voices and running showers, we tear ourselves apart. Disheveled and breathing hard, we sit frozen as two teammates walk past, absorbed in conversation.

Neither glance our way as they head for their lockers at the end of the long room. Once they disappear around the corner, Riot releases a shaky exhale. His mouth is kiss swollen and eyes volcanic, still devouring me from two feet away.

I clear my throat, looking down to hide the evidence of my arousal straining against my cup. We sit in silence that’s heavy with promise until the showers shut off one by one.

With a murmured goodnight, Riot grabs his gear bag and leaves. The brush of his fingers over my shoulder lingers long after he’s gone.

Alone now, I touch my still-buzzing lips in wonder. I can barely keep up with the transformation of my relationship with Riot in the weeks I’ve been here. I used to hate the guy... now I want to punch anyone who touches him and I’m getting addicted to the taste of him on my tongue.

It’s weird as fuck.

Shit. The only thing I know with certainty now is that Riot Kensington has somehow become my world off the ice. And

I'll be damned if I let anyone try to take him away from me.

Whatever this is growing rapidly out of control between us, there's no going back now. We're in dangerous, uncharted waters, but for once in my goddamn life, I'm not afraid of drowning.

Not with him by my side.

LONDON

I CAN STILL FEEL the sting of Thompson's knuckles splitting my eyebrow as I stare up at the ceiling above my bed. My bruised fists ache in turn, satisfyingly sore after the number I did on the bastard's face. We earned that win against Stormbridge through blood and sweat.

Rolling over with a groan, I grab my phone and navigate to the chat app, my thumb hovering over FrozenFire's icon. Talking to him always helps me process the chaos in my head. And after the turbulence of last night, I could use some clarity.

I type out a message, recounting the thrill of our narrow victory, the satisfying crunch of bone-on-bone hits, and the roar of the crowd shaking the rafters. But I leave out the undercurrent that's really throwing me off balance lately—whatever is sparking between me and Golden Boy. Frozen seems to read me so easily, like he's got some window into my scrambled thoughts. No need to stoke that fire just yet.

FrozenFire: Hell yeah, man, sounds legendary. Love hearing about your games, it's like I'm right there crushing beers in the stands lol

FrozenFire: Just be sure to take it easy too, though. Don't let the adrenaline steer you wrong after a fight like that.

Me: You know me, cool as ice. I play hard, but keep my head on straight.

But even as I type it, doubt creeps in. Is keeping my head on straight getting harder lately? Ever since I kissed the shit out of my teammate... twice?

Before I overthink it, I hit send.

FF's typing bubble lingers longer than normal. Oh shit, did he sense something between the lines?

FrozenFire: I feel you dude. Just watch that things don't get too heated with your teammates either, you know? Competitive fire is great but you don't wanna burn bridges.

I bristle instinctively at the implication.

Me: Hey I'd never put some petty beef over the team. You know me better than that.

FrozenFire: Totally. My bad, man. I know you've got your priorities straight. Was just checking in.

His quick reassurance eases my defensiveness. I shouldn't have snapped.

Me: All good bro ☐ Guess I'm still amped up from the fight lol. Appreciate you having my back.

FrozenFire: Anytime. Get some rest and enjoy the win. Til next time 🤝

I smile and send a fist bump emoji. Chatting with FF always helps me sort out the madness. I lean back in bed, tensions fading. Still uncertain what to do about my teammate stuff, but for now, I breathe a little easier.

Tossing the phone aside before I obsessively re-read our chat, I force myself out of bed. A hot shower helps ease my battered muscles while I try to keep my thoughts from wandering too close to a certain smug teammate. But the more I fight it, the more my traitorous mind replays moments from last night.

The brush of Riot's fingers over my shoulder as he left the locker room. Those drugging kisses in the shadowy corner that

pushed all rational thought from my brain. He gave me a once-over, his eyes lingering on my bare chest, and my fingers curled into fists because I wanted to touch him everywhere.

“What the hell are you doing?” I growl at myself, shutting off the now cold spray. Whatever Riot Kensington has awakened in me, I can’t let it derail our season, my future, *or* my sanity.

After throwing on some clothes, I shoot Knight a text to see if he wants to grab lunch off campus. Being around Riot right now is... complicated. And I’ve discovered Knight’s chill presence usually helps clear my headspace.

Twenty minutes later, I slide into the vinyl booth across from my friend in our favorite hole-in-the-wall spot near campus. Knight’s easy smile and the scent of greasy burgers immediately put me at ease. We exchange our standard bro-hug before falling into relaxed conversation.

“Been meaning to ask, what are your plans for the holiday break coming up?” I snatch a fry off his plate as I pose the question.

Knight glances away, uncharacteristically hesitant. “Heading home for a bit. Thought it was time to face the music, you know? Try to make patch shit up after everything that went down before I left. Talk some sense into my old man.”

I nod slowly, reading the shadows in his eyes. I don’t know what happened in his past, but based on the look in his eye, I’m not gonna pry. He’ll share if he wants to. “That’s real as fuck. Making peace is never easy, but I respect you for putting yourself out there.”

Knight’s mouth quirks. “What about you, big shot? Heading home or you sticking around here?”

The mere thought makes my shoulders tense. “Haven’t decided. Things are... complicated with my family right now.”

More like my mom’s between jobs because she got laid off again and I don’t wanna burden her with another mouth to

feed or make her feel guilty for not being able to do traditional Christmas shit.

Knight studies me with that too-perceptive gaze of his, like he's piecing together parts of me I'd rather stay buried. "You know," he finally says, "maybe you should bring someone with you. Could help smooth things over if you've got moral support, yeah?"

Too bad it's not that kind of complicated. I love my mom and my younger brother to death, but I don't want to burden them. Still, I *do* miss them...

I snort. "Who, you volunteering as tribute?"

But his expression remains thoughtful. "Why not bring Kensington along?"

I nearly choke on my bite of food. "Come again?"

"Hear me out," Knight says over my coughing. "You two clearly have unresolved shit. Maybe getting away from the pressures here will give you some fresh perspective. A neutral ground to bury the bad blood off the ice."

I stare at him in disbelief even as an instinctive part of me latches onto his logic. "You don't know Riot like I do. He'd never agree to that."

"Maybe not," Knight allows. "But at least extend the offer, right? Get him out of that giant cold-ass mansion. Let him see where you come from. Might help you both move forward, whatever's going on between you two."

I shift in my seat, equal parts intrigued and uneasy at the thought of Riot in my world. But Knight's reasoning lines up, even if it makes my palms sweat.

"Just think on it," he concludes gently. "Worst case, he says no. But you don't know unless you ask."

I nod slowly, thoughts churning as we switch to safer topics like Knight's holiday plans. His unwavering faith that I can mend this inexplicable tie between me and Riot plants a seed of hope. One that swells anxiously in my chest on the walk back to our apartment.

Can we sort through the bullshit if I let him in and we stand on equal footing?

Riot's already under my skin, so maybe it's time to let him deeper into my world, too.

I find Riot in the kitchen, scrolling through takeout options for dinner. His relaxed posture stiffens when I enter, eyes darting to and away from me. The electric current between us sparks to life the second we're in the same room together and it's hard as fuck to ignore it.

Clearing my throat, I lean against the counter opposite him. His Hollowgate Hockey t-shirt hugs his chest and shoulders and I have to tear my eyes away. "So, uh, random question for you."

Riot's sharply arched brow urges me on.

"Any plans for the holiday break coming up?" I force out casually. "I think most guys will be heading home or on vacation."

Riot shrugs one broad shoulder. "Parents are headed to the Swiss Alps to ski. Was just going to crash here, keep up with training."

I latch onto the opening. "Well, if you'd rather not stick around campus alone... you're welcome to come with me. To my family's place, I mean. It's not much, but the company's alright." I try for a teasing grin to downplay the enormity of the offer.

Riot stills, eyes narrowing. "Why would you invite me to your family's house?"

"Mostly so I don't have to face the guilt alone," I admit wryly. "Could be good to get a change of scenery too, yeah? Neutral ground and all."

He studies me for a long, uneasy moment. "You sure that's a good idea?"

My palms prickle with sweat, but I force a casual shrug. "Up to you. No pressure either way."

Riot's expression gives away nothing of his inner deliberations. The offer hangs heavily between us. Just when I'm sure he'll refuse, he exhales roughly.

"Yeah, alright. Beats sticking around here solo."

I blink, blindsided. "For real?"

Riot brushes past me to grab a protein shake from the fridge, that faint smirk playing about his lips.

"Don't make me change my mind, Hotshot."

Ignoring my racing pulse, I lift my chin. "Wouldn't dream of it, Golden Boy."

We lock eyes, the weight of this leap into the unknown passing between us. I wonder if I just lit the accelerant on whatever's smoldering out of control between us.

But when Riot turns away, the set of his shoulders looks looser somehow. Like he's equally relieved at the prospect of a chance to clear the chaos choking the air we share.

Or maybe he's just as excited as I am to not have to spend a week apart wondering what the other person's doing... or if they're thinking about you.

Fuck, I'm glad he's coming. I think I might miss the asshole if he wasn't.

I blow out a long breath as I retreat to my room, nerves and anticipation coursing through me in equal measure. However this plays out over the break, one thing's for damn sure—Riot's about to get a deep dive into my life in a way no one else ever has.

And I think I might like it.

RIOT

THE RUMBLE of my Maserati's engine fades as we roll to a stop outside a weathered three-story walk-up in Westbrook Heights. Engine idling, I take in the peeling paint, barred windows, and neglected courtyard with its browned grass and empty swing set.

It's a far cry from my family's expansive estate in the wealthy suburbs. For all the money and privilege I was born into, I know nothing of the resilience required to thrive in a place like this. A twinge of unease penetrates my designer clothes and privileged mindset.

Beside me, London shifts, eyes trained forward. "Home sweet home," he mutters.

I glance over, surprised by the defensiveness in his tone. Like he's daring me to judge this place that shaped him.

"It suits you," I offer sincerely. The quiet strength embodied by these buildings perfectly mirrors the steely determination I've come to admire in London.

He responds with a complicated smile, but his shoulders relax a bit.

Grabbing our bags, we make our way inside. The stairwell carries a medley of cooking spices, marijuana smoke, and laundry detergent. Muffled salsa music and argumentative voices drift from behind closed doors. The building thrums with working-class life.

On the third floor, London unlocks the last door and steps back for me to enter. “Mom, we’re here!” he calls out.

My palms prickles strangely as I follow him inside. Meeting his family feels oddly... intimate. Significant. I wish I could tell him how much this means, that he’s letting me into this part of himself. But the words stick in my throat.

The living room is modest but homey, with a squashy floral sofa and paintings by local artists. Framed photos cover every surface, a visual tapestry of London’s life.

Before I can examine them, quick footsteps rush our way. A petite woman with London’s hazel eyes and a younger boy who’s nearly his spitting image hurry over.

“There’s my boy,” his mom gushes, pulling London into a fierce hug he returns just as tightly. His obvious adoration makes warmth bloom in my chest.

The younger one eyes me curiously as they separate. London clears his throat. “Uh, so this is my friend from school, Riot.”

Friend. Right. I swallow my inexplicable pang of disappointment. What was I hoping for, London to introduce me as his boyfriend? The thought catches me off guard. Since when does the word *boyfriend* in relation to London Lancaster make my heart race?

Or in relation to any guy?

I really need to set aside time to figure out what the hell I’m doing with him.

I paste on an easy smile, extending my hand. “Riot Kensington, pleasure to meet you both.”

“Well, aren’t you polite as pie!” His mom clasps my hand warmly. “I’m Aubrey, and this is London’s brother Leo.”

Leo’s clearly a few years younger than London and still has some growing left to do, but the family resemblance is clear from his tousled blond hair to his quick, assessing hazel gaze.

“So you’re the rival, huh?” Leo asks, arms crossed over his skinny chest. “London told me all about you.”

The hint of warning in his tone makes me bite back a laugh. Clearly the protective younger brother role. London rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning.

“Only shitty stuff, I’m sure,” I reply lightly. “All true, of course. Your brother and I have clashed on the ice more than once.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” Leo scrutinizes me a moment longer before breaking into a sudden grin.

“Wanna see London’s baby pictures? He was such an awkward kid. Braces, acne, the whole shebang.”

“Hey now—” London protests, but Leo’s already dragging me toward the photos. Chuckling under London’s baleful stare, I let myself be pulled along.

Leo points out shot after entertaining shot—a toothless, grinning toddler London clutching a hockey stick, awkward preteen London scowling under a truly tragic 90s throwback bowl cut. Each offers a window into the boy who became the man stirring up feelings that confuse the shit out of me.

The afternoon passes quickly, lunch filled with Aubrey’s stories of London’s escapades and early hockey exploits. Leo pesters me with questions about university life and I sense his thirst to experience the wider world. London remains uncharacteristically quiet, eyes lingering on me anytime I interact with his family.

Under the table, my fingers find his and curl around them. He flips his palm and weaves our fingers together. I’m surprised when London doesn’t pull away, and instead his palm is warm and solid against mine. I’m soaking up these moments, wishing I could maintain this easy connection between us once we’re back on campus. London’s slowly letting his guard down and I’m fucking here for it one hundred percent.

After lunch, London suggests we take a walk, and he grabs my hand the second we step out onto the sidewalk, like he

couldn't stand the two minutes between when we got up from the table and he had to stop touching me until now.

The frigid air outside shocks my lungs, but London seems invigorated by it, leading us with purpose. He only releases my hand when we reach a sad little community rink encircled by a chain-link fence.

"Ta da. My home away from home as a kid," London announces wryly, sweeping his arm at the unfortunate rink.

I take it in—the scarred ice, rusting goalposts, and wooden boards with peeling blue paint. Cracks web the concrete nearby from stubborn weeds poking through.

Everything about this place screams neglect. Except for the freshly shoveled snow by the gate, revealing it still gets use. My throat tightens, picturing young London spending hours here, seeking solace on this beat up ice.

London leans against the gate, lost in memory. "I'd sneak over here after school and skate for hours sometimes. The owner didn't mind, it wasn't like crowds were lining up to use it. Gave me an escape when things got chaotic at home."

His smile holds old hurts and ferocious longing. This place shaped the fire in him. Forged his love for the ice not in spite of its imperfections, but because of them.

Overcome by the significance of him bringing me here, I wrap my arm around his waist and pull him into me. "You persevered because of places like this. They made you the player you are. The person you are."

London searches my face, defenses cracking. "Everything I have is because I didn't give up." His voice holds quiet conviction. "That's why I can't stop fighting now."

"I know," I breathe. And I do. That inner flame drives him, even as it threatens to consume him from within. I wish I possessed half his strength of spirit.

It hits me then: I'm really fucking proud of him.

We stand in charged silence outside that beat-up rink of London's past. I'm struggling to express how much this

glimpse into his world means to me, and so I say nothing.

This newfound closeness frightens me, even as I crave more. What is it about London Lancaster that manages to shatter my walls and rattle my composure? He's a force of nature, bending me to his ferocious will.

I want to grasp the full truth struggling to break through the surface. My heart pounds with it, like the too-full stands before a championship faceoff. But the time's not right yet.

For now, all I can do is meet London's eyes and hope he reads the depth of my gratitude. The rest will come soon enough if we keep circling this fragile ice between us. I know my truth won't stay hidden in the shadows forever. Not with him drawing it inexorably into the light.

BACK AT THE APARTMENT, AUBREY'S GETTING DINNER READY in the tiny kitchen. London drifts over to help chop vegetables while Leo sets the table. Watching them, I'm struck by inspiration.

"You all don't have a Christmas tree yet, right?"

London glances over, wary. "Wasn't really in the budget this year. We'll decorate other ways."

I wave him off. "Nope. We're getting a tree." I turn to his brother. "Leo, feel like picking out a tree with me? Your brother can put those muscles to use getting it upstairs."

Leo's pumped, but London looks pissed. "Riot, that's not —"

"I want to," I insist, holding his stare. *Don't fight me on this. Just let me do this one thing for you.*

Finally, London sighs, nodding as his eyes soften. "A real tree would be nice," Aubrey says softly. "Thank you, Riot. That's very kind."

Grinning, Leo tosses me my coat. London shakes his head, but I see his reluctant smile.

Leo bounds down the steps of the apartment building toward my shiny black Maserati parked at the curb.

“Whoa, nice ride!” He runs an admiring hand along the glossy hood. “A Maserati, huh? Now this is a sweet car.”

Opening the doors, I see the look of wonder on his face and can’t help but chuckle. “One of the few perks of being a Kensington.”

We climb inside, the leather seats creaking. Leo props his feet up on the dashboard like he owns the place already. Shaking my head, I start the throaty engine.

“So what’s your deal, anyway?” Leo asks as I navigate the slushy streets toward the tree lot. “You and London used to hate each other, right?”

I grip the steering wheel. “Let’s just say we’ve had our differences on the ice. But lately that’s been changing.”

He snorts. “Into what, friends?”

I nearly swerve at Leo’s directness. The kid doesn’t mince words. I clear my throat, avoiding his piercing stare. “We’re... still figuring that out, honestly.”

Leo seems to accept my evasion, launching into speculation about what model car he’ll buy when he’s rich as we pull into the crowded tree lot.

We wander the rows of fragrant firs, Leo giving each tree a critical inspection. I trail behind, laughing under my breath. His enthusiasm takes me back to childhood trips with my mom, when everything was still magical. When she still cared enough to try.

“What was London like growing up?” I ask as Leo circles a big ass Douglas fir.

His eyes brighten at the chance to share. “Oh man, London was the coolest big brother. He always let me tag along to play street hockey with his friends. And he’d sneak me candy from the corner store even when Mom said no and it was his last dollar.”

Leo's admiration and love for his brother washes over me. The more I learn about the forces that shaped London, the more I want to unravel the complex man beneath the bravado and sharpened edges.

"What about you?" Leo tosses back. "Any embarrassing stories from when you were a kid?"

I rub my neck, chuckling. "Well, there was this one Christmas where I was so eager to show off my new hockey stick that I swung it in the house and shattered an antique vase..."

As we browse, we share stories from our childhood and it's like we've known each other forever. With Leo, it's simple in a way it rarely is for me. I find myself hoping this tentative bond outlasts the holidays.

"This one!" Leo proclaims finally, patting a full 6-foot fir. I admire his choice, awash in nostalgia and promise. Together, we haul it to the counter to purchase.

I feel his excitement like a static charge as we haul it to my car and strap it to the roof. I'm not even bothered by the scratches the branches are gonna leave on my paint job.

On the drive back, I'm trying to figure out how to distract London from getting pissed off by me buying his family the tree. He's got a shit ton of pride, and I know this is going to rub him the wrong way. But I want to experience this family tradition with him. We need to regain some of that childlike wonder we've lost. We're barely adults, and I'm tired of hating the holidays.

London waits on the front steps when we return, messy blond hair under that goddamn backwards hat, eyeing the strapped-down tree skeptically, even as his lips quirk. "Not too shabby, Golden Boy."

I smirk, admiring the play of his leg muscles as he hauls the tree upstairs. Together, we maneuver it into the living room. Leo blasts cheesy Christmas songs, fishing dusty ornaments and strings of lights out of a box.

We make quick work decorating the fragrant fir in strings of popcorn and handmade ornaments from London and Leo's childhood. Leo nearly takes out the whole tree showing me how to loop the lights, but his laughter fills the little apartment with warmth.

This ritual feels sacred, fuzzy nostalgia coating my insides like hot cider. I meet London's eyes and find my contentment mirrored on his face. For a beautiful, fleeting moment, the chasm between our worlds doesn't seem so vast.

After dinner, Leo disappears into his bedroom while London and I fall into familiar silence while tidying up. The undercurrent charging the air all the time crackles more than ever between us.

Finally settled on the lumpy sofa, London scrubs both hands down his face before meeting my gaze. "Thank you for being here," he says gruffly. "It means a lot, even if..."

He trails off, but I hear the rest. Even if you could've spent your time in a mansion instead of a rundown two-bedroom apartment with a thrift store couch.

I try to tell him that his world means more than mine ever could. That the love and character etched into these walls and people outweighs any privilege. My tongue feels clumsy forming the words, but something in London's stare tells me he understands anyway.

London studies me, eyes glittering in the Christmas tree lights. "So, what's the real story with your family? All those cracks you hide under the whole Kensington pedigree and shit."

I stiffen, pulse kicking. I kept the dark side of being a Kensington hidden for so long, but London sees through it all. Those piercing eyes strip away my polished facade.

"It's complicated," I hedge, fingers shredding a loose thread on my shirt.

London leans forward, perpetual intensity radiating off him. "Yeah? Try me, Golden Boy. I know complicated family bullshit, remember?"

His challenge and the hand he puts on my knee spur me on. I meet his stare. "My father expects nothing short of perfection. And if you disappoint, you're dead to him." I give a bleak laugh. "Guess I've been a ghost for a long time."

My programmed composure slips, just as it does whenever London Lancaster looks at me for too long. He has a way of unraveling my seams, exposing the fragile soul inside.

London's thumb strokes over my leg, soothing and electric. "He's still got you chasing his bullshit approval though, doesn't he? I see it in how hard you push yourself."

I look away, hating the truth in his words. My next admission comes out in a hoarse whisper. "And my mother... she checked out years ago. At the bottom of a bottle, or whatever her poison of the day is."

London squeezes my leg, grounding me. His own gaze holds old hurts. "That's a shitty hand you got dealt, Kensington. But it doesn't define you, alright? You got away, made your own path."

My throat tightens at the absolution in his tone. I cover his hand with my own, our fingers lacing together. "I didn't do it alone. But yeah... I'm trying."

London holds my stare, fire sparking beneath the vulnerability we've traded. "Just don't forget you've got people in your corner now. Including me."

The simple vow warms my soul and soothes my past hurts. London makes me feel like I can conquer the darkness.

What is it about him? I find myself letting my guard down and admitting weaknesses no one else knows and all he has to do is look at me and I want to spill all my secrets. Somehow, baring myself brings relief rather than shame. Like cutting into an infected wound to start the healing.

With him, I think that kind of healing may finally be within reach.

We're both broken boys underneath the bravado, aren't we? Carrying our pain and anger onto the ice, desperate to

rewrite our stories. Is that why we clash so spectacularly? Because we're afraid to see ourselves reflected in each other?

London's hand squeezes mine. "I'm glad you're here for the holidays, Ri. Dunno why exactly but... having you here feels right somehow."

My breath catches hearing him speak my own feelings out loud. It's crazy how sharing this glimpse of his life changed everything for me. Maybe for him, too.

I rub my thumb across his knuckles. "There's nowhere I'd rather be."

The admission hangs between us, like every time we open up, this new bond between us knots us tighter together. London squeezes once before releasing my hand.

"Come on, help me put Leo's presents under the tree before we crash." There's a playful lightness in London's eyes now that warms me more than any fire could.

I really want to kiss him.

I follow him down the short hall to Leo's room, leaning against the doorframe as London arranges a couple of wrapped packages under the glittering tree. Watching his strong hands caress each gift, I'm struck by a startling but certain realization:

I want to be more than just his friend, rival, or teammate. London Lancaster has a magnetic pull on me that goes beyond any of those roles. And it terrifies me even as my entire being strains toward him.

It's no use resisting gravity. In London's presence, I'm helpless but to fall. I only hope that he'll be there to break it. All I know is my path is leading me to him. Where it ends, I have no fucking clue.

London glances up, catching my stare. He's not wearing a shirt and that damn hat is driving me insane. "What?"

I shake my head. There's a traffic jam of thoughts stuck in my throat. I can't tell him any of this shit. I don't fully understand these feelings myself yet. But the words are

coming, as sure and relentless as the tide. I won't be able to hold everything back. The entirety of my feelings is going to spill out onto him, and soon.

But tonight, it's enough to have London lead me to the couch, pulling a blanket over us and nudging me to switch off the lamp. No giant, empty mansion could feel more like home than this.

And that scares the fuck out of me.

London nestles against my chest, hat tossed on the table and head tucked under my chin. I breathe him in, the subtle scent of cedar and musk that's intrinsically him. He smells like winter.

He smells like home.

Fuck.

"This okay?" London's voice rumbles against me.

"Perfect," I assure him, fingers trailing up and down the warm skin of his back. He hums contentedly, the sound vibrating through me.

My legs tangle with his under the blanket as we shift to get comfortable. Outside, flurries swirl in the glow of streetlights, but tucked away here, a sense of peace steals over me. With London's steady heartbeat against my ribcage, the stresses of life feel distant.

"What Christmas movie should we fall asleep to?" I murmur into his hair.

London chuckles. "Lemme guess, you like the cheesy shit like *It's a Wonderful Life*." He tilts his head up, eyes playful. "But what about *Die Hard*?"

"*Die Hard*'s not a Christmas movie."

He sits up with a gasp. "Bullshit. Don't fuck with me, Kensington. I will die on this hill."

I can't help it. I laugh my ass off at the death glare he's aiming my way. "Pick another movie."

"*Die Hard 2*?"

I make an exaggerated noise of protest and he grins. “Fine, fine. Elf? That one always makes me laugh.”

“Solid choice.” London reaches for the remote, pulling up the movie and settling back against me. As the opening scenes play, his fingers trail absently along the ink on my arm.

The familiar comedy and London’s touches, both comforting and electric, lull me into a state of blissful contentment. Snow continues to fall outside our blanket cocoon. London’s occasional laughter against my chest makes me smile.

By the time Buddy starts enthusiastically decorating Gimbles, London’s breaths have deepened into sleep. I give him a light kiss on his hair, breathing him in, feeling grateful for this special holiday moment he invited me to share.

As my own eyes grow heavy, the certainty from earlier echoes through me again. Here, wrapped up with this maddening, complex, perfect man that I used to hate, is exactly where I’m meant to be.

LONDON

STARING out at the snow drifting down outside my window, my mind keeps flashing back to winter break. Riot Kensington decorating a Christmas tree up in our run-down apartment. Charming my mom with his polished manners and flashing that million-dollar smile. The two of us curled up under a blanket on the couch, his steady heartbeat under my ear lulling me to sleep.

Hard to believe it was just a week ago that Riot and I were waking up together on the lumpy pull-out couch at my family's place. Now here we are, back in our cramped apartment on campus.

The rest of the holiday week with Riot was awesome. Building snow forts in the park with my brother even though we're all too old for that shit, and pelting Riot with snowballs until he was soaked and freezing. Wolfing down leftover turkey sandwiches at two a.m. when we both got the munchies. Riot's trying to freestyle rap to one of Leo's beats, making my mom crack up. Moments I already miss.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't mess with my head, having Riot share that private glimpse into my world. Seeing where I came from, how the other half lives. It cranked up the heat on the mysterious pull between me and Golden Boy.

The shrieking of my alarm jolts me back to reality. Right, no more cozy holiday bubble. Now it's back to classes, hockey, and Riot as my teammate, not... whatever we're starting to become.

What *even* is this?

I don't fucking know.

A smile tugs at my lips even as my pulse starts to race. Having him with me over the holiday felt right in a way I can't explain. Like I've been waiting for the missing piece that is Riot Kensington to slide into place.

Shaking off those dangerous thoughts, I haul myself out of bed. Riot's already up, judging by the fact his door's wide open but his bed's empty. He's probably gone for one of his relentless morning runs. The dude never skips a day and he's got the body to show for it.

It's cold as fuck outside and I'm skipping a run in favor of the stationary bike today for sure.

After a quick shower, I throw on jeans and a thermal shirt. As I'm tugging on my boots, Riot walks in, skin flushed from the cold. His fitted black Henley clings to every sculpted muscle and my mouth goes dry.

"Morning," he says briskly, yanking off his shoes. "You ready for class?"

That's right. We have Literature together this morning. The thought of sitting next to Riot, way too aware of his every movement and listening to his voice, makes my palms prickle and I swallow hard.

"Yeah, let me grab a protein shake first. You want one?" My voice comes out weirdly strained.

"Sure, thanks. I'm gonna jump in the shower real quick. Give me ten."

Riot disappears into the bathroom, and I slump against the counter, pulse racing. The thought of him naked and wet just feet away makes my dick hard enough to ache. I make both of our shakes, willing my cock to behave.

Maybe a cold shower of my own is in order. A long, lonely, very cold shower to make it through the day sitting next to Riot without doing something stupid like shoving him up against the wall and—

The shower shuts off and I squeeze my eyes shut, willing my cock to knock its shit off. I need to stay in control. You got this, London. You're not gonna jump your teammate, even if he is tempting as fuck.

Riot emerges in a cloud of steam that smells like his minty body wash, raking a hand through his damp hair. Droplets cling to his sharp jawline and full lips. He didn't shave today so dark stubble dots his jaw and I wanna rub against it until it hurts.

I can't help but stare, a flush creeping up my neck. Riot's lean but muscular, his abs and pecs flexing as he reaches for his protein shake. The tattoo on his neck bobs as he gulps it down, making me want to trace it with my tongue.

Something inside of me snaps and before I can think better of it, his shake is dropping to the hardwoods as I slam him up against the wall, needing to taste him so fucking bad I'm shaking.

Riot grunts in surprise, but then his hands are fisting in my shirt and my hair, and he's kissing me back with a desperate intensity that makes my head spin. His lips are soft and full, tasting like mint and his shake. His stubble scrapes my chin and I groan into his mouth, grinding shamelessly against him.

My dick's so goddamn hard, I'm surprised it's not tearing through my jeans.

"London," he gasps, pulling back just enough to meet my eyes. "What are we doing here?"

"I don't know, but I don't want to stop." My voice is ragged with need. "You make me crazy."

Riot's fingers tangle harder in my hair, pulling me back to his mouth. "Fuck, you're driving me insane, too."

His tongue slides over mine, and I moan as our hips rock together. Riot's cock is just as hard as mine, the thick length of it pressing against me through the towel hanging precariously low on his hips.

I've never felt anything like this. Never thought I'd find another guy's dick hot, but here I am. None of the girls I've

hooked up with in the past ever made me this hard.

“We should stop,” he pants between kisses. “We have class.”

“Fuck class.” I nip at his bottom lip, reveling in his sharp intake of breath. “I want you, Riot. So fucking bad.”

He groans and shoves his tongue into my mouth again. The kiss is sloppy and painful and so fucking perfect. My hands find his towel and yank it off, baring him to my hungry gaze.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, taking in the sight of his long, thick cock jutting out from his sculpted body. It’s pierced, flushed pink and dripping pre-cum, begging for my tongue to lick up every goddamn drop.

My mouth literally waters, even if I have no idea what I’m doing.

Riot’s eyes are wild as he watches me drop to my knees in front of him, desperate to taste him. I’m freaking out a bit since I’ve never done this, but I’m not about to let that stop me.

“You’re not allowed to say shit if I’m bad at this,” I warn him, voice shaking.

“London,” Riot growls, fingers tangling in my hair again. “You could be terrible at sucking dick and I’d still come in two seconds.”

I grin up at him. “You a two pump chump, Golden Boy?”

He rolls his eyes, but his cock twitches against my cheek, the metal of his piercing hot. “Just suck my fucking dick already.”

When I wrap my lips around the tip of his cock, Riot’s fingers tighten in my hair with a groan that makes my own dick throb.

His piercing rubs against my tongue as I take him deeper, loving the salty taste of his skin. He’s so hard and smooth, his cock pulsing with need as I take him as deep as I can, gagging because he’s too fucking big and I’m a total rookie at this.

“Fuck, London,” he groans, hips jerking. “Your mouth feels so good.”

I hum around him, loving how his cock fills me up until I’m drooling down my chin. My dick aches in my jeans, but I don’t dare touch myself. This is for Riot, showing him how much I want him, even if we never speak of it again.

I bob my head faster, sucking him deep and swirling my tongue around his piercing. His fingers tighten in my hair, sending sparks of pain through me that just make me harder.

Riot’s hips roll forward, fucking my mouth with quick thrusts. I can’t believe I’m sucking off Riot Kensington. This is fucking insane.

“What are you doing to me?” he groans. I glance up and his eyes are blazing like a fucking inferno down at me as I try to think about what I’ve liked when chicks have blown me in the past and do that to him. My fist wraps around his base and I stroke him in time with my mouth, making him curse under his breath.

My jaw hurts, but there’s no fucking way I’m stopping.

“London,” he growls. “I’m gonna come.”

His words gave me goosebumps. It’s fucking weird to think it, but I want to see what his cum tastes like.

With a strangled groan, his cock pulses in my mouth, and hot cum spurts over my tongue. It’s salty and bitter and so goddamn perfect I moan around him as he fills my mouth and I swallow as much as I can.

When he’s finally spent, I pull off of him, cum dripping down my chin. He stares down at me, eyes hazy with bliss and something like awe.

Then he reaches down and uses his fingers to swipe his cum off my chin and shove them into my mouth. “Suck.”

I do, getting lost in the taste of him as he watches me with dark eyes.

“You’re fucking incredible,” he murmurs, voice hoarse. Then he pulls me to my feet and kisses me hard, licking his

own cum off my tongue until I'm dizzy and so goddamn horny I think I might die.

Riot's fingers find the button on my jeans and pop it open. "My turn."

I lean against the wall, legs shaking as he sinks to his knees in front of me and yanks my zipper down.

"Fuck, Golden Boy," I choke out as his hot mouth engulfs my cock. He sucks me deep, his tongue teases the underside of my dick in a way that makes my balls tighten.

His hands grip my hips, holding me in place as he swallows every inch of me, making me see stars. I can't believe Riot Kensington is blowing me, his lips stretched around my dick like he fucking loves it.

"You sure you've never sucked cock before, Kensington?" I say as he licks my dick like an ice cream cone.

He chuckles, and it vibrates through me. "Maybe I've done some research."

I don't know if that's true or not, and right now I don't fucking care. All I know is that his mouth feels so good on me that I'm already on the edge.

Then Riot's fingers find my balls and roll them gently and I'm coming with a shout down his throat, my cum spurting across his tongue in wave after wave of mind-blowing bliss. I didn't even have time to warn him.

He swallows every drop, eyes locked on mine, and when he pulls off, his lips are swollen and wet. He looks destroyed, and I can't believe I had any part in making him that way.

Riot rises to his feet, pressing a soft kiss to my lips before pulling back to meet my gaze. "We should probably get to class."

I blink at him, still reeling from the best blow job of my life. "Uh yeah, right." I tuck myself back into my jeans and kiss the shit out of him before slapping his bare ass as he turns to get dressed. I clean up his spilled protein shake and make him another one.

He steps out of his room looking like nothing ever happened between us. Like we didn't just suck each other off in our tiny apartment. But I know it did, and the memory of his cum on my tongue makes me grin.

I wanna do it again.

It's gonna be a long fucking day.

Riot cocks a brow at me as I hand him his shake, but he doesn't say anything but a murmured *thanks* as he grabs his backpack. His dark hair is messy like he just got fucked, and his neck tattoo peeks out the top of his shirt. I wanna lick it.

His wintry scent hits me when he brushes past to open the door, and I nearly sway into him. Fuck, now I'm acting like some clingy chick.

We decide to walk to campus rather than drive, enjoying the brisk winter air. Next to me, Riot looks unfairly hot with his stubble and his tattoos and his long designer coat. He comes across aloof and untouchable, but I'm starting to see another side of him that he only seems to show me when we're alone.

We make it just before class starts and slide into two seats in the last row. A couple of giggling girls nearby keep trying to catch Riot's eye, but his attention stays locked on me. As the lecture begins, I quickly lose focus. Riot's commanding presence beside me consumes my all of my senses, drawing my eyes to him again and again. The clean lines of his jaw, the way he rolls his fancy pen between his long, tattooed fingers.

Riot catches me staring and leans in close. "See something you like, Hotshot?" he murmurs, lips quirking.

I hold his simmering gaze. "Maybe. Although those chicks seem pretty into the view, too."

Riot glances their way dismissively before focusing back on me. "They're not my type."

"No? And what's your type, Kensington?" I ask softly.

Riot's eyes darken, dropping to my mouth. "I'm pretty sure you know, but just in case... Blondes with killer hazel eyes."

I shiver at his husky voice. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I do know. And it seems I'm far from alone in finding Riot irresistible. Half the people in this school want to fuck him. But for now at least, his attention is all mine.

I force my eyes forward, trying desperately to focus on the lecture and not the electricity ricocheting between Riot and me.

By the time class ends, I'm wound up and so goddamn hard it hurts. I rise and have to adjust myself before the entire room gets a look at my dick. I need to put space between me and Riot before I do something stupid, like shove him up against the wall and—

“Hey, wait up,” Riot calls after me. I stop reluctantly, pulse already pounding as he approaches. “Let’s grab some lunch. I saw a decent-looking cafe just off campus yesterday.”

Everything in me wants to refuse. Being alone with him right now seems like a spectacularly bad idea. But Riot’s eyes gleam with that familiar challenge and my traitorous mouth is already agreeing.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re seated across from each other in a cozy cafe and this feels a whole fucking lot like a date. I cradle my black coffee, avoiding Riot’s intense stare. The soft chatter of other diners and indie music in the background aren’t doing anything to relieve the tension.

I clear my throat. “So, uh, how’s your bacon and egg sandwich? Looks good.” *Small talk, Lancaster. Keep it safe.*

“Cut the bullshit, London,” Riot says bluntly after swallowing a bite. “We gonna talk about what’s going on here or just pretend there’s nothing between us?”

My jaw clenches. Trust Riot not to tiptoe around the giant fucking elephant between us.

“I mean, there’s definitely... something,” I hedge. “I just don’t know what the hell we’re doing, Ri.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Oh, you don’t blow all your roommates, then?”

I flip him off and he laughs.

“Maybe we need to lay it all out there. See where we both stand.”

Despite my nerves, I meet his stare. Once we cross this line, there’s no going back. But locking away my tangled feelings for Riot is slowly choking me. Maybe the truth will set us free.

“Alright,” I breathe. “Cards on the table. But not here.”

Riot’s eyes darken, reading my intention. He throws some bills down and we head out into the brisk afternoon. I don’t know where we’re going exactly, just that it needs to be private.

Eventually, we come across a narrow alley running between buildings. Glancing around, I tug Riot into it. He comes willingly, expression unreadable.

Out of sight from prying eyes, I lean back against the brick, heart hammering. Riot braces one hand beside my head, caging me in. His eyes bore into me, waiting.

“Right, confession time,” I force out. “Here’s the thing. I can’t stop thinking about you. About what it all means. About how I want your dick in my mouth again. How I want to kiss you and fucking own you. It’s messing with my head and throwing me off my game.”

Riot steps closer. “You think it’s been easy for me? I can’t focus for shit lately with you constantly in my head.” His free hand wraps around my throat, inked fingers cold from the air. “I don’t know what power you have over me, Lancaster. But I can’t resist it anymore. I’m strong, but not strong enough for that.”

His quiet admission emboldens me. “Part of me is fucking terrified by this,” I confess. “It could change everything if anyone found out.” I wet my lips and his eyes track the movement like he’s hunting prey. “But trying to stay away from you isn’t working. I don’t think I want it to.”

Riot’s fingers tighten, eyes burning into me. “Are you saying what I think?”

My next breath shudders out. “That I want this? Want to see where this thing between us goes?” I press my palm to his chest, feel his frantic heart matching mine. “Yeah. I’m saying that, Golden Boy.”

A rupture seems to go through Riot at my words. In a flash, his mouth is on mine, hot and demanding. I groan into the kiss, senses overwhelmed by the taste of him and his wintry scent. My fists bunch in his shirt, dragging him closer.

We kiss hungrily, months of suppressed cravings and tension exploding between us now that we’re officially giving in. My hands grasp desperately at his shirt, dragging him against me so there’s no space between us. Riot pins my wrist to the brick wall, taking control as I groan into his devouring mouth.

He kisses me like he’s been starving, and I kiss him back with the same intensity. I strain against his hold and Riot pushes me harder into the wall, his muscular thigh thrusting between my legs. A choked moan escapes my throat at the dizzying friction, which Riot eagerly swallows.

“I want you so fucking bad,” he growls against my swollen lips. “Needed to hear you say it.”

“I want this, Ri. Want you,” I breathe raggedly.

Riot’s eyes blaze into mine, dark with lust and promise. His next scorching kiss steals my breath and weakens my knees. I’m drunk on him, on the rush of our mutual cravings.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, the same exhilaration and fear shine in Riot’s eyes that must be in mine.

“People will judge us if they find out,” he rasps. “They won’t understand.”

I lace our fingers, heart swelling with this newfound connection. “Doesn’t matter. It’s you and me now. We’ll figure the rest out.”

Riot searches my face, then nods slowly. “Together then. You and me against the world, Hotshot.”

His vow sends warmth curling through me despite the winter chill. I know this won't be easy or likely accepted where either of us wants to go in the pros. But Riot's palm in mine feels destined, like coming home.

We leave the alley and walk back to campus hand in hand, only letting go when we're close enough to run into people we might know. Tomorrow, everything between us goes back to being a secret. But tonight, I fall asleep in Riot's bed without a single fuck to give.

RIOT

THE RHYTHMIC POUNDING of my feet on the treadmill does nothing to quiet my racing thoughts. I increase the incline, relishing the burn in my calves and lungs. Physical pain I can handle. It's the mess in my head that's slowly unraveling me.

With a frustrated grunt, I hop off and head for the stationary bikes instead. A familiar figure is already there, pedaling at a steady clip.

"Hey Deck," I greet my friend and captain.

Deck glances over with a nod. "Kensington. You're looking intense today."

"Just one of those days," I mutter, taking the bike beside him. We fall into our usual rhythm, the familiar hum of the wheels and motion of our legs oddly soothing.

I keep replaying moments from the holiday week with London. Taking turns beat boxing with his brother Leo until we were all breathless with laughter. London trying and failing to teach me how to make his grandma's famous mac and cheese. Getting caught in an intense snowball fight on campus, the two of us collapsing behind a tree, soaked, freezing our asses off but happy. Each memory leaves me craving more. There's an ease to our... whatever we are that we've found over the break that I'm desperate not to lose.

And when he blew me a couple of days ago... I almost lost my goddamn mind. I have no idea what I'm doing trying to be with a guy, let alone my rival. Though these days he feels less like a rival and more like... everything.

If only it were that simple. Ever since we got back, I can't stop thinking about my online friendship with "FallingDown." The parallels to my own conversations with London are uncanny with things happening in our lives. And then there's the connection we share, our love for hockey, and some of the phrases he uses.

Fuck, could London be FallingDown?

No, that's crazy... right?

My pulse picks up. I have to get this off my chest or it's going to eat me alive.

"Hey Deck, can I run something by you?" I blurt out.

Deck shoots me a sidelong glance. "Sure man, what's up?"

I grip the handles, steeling myself. No names, but just enough truth. "So I have this... online friend I chat with sometimes. We have this great connection around hockey. Only lately, things in real life make me wonder if he might be someone I actually know."

Deck's brows rise, but he simply nods for me to continue.

"And it's messing with my head, you know? I value what we have online, but now things feel... complicated." I wet my lips. "Because if it is who I think, then I've basically been lying to him since I figured it out."

Which, admittedly, was pretty much a week ago. Still feels shitty.

I'm tense as fuck as I wait for Deck's reaction. He pedals silently for a minute, mulling it over.

"Well, you said you think it might be someone you know. But you don't actually know for sure, right?" Leave it to Warren Decker to zero in on the crux of my issue.

I rake a hand through my damp hair. "I mean, no. It's just a suspicion based on things he's said."

Deck nods. "Then maybe don't jump to conclusions yet. Keep talking to the guy. See if you can get more solid proof before saying anything."

I chew my lip. He has a point. “But don’t you think that’s kind of... unethical? If I really believe it’s someone I know, then I’m basically lying to him by not saying anything.”

At this, Deck shoots me a look before shaking his head. “No, you’re right. If you truly think this online guy is someone in your life, you shouldn’t keep talking to him that way. It’d be dishonest, man.”

His blunt words hit me squarely in the chest. Deck just put into words what I’ve been worried about. Can I really continue my chats with FallingDown, believing he’s London, while hiding my identity? The thought makes shame crawl up my spine.

Deck seems to read my inner conflict. “Look Riot, I don’t know the full story here. But if your gut is telling you this online thing feels wrong, maybe it’s time to come clean. To him and yourself.”

I stare down at the blinking console, resentment and guilt churning inside me. I’m feeling pretty upset about losing my go-to person in FallingDown. Deck is right, and I feel bad about it. I’ve been acting like a jackass ever since I started suspecting that my online buddy and London might be one and the same by not confronting London about it. But I didn’t want to mess with whatever it is he is to me.

Rival?

Teammate?

Crush?

...Boyfriend?

Our cycling tempo gradually slows as we cool down. Deck slaps me on the back before dismounting. “You’ll figure this out, man. Just listen to that little voice telling you what’s right.”

I force a tight smile as he walks off. If only it were that easy. Right now, the voice inside me is a conflicting mess of fear, desperation, and frustration.

With a deep exhale, I climb off the bike on unsteady legs. I came here hoping for answers, but now I'm more confused than ever.

For now, all I can do is take a step back from FallingDown. I might be wrong, but until I know for sure, I need to do this. To turn this delicate new connection with London into something genuine, with no secrets holding us back.

I know eventually I'll have to confront him with the truth. Risk fracturing the very connection I'm trying so hard to build. But today, I just need to stop answering FallingDown's messages and focus on London in real life.

Showered and changed, I exit the gym into the chilly afternoon. Students rush by on their way to class or meals, oblivious to my inner crisis. I check my phone reflexively. No new messages from FallingDown.

I shove it back into the pocket of my hoodie, fingers itching to type out a message of my own. To just spill all my secrets and suspicions the way I have for the last five years. But I resist.

However this plays out, I know things will never be the same between us. The only question is whether the truth will bind us tighter or shred the fragile bonds we've started to build.

I tip my face up to the muted winter sun. Inhale the crisp air, hoping it will shock some clarity into my messy thoughts. But the cold does little to numb the ache. FallingDown's friendship helped with the constant loneliness and knowing I might lose that it a tough thing to accept. But if I'm right and I get Riot in my everyday life, maybe it won't be such a huge blow.

Clenching my jaw, I start the trudge back to my apartment. Back to London, who's oblivious to the hurricane he's stirred in me.

I have no idea what the future holds. But I have to believe that somehow, some way, the truth will guide me through.

Even if it burns everything down first.

I find London sprawled on the couch, notes scattered around him. He glances up with a distracted smile that makes my chest constrict. Goddamn, he's hot with his gray sweats low slung on his hips and that fucking hat turned backwards on his head.

"Hey. How was the gym?"

"Same old." I slump next to him, needing his warmth to unscramble my thoughts. When I'm touching him, everything feels so clear. "You studied through lunch again, huh?"

London lifts his hat and rakes both hands through his messy hair. "Yeah, I'm so damn behind already. Coach wants to meet about changing up my conditioning routine too."

I push his shoulder so he's twisted and rub his shoulders. He groans and I wish I could absorb some of the burdens weighing him down. "You'll get there. And you know I've got your back with Coach."

London relaxes against me. "I know. Couldn't do this shit without you, Ri." He grins at me over his shoulder. "Enough about me. You break your squat record?"

My pulse quickens, but I make myself hold his gaze. No more lies. "Nah, just cycled with Deck. We got some laps in together."

Something in my tone seems to catch London's attention. He sits up straighter and turns back toward me, searching my face. "What's up? You seem off."

I nearly laugh at his perceptiveness. I've gotten too used to the openness between FallingDown and me. My walls don't hold up nearly as well around London anymore.

"Just stuff on my mind," I hedge. "Family, school, the game this week. Just the usual grind."

It's not a total lie. But the omission sits bitterly on my tongue.

London frowns, clearly unconvinced. But he simply drapes his arm around my shoulders and tugs me against him. "Yeah,

I feel that. This term's gonna be a bitch, huh?"

I let myself sink into his warmth, the steady thump of his heart calming my earlier agitation. He smells amazing, like the cinnamon gum he's chewing and his woodsy cologne. "Nothing we can't handle, though. We'll keep each other sane."

London's chuckle rumbles through me. "Sanity's overrated, dude."

I smile against his chest, the lightness of him easing some of the vice around my lungs. Maybe everything's gonna be okay.

We order takeout and spend the evening wrapped up in each other while we watch sitcom reruns. London's fingers comb idly through my hair as he laughs at the cheesy jokes. Gradually, the knot in my chest loosens.

Curled here in this bubble, away from expectations and obligations, things feel simple. Easy. No risk of our secrets unraveling and destroying this delicate balance we're building, brick by fragile brick.

"You falling asleep on me, Golden Boy?" London's amused voice cuts through my drifting thoughts.

I blink sluggishly up at him. "Maybe. Long day."

His eyes soften, thumb rubbing the furrow between my brows. "Yeah, I know, you're stretched thin lately. Come on, let's get you to bed."

Too tired to argue, I let him tug me up and propel me toward my bedroom. I face plant onto the blankets with a groan while London chuckles.

"At least take your clothes off first, dude."

I make a half-hearted noise of protest, but London's already pulling my shirt over my head and wrestling my jeans off. His hands move with both tenderness and confidence as they touch my skin. I give up the fight and let him maneuver me under the sheets, wearing nothing but my boxers.

“Get some rest, okay?” London murmurs, brushing the hair off my forehead.

The moment he starts to pull away, I’m hit with a strong sense of longing. I catch his wrist, pulse skittering. “Stay. Please.”

London pauses, searching my face. I hold his gaze, hoping he reads the depths of my need for him to stay close tonight. After a moment, he nods and moves to turn off the light.

In the dark, I hear the whisper of his clothes hitting the floor before he slides in beside me. The heat of his bare skin against mine sends a shiver down my spine. I shift back against him and London wraps an arm around my waist, molding himself to me.

“Thank you,” I breathe into the shadows, the warmth and strength of him loosening the knot inside my chest. “For staying.”

London presses a kiss to my shoulder. “Anytime, Ri. Get some rest.”

I lace my fingers through his where they rest over my heart, anchoring myself to him.

The tension seeps from my bones. With London all around me, my nagging doubts retreat to the shadows. There’s only his sweet scent and the feel of his body wrapped around mine.

Tomorrow my secrets will still be there, but right now, I let go. Surrendering to the safety of London’s embrace, I finally drift into untroubled sleep.

LONDON

THE LIVING ROOM'S dark except for the glow of the TV. Some cliché action flick Riot picked out, though we're barely watching. The popcorn between us has gone cold, and I don't think either of us has moved in over an hour.

Riot's thigh presses against mine, warm and solid. It still feels new being this close, blow jobs aside, but it's starting to feel natural too. We've got a comfortable quiet going, just the movie's explosions and cheesy one-liners filling the space between chatting.

"That line was supposed to be funny, right? Hard to tell with this shit plot," I comment.

Riot chuckles, his breath tickling my ear. "Yeah, it's impressively terrible. But this..." His hand trails up my leg. "This is way better than any movie."

A smile tugs at my lips as I turn my head towards him. "Got that right." I close the distance between us, kissing him slow and deep. It's insane to me that I can do this now.

Or that I want to.

Riot makes a low sound in his throat, hand tightening on my thigh. We take our time exploring each other's mouths, the movie fading to background noise. He tastes like buttery popcorn and mint, and I can't get enough.

His thumb brushes my cheek when we finally separate. "What do you say we ditch this cinematic masterpiece and

find something better to do?” His suggestive smile sends heat swirling through me.

“I like the way you think, Kensington.” I grab the remote and flip the TV off, bathing us in darkness.

Riot’s mouth finds mine again as his hands trail across my chest. My fingers dive into his silky hair, pulling him closer. The kiss is lazy and a little bit dirty while we feel each other up.

His lips move to my jaw, my throat, each press lighting me up. I tug at his shirt, needing to feel his skin. He reaches back and pulls it off in one smooth move that I’ve done myself a thousand times and never found hot until now. I explore his jacked chest and inked arms, tracing each ridge. Mapping every plane and valley.

“God, London,” he breathes, nipping my bottom lip. “I want you so fucking bad.”

“Then do something about it,” I dare, pulse racing as our mouths crash together again.

Riot lets out a low growl into our kiss, his roaming hands and hungry mouth making it damn clear how bad he wants this. He tugs at my shirt until I lean forward enough for him to pull it over my head.

Skin to skin, we crush together, hands greedy to touch whatever they can reach. I kiss and nip along his neck as his fingers trail fire up my spine, making me shiver hard.

“Fuck, London,” Riot rasps, tipping his head back so I can kiss lower. I lick over his collarbone, drinking in each hitch of his breath.

His hands move to grip my hips, guiding me until I’m straddling his lap. The new position aligns us perfectly, hardness meeting hardness through our jeans. I rock my hips and we both groan at the delicious friction.

Riot’s blown pupils meet mine, desire etched on his face. “I want you so much, baby,” he murmurs, palm cupping my cheek.

Hearing the endearment in his wrecked voice makes me ache. I press our foreheads together, noses brushing. “I want you too, Ri. Just you.”

And I do. I might’ve never wanted a guy before, but I sure as fuck want him. I haven’t even looked at a girl—fuck, anyone else at all—since he became my focus.

We stay pressed close, just breathing each other in. The tension between us is electric, a powerful energy that I can almost taste.

Riot moves first, his hand sliding to the back of my neck to guide my mouth to his again. The kiss is simmering now instead of burning. Still passionate but infused with this new closeness.

I pour everything I’m feeling into it, trusting my body to speak for me instead of fumbling for words. Judging by Riot’s response, he hears me loud and clear.

We kiss slow and deep, lost in the sensations and emotions crashing over us. Riot’s hands roam my back, tracing every muscle. I thread my fingers through his hair, angling the kiss how I want it.

I shift closer in his lap, chasing more contact. Our bodies are gravitating towards each other, as if pulled by a magnetic force. Riot lets out a low groan as I rock against him, his cock pressed against mine.

“Want you so fucking much,” he breathes against my lips.

“You keep saying that, but you aren’t doing shit about it. I’m right here, Ri.” I slide my hands down his sculpted torso. He’s like a work of fucking art. “Take what you want.”

Riot shudders, eyes burning into me. Slowly, he splays a hand over my chest, then guides me down onto my back along the couch. He settles between my thighs, gaze predatory.

I lick my lips in anticipation as he trails a hand down my stomach, palming me through my jeans. If I thought it’d be weird to do this with a dude, I was very fucking wrong. My hips arch desperately, begging without words for more.

Riot obliges, undoing my fly just enough to slide his hand inside. I suck in a sharp breath as his fingers wrap around me, stroking with confidence only another guy would have.

“Yes, baby. Just like that,” I pant, head falling back. He knows exactly how to touch me, learning my body’s responses as easily as mastering a new drill on the ice.

He leans down and kisses me hard, swallowing my moan as he works me over with expert strokes. “You’re so fucking sexy like this, London.”

I’m so close already, the need coiling tight inside me. But I want more than a quick hand job.

I reach up and grip his shoulders, pulling him down onto me as my heart thunders in my chest. “I want you in me, Ri,” I whisper against his lips, shocking myself with how much I mean it. “I know it’ll be good.”

Riot shudders against me. “Are you sure?” His voice is rough with lust, but there’s something else too. Something like awe or disbelief.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Scared shitless, but sure. I kiss him again, pouring everything into it. “I trust you.”

Something flickers in Riot’s eyes at my words. “Fuck yes, I’ll make you feel so good.”

He kisses me fiercely, our tongues twisting together as he grinds against me. It’s fucking perfect.

“Let’s take this to my room,” he rasps, breath ragged against my ear. “Need a bed for what I want to do to you.”

The promise in his voice sends shivers down my spine. I nod eagerly and we stumble off the couch, hands never leaving each other.

We crash through Riot’s bedroom door, kissing hungrily. He guides me to his bed and lays me back on the sheets before stripping off his jeans and boxers. I watch with hungry eyes as he strokes his cock, the shiny metal right under the tip catching the light.

I lick my lips, wanting him in my mouth. But Riot shakes his head and crawls over me, pinning me down. His eyes blaze into mine with a mix of lust and wonder.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he murmurs, trailing a finger along my jaw. “I can’t believe you want this.”

“I want it so bad,” I breathe, arching up against him.

Riot kisses me hard before reaching for the lube and a condom in his bedside table. He slicks up his fingers before sliding them between my thighs.

I spread my legs, giving him access. I never in a million years thought I’d be in this situation with him. Or, fuck, anyone. And it’s a total mindfuck that I’m not even embarrassed by any of this. I just need him.

I’m completely under his spell as his fingers work their magic, building up my desire until I can’t take it anymore.

“Fuck, Ri,” I grunt, as he slides one long finger into me. It’s an odd sensation, but not bad. My body adjusts quickly, opening for him and what was a weird pressure morphs into pleasure.

He works me slowly, stretching me open until I think I’m gonna die if he doesn’t give me more. “More,” I say and he smirks down at me because we both know I just begged him. Asshole.

With a low groan, Riot adds a second finger, filling me up in a way that makes my cock throb. He scissors his fingers, working me open and hitting something inside of me that makes my cock throb until I’m shaking with this desperation to feel him inside of me. I think I might explode unless he gets inside of me in the next thirty seconds.

Riot seems to read my mind, withdrawing his fingers and rolling on a condom before slicking himself up. “I can’t believe you’re gonna let me fuck you,” he murmurs, running his fingers up my inner thigh.

“Believe it,” I pant. “I want you so fucking bad, Golden Boy.”

Riot's eyes flash at the nickname, but he doesn't protest as he lines himself up and starts to push inside of me. The pressure and stretch are intense, but I breathe deep and relax into it.

"You good?" he asks, and his body is rigid as he holds himself part way inside of me.

I nod and he blows out a breath, relaxing some. He goes slow, letting me adjust as he sinks deeper. It feels fucking amazing to be filled up by him. I've never felt this way with anyone else.

When his whole dick's inside me, I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. "Fuck, Ri," I groan as he starts to thrust in long strokes. "Feels so good."

"You're so tight and perfect," he breathes, eyes locked on mine. "You were made for me, weren't you?"

I nod, rocking my hips to meet his thrusts. I don't say it, but I think he was made for me, too.

We find a rhythm, our bodies moving together like we were supposed to do this all along. Riot's cock hits all the right spots inside of me, nailing what I'm guessing is my prostate with every stroke. I'm trembling and biting him and trying to pull him closer while I beg him to go harder.

He kisses me hard, swallowing every sound as he fucks me deeper. His hand slides down to grip my cock, stroking me in time with his thrusts. It's fucking perfect.

The pressure builds inside of me until I'm teetering on the edge. "Fuck, Ri," I groan, nails digging into his back. "I'm gonna come."

"Do it," he growls against my ear. "Come for me, baby."

His voice sends me over the edge. I come with a choked cry, spilling over his fist and onto my stomach. Riot strokes me through it, prolonging the pleasure until I'm shaking with aftershocks.

He pulls out and strips off the condom before jerking himself off over me. I watch with hooded eyes as he comes

with a low moan, painting my stomach and chest with hot ropes of cum.

He reaches down and swipes his fingers through our combined cum on my chest, painting the letters M-I-N-E into my skin before he kisses me hard.

I put everything I'm feeling into that kiss. How much this meant to me, how much he means to me. And judging by his response, he feels the same way.

We collapse together in a sweaty tangle, breathing hard as we come down from the high. Riot nuzzles my neck, pressing soft kisses to my skin. I wrap an arm around him and pull him closer, not wanting to let go yet.

"That was fucking amazing," I murmur against his hair.

As I float back down, Riot strokes my cheek reverently. "So fucking gorgeous. You undo me, Hotshot."

I give a dazed, satisfied smile, my thumping heart feeling full up and sated. Maybe for the first time ever. "Same, Kensington."

Riot presses a tender kiss to my forehead before shifting off of me. I already miss his warmth.

"Be right back," he murmurs, disappearing towards the bathroom. Do I watch his naked ass as he walks away? Hell yes, I do.

I get up and walk back out to the living room, not bothering with clothes. I'm sticky as hell and gonna need a shower, but I'm not ready to wash *us* off my skin just yet.

With a contented sigh, I stretch out on the couch and let out a deep breath, feeling completely spent. The TV screen's still dark and the only light's coming from the light above the stove.

Riot comes back with a warm washcloth and gently cleans me up. The intimacy of it makes warmth spread through my chest. He chuckes the cloth in the laundry and comes back with our boxers, tossing mine at me.

Once we're semi dressed, Riot picks up the remote and sprawls out on top of me. "Wanna watch one more flick before bed?"

He settles into my arms with a happy hum. "Sounds perfect."

Riot puts on some forgettable comedy, but I'm barely watching. I'm focused on his steady breathing, his fingers trailing along my arm, his solid presence keeping me grounded.

After the emotional highs of the last hour, I'm happy to simply be still with him. The movie plays softly in the background as we relax, our bodies intertwined, his breath warm on my skin.

Right here, right now—this is all I need.

At least until my mind starts to wander.

FrozenFire's absence has left a hollow ache inside me the past few days. Our talks were a constant I didn't fully appreciate until they stopped. Now the silence sits heavy, and it's impossible to ignore.

When Riot gets up for more popcorn, I grab my phone on impulse. Before I can overthink it, I shoot FrozenFire a message.

Me: Hey man, it's been a minute. Everything ok? Feels weird going from daily chats to radio silence. Hope I didn't say something to piss you off.

I hit send and glance up just as Riot steps back into view. At the same time, a phone buzzes on the coffee table. Riot's phone.

My heart seizes as he glances at the illuminated screen, brow furrowed. Dread trickles down my spine. No fucking way. It can't be.

But as Riot's resigned eyes meet mine, the truth clicks into place. FrozenFire isn't just someone I know—he's the man I might be falling for.

Riot motherfucking Kensington is FrozenFire.

I know it as sure as I know blood pumps through my veins.

Time slows to a crawl. A hundred chats and shared secrets replay in my head, now in a totally different light. My safe space online is the man I've opened my heart to. And he's been hiding this truth for who knows how long.

Blood roars in my ears as betrayal cuts through me. I stare at Riot's conflicted face, struggling to grasp this earthquake of a revelation. Everything between us just shifted in ways I'm not ready for.

Riot steps towards me, eyes brimming with worry. The popcorn bowl sits forgotten between us.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Fuck. You know." It's not a question.

I hold his gaze, anger and confusion swirling through me. "You're him. You're FrozenFire."

Riot's shoulders slump. "Yeah. I'm him." He takes a cautious step forward. "London, I wanted to tell you. I just didn't know how once I realized."

My fists clench at my sides. "How long have you known?"

He sighs heavily. "About a week. I noticed things you said lining up with our chats. Wasn't totally sure until a few days ago." His eyes plead with me. "I'm so damn sorry. I handled this all wrong."

I'm reeling, trying to wrap my head around this. This person who's been my safe place, my best fucking friend for years has been Riot this whole time.

"You should've trusted me with the truth," I bite out. Underneath the anger, hurt throbs sharp. He didn't think I could handle knowing. And we just fucked with this lie between us.

Goddamn it.

Riot looks torn up. "You're right. I was trying to protect myself, but I fucked up. I was scared of losing what we've got

going here.” He reaches for me hesitantly. “I know it’s no excuse. I should’ve been straight with you.”

I waver, resentment warring with empathy inside me. But his dishonesty cuts deep.

Riot seems to read my conflicted feelings. “I know I messed up bad. But can you give me a chance to make this right between us, London? Please?”

His raw plea deflates some of my anger. But it can’t erase the damage that’s done. I rake a hand through my hair, way too rattled to process all this tonight.

“I just... I need some space to think, okay?”

Riot looks crestfallen but nods. “Yeah, of course. Take your time.”

I turn away before my traitorous heart caves. Tonight has irreparably changed things between us in more than one way. We fucked for the first time, but he also lied to me. Where we go from here, I just don’t know.

I stop at my door, anger bubbling up again. There’s one loose thread left.

I turn back to Riot. “Why’d you ghost me online? Why just disappear?”

Riot looks guilty as hell. “I thought it’d be simpler to focus on us, on what we’ve got going here.” He motions between the two of us before he rubs his neck. “I wasn’t trying to complicate shit.”

I cross my arms. “You still should’ve told me straight up. Not just left me on read.”

“You’re right,” he says heavily. “It wasn’t cool of me. I fucked up.”

I sigh, exhaustion hitting hard. “I get your reasons. But it hurts you didn’t trust me to handle the truth. To talk it out like a fucking adult.”

Riot opens his mouth, but I hold up a hand. “I believe you’re sorry. But I need time to sort this clusterfuck out in my

head.”

I leave Riot standing there looking like a kicked puppy. But I’m running on empty tonight.

In my room, I fall onto the bed, emotionally spent. Tonight was a goddamn earthquake, rattling the foundation between us. I never thought the first time we fucked I’d be passing out in my bed alone.

But right now, I just need sleep to wrap my head around what this all means.

I listen to Riot settle on the couch, no doubt wrestling with his own regrets. Part of me wants to crawl into his arms and say *fuck it, I forgive you*. Tonight, I need space to untangle my emotions without causing harm to our relationship. I don’t want to lose him, but I don’t know if I can trust him either.

RIOT

THE CHILL from the ice seeps through my skates, but it's London's blank stare that sends a shiver down my spine. He's huddled with the guys across the rink, not even tossing me a glance. It's like he's empty. The cold shoulder would hurt less if his dismissal didn't slice so deep.

Things have been fucked between us since he realized I'm FrozenFire. That I kept the truth from him once I suspected. He needs time to wrap his head around it; I get that. But his withdrawal leaves me unsteady, like losing an edge at high speed.

Doesn't he realize I depended on him, too? That losing FallingDown is about as fucking bad as it gets for me?

That I'm hurting, too?

I pound a slapshot into the open net. The satisfying smack of the puck finding twine echoes through the empty rink. But it doesn't fill the pit in my stomach or the London-shaped hole next to me on the ice.

The buzzer blares, shaking me from my broody thoughts. Pinehurst is notorious for getting nasty. We need to be ready.

If only I felt ready in my own heart.

We line up, sticks clashing like swords. No more time for distractions. The game is on.

We control the puck early but can't convert. Each glance at London is a gut punch. We're out of sync in a way I've never experienced before. My passes hit his stick a split second too

late. The absence of our shared instinctive rhythm causes our movements on the ice to become disjointed.

The distance between us feels like a gaping void, throwing everything out of whack. I grit my teeth in frustration as another setup goes awry; the puck sliding just out of London's reach. We play on, but there's no flow, no electricity between us. Just frayed wires where a connection used to hum.

Ten minutes in, Pinehurst gets chippy. They land some ugly checks, trying to throw us off our deteriorating game. We manage some tape-to-tape passes that leave them spinning, but our hearts aren't in it. The lack of unity shows.

But the cheap shots keep coming. I spit blood when an elbow catches my mouth. The refs turn a blind eye, letting the game flow. Frustration mounts at the lack of calls.

I dish a sweet saucer pass to Mateo, muscles coiled tight. We just need to out skate these aggressive bastards.

Number nineteen barrels towards London with violence in his eyes. Before anyone reacts, he crushes London into the boards with a hit so far outside the rules it's criminal. London crumples like a rag doll, his pained grunt echoing through the suddenly silent arena.

Rage whites out my vision. With a primal yell, I charge the Pinehurst asshole, fists swinging wildly. The refs shout as I tackle him, stars exploding behind my eyes as we crash onto the ice. I don't stop pummeling every inch I can reach, consumed by fury. He deserves this pain for hurting London.

My London.

My teammates finally rip me away, Luc and Teo restraining me. I fight their hold, straining towards the bloody mess I've left the bastard in. The refs look disgusted by both of us.

"Enough, Riot! You made your point," Teo grits out near my ear.

Chest heaving, I stop resisting long enough for my teammates to steer me away before I do any more damage. I fix the bastard with a searing glare, promising brutal

retribution next time we meet on the ice, before letting myself be led away.

Coach storms over, beet red and shouting threats about suspensions. But his voice fades to background static when I see London still motionless on the ice, medical staff gathered around him.

It's like the world narrows to a pinpoint—all I see is London's crumpled form surrounded by medics, their mouths moving but no sound reaching my ears over the frantic pounding of my heart.

I rip off my helmet, the clatter of it hitting the ice barely registering. I'm deaf and blind to everything but the need to get to London. I'm dimly aware of my skates cutting furrows in the ice as I carve my way to him. My future, consequences, the goddamn game—none of it matters if he's not okay.

Coach grabs my jersey, bellowing in my face, but I shake him off and keep going. Let him scream. Let him bench me. Let him kick me off the fucking team. None of it will stop me from getting to London's side.

I'm deaf to the warnings pursuing me as I crash through the locker room doors. The only sound ringing through my head is the sickening crack of London's body against the boards. I shed my gear without bothering to undo the straps, desperate to get back to him.

In street clothes and still sweaty, I sprint back just as they load London's disturbingly lifeless form into the ambulance.

"I'm riding with him," I state, daring the EMT to argue. She takes one look at my thunderous expression and bloody knuckles and nods, closing the doors behind us.

As the vehicle lurches into motion, I grasp London's limp hand. "You're gonna be okay," I rasp. After everything between us, I'd give anything to undo the damage my secrets caused. To go back and choose openness over festering lies.

Sirens wailing, I cling to him, praying to anyone who might be listening for the chance to make this right. To make him love me.

Halfway there London stirs, face contorted in pain. I lean closer as his eyes flutter open, glazed with confusion.

“Riot?” His voice is hoarse and quiet, but he clutches my hand like a lifeline. Like I’m his anchor.

“I’m here, Hotshot. You’re gonna be alright,” I say roughly, emotion clogging my throat.

He tries to shift but winces, falling back. “Fuck, my side... what happened?”

I stroke his sweaty hair, soothing him. “Got slammed taking a hit meant for me. But you’re gonna be okay.”

London squeezes his eyes shut when the ambulance goes over a bump. “Hurts like a bitch.” His exhale shudders. “But I’m glad you’re here.”

My heart clenches. After everything between us, he still wants me close.

I cradle his hand between mine. “I’m not going anywhere.” I kiss his scraped knuckles, blinking back the stinging in my eyes.

A weak smile flickers across London’s face. “Knew you caught feelings, Golden Boy.”

Even banged up and loopy on meds, the smug bastard can’t resist trying to get a rise out of me. Good to know some things never change.

I let out a watery laugh. “Like you’re one to talk. We both know you’ve gone soft over me.”

London tries to look indignant. “I feel like I should say something about my dick here,” he says and then groans as we come to a stop.

I grasp his hand tighter, hoping he understands how much he means to me. How much I want to fix things between us.

London’s eyes flutter closed again as the pain meds drag him back under. Our hands stay locked together, and I can feel the rough callouses on his palms reminding me he’s still here.

I cling to him, pathetically grateful he's letting me stay close despite the rift I caused between us. We've got a long road ahead to clear the wreckage my secrets left behind. But here and now, at this moment, we're a team again. And maybe that's enough.

I press a fierce kiss to his battered knuckles, a silent promise I fully intend on keeping. "Stay with me, you stubborn bastard."

He doesn't respond, already out in a fitful sleep. But I feel the familiar pressure of his calloused palm against mine. And for now, that whisper of connection keeps me from freaking the fuck out or going back and killing that Pinehurst prick.

And if fate decides to cut me one last break, maybe we'll weather what comes next as a united front this time. Him and me with nothing between us.

LONDON

WAKING up feels like I went a round with a freight train and lost. My head is throbbing like it's got an axe buried in it. I crack open my eyes before immediately regretting that shitty decision. Even the faint light is enough to make my brain feel like it's leaking out my ears.

"Take it easy." Riot's gravelly voice cuts through the jackhammers going off in my skull. I feel his hand gently push me back against the pillows. The softness is a relief after whatever the hell happened that landed me here.

Flashes punch through the fog smothering my brain—the game, the hit, getting hauled off on a stretcher. And Riot staying by my side the whole damn time.

I pry my eyes open to slits again, bracing for the ache. Riot's face swims into focus, etched with tension beneath the scruff. "How bad's the damage?" I rasp out.

"Grade 2 concussion. Couple bruised ribs. But you'll live." Riot's smile looks strained. "How you feeling, Hotshot?"

Fuck, my whole side feels like it goes through a trash compactor when I try shifting. "Like I got slammed into next week and dragged back over glass."

Riot's hand finds mine, grounding me. His fingers weave between mine. The warmth of it is soothing. "The doctors said you need rest. No strenuous activity or screens." His voice has that worried edge to it again that tugs at this newly softened place in me that belongs to him.

“So, no practices or games for at least a week. Maybe longer depending on symptoms.” Riot sighs heavily and scrubs a hand down his handsome but tired face. “I’m sorry this happened, London.”

I crack one eye open again, confusion swimming through the throbbing ache. “The hell you apologizing for? You didn’t clobber me, dumbass.”

Riot looks torn up with guilt. “That hit was meant for me. You took the bullet.” He avoids my eyes. “I should’ve protected you out there.”

Oh. I get it now. Riot’s blaming himself.

“It wasn’t on you, Ri. I chose to block that douchelord.” I squeeze his hand, suddenly needing that point of connection between us again. “You’d do the same for me out there. We have each other’s backs.”

“Well, I’m here. And I’ll get you whatever you need.”

Warmth curls through me, dulling the constant ache for a minute, and I raise my eyebrows before smirking. “*Whatever* I need, huh?”

I let my gaze roam over him suggestively. “Gotta admit, some activities come to mind that don’t require me exerting myself too much.”

Riot’s eyes widen, a smirk tilting his full lips. “Oh yeah? And what activities might those be?” His voice drops an octave until it’s that low tone he used when we fucked and now my dick’s getting hard.

I lick my lips slowly. “Use your imagination, Ri. I’m sure you could find a way to... take care of me.”

Riot makes a low sound in his throat, eyes darkening. He leans in closer. “Don’t tempt me, Hotshot. You trying to take advantage of me?”

“Maybe a little.” I run my fingers up his veiny, tatted forearm. “But admitting you want me isn’t a crime.”

Riot shudders, his gaze heating. “Believe me, I want you.” His eyes flick to my lips. “But you’re still recovering. I don’t

wanna do anything to hurt you more.”

I pout dramatically. “You’re no fun. I can think of a few things we could do that require minimal exertion.” I slide my hand up his thigh.

Riot inhales sharply. “Fuck, you’re killing me, Lancaster.” He gently removes my hand, lacing our fingers together. “How about this—you focus on healing up and later... I promise we’ll pick up where we left off.”

His heated look leaves no doubt just how much he wants me. I sigh theatrically. “Fiiine. But just know, once I’m back on my feet, you’re in trouble, Kensington.”

I lean in, dropping my voice to a husky murmur. “And I won’t even need to do any work for what I have planned. All I’ll have to do is lay there while you show me how talented your mouth is.”

Riot makes a strangled sound, his eyes molten. “Jesus, London. You tryin’ to kill me?”

I chuckle lowly. “Maybe a little death wouldn’t be so bad.” I kiss him deeply, reveling in his sharp inhale. “Isn’t that what the French call an orgasm? *The little death*?”

When we separate, Riot rests his forehead against mine. “Soon, I promise. But for now, just focus on getting better. Please.” His smile turns tender. “And until then, I’m not going anywhere.”

As much as I want him, his words kindle a warmth in my chest that has nothing to do with lust. “You’re gonna get sick of me, Kensington.” I brush a soft kiss over his lips. “But I’ll take it.”

Riot’s answering smile is radiant as the sun, but dark like an eclipse.

He helps me get settled before I let bone-deep exhaustion suck me back under. With Riot here, I know I can pass out and no one’s gonna fuck with me.

The next few days, Riot keeps his word. He practically becomes my personal servant, all attentive to my every whim

and need.

Well, *most* of my needs.

Fucker still won't touch me like I want.

If the sunlight stabs my sensitive eyes, he's up in a flash fixing the blinds. If I even so much as shift against the mountain of pillows propping me up, he swoops in to rearrange them and mess with my blankets.

He helps me hobble to take a piss when standing makes my head spin like a carnival ride. Thankfully, he doesn't have to hold my dick for me.

Riot brings me water, snacks, and pain meds right on schedule. His dedicated care calms me when I start feeling caged by this damn bedrest. Part of me wants to grumble that I can handle shit myself. But the way he looks after me, always making sure I've got what I need... it fills some empty space in me I didn't realize needed filling.

Late one night when the throbbing pain keeps me awake, Riot climbs into bed and lets me tuck myself against him. He holds me while his steady heartbeat and warmth lull me to sleep.

It should maybe feel weird getting all snuggly with him after everything, but it just feels right in a way I can't explain. Like I can drop my guard with him for the first time. Like all the secrets between us are finally gone.

A few days in we're chilling on the couch half watching some comedy after the all-clear for limited screen time. My legs are draped over Riot's lap. His hand rests on my ankle, thumb idly sweeping back and forth. Soothing me. It's simple but intimate in a way that makes my pulse pick up.

We're very couple-y right now.

Riot's laughing at some dumb joke when the front door just swings open. We both startle as Warren fucking Decker strolls in like he owns the place.

Deck stops short, and his eyes sweep over the two of us.

Well, fuck me. This looks bad. *Real* bad.

I jerk my legs off Riot's lap, but pain detonates through my ribs at the sharp move.

"Take it easy," Riot says, eyes wide and panicked on Deck.

An awkward beat passes before Deck recovers, rubbing his neck. "Uh, sorry for just barging in. I borrowed your key that time you were locked out, but I should've knocked."

"S'cool, man," I grind out through the ringing pain in my ribs. Gotta play this down. Make it seem normal that I was just cuddling with my teammate, a guy I supposedly hate.

But the way Deck's staring at us makes it clear he knows this is anything but normal.

"Just wanted to check on you. And uh, Coach wants to see you, Riot. The fight and all." Deck shifts on his feet, uncomfortable as hell. "But it can wait if you're busy, though."

Riot moves to get up but pauses, glancing at me uncertainly.

I wave him off, faking chill. "I'm good, bro. Go see what Coach wants."

Riot searches my face before nodding. He turns to Deck. "Give us a minute?"

"You got it." Deck makes a quick escape into the hall.

The door click echoes through the suddenly heavy silence. Riot perches on the couch's edge, looking conflicted as hell. We both know Deck walking in on us like this changes shit.

I clear my throat awkwardly. "So... that happened."

Riot scrubs a hand down his face. "Fuck. What do we do now?"

I blow out a breath, my aching brain trying to make sense of this. "We gotta talk about this thing between us. 'Cause it's starting to feel like... more." I meet his questioning eyes.

Riot's expression gentles. "Yeah. It's definitely more." He takes my hand, the contact so soft it sends a shiver through me. "I care about you. A lot. Never felt this way about anyone before." His eyes drop away like he's being shy. Never

thought I'd see that expression on *the* Riot Kensington's face. "Definitely not another guy."

Warmth spreads through me hearing him say it. I may not have done the dude-on-dude thing before either, but my feelings for him are undeniable.

"I feel you. This is new ground for me, too." I lace our fingers together. "But I want to see where this goes. I want you, Riot. As more than just my teammate or rival."

Riot lights up like Christmas at that. "I want that too. I want you, London." His eyes search mine, serious now. "So what do we do? Keep it secret for now?"

I consider, absently playing with his fingers. "Maybe for now, yeah. This could fuck up team stuff if word got out."

Riot nods. "You're right. It's risky going public when we're just figuring this out." His hand tightens on mine. "But just so you know, I don't give a shit what anyone thinks. I want to be with you. Out loud."

Emotion sticks in my throat. I never let myself believe I could have something like this. But here Riot is, offering me his heart. And I'll be damned if fear keeps me from taking it.

I meet his earnest eyes squarely. "Okay. Let's do this. You and me." I let a smile spread across my lips. "We'll keep it on the down low, but I'm yours, Riot. Only yours."

Riot surges forward and captures my lips in a hungry kiss that steals my breath. When we separate, his forehead pressed to mine, the depth of feeling between us is tangible.

Riot smiles softly. "I'm yours too, London. In every way."

We stay wrapped up in each other, soaking up this new step for a couple of heartbeats before he has to pull away. No matter the shit coming our way, just knowing I have Riot by my side makes me believe anything's possible.

He presses a kiss to my forehead before standing reluctantly. "I should go see Coach now. But I'll be back soon 'kay? If you need me, text."

I grin, happier than I can remember being in fucking forever. “Looking forward to it, boyfriend.”

Riot’s answering smile is dazzling. With one last lingering glance, he heads out, leaving me floating on cloud nine.

Boyfriend. Never thought I’d use that word for sharp-tongued, arrogant Riot. But here we are. It’s gonna be a wild ride exploring this uncharted path with him.

RIOT

I CATCH up to Deck as he's heading back toward the athletic building, his face still flushed from the awkward scene he stumbled upon. "Hey, man. Can we talk for a sec?" I ask, hating how desperate I sound but needing to get this shit out there.

Deck turns, looking wary. "Sure, what's up?" His eyes flick towards our apartment building before returning to me. "Is this about London? Or the fight on the ice?"

"Both, actually." I run a hand through my hair, nerves twisting my gut. "Look, I know you walked in on... something back there. And I'm sorry you had to see that."

Deck looks like he's trying to figure out where this is going. "I don't care if you guys are hooking up or whatever. Just don't let it mess with team stuff."

My heart pounds in my ears. "It's not just hooking up. We're dating. Like, for real."

Deck's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh, shit." He looks stunned but not disgusted or anything. "That's uh...that's big news, man."

I nod, feeling like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. "Yeah, it is. But we're keeping things quiet for now. Don't want the team to get caught up in our drama."

Deck nods slowly. "Yeah, that makes sense. But I'm happy for you guys. Really." He claps me on the shoulder and smiles warmly. "I won't tell anyone."

Relief floods through me. “Thanks, Deck. That means a lot.”

He shifts his gaze over to me and then it darts away, almost like he’s... curious. “How did this happen, anyway? I thought you guys hated each other.”

I rub the back of my neck, feeling self-conscious but also wanting to share this with someone. “We did hate each other. Do you remember the retreat?”

Deck nods slowly, his eyes widening. “Oh shit, that was when you guys hooked up?”

“No.” I blow out a breath. “But something happened that night. I talked to him and for the first time, I really listened to what he had to say.” My voice softens. “And I realized how much we have in common. Hard to hate a guy when he’s been through some of the same shit you have, you know?”

Deck smiles knowingly. “Yeah, I get it. And London seems like a good guy.”

“He is.” I can’t keep the smile off my face as I think about London waiting for me back at our place. “And I’m lucky as hell to have him. Doesn’t hurt that he’s hot as fuck.”

Deck gags. “Dude. No.” He shakes his head. “I don’t need to hear about your boyfriend’s... fuck, anything.”

I laugh and shove him playfully. “Guess I can spare you the details.” I shrug. “Your loss.”

Deck turns to me, his expression oddly sober. “But seriously, I’m happy for you guys.”

“Thanks, man.” I clap him on the shoulder. “I appreciate you being cool with this. And keeping it quiet for now.”

We head toward Coach’s office, the tension between us broken. London and I might have to keep our relationship on the down low for now. But at least we’ve got one ally on our side.

I’ve only taken a couple of steps when I hear it.

I freeze when an all-too familiar voice calls out my name. Deck raises an eyebrow in a silent question, but I wave him off. My whole body's tense, but I knew I was gonna have to face this at some point. Ignoring all my dad's calls and texts since the game wasn't gonna keep him away forever.

"Go. I'll meet you inside."

Deck eyes me and then my pissed off asshole of a father before turning and heading inside.

My dad steps up, his expression hard as granite. "You've been avoiding me, son."

I cross my arms defensively. "Yeah, well, you haven't exactly gotten the hint since you're here."

"I don't know what it is you think you're doing, but your behavior in your last game was completely out of line. That's not how a Kensington acts. You know better than to embarrass me like you did."

His words cut deeper than I want to admit. I hate that he can still get to me even though he's made it clear over and over again how little of a shit he gives. Even now, the only reason he's here is because I embarrassed him, not because he actually cares.

"Well, maybe I'm tired of acting like a Kensington," I say, my voice rising with anger. "Maybe I'm done trying to be what you want me to be when it's never enough for you."

My dad looks shocked by my outburst. "You don't mean that. You're just being dramatic." He shakes his head. "Look, son, I know you're upset about what happened. But you need to get over it and focus on your game. Better yet, quit hockey. It's not your future, becoming CEO of Kensington Financial is."

I stare at him incredulously. "I'm not even gonna touch the whole CEO thing. How many times do I have to tell you I'm not studying business? I'm never going to be CEO, Dad."

"I'll cut you off."

"Good. Do it."

My dad's eyebrows rise. "Keep pushing and I will."

"I'm not gonna quit hockey, and I'm sure as hell not gonna get over watching my boyfriend take a hit that could've killed him. You don't know me at all if you think I'd just stand there and let it happen without doing something about it. Fuck that." I'm shaking, trembling because my blood has turned to lava in my veins and I'm a volcano on the verge of erupting.

My dad's eyes widen as he processes what I just said. "Wait, your... boyfriend? What the hell are you talking about?"

I square my shoulders. "You heard me. I'm bi and I'm dating London. And we're fucking happy. You're not going to come in here and ruin that for me. I refuse to let you."

My dad looks like he's going to be sick. "You can't be serious. This is a joke, right? I didn't raise a faggot." He glares at me. "You're not dating that... that loser from Ravenloft. I won't allow it."

"London's not a loser," I say, my voice rising with anger. "He's a better person than you'll ever be and fuck you for calling him that. And last I checked, I'm an adult. You don't get to allow shit."

My dad shakes his head. "This is ridiculous. You're just confused. You need to get your head on straight and focus on school and hockey, if you must. Those things are what you're good at, not... this." He waves his hand dismissively at me.

"I'm good at a lot of things, but apparently being a Kensington isn't one of them." If I could kill him with a look, he'd be dead at my feet. "I'm done living my life according to your rules and expectations. I'm done trying to please someone who can't be pleased."

My dad stares at me for a long moment before shaking his head. "We're going to get you help—"

"Wanting to be with a guy isn't a mental illness, Dad! What the fuck is wrong with you?" My voice is shaking with rage now. "And I'm done listening to you tell me I'm not good

enough or that I'll never be what you want. I'm done with all of it."

My dad's expression hardens. "You're being selfish and you don't know what you're talking about. This... this phase of yours isn't real. It's just a distraction from what you're meant to be doing." He looks at me like I'm a stranger. "But I will not stand here and watch you throw your life away."

I shake my head. "I've never felt more alive than when I'm with London. And if you can't accept that, then fuck you. You're right. You're not going to be around to watch shit. I'm done with you."

My dad's eyes narrow. "You'll regret this, son. Don't come back begging me to help when all of this blows up in your face." He curls his lip in disgust before he turns and walks away, leaving me standing there shaking with anger and pain.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before heading inside to see Coach. I can't let my dad's toxic bullshit poison my future with London. Not now, not ever.

I square my shoulders and walk into the building, ready to face whatever comes next.

And with every step, a weight lifts off my shoulders until I almost feel... free.

RIOT

THE MORNING SUN peeks over the horizon, casting everything in a rare golden glow as I load up the last of our supplies. After yesterday with my dad, I feel lighter this morning. Like my future finally belongs to me.

London leans against the passenger door, sipping coffee, still looking half-asleep. His hair sticks up in tousled spikes and it makes me want to run my fingers through it and kiss him breathless.

But we have a long drive ahead, so I resist the urge. For now.

I wonder where his hat is. He looks fuck hot in it, but for whatever reason it's missing this morning.

"Ready for our escape from reality?" I ask, shutting the trunk.

London cracks a smile, the weak sunlight catching in his hazel eyes. "Hell yeah. Lead the way, Kensington."

We jump into the car ready to start our impromptu road trip, heading for the coast to get away from the pressures of recovery, school, and secret relationships. Just London and me on the open road, leaving all the bullshit behind.

London messes with the radio while I focus on the curving highway flying under our wheels. The miles peel away and London's hand finds mine across the console, fingers threading together. We drive in contented silence as the world awakens around us.

About an hour into the drive, London turns to me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Let’s play two truths and a lie. I’ll go first.”

I choke on my coffee, and he laughs.

He runs his thumb along his lower lip while he thinks, and I have to force my eyes back to the road. “Okay, got it. One, I once sang in a talent show. Two, I hate romantic comedies. And three, I had a pet iguana named Godzilla.”

I consider his options. “Hmm... I’m gonna say the iguana is a lie.”

“Damn, you’re good. Yeah, never had an iguana. Now you go.”

“Wait. I’m gonna need to hear more about this talent show.”

He scoffs. “Not a chance in hell.”

“I bet Aubrey has video.”

He cuts a glare my way. “I will kill you.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “You think I’m afraid of you, Lancaster?”

“You should be. I know where you sleep. Now go.”

I let it go for now and debate which truths to reveal. “Alright, I played the clarinet as a kid, I’m terrified of heights, and... I used to sneak into my dad’s study to try his whiskey.”

London laughs. “Oh man, please tell me it’s the clarinet.”

I grin sheepishly. “Yeah, never touched the clarinet. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die when my mom suggested it. No way was I going to become a band geek.”

“You were a little badass even back then,” London says with an approving smirk.

He runs his thumb along his bottom lip again, and I groan. “You’re fucking killing me.”

London gives me another dirty smirk and his eyes glint like he knows exactly what he’s doing.

Asshole.

“If I didn’t think you’d kill us both, I’d give you road head.”

My cock goes hard between one heartbeat and the next. Rock fucking solid. “What if I promise not to crash?”

He laughs again. “Not good enough, dude. I’m too hot to die.”

“Truth,” I mutter, glaring at him while I adjust myself. “You owe me for this.” I gesture to my dick. “And payback’s a bitch.”

“Bring it on, Kensington.” He grins at me and then kicks his feet up onto my dash. “My turn.

One, they almost expelled me in middle school for a prank gone wrong. Two, I once ate a ghost pepper on a dare and had to go to the ER. And three, I can play the guitar.”

I think about all the options, imagining a naughty, young London causing chaos wherever he went. “Hmm... I’m gonna guess the guitar is the lie.”

London shakes his head, laughing. “Nope, I really can play pretty well. An ex boyfriend of my mom’s taught me as a kid before hockey took over my life.”

“No way, really?” I ask, genuinely surprised. I file away this new detail, desperate to learn everything about him.

“Really. The lie was the prank. Now you go, Kensington.”

I debate which truths to reveal, wanting to give him new insight into me, too. “Alright, let’s see. I used to want to be an astronaut, I’m terrified of spiders, and... I had a pet rabbit named Marshmallow when I was seven.”

London’s eyes light up. “Please tell me Marshmallow is real.”

I chuckle, rubbing my neck. “Yeah, he was definitely real, fuzziest little thing. I cried for days when he died.”

“Aww, little baby Riot. Don’t worry, your secret soft side is safe with me,” London says, squeezing my hand.

I love how he can tease me while also making me feel so seen.

Also, how the fuck is he so good at this game?

We continue the game as the coastline zips past in a blur. He tells me about the time he and his brother snuck into an R-rated movie and got caught. I admit my obsession with true crime podcasts. He tells me about how he hates clowns. I confess that I sometimes still look for my dad's approval, even though I know I'll never fully have it.

I find myself sharing things I've never told anyone—how lonely my childhood was, how I used to wish on stars for a friend who really knew me. How the wishing stopped when I started talking to FallingDown online.

London listens intently, no judgment. Just interest and understanding. With him, I feel safe removing the mask I wear with most people. For the first time in my life, I can simply be me.

When we stop for gas, London hops out to grab supplies. He returns with energy drinks, chips, and beef jerky.

I raise an eyebrow at his choices. "How the hell can you eat that shit and stay as jacked as you are?"

"Shut it, Kensington. Just because you have the diet of a constipated grandpa doesn't mean the rest of us can't live a little." He tears open a bag of chips defiantly with his teeth, flipping me off with his other hand.

"Hey, I'll have you know I get cravings just like anyone else. But they involve dark chocolate and decaf coffee instead of processed junk," I say like a tool because I feel like pissing him off. Yeah, I fully admit I can be an arrogant jackass about my food.

London just laughs and pops a chip in my mouth. "Uh, huh. Sure thing, gramps."

I can't help but smile as I chew. London just makes me feel so free to be myself. These moments with him are everything to me.

As we get back onto the road, our conversation picks right back up as the miles blur by. London asks about my childhood—what I was like as a kid. I share a funny story about the time my cousin Sebastian tricked me into eating a dirt because he wrapped it in a candy wrapper. The memory makes London laugh, eyes crinkling at the corners.

I ask about his hopes for the future after graduation. He goes quiet, gazing out the window for a long moment.

“I’ve always wanted to go pro, play in the NHL,” he says finally. “That’s why I came to Hollowgate, even though some said I’d never make it. Hockey’s the only thing that’s ever made sense in my life.”

He looks back at me, vulnerable but determined. “Lately, though, I’ve started thinking about more than just the game. Building something real with you. I never thought I could have both, but now...” He squeezes my hand. “You make me feel like I can have it all.”

Emotion wells in my throat, and I tighten my hold on him. “You’re the most driven person I know, Hotshot. If you want the NHL, I know you’ll make it happen. And I’ll be right there cheering you on when you do.”

“Fuck, no. You’ll be right there with me, going pro.”

My breath catches. I can almost see it. “Is it crazy to think that it could happen?”

He grins at me, that smile that makes my heart hurt. “It’s going to.”

We eventually reach the coast, all dark ocean-blue and edged by towering rocky cliffs. I pull into an overlook and we get out, the salt breeze tousling our hair. Below, waves crash and foam against jagged rocks.

I grab the picnic supplies while London scouts a spot for us to sit on the clifftop overlooking the endless Pacific. He lays out a blanket and we sit together, the only souls for miles. We just sit and eat, taking in the awesome view.

When we finish, London settles against my side and I wrap an arm around him. He’s been quiet since we got here, lost in

his own world.

“You okay?” I ask. “I know it’s been a rough recovery this last week.”

London sighs, dropping his head against my shoulder. “Yeah, just... doubts creeping in. About getting back to where I was.”

I rub his arm. “Hey. You’re the strongest person I know. You’ll get through this and be better than ever. If you stop eating chips.”

London laughs before he sits up and punches me. Then he falls back against my side. He turns his face into my neck and his lips brush against my tattoo when he speaks. “I’m trying. Just feels like everything’s on the line, you know? Hockey, school. Us.” His voice drops. “I can’t lose any of it.”

“You won’t,” I say fiercely. I cup his cheek, waiting until he meets my eyes. “You’ve got me, London. Every step. I’m in this.”

London’s eyes lighten, like clouds parting to make room for the sun. He leans in until our lips meet in the softest, gentlest kiss I think we’ve ever shared. My heart swells, overflowing with this boy who’s come to mean everything.

Every-fucking-thing to me.

The taste of him is sweet, like the tiramisu I packed us for dessert and something uniquely London. I deepen the kiss and he moans into my mouth, sending heat curling through me.

When we pull apart, London’s cheeks are flushed, and his pupils are blown. He looks at me like I’m the only person in the world. He makes me feel invincible.

“You’re incredible, you know that?” he says, voice husky. “I’m so fucking lucky to have you.”

I trace his cheekbone with my thumb, still awestruck by his beauty. How the hell did I not see it before? “Right back at you, Hotshot.”

We lean in again and forget everything around us; the ocean breeze hugging us like a blanket.

As we make out, I realize this is the first time we've kissed outside of our rooms or hidden corners of campus. And it feels so right, like we were always meant to be here together.

RIOT

LONDON PULLS me on top of him, his hands gripping my hips. He kisses me hard and deep, like he's trying to crawl inside me. I groan into his mouth, the heat building in my gut.

I grind down against him, my cock hardening as his tongue tangles with mine. His fingers dig into my ass, urging me closer as he thrusts up against me.

The air is thick with desire; the ocean crashing below us. But all I can focus on is London beneath me, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

It's cold as hell out here, but I can't even feel it because the heat between us is scorching. London's hands slip under my shirt, his calloused palms skating up my back.

"You're so fucking hot," he rasps against my lips. "I want to taste every inch of you."

I shudder at the thought of his mouth on me, licking and sucking me until I'm a trembling mess and coming down his throat. I've been craving him since the last time we did this and I'm down for whatever he wants to do right now. This week's been torture trying to keep my hands off of him while he recovers from his concussion, but right now I don't wanna hold back.

I kiss him hungrily, my tongue sliding against his. He moans into my mouth and bites my lip until he draws blood as he grinds up against me again, our cocks rubbing together through our jeans.

Fuck, it feels good. But I want more. Nothing's ever enough with London.

I sit back, straddling his hips as I pull off my shirt and toss it aside. London stares up at me, eyes dark with hunger.

"My mouth is fucking watering, Golden Boy," he says in a rough sex-laced voice. His eyes trace over my abs, lingering on the trail of hair leading below my waistband.

I smirk down at him, loving how turned on he is by me. "Then what are you waiting for?"

London's eyes spark with an intensity that makes my cock twitch, and he sits up, pushing me off him. He kneels between my legs, his hands skimming over my thighs as he leans in.

I groan as he mouths over my cock through my jeans, the friction making my head spin. He looks up at me through his lashes as he works me over, his lips wet and swollen already.

Fuck, it's so hot watching him go down on me. I run my fingers through his hair as he unzips my jeans and tugs them down.

"Jesus Christ," London rasps as he takes in my cock straining against my boxer briefs. He palms himself through his jeans, like he's trying to relieve the ache.

"Get your fucking mouth on me, Hotshot," I growl out.

London smirks up at me before tugging down my boxers and taking me into his mouth. I groan as his tongue swirls around the tip, brushing across my piercing while his hand pumps the base of my cock. I don't think I'll ever get used to this.

It's fucking incredible. The way he looks up at me, eyes dark with lust, is enough to make me come immediately.

I grip his hair as he takes me deeper, his throat working me over. He's learned from the last time he had my dick in his mouth. He moans around me; the vibrations sending sparks shooting through my body.

"Fuck, London," I gasp out. "That feels so good."

He pulls off, licking his lips. "I want you inside me so bad, Riot." His voice is raw, and he looks all sorts of fucked up. "I want you to fuck me right here on this blanket, with the ocean crashing below us."

Holy fuck. The thought makes me throb in his hand. "You sure? We don't have any supplies."

London grins wickedly. "Don't worry, I came prepared." He reaches into his pocket and produces a small bottle of lube and a condom.

"You're fucking amazing," I say, kissing him hard, already imagining sinking into him.

London strips off his shirt and jeans, revealing his gorgeous body beneath. He's all lean muscle and smooth skin, his abs rippling as he strokes himself.

Fuck, it's so hot watching him touch himself. I can barely breathe as he slicks up his fingers and works them inside himself, stretching himself open for me. I need to taste him.

I pull him into my lap and kiss him hard as he continues to finger himself open. I bat his hand away and take over, groaning as I sink my finger inside of him. He's so tight and hot, and he moans into my mouth as I grab his ass, kneading it roughly.

"Fuck me," he gasps out, grinding against me. "I need you inside me, Riot."

I'm more than happy to oblige. London rolls the condom onto me before straddling my hips and sinking down onto me.

We both groan as I slide inside him. The sensation of having him wrapped around my cock is almost overwhelming. He's so tight and perfect, and I grip his hips as he starts to move on top of me.

It's fucking incredible being here with him like this. The ocean crashes below us and the sky is an angry gray blanket above us, and London rides me like it's our last night on earth. The way he's looking at me with those pretty hazel eyes is driving me wild and making my heart ache.

Fuck, I think I love him.

I thrust up into him as he grinds down against me, his cock leaking pre-cum between us. I'm drunk on watching him lose control like this. The energy between us is damn near catching fire. He's always so guarded, but here, with me, he's unleashed.

We move together in perfect sync, our bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces. I kiss him deeply as he rides me harder, his fingers digging into my shoulders while I wrap my fingers around his thick shaft.

"Fuck," he gasps out, throwing his head back. "I'm so close."

I stroke his cock in time with our thrusts, and soon we're both teetering on the edge. London comes with a cry, his body clenching around me as he spills over my hand and onto my abs.

The sight of him coming apart is enough to send me over the edge, too. I groan as I come, my hips jerking against his ass as I empty myself inside of him.

London slumps against me, panting and spent, as his head falls onto my shoulder. We stay wrapped up in each other for a few minutes before he pulls off of me and collapses beside me on the blanket.

"Holy shit, what the fuck, Riot," he says, still breathless. "How is fucking you so goddamn good? It's blowing my mind." London laughs as I yank off the condom.

"Yeah, it's never been like that with anyone but you. You're fucking amazing," I say, kissing him softly. "I can't believe we just did that out here."

London grins at me, all smug and satisfied. "It's hot as hell, isn't it? Out here with the ocean and the cliffs and just us. Where anyone could've driven by and seen."

He gives me a deep kiss, like he's trying to eat me alive, and I drown in him again. It's so easy to get lost with him, to forget about anything else but this moment. His touch sends jolts of electricity buzzing through my veins, and I want to

sink inside him all over again. My obsession with him burns through me like a wildfire. It's inescapable and all-consuming.

I sit up and stare at him. He watches me right back. "I love you," I blurt out like an asshole.

London stares at me, his eyes widening slightly. "What?" he asks, choking on nothing but air.

"Fuck. I didn't mean to say that." My cheeks heat up and I look away, embarrassed. I'm not taking it back, though. "But it's true."

London sits up too and cups my cheek, turning my face towards his while he runs his thumb across my stubble. His hazel eyes are warm, filled with something that looks a lot like love, too. "I love you too," he breathes. "I've been trying to figure out how to tell you for weeks."

My heart leaps into my throat as I pull him close, kiss the hell out of him. It's not like I thought he'd reject me or anything, but the relief I feel hearing him say it back is overwhelming.

We kiss for a long time until London pulls away because he's shivering. "It's fucking freezing out here."

I laugh as we get dressed and toss him my hoodie. He smirks and pulls it over his head. Shit, seeing him in my clothes does something to me. "Hope you don't think you're getting this back," he says and I wrap my fingers in the front of the fabric and yank him to me so I can kiss him.

"Looks better on you anyway, Hotshot," I mumble against his lips.

I let him go and we pick everything up and head back to the car, hands linked. Neither one of us wants to stop touching.

As the sun sets, we start the long drive home. It doesn't take long before London's dozing against the window. I can't believe the gift this imperfect, beautiful boy gave me today.

I've never felt closer to someone before. It's exhilarating but scary, this power he has over me now that I've fully let

him in, and I don't give a fuck what the world thinks. London
Lancaster belongs to me.

RIOT

THE SNARLING engine of the bus rumbles beneath me as we pull up to the Silverton Arena. Crowds are already filing into the towering stadium, hungry for the game between us and the Silverton Sabers. The energy in the air is electric, setting my nerves on edge.

This will be my first game back after the one match suspension for leaving the Pinehurst game when London got injured. No regrets on that front—I'd drop everything again in a heartbeat if he needed me. But having to watch powerlessly from the stands while the team struggled last game still gnaws at me.

My place is on the ice with my team.

I roll my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension coiled tight there. The stakes are high for tonight's game if we want to keep our spot in the finals. And with our rhythm fucked from London's absence, we need to be in sync.

My eyes find him as we disembark from the bus, duffel bags slung over our shoulders. London's laughing with Knight about something, but I sense the underlying nerves in the set of his jaw, the tension lingering in his frame. I can read him so well now. This will be his first time back after the concussion and last night when we were in bed, he confessed how nervous he is. He feels like he's got something to prove tonight—to the crowd, the team, but most of all, to himself.

He looks up and our gazes clash for a split second where everything else disappears. They flash like lightning behind

storm clouds, telegraphing his determination to dominate this game. Then Teo bumps into my shoulder and I'm forced to look away from him and act like I don't know what it feels like to be inside of him or how my name sounds rolling off his tongue when he's coming.

Fuck, I wish we could have a moment alone before the game, just to check in. But the loud and crazy locker room kills any chance. The guys are rowdy, riding the pre-game high—chirping at London about him finally being back to pull his weight, teasing Deck about his superstitious game day rituals.

The mood is electric, vibrant, but beneath it simmers the current of competition, of the brutal battle awaiting us on the ice. We can pretend, but the promise of violence sings in our blood, tugging at that primal part of ourselves we try to tame in every other part of our lives.

I tune out the loud-ass chatter, focusing inward as I gear up. The familiar ritual soothes me, pulling me into the headspace I need to dominate the game. I shrug on my pads, the weight grounding. Next come the skates, their sharp edges glinting under the fluorescent lights. I lace them with practiced movements, each crisscrossing tug settling me further. The jersey slides over my head, the twenty-nine across my back blending me fully into the unit we become on the ice. No longer Riot, but part of the whole. The team. The helmet completes it, shutting out distractions, sealing me into the hyper-focus required in this unforgiving arena.

Ready for war, I look up and again my eyes seek out London. He looks as coiled and prepared as I feel. I try to channel strength toward him with just one look. Let him know I've got his back. That I know for sure he's capable and I trust him with everything I've got. His lips quirk and he nods once. Message received.

We move as one force toward the ice, sticks clacking together, hearts beating the war drum. The cheers hit us like a shockwave when we enter the rink, thousands strong, shaking the barn's foundations. But I block it out. The only thing that matters now is the ice and my brothers beside me.

The puck drops, and we explode into motion. I get an assist early, sending the puck right to Mateo's tape for our first goal, the red light flashing triumphantly. But there's no time to celebrate. The game gets intense, with both sides crashing into each other with enough force to knock teeth out.

It doesn't take me long to realize their strategy—the Sabers are targeting London. A-fucking-gain. Maybe they're hoping to capitalize on any remnants of weakness from his injury. They think he's fractured, fragile. An exposed nerve to twist. Or maybe they're trying to bait me.

Fuck them.

I should've predicted their ruthlessness. Instead, rage clouds my vision as I watch them crash London into the boards again and again, piling on hits outside the bounds of fair play. The refs might as well be invisible with their blatant swallowing of whistles.

When number twenty-two delivers a nasty cross-check to London's lower back, I see red. Before I can think, I'm barreling toward the piece of shit, gloves off and swinging wildly. We crash together, trading punches until his nose explodes with blood all over the place. My teammates swarm to pull us apart before the refs descend, shouting threats of penalties as they force distance between our scrum.

I shake off Mateo and Bear, chest heaving. I drew blood, so I'm definitely going to the box. My knuckles throb where they split against the bastard's helmet, but it's his busted nose and blackening eye that satisfies me. Let him think twice before targeting London again.

Across the now blood-splattered ice, London meets my eyes. I expect anger or exasperation. Instead, his eyes flash with gratitude and, fuck me, heat. I nod once and turn away before my traitorous gaze reveals everything between us. Like the fact I fucking love him. Or want to fuck him. Take your pick.

The refs are circling like vultures, waiting to make an example of me. Funny how they didn't do shit when twenty-two was trying to lay out my man.

I escape with only two minutes in the sin bin for the fight. The Sabers player cried to the ref, but fuck him. His wounded face is the highlight of my day.

The fight riled up the crowd and now they're hungry for more violence after they got a taste. Bloodthirsty assholes. The energy turns ravenous, feverish. My teammates ride the electric edge too, amped up and aggressive as we step back onto the ice for the second period.

We control the puck early but can't convert against their brick wall of a goalie. Frustration mounts at each failed setup and missed shot. Meanwhile, the Sabers continue their targeted assault on London. Apparently, they didn't learn the first time. I think I might have to kill someone out on this ice tonight.

After I hit back, they started hitting harder. Fuckers.

I boil watching their cheap shots and London's barely contained fury. My focus splinters between monitoring him and trying to rally our flagging team. Our plays unravel, one mistake snowballing into the next until the Sabers capitalize, sinking two goals midway through the period to even the score.

The mood in the locker room during the last intermission is grim. Coach paces, face mottled red as he grills us on where shit went wrong. I only half listen, watching London rotate his shoulder with a barely concealed wince. He looks like he went a few rounds in a back alley brawl. I want to pull him aside, check that he's okay, but now isn't the time or place with the team on edge and morale low.

Not to mention we're not ready to come out to them.

Deck tries to rally us with one of his motivational speeches, but his words can't seem to penetrate the dark mood. My thoughts keep spiraling back to London and how much more punishment he can take tonight.

I'm clenching my stick so hard it bites into my palms and I'm surprised it doesn't snap. Tris sidles over with a water bottle, Eli on his heels.

“You good, Ri?” Tris asks, assessing me with a furrowed brow. “You seemed pretty on edge out there whenever the Sabers targeted London.”

I force myself to exhale, trying to unwind the tension coiled tight as a spring. “Just want to protect my team. Sabers are playing dirty as hell.”

Tris and Eli exchange a look loaded with meaning I don’t understand.

“True,” Eli says carefully. “But you seemed ready to tear heads off whenever London took a bad hit. Kinda seemed... personal.”

I blow out a frustrated breath, defensive anger spiking through me. Can’t they see London’s taking the worst of it tonight? Besides, I can’t exactly tell them I can’t handle watching the Sabers come at my boyfriend. “We’re teammates. Would’ve done the same if it was any of you out there.” My voice comes out sharper than intended.

Tris holds up his hands. “Woah, hey. We just want to make sure your head’s on straight for the game. No judgment.”

I force myself to uncoil, regretting snapping at them. They’re just trying to cover my ass. “You’re right, Tris. Sorry. Just on edge and want us to take these fuckers down.”

Eli claps me on the back. “We’ve got your back, brother. Let’s go show these Sabers what happens when they mess with our boy Lancaster.”

Tris grins and fist bumps my shoulder. “Hell yeah. We’re ending this shit tonight.”

Their show of solidarity loosens the iron band around my chest, and I offer a small smile back. It’s forced, but whatever.

Their curious looks make it clear my reaction to London didn’t slip by unnoticed. A problem to worry about later. Right now, we have a game to win.

Back on the ice, we claw our way to a slim lead to start the third period, but exhaustion drags at us. The Sabers smell blood in the water. A mistake now could finish us.

I force my legs to pump harder, skates chewing at the ice. But everything feels sluggish, my reactions too slow. London's hit once again and this time stays down on his knees, head bowed. Before I can intervene, the ref's whistle slices the air.

Penalty. Sabers. The crowd boos their displeasure, but I feel savage satisfaction. Let them pay for the damage they've done tonight.

Coach calls a timeout so London can recover. As we circle up for the power play, I finally get a good look at him. Fresh bruises mottle his skin and his eyes are glassy with pain. Everything in me clenches with the need to shield him, take him away from this violence. But all I can do is offer words of encouragement as Coach draws up a plan to press our advantage. London meets my gaze and I will every ounce of strength I possess to flow into him.

The game drags on, minutes bleeding away painfully slow. We dig deep but can't get insurance. All the Sabers need is one slip up from our exhausted team to tie this game and destroy our shot at the championships.

Only thirty seconds left. We just need to hold them off. My legs shake, muscles screaming, but I keep pushing. I can rest when this is over. When we've won.

Ten seconds. I block out the crowd roar, the shriek of skates, all of it narrowing to the ticking clock. Five seconds. A Saber breaks away with the puck. I give desperate chase, but I'm a stride too slow. Time dilates as he winds up for the shot that could ruin everything we've fought for tonight.

But then London is there, a lightning bolt shooting across the ice. He throws himself in front of the blistering shot, knocking the puck away a split second before the buzzer sounds.

We've done it. Barely.

The team crashes together in a clench of heaving chests and thumping helmets, roaring our victory. But my eyes find London as the crowd boos and throws shit onto the ice at their team's loss. He looks utterly spent, hands braced on knees,

head hanging low with sweat dripping onto the ice. But when he lifts his eyes to meet mine, I see pride burning there, and a deep-seated satisfaction. He took everything they threw at him and still came out on top.

In the locker room, a different energy hangs over the team. Winning with a low-key vibe. We know we scraped this win by the skin of our teeth. But together, we were just strong enough.

London settles beside me, wincing as he bends to untie his laces. Now that the adrenaline is fading, the toll of the game shows in the stiff set of his shoulders and the occasional grunts and sounds of pain.

My fingers itch to reach for him. To make him feel better as we sit here, bruised but not broken. But the busy locker room offers no privacy for the things I want to say... and do.

Our eyes meet and I mouth the words *I love you*, unable to resist the temptation.

I settle for skimming my fingers lightly over his forearm. The touch is so brief I can almost pretend it never happened. But London inhales sharply at the contact, the sound lost beneath the ambient noise of the team. He doesn't pull away, though. Just lets my fingers sit against his battered skin.

The simple contact only makes me crave more. I wish I could give him a big hug and make it all better after that tough game. You know or drop to my knees and suck him off. But we have to wait until we're alone.

We both feel stronger—and calmer—from this small touch, I can tell. It's like a secret moment of closeness between us in the middle of all the rowdy team energy. But it's a reminder that I have someone to face life's challenges with. A partner in every sense of the word. Whatever comes next, London will be there to take it on with me.

And no matter how hard the clashes rage on the ice, in the quiet moments between just him and me, we can drop the act. Can show the truth of who we are and what we're becoming.

Even after our years of clashing, there's something about London that slips past my defenses. That's why just this small touch grounds me when tensions are high. Makes me feel less alone.

I spent years telling myself he didn't belong here, that he was just flash and no heart. But I know now that was all talk. Underneath it, there's more to him than I ever let myself see. There always has been. Maybe I was afraid to get to know him all those years because I could sense what he'd become to me if I stopped to really know him.

That heated promise in his eyes steels me as we board the bus back to campus. Back to the normalcy of classes and practices, a world away from the brutality of the hockey rink. Where we're a secret to the world, but I wouldn't give him up for anything.

As the team settles into their usual shit-talking for the ride home, London and I take seats at the back, far enough apart not to draw attention. But once we're moving, I feel London's hand slip into mine, hidden from view as his pinky hooks around mine. In the reflection of the dark bus window, I see the understanding in his eyes. The unspoken vow that he's my person and always will be.

Maybe it's stupid to tempt fate again after the damage secrets caused before. But with my steady strength balancing London's rough edges, I find myself not giving a fuck about anything but him. This. If everyone finds out and it ruins our futures, so be it.

Just feeling his finger curled around mine settles something in me. A reminder that I don't have to shoulder the burden alone anymore. London could've turned his back after the mess I made, but here he is, offering me another shot. Giving me his heart. That means more than I can say.

I know we've got a rough road ahead, full of challenges that'll test us. But feeling the warmth of London in the shadows, I'm ready to fight for this. For him. For us.

LONDON

WAKING up tangled with Riot has become the best part of my day, no contest. The smell of him, his comforting aura, the rhythm of his heart—they keep me grounded and not lost in the loneliness that I usually feel.

This morning, I let myself indulge as the first rays of sun creep across the sheets. Study the smooth muscles painted in black ink of Riot's back, his just-fucked hair sticking up every which way. Trace the tattoos scrolling down his arms—they're like the story of who he is.

When my touch makes him stir, I smile against his shoulder blade. "Go back to sleep," I murmur.

He grumbles, but soon he's breathing deep and even again.

I'd love to stay wrapped up in this little cocoon with him, keeping the world and its judgments locked outside. But then reality shows up, even when things are going well.

With a reluctant sigh, I slip from the tangled sheets and pad to the bathroom, wincing as my bruised muscles scream like a motherfucker. I scrub the scent of sex and Riot off my skin, watching the steam fog the mirror. My reflection's a roadmap of scars, but there's a new light in my eyes lately. Something dangerously close to hope.

It scares me, if I'm being real. I spent so long building up walls to keep the world's pain away. Now here I've gone and handed Riot a damn sledgehammer to those defenses. I gotta believe he'll wield it gently, but old doubts still whisper their bullshit.

*You really think you can trust him with your heart?
Remember how he lied to you?*

I grit my teeth and force those doubts away. What Riot and I have now runs deeper than any past beef or miscommunication. He's the rock that balances out my rough edges. With him, I'm no longer brittle steel at risk of shattering—I'm fuckin' titanium. Unbreakable.

We still clash sometimes, no question. We probably always will. But we're figuring out how we fit. Walking away now would break me in ways that might not ever heal.

So I leave the past where it belongs—behind me. Riot and me, we've got our eyes on the future now. We're gonna do big things together.

I make my way to class and it drags on endlessly. I'm itching to be back with Riot, but he's got a full slate of his own today. The way I'm addicted to him is idiotic.

So fucking dumb.

I can't stop. Don't want to.

This muscle physiology lecture isn't sticking. I can't focus for shit. My notebook fills up with plays I want to run, crosses and hooks laid out in dark slashes of ink instead of what I should be paying attention to. The margins crowd with doodled faces that slowly transform into Riot's sharp features, his piercing eyes.

Christ, you got it bad, Lancaster.

I huff a breath, gripping my pen tighter. Who'd have thought it'd be the arrogant, sharp-tongued Riot fucking Kensington that cracked through the concrete around my heart? Sure as hell didn't see that coming. But here we are. And I'm happier than I can ever remember being.

Of course, that happiness comes with a price. Namely, our relationship being a dirty little secret.

We're playing with fire and I damn well know it. On the ice, Riot and I skate the line between "just friends" and "a whole lot fucking more" so close that eventually, we're gonna

cross it. The lingering glances and secret touches only hide so much when you're feeling like *this*.

Plus, him beating people's asses on ice anytime they so much as breathe in my direction is a problem, no matter how much I fucking love it.

I'm tired of hiding how he makes me feel. Scared too, if I'm being dead honest. Going public with *us* means dealing with the judgments and shit I escaped from when I left Ravenloft. But staying silent means denying some fundamental truth about myself. And Riot should never have to feel like something I'm ashamed to share with the world.

The decision's been weighing on me, tugging at me relentlessly all week. I thought I could work through it alone, but that strategy's getting me nowhere but more lost. Talking it out's the only way I'll find any clarity here. But who the hell can I even tell?

Normally I'd go to FrozenFire, but that's fucked.

The answer hits me as I'm heading out of class. Up ahead, I spot Knight breaking away from a pack of guys, his chestnut hair spilling out from a beanie.

"Ey, Shadow!" I call out, jogging to catch up. He grins when he sees me coming.

"Lancaster, my dude. You survived physio, yeah?" Knight greets me with a grin.

My lip curls. "Barely. That shit's 90 minutes of slow torture. I'm starving after—you down to grab a bite?"

Knight's smile sharpens, something calculating glinting in his mossy eyes before it's gone. "I could eat. Lead the way."

We end up at Lou's, my favorite campus deli. The faint twang of country music plays over the sizzle of the griddle. We grab loaded sandwiches and slide into a corner booth.

Knight studies me while I unwrap my food. "So what's up? You didn't suggest lunch just for my sparkling company."

I huff a laugh at his bluntness.

“What, I can’t want to hang with my teammate?” I deflect, buying time. Bringing this up won’t be easy. Shit, I’m already sweating. Knight’s still the other new guy on the team, an unknown in a lot of ways sorta like me. But my gut says I can trust him with this.

Knight levels an unimpressed look my way. “Cut the bullshit, London. You’ve got a tell when something’s eating at you.” His eyes sharpen, seeing too much as he gestures to the way my leg’s shaking under the table. “Spill it. I won’t judge.”

I exhale, turning my iced tea between my palms. No use dancing around it any longer. “It’s about me and Riot. We’re... together. Romantically.”

Knight’s expression doesn’t change, like he expected as much. “Figured it was something like that. You two have gotten pretty cozy lately.”

I raise a brow, surprised. “That obvious, huh?”

Knight smirks. “I’m not blind. Most of the guys just think it’s your rivalry mellowing into friendship. But I could tell there was more going on. He looks at you like he wants to murder the air for touching you.” He bites into his sandwich, mulling. “So what’s the issue? Trouble in paradise already?”

I run a hand through my hair, exhaling harshly. “Nah, we’re solid. It’s just... nobody else knows. Well, except Deck. We’ve been keeping it quiet.”

Understanding flickers through Knight’s gaze. “Still in the closet and it’s getting cramped, yeah?” He leans back in the vinyl booth. “You thinking of coming out to the team?”

“I want to,” I admit softly. “I’m just not sure how they’ll take it, you know? Hockey culture and all.”

Knight nods thoughtfully. “It’s a legit fear. I’ve known guys who went through hell trying to come out in this sport.” His eyes turn distant. “Lost friends. Got forced off teams. There’s still a lot of toxic bullshit out there even outside of hockey.”

A storm cloud passes over his eyes before he blinks, and it’s gone.

My gut sinks hearing my worries spoken out loud. Makes them feel more real somehow.

Knight must read the apprehension on my face. He reaches across the table, squeezing my forearm. “But the team here won’t pull any of that crap. They might be shocked at first, but they’ve got your back.” His mouth lifts. “Riot’s too. No matter what.”

Something in me unclenches hearing the certainty in his voice.

“Most of the guys won’t care who you love so long as you show up on the ice,” Knight continues. “Deck, Teo, Eli, Bear—you know they’ll support you no matter what.”

I nod slowly, feeling the tight band around my chest loosen with each steadying breath. Knight’s confidence gives me hope that this could work out. That Riot and me don’t have to stay hidden forever.

“You really think the team will accept it?” I ask.

Knight smiles, but it’s tight. “They might razz you a bit, but it’s ‘cause they care. You’re their brother, London. That won’t change.”

My mind quiets down when he puts everything into perspective like that. Knight’s right—these guys have had my back through hell and back this season. I’ve gotta trust they’ll still be there now.

“Thanks, man,” I say gruffly. “I needed to hear that.”

Knight squeezes my shoulder as we slide out of the booth. “Anytime. And let me know if you need someone in your corner when you decide to pull the goalie.”

I chuckle as we head into the bracing air. The tightness I’ve carried for weeks has started to fade. Knight’s confidence in the team steadies my resolve not to hide this—hide us—any longer.

My steps feel lighter as I make my way home through the busy campus. Inside the apartment, I find Riot at the kitchen table, textbooks and notes splayed around him. His hair’s a

mess, like he's been raking his hands through it. Probably driving himself crazy trying to memorize pages of legal jargon.

He looks up, and his serious face turns into a stunning smile when he sees me. I grin back and drop my keys on the counter.

"Hey you. How was class?"

"Boring as hell." I step behind his chair, leaning down to kiss the side of his neck before kneading the rigid muscles of his shoulders. "Missed you though."

Riot tips his head back with a groan as I work at a stubborn knot and I drop a kiss to his lips because I can't get enough of him. "God, that feels incredible. I've been hunched over these damn books for hours."

"Poor baby," I tease, leaning down to brush another kiss at the edge of his jaw.

Riot captures my hand, guiding me around to his lap. He cradles my face between his palms, drawing me into a deep kiss that steals my breath and makes my pulse race. "I missed you," he murmurs against my lips.

"Are you kidding? I miss you right now. In case you haven't noticed, Golden Boy, I'm kinda obsessed."

Riot's eyes flash and catch fire. "I've noticed," he says huskily. He pulls me closer, kissing me until my head spins.

When we finally come up for air, Riot searches my face. "Everything okay? You seem like you're somewhere else."

I exhale slowly. My stomach's in knots. I have no idea how he's going to take this. "We should talk. About us."

Riot tenses. "Yeah? What about us?"

"Don't worry, Golden Boy. It's nothing bad," I say with a smirk as I run my fingers through his hair. He leans into my touch. "I'm tired of hiding this. Hiding us." The soft strands of his hair run between my fingers. "I want to stop pretending we're just friends or teammates. I want to hold your hand on

campus or kiss you after games without worrying about who'll see."

Riot's quiet as he takes this in. His thumb traces restless circles against my wrist. "You know I want that, too. More than anything." He sighs. "But if we come out, especially to the team, it could get messy." His jaw tightens. "I don't want to cause issues before the playoffs. And I sure as hell don't want anyone giving you shit over this."

I know Riot's just being protective in that gruff way of his. But his words rub me the wrong way.

"So we just keep sneaking around indefinitely? Only touch when there's locked doors separating us from the world?" I try to rein in the bitter frustration creeping into my voice. "I knew the risks when we started this, Riot. I don't need you protecting me from what people might say. I've been dealing with haters my entire life, dude. I can handle it."

Riot's eyes narrow, his mouth thinning into a line. "It's not about protecting you—"

I scoff, and he wraps his hand around my throat and tightens his hold just enough to remind me I'm his.

"I just think we should be smart about this. Coming out now, at the end of the season, it's asking to fuck everything up."

"And what if I don't give a damn about that?" I challenge. "I'm not gonna pretend to be someone I'm not. Not anymore."

We stare at each other, both breathing hard, his painted fingers around my throat. The first cracks are showing in this thing we're building, threatening to crumble the foundation. All the fears we've buried are clawing their way to the surface now, baring their teeth.

I force a slow exhale, softening my voice. "I'm not trying to rush into this, Riot. But I talked it through with Knight today and I don't want to hide you anymore." I lean into his hold and wrap my arm around his neck. "I know change is scary as hell. But we need to do this. And I really believe it'll be okay."

Riot searches my face, a flicker of hesitant hope in his stormy eyes. “Knight thinks so? That the team will accept us being together?”

I grin because I know he’s going to give in. I can feel it in the way he’s touching me, his thumb stroking the side of my throat. I don’t think he even knows he’s doing it. “He does. And these guys love you. You think they’re going to turn their backs on us?” I run my fingers through the hair at the back of his neck. “We need to make fear our bitch. Right?”

Riot exhales harshly, like he’s been holding that breath for years. “You’re right. I’m just being a paranoid dick. I want this—I want you, out in the open.” He grips my jaw in his hand, tilting my head how he wants me before kissing me fiercely, like he’s sealing his promise between us.

When we break apart, he rests his forehead against mine. “We’re going to do this.”

Relief crashes over me, so powerful I feel dizzy with it. I kiss him again, trying to pour all I’m feeling into it—the fear, the hope, but most of all the bone-deep love I’m finally letting myself accept I feel for this man.

“I’m with you, Kensington. I’m *so* fucking with you.”

Riot smiles against my lips, soft and sure. “Together then. It’s cheesy as fuck, but it’s you and me against the world, Lancaster.”

I pull back, meeting his gaze steadily. “And if the world tries to take us on? What then?”

“We’ll fight like hell,” Riot says fiercely. “And we’ll win.”

RIOT

THE ICE GLEAMS under the arena lights, smooth and untouched as we take the rink for pre-game warmups. But my roiling thoughts are anything but calm. Today's the day London and I agreed it's time to tell the team about us.

My guts are in knots, nerves buzzing louder than the clash of sticks and skates echoing through the empty stands. I got here early, hoping to rein in the chaos in my thoughts before facing the guys. But the longer I sit here spinning scenarios, the deeper my anxiety grows, twisting my insides tighter.

I'm not ashamed of me and London. Far fucking from it. But these teammates—they're my brothers. And the thought of that bond fracturing over who I love... it makes my chest clamp tight.

What if this wrecks the rhythm we've fought so hard to build? I can't be the reason our play falls apart before the playoffs. Can't risk costing the guys their shot at victory. Not when they've bled for it as much as I have.

But staying silent means denying the truth of me and London. Acting like what we have is some sordid secret. He deserves better than that. Deserves to stand proud in who he is—who we are together.

My thoughts chase themselves in useless circles until I'm at risk of wearing a rut in the ice. I force a long exhale, watching my breath plume white. All this stressing is getting me nowhere. Whatever happens today, London and I are gonna face it together.

I spot Deck chatting with the assistant coaches by the bench. *Better get this over with.* I skate over, my stomach swooping uneasily.

Deck notices me approaching and excuses himself. “Hey Ri. You’re here early.”

“Wanted to grab you before the rest of the guys get here.” My hands tighten around my stick, palms clammy. “There’s something I gotta tell you.”

Deck’s brow furrows, but he nods. “Let’s talk in the locker room.”

The short walk off the ice feels endless. My legs are stiff, nerves coiling tighter with each awkward step in my skates.

Finally alone, Deck leans against the bank of lockers, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “What’s up? Something on your mind?”

I swallow hard, trying to find my voice. “Yeah, actually. London and I...” I hesitate, the words sticking in my throat.

Deck studies me, something knowing in his eyes. “You two finally got your shit together, huh? It’s about damn time. You two ready to tell the team?”

My jaw drops, relief rushing through me so fast my knees nearly buckle. “You don’t care?”

Deck chuckles. “You two aren’t exactly subtle. It’s probably a good thing to tell them before they figure it out on their own.” He claps me on the shoulder. “Remember when I walked in on you two snuggling on the couch when London had his concussion?” His smile softens. “Didn’t take a genius to see how much you care about each other then, and it’s not a far stretch to imagine you’d want to tell the team now that you’re sure.”

I exhale sharply, feeling like an idiot for not knowing Warren would have my back. But I couldn’t risk it until now. Not when coming out could cost us everything.

I huff a laugh, relief crashing through me. “Well, guess that panic attack I had this morning was for nothing. But yeah,

London and I are officially together and if anyone in this locker room fucks with my boyfriend, I'm gonna go the hell off. Just a heads up." I meet his eyes. "Got me?"

He laughs. "Yeah, I got you."

I blow out a breath. "I know it's risky, but I've never felt like this about anyone before."

Deck grips my shoulder. "You don't need to explain it to me. I can see it." His mouth quirks. "Took you idiots long enough to get your shit together, though."

I roll my eyes but can't contain my grin. However the rest of the team reacts, at least I know my captain's got my back.

"Are you happy? Both of you?"

My lips tip up into a grin. "Happier than I've ever been," I admit. "London, he just... gets me, you know? In a way no one else does."

Deck nods slowly. "Then I'm happy for you. For both of you." He smiles wryly. "Guess your obsession with defending his ass on the ice makes a lot more sense now."

I huff a laugh. "Yeah, I may have been a bit over the top lately." I clear my throat. "We're planning to tell the team today. Just wanted to talk to you first."

Deck nods, his expression turning serious. "I'll back you both up. The guys might be surprised at first, but they'll come around." He squeezes my shoulder. "You've got this, brother."

His support bolsters my resolve. I nod, heading deeper into the locker room to face the music.

London's already in his gear, lacing up his skates as the rest of the team trickles in. His eyes meet mine, steady and sure. Whatever happens, he's got me and I've got him.

The team is shit talking each other, and it's making me even more nervous. I just gotta rip off the band-aid and get it over with.

"Hey guys," I call out, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "London and I have something to tell you."

The room goes quiet, all eyes on us. London steps up beside me, his hand brushing mine.

Everyone's waiting for us to say something. Suddenly my knees feel weak. I'm used to commanding attention on the ice, but this kind of scrutiny is new. Raw.

"We're dating," London says simply before I can force the words out. "And we wanted to be honest with you before rumors start flying or whatever." He shrugs like he's not hanging his heart out for these guys to stomp all over. "So... yeah. We're together."

A beat of silence stretches, broken only by the hum of the air conditioning. Then Mateo lets out a whoop, grinning wide. "I knew it! Pay up, Eli." He holds out a hand and Eli slaps a twenty into it with a grumble.

"You bet on this?" London asks, incredulous.

Eli smirks. "Knew you two had the hots for each other from day one. Just didn't know when you'd give in to the inevitable."

The rest of the team starts laughing and joking, the tension easing from my shoulders as they accept us with literally no drama at all. I meet London's eyes, feeling my own widen with disbelief. This is really happening—we're out, and the world hasn't ended.

Deck steps up, clapping both of us on the back. "Told you it'd be fine. Surprise, surprise, no one gives a fuck."

London exhales shakily, his relief palpable. "Holy shit." He looks at me, eyes getting all soft and mushy. "Thanks for jumping with me, Golden Boy."

I smile back, feeling lighter than I have in forever. The team's support means more than they'll ever know. And now that we're out, there's no more hiding. No more secrets or lies. Just us and whatever comes next.

Bear scratches his jaw, looking between us cautiously. "So, are you guys, like, gonna be affectionate and stuff around the team now?"

I exchange a glance with London. His eyes say, *Your call*. This affects both of us, but I know he'll follow my lead.

"Things won't change much," I answer carefully. "We know there's a time and place to be... affectionate." I keep my tone light, hoping to put Bear at ease. "You're still our teammates first and foremost. That won't change."

A few others lob questions our way about how this happened, if Coach knows, whether our status will impact the team dynamics. Who fucks who. That one gets Eli punched.

London fields everyone's questions smoothly, and I let him, happy to sit back and watch my boyfriend charm the fuck out of this team. Who knew my asshole rival had this in him?

The locker room buzzes with energy as the guys finish getting ready for the game.

I take the opportunity to move closer to Knight. "Hey, London told me you talked to him about everything. Thanks for that."

He nods but doesn't say anything.

I frown. "You've been quiet. Everything okay?"

Knight's mouth ticks up but the smile seems forced. "All good. I'm happy for you guys."

I study him closely. His words say one thing, but his posture screams another. The dude's uncomfortable. London told me Knight was the one who encouraged us to do this, so I don't get his mood now. Before I can dig in further, Coach tells us to quiet down.

I take my seat beside London, our thighs brushing as we settle in for Coach's pre-practice run down. Looks like this conversation will have to wait.

London leans close, his voice low. "We did it, Riot. We really fucking did it." His eyes gleam with pride and relief and something that makes my pulse quicken. *Love*. "And now that everyone knows, we can do this." He nods in the direction of the ice. "Together."

His words resonate through me, filling me with a fierce sense of belonging I've never felt before. This team is my family, and now that they've accepted me for who I am, accepted *us*, I'll protect them with everything I have.

Practice drags at first as I adjust to being on the ice with London as more than just rivals out in the open for the first time. But soon we find our groove again, skating hard and fast like we were born for it.

The guys chirp at us good-naturedly as we take the ice for drills. "Watch out, Kensington. Your boyfriend's gonna try to steal your thunder as our favorite," Mateo taunts.

"He's my favorite, so that makes sense." I shrug. "I've got no problem letting him take the lead," I say with a smirk. "He's better at it anyway."

London smirks at me, his eyes glinting wickedly. "You sure about that, Kensington?"

I laugh and my heart feels like it's flying as our teammates tease the hell out of us. This is what I've been missing all this time—being able to be myself with these guys and not hide who I am or who I love. It feels fucking incredible.

As we head into the final scrimmage of practice, I feel a surge of confidence. We've got this. Me and London—we're unstoppable together.

London and I linger on the rink as the others clear out. Alone at last, I pull him close, holding him tight.

"That was fucking brutal," I mutter into his hair, relieved this hurdle is done and it went better than either of us dared to hope it would. "But we did it. No going back now."

London leans into me with a shaky exhale. "I know telling them was the right call. But fuck, that was hard. I was fucking terrified." He nuzzles my throat. "Don't know what I'd do without you getting me through it."

I lean down to capture his lips in a kiss, slow and sweet and filled with everything I feel for him right at the blue line. "You'll never have to find out."

London's eyes gleam. "Damn straight." He kisses me again, deeper this time, until I'm breathless and so goddamn hard it hurts.

"I meant what I said in there," I murmur against his temple. "You and me? We're endgame." I squeeze his hips through his pads. "All that other shit, we'll handle it. Together."

London grins. "That's the only way I want it, Kensington."

We reluctantly let go, knowing Coach will be out here ripping us new assholes if we don't get into the locker room. But as London leads me off the ice, I feel so free. Coming out to the team was one hurdle, but there's still plenty of shit ahead for us to navigate. The hockey world's not exactly known for its acceptance of gay players, so we gotta be smart about this.

Am I gay?

No, I think bisexual's a better label, like I told my dad. But it won't matter to the world because I'm in love with a man and that's all they'll see.

As we head back to the locker room, I feel a surge of gratitude for this team that's become my family. They've got my back through anything, and that's more than I could've ever dreamed of.

London squeezes my hand, his hazel eyes bright as we step into the locker room together. "We're gonna be just fine," he murmurs, low enough that only I can hear. "And we're gonna make history."

I smile back, feeling his words resonate through me with soul-deep certainty. Together, we're gonna take the hockey world by storm.

RIOT

WAKING up next to London never gets old. The warm press of his body against mine, his breath tickling the back of my neck, his arm slung over my waist—it grounds me in a way I’ve never known. For once, I’m not itching to jump out of bed and be productive. I let myself bask in the gray morning light filtering through the blinds, etching muted stripes across our bodies.

London stirs, nuzzling the back of my shoulder. “Mornin’,” he mumbles, his voice still rough with sleep.

I roll over to face him, taking in his tousled blond hair, eyes still heavy-lidded. He looks unfairly sexy like this. I brush my lips over his, reveling in the roughness of his morning scruff.

“Morning, Hotshot.” I play with his hair. “Ready to make today our bitch?”

London groans. “Five more minutes. You’re too damn comfortable.” But he’s got a soft, crooked smile as he nuzzles his face into my neck and nips at my skin, clearly just as content to laze here a while longer.

Our lazy kisses get cut short by my annoying phone alarm. With matching sighs, we drag ourselves out of bed to get ready for our workout.

The frigid morning air bites through my hoodie as we step outside into the gloomy drizzle. I stole it from London and it smells like him.

London bounces on his toes beside me, shaking out the last of his drowsiness. “Race you to the athletic building?”

I quirk a brow. “You sure you’re ready to get your ass kicked this early?”

“In your dreams, Kensington.”

And he’s off, legs eating up the slick pavement in smooth strides. Laughing, I chase after him, my own muscles warming fast. We push each other up the steep incline, London taunting me the whole way. I just manage to beat him to the double doors, both of us gulping air as he uses his keycard to buzz us in.

The gym is quiet this early, only a few other guys scattered throughout the weight room. London and I settle in side by side at the bench press, trading barbs like always.

I watch him work through his reps, feeling a surge of pride at his strength, the way he grits his teeth as he pushes past his limits. The ways his arms flex, the veins popping out as they strain against his skin—it’s fucking hot as hell.

London smirks when he catches me staring. “Like what you see, Kensington?”

“You know I do.” I lean down to kiss him, tasting the salt of his sweat on his lips. “I love you like this. All sweaty and worked up.”

London’s eyes darken. “Maybe we should skip the gym next time and just fuck instead.”

I groan. “As tempting as that is, we need to be in peak shape for the playoffs. And Coach would kill us if we missed practice.”

London grumbles but finishes his set, wiping the sweat off his face with a towel. “Fine. But we’re fucking when we get home.” He kisses me again, slow and deep, before heading to the stationary bike to finish his workout.

I watch him go, feeling my heart swell with something close to wonder. I never thought I’d have this—someone to come home to, to wake up with every morning. Someone who

knows me inside out and loves me anyway. Sometimes I think I'm dreaming.

But this is real. And it's fucking incredible.

After our workout, we go home and shower together, and he kisses the hell out of me against the cold tile wall. The warm water slides over us, relieving the soreness in our muscles.

London's hands wander, sliding down my abs and lower until his fingertips brush against my hips.

"You're killing me," I groan as he palms my ass. "If you keep this up, we won't make it to practice."

London chuckles low in his throat. "I know you can take more than this, Kensington." He nips at my earlobe, making me shudder. "And I want to hear you scream my name."

I groan again as he drops to his knees, sucking me into his mouth like a goddamn pro. His eyes meet mine, filled with wicked intent as he works me with his tongue, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

"Fuck, London," I choke out, gripping his hair as he swallows me down. "You've gotten so fucking good at that."

London hums around me and the vibration makes me see stars. It's all I can do not to thrust into his mouth, but I don't want to choke him.

I let him work me until I'm writhing against the wall, panting for air. "Enough. Fuck, I'm already gonna come."

He pulls off of me with a pop. London chuckles, then stands, kissing me again. "I'm gonna give you the best orgasm you've ever had," he rasps.

My cock throbs at his words, and I let out a strangled laugh.

"I'm serious," London promises, eyes burning as he slides his fingers through my hair. "Fuck me," London growls against my lips. "I want you inside of me."

His words make my cock twitch. I spin him around, pinning him against the shower wall with his hands above his head. “You sure about that?” I grip his throat and squeeze. I’m obsessed with holding him like this, showing him he’s mine.

“Yes,” London moans. “Fuck me, Riot. Now.”

I reach for the lube we keep stashed in the shower caddy and slick myself up, groaning at how good it feels. Then I press use my fingers to stretch London as he curses and writhes against me, desperate for more.

“I’m clean,” he says. “Got tested last week.” He bites his lip, looking back at me. “And I trust you.”

His words made me so happy, knowing he trusts me. “I got tested at the start of the season and I haven’t been with anyone but you. Are you sure?”

London nods, his eyes dark. “C’mon, Golden Boy. I wanna feel you bare.”

The thought makes my head spin, but I’m too far gone to do anything but what he’s begging for. I press into London slowly, savoring every inch as he takes me inside him. He moans, his forehead pressed to the shower wall as I fill him all the way up with my cock.

“God, you’re so fucking perfect,” I murmur against his neck, letting my teeth scrape against his skin as I start to move. “You feel incredible.”

I turn his head to the side, kissing him hot and hard, sucking his tongue into my mouth. I want him to know how good this feels, how much I love him.

London pushes back against me, meeting my thrusts as we find a rhythm. It’s messy and so fucking good that I know I won’t last long. But I don’t care.

“Fuck, Riot,” London gasps as I tilt my hips to hit his prostate. “Just like that.”

I keep going, chasing that sweet spot until he’s panting and trembling and I’m holding him up. His cock is hard and

leaking between his thighs, but I don't touch it. I want him to come just from my cock inside him.

"I'm close," London moans as I thrust into him harder, faster. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm gonna come."

I grip his hips tighter, fingers dig into his skin as I pound into him relentlessly. He shudders around me, and his head falls back against my shoulder as he comes untouched all over the shower wall. The sight of him coming pushes me over the edge, too. I let go with a strangled groan, filling him up with hot spurts of my cum.

We stay like that for a long moment, breathing hard as we come down from our high. I don't ever want to pull out of him. My forehead falls to the back of his neck as I catch my breath. "I live here now," I tell him and he laughs.

"You're welcome to stay," London says. "But when we go to practice, I think the team might have something to say about your dick in my ass."

I groan, reluctantly pulling out of him. We rinse off quickly, then stumble back into the bedroom to find clean clothes.

London pulls on a pair of boxers, his eyes darkening as he catches me watching him. "You're gettin' greedy, Kensington."

I smirk at him. "Can you blame me? You're fucking hot."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "We've gotta get going or we'll be late for practice." He grabs a t-shirt from the closet and pulls it over his head. It's mine. "And Coach will have our asses."

"I already had your ass."

He flips me off and yanks a pair of joggers up. I sigh, knowing he's right. But I can't resist pulling him close and kissing him one more time before we head out the door.

The brisk air outside snaps me out of my London-induced fog as we walk to campus.

When we're done with the morning skate, we head out for coffee. We're passing Espresso Yourself when the front door swings open and Deck steps out clutching an oversized coffee. Damn, he got here fast after practice. He must've been desperate for caffeine.

"Hey, you two," he calls out, falling into step beside us. "Running late, Ri?"

I roll my eyes. "Please. My watch says we've got four minutes to spare."

Deck just chuckles, already accustomed to my punctuality neuroses. His knowing smile falters when he looks at London. "So, how'd everything go yesterday? The team seemed fine when I left. Anyone giving you guys shit?"

London exhales, a hint of lingering tension in the line of his shoulders. "Better than we could've hoped. Mostly just shock and some stupid questions." He nudges me with his elbow. "But no over the top drama, thank fuck."

I nod in agreement. "It'll take some adjusting, but the guys seem cool with it all." I hesitate, thinking of Knight's odd reaction yesterday. "Well, most of them anyway."

Deck's mouth thins, his gaze turning distant. "Yeah. About that..." He clears his throat. "I should've given you a heads up on Knight. His, uh, family history makes him sensitive about this kind of thing."

London and I exchange a look. Deck isn't one to talk shit, so this must be important.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Deck shakes his head. "It's not my place to share details. But let's just say his dad wasn't exactly accepting when Knight's older brother came out." His jaw clenches, anger flashing in his eyes. "Knight hasn't seen or spoken to his old man in years because of it. It's still a painful subject for him."

Understanding sinks like a stone in my gut. Knight's reaction yesterday makes infinitely more sense now. This wasn't about me and London at all—just old wounds threatening to split back open.

“Shit, that’s rough,” London murmurs. “Definitely explains the mood he was in. I should’ve realized...”

“Not your fault. Neither of you could’ve known.” Deck puts a hand on each of our shoulders. “Just... give Knight some space to work through whatever’s going on in his head. He’ll come around.”

I nod, wishing I’d been more aware of what coming out could drag up for my teammate. “Thanks for the insight, Deck. We’ll be sensitive to what he’s dealing with.”

The coffee shop door swings open again and two girls step out, deep in conversation. Deck glances at his watch. “I better run or I’ll be late for class. But we’re good, yeah?”

“We’re good,” I confirm.

Deck smiles. “Glad to hear it.” He heads off with a final wave.

London exhales once he’s out of earshot. “Well, shit. Now I feel like an ass for not realizing Knight might be struggling.” He scrubs a hand through his hair. “I should’ve picked up on it.”

“We both should have. But now we can give him the space he needs.” I take London’s hand, weaving our fingers together. “It’ll work out. Just gotta be patient.”

The tension in London’s shoulders eases. “Yeah, you’re right. With time, he’ll—”

“London!”

A voice calls out from across the quad, bright and enthusiastic. We both turn to see a skinny teen hurrying over, smiling wide. He’s the spitting image of London—same golden blond hair and bright hazel eyes.

“Leo?” London blinks in surprise. “What’re you doing here, little bro?”

Leo bounds up to us, practically vibrating with excitement. “Mom let me take the car up for the day! Finally got my license last week.”

“No shit?” London grins, tugging Leo in for a quick hug. “Look at you, all grown up.”

Leo beams, puffing out his chest. “Yep, I’m official now. She was worried about me driving alone, but I promised I’d take it slow and stick to the highway.”

I can’t help but smile watching the two brothers together. Leo idolizes London; it’s clear in the way his eyes shine when he looks at his big brother.

London ruffles Leo’s hair affectionately. “Just glad you made it in one piece. We were just heading to grab some lunch if you want to join.” He glances at me. “That cool with you, Riot?”

“For sure.” I like Leo and now that I’m staying in London’s life, I want to get to know him better.

Leo lights up. “That’d be awesome! I’m starving after the drive up.”

We settle on sandwiches at a deli near campus. Leo chatters the whole walk about how school’s going and how he convinced their mom to let him get behind the wheel.

“She made me send her photos at every stop,” Leo explains through a mouthful of pastrami. “I was like, chill woman, the highway’s a straight line!”

London chuckles. “Hey, driving’s a big deal. She’s just looking out for you.” A complicated mix of emotions flits across his face—nostalgia, protectiveness, pride.

It’s clear he wants the best for Leo, even if their upbringings were worlds apart. Leo’s innocence and enthusiasm are magnetic.

Eventually Leo turns the conversation to us. “So London, are you guys officially together now? I figured since Christmas...”

He waggles his eyebrows suggestively and London flushes. I bite my lip, fighting a laugh at the memory of Leo walking in on us in a compromising position on the couch. That was real fucking uncomfortable.

London clears his throat, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Uh, yeah. It’s still pretty new, but we’re trying this whole dating thing out.”

Leo grins. “I knew it! You’ve got a boyfriend. Mom owes me ten bucks.” At my raised eyebrow, he adds, “We may have had a bet going about when you guys would stop being dumb and admit you’re together already.”

I bark out a laugh as London hides his face in his hands with a groan. “Unbelievable. My own family’s been talking about my love life behind my back.” But his voice is filled with warmth underneath the mock indignation.

“We just want you to be happy, bro.” Leo grins. “And Riot clearly makes you happy. Anyone can see that.”

Warmth swells in my chest at Leo’s words. What a complete difference from the way my father reacted when he found out. I blow out a breath as the twisting in my stomach settles. However we navigate everything else, it means the damn world to me that London’s family already accepts us together.

I know my own parents are gonna require some tough discussions when the time comes to face them again. My dad thinks I need conversion therapy, so fuck him. And my mother—hell, on a good day she can barely string two words together through the haze of whatever she’s drinking.

They won’t get it. Won’t see how London challenges me, calls out my bullshit, and makes me want to be better. How his loyalty and passion fill the holes left gaping and empty from the dysfunction I grew up in.

But London’s family—they’re a lifeline I sorely need. Aubrey welcomed me without question or judgment. And Leo—he looks up to his brother like the damn sun rises and sets on him. Having their blessing, their unconditional support—it’s invaluable. Means we’ve got somewhere safe to land when the rest of the world inevitably tries to tear us apart.

So yeah, warmth blooms in my chest hearing how readily they accept London and me together. How fiercely they’re in

our corner. Reminds me that family isn't always just the blood you're born to—sometimes it's the people you choose instead. The ones who really see you. And who never let you down.

“Thanks, Leo,” I say, hoping he understands how much his support means. “We’re still figuring things out, but your brother means everything to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

London’s eyes shine, even as he shakes his head in amusement. “You two are gonna turn me into a sappy little bitch. C’mere.”

He pulls me close, kissing me in front of his brother and everyone. I hear Leo make an exaggerated gagging sound, but don’t care. This is us, out in the open, unashamed. And it’s fucking incredible.

When we finally break apart, London’s eyes gleam with mischief. “You know, Leo... Riot’s a pretty decent hockey player. He might be able to give you some pointers.” He smirks at me. “And he’s got a wicked slapshot.”

He pulls Leo in, ruffling his hair. The easy affection between them makes me ache for my own family. I haven’t spoken to them in weeks, not since my asshole sperm donor decided to show up here and tell me I need therapy to get over my feelings for London. What a dick. But dwelling on family drama will have to wait for another day. Right now, I’m exactly where I want to be.

Outside the café, we spot Deck and Knight across the street. They seem to be arguing about something, both tense. I wonder if it has to do with our conversation this morning. Before we can intervene, Knight storms off and Deck scrubs a hand over his face tiredly.

London frowns after them. “Should we go over there?”

I hesitate, thinking of Deck’s advice earlier. “Let’s give them some space. Whatever’s going on between them, we shouldn’t get involved unless asked.”

Though my protective instincts chafe at doing nothing, we have more than enough problems of our own. Forcing the

issue will only make things worse. Knight will talk when he's ready.

We say goodbye to Leo, making plans to meet up again soon for that lesson London volunteered me for. Watching his car disappear down the road, London sighs.

"It was great to see my brother, but now I gotta tell Mom about us before he spills the beans. She needs to hear it from me." He glances at me uncertainly. "You okay with me calling her now?"

My gut knots at the thought of London coming out to his mom—especially after the way my jackass of a father reacted. But London's right—his mom deserves to learn about us from him directly.

"Of course," I say. "I'll be right by your side through it." I take his hand, hoping he can sense my support and not the way I'm freaking the fuck out. What if she disowns him, too? I can handle being thrown away by my parents, but London's family is everything to him.

London exhales harshly and pulls out his phone with a slightly shaky hand. He taps his mom's contact, putting the call on speaker.

It rings only twice before she picks up. "London? Everything okay?" Aubrey sounds mildly concerned about getting a call at this hour and with Leo on the road I bet she's starting to freak out.

"Everything's fine, Mom, don't worry." London closes his eyes briefly, as if bracing himself. "Just wanted to talk to you about something. You got time?"

"For you? Always." Her voice softens. "What's going on, sweetheart?"

London glances at me one more time, squeezing my fingers.

I nod encouragingly, trying to convey that he can do this. That he's not alone.

London takes a deep breath. “Mom, Riot and I... we’re together.” He hesitates, licking his lips. “And it’s not just some fling or whatever. I love him.”

Aubrey doesn’t let him finish before squealing loudly enough that we both wince.

“Oh my god, it’s finally happened! I owe Leo ten dollars.” She laughs. Her elation is impossible to miss, even through the phone. “I knew you two would figure it out eventually if you just pulled your heads out of your—”

“Okay, okay!” London rushes to cut her off, flushing. He laughs softly, the sound filled with relief. “So, you’re really okay with this?”

“Okay with it? Baby, I’m thrilled!” She makes an excited noise. “Riot’s a lovely young man. And I can tell he makes you happier than I’ve ever seen.” Her voice turns serious. “The world may not always understand, but your family does. And we support you one hundred percent.”

Emotion clogs my throat, hearing the unconditional love and acceptance in her tone. Knowing we have her blessing means everything, not just to my boyfriend, but to me, too. After a few apathetic voicemails from my mom begging me to reconsider and call the therapist she found for me, I haven’t heard anything from my parents, and I kind of hope I never do.

London’s blinking fast, like he’s trying to process or he might cry. “Thanks, Mom. You have no idea how much that means to us.” He looks at me and I squeeze his hand in silent support. At this point, my fingers are numb. I don’t give a fuck.

“Of course, sweetheart.” Aubrey hesitates. “Have you told your parents yet, Riot?”

I tense, the warm glow vanishing. “Yeah. It... didn’t go well.”

“I’m sorry, honey, but you know you’re ours now. An unofficial Lancaster.” Her smile is audible. “You both know you have a safe space here. I can’t wait to see you boys soon. We’ll celebrate properly.”

The casual inclusion warms me. “That sounds perfect. Thank you, Aubrey.”

We chat a few minutes more before reluctantly hanging up. London sags against me in relief, and I wrap my arms around him.

“That went so much better than I expected,” he admits.

I kiss his temple, holding him close. “Because you have an amazing mom. I’m happy for you, Hotshot.” And I truly am.

But looking at the lightness in London’s eyes, I know we’ve cleared another hurdle today. His family knows about us, and they’re still here.

The future feels scary as hell but hopeful too, in some small way.

We’ve got London’s people standing with us now. And together, we can weather whatever narrow-minded bullshit gets thrown our way next.

I didn’t have a clue what I was signing up for when I fell for this infuriating, reckless, incredible man. My world’s been tilted on its axis ever since, in the best and most terrifying ways. But I know one thing for damn sure—I’m ride or die for London now. Where he goes, I go too.

RIOT

THE DEAFENING CHEERS of the crowd reverberate through my chest as I step onto the ice. Spotlights trained on the rink glare down, bright enough to feel like the damn sun beating against my skin. I squint up into the stands, the roar rolling over me in waves.

This is it. The championship we've bled and sacrificed for all season comes down to this one game. Win or lose, this is the last time this team takes the ice together.

A wave of nostalgia sweeps through me, potent enough to steal the breath from my lungs. We've been through so much—injuries, rivalries, triumphs and defeats that have bonded us tighter than family. The ice beneath my skates is home in a way nowhere else has ever been.

But tonight isn't just about putting another trophy in the case. It's a final stand for what we believe in. What I've found with London.

Across the rink, the doors slam open and our opponents skate out. The Evergreen State Enforcers. Hulking forms packed with raw aggression and power. They're known league-wide not just for their ruthless playing style, but for their narrow views off the ice too.

Bile rises in my throat as the crowd cheers for them, oblivious to the pieces of shit they're rooting for. Their star defenseman winks up at the stands, the girls around him shrieking. My hands tighten around my stick. Men like him make me sick. Bigots hiding behind charm and popularity.

But he won't catch me or London off-guard. We know men like him—the kind who seem supportive in public but spew hatred in private. Who never hesitates to take cheap shots if it knocks someone like us down a peg.

At a party last year, I saw him put hands on a dude he thought was gay, literally throwing him out of his frat house. Fuck that guy.

My gaze finds London across the ice, and he skates toward me. He holds a hand up, his glove tucked under his other arm, and I mirror him, pressing our palms together and linking our fingers. We exchange a single look, a hundred emotions flowing between us. We've got each other's backs. No matter what dirty tricks or slurs get thrown our way tonight, we're in this together.

He's my ride or die and I'm his.

The boys fall into formation around me as we take the ice, focus radiating off them in waves. We're honed to a razor's edge, connected in a way we've never been before. It's bigger than a championship now—we're family. And we'll bleed for the man next to us if that's what it takes.

Even Knight seems less broody today. There's a sense of brotherhood enveloping us all as we carve up the fresh sheet of ice. The scrape and hiss of our skates is that siren song I've craved, feeding the fierce hunger that lives in my gut. My blood's on fire for one reason—to leave everything I've got out here tonight. No doubts, no regrets, no holding a damn thing back.

This team's put me through hell, and I've returned the favor. But those trials fused us into something unbreakable. Destiny brought us together to be champions. And we sure as hell will be after tonight. The world hasn't seen the likes of us—won't know what hit 'em once we're set loose.

So I've got one job: lead these boys to war. Take every shot, make every pass count. Do whatever it takes to bring back that trophy. And if I've gotta put my body on the line, I'll do it without blinking. Because we're not skating for glory or some piece of metal today. We're proving what family forged

in fire and blood can achieve. And I'll be damned if we fall short now.

The Enforcers line up across from us, eyes raking over our team. Their captain angles his body just enough to bump my shoulder as we skate by.

"Hope you're ready to get knocked on your ass tonight," he sneers under his breath. "We don't go easy on your type."

It didn't take long for word about London and me to spread to other schools, and I'm sure this dickhead's going to be chirping at me all night. It's not okay, but I can take it.

Heat flares in my chest, but I keep skating, my expression impassive. He wants a reaction. But I won't give him the satisfaction. A quick glance at London tells me he caught the exchange too, anger smoldering behind his neutral mask.

We pass it off to our teammates in warning. If tonight goes the way we expect, tensions will run high. But we know how to handle it. Their slurs and cheap shots are nothing. They can't touch what London's given me—strength, purpose, a reason to fight with everything I've got.

One last drill finished, and it's time. We shed our warm-up sweaters and take our positions, shoulders squared, breaths controlled. The tension crackling through the arena is electric. Across from us, the Enforcers are coiled springs ready to be unleashed.

The ref takes the ice with the puck, glancing between the teams. His whistle pierces the heavy air. My pulse thrums as I lunge for the puck. Our skates tear at the ice, sticks colliding as we battle for control.

The game starts off fast and brutal, both sides ruthless in pursuit of control. But it's more than a quest for points—it's primal. A battle for dominance between two clashing philosophies.

Their blows land harder than usual, eyes lit with something that curdles my stomach. Bigotry breeds brutality, even if it's wearing a uniform and cheered from the stands. They see me

and London as weak spots to exploit. And they won't hesitate to hit us where it hurts.

I'll show these fuckers weak.

Tris practically snarls when their winger aims an elbow at London's head. Hotshot knocks the bastard off course and sends the puck sailing down ice to me instead. I make the shot, grinning savagely as the siren sounds.

On our next possession, the Enforcers team up to block London from passing me the puck for a clear shot. But Bear uses his hulking frame to clear space, allowing London to thread the pass through at the last second. My stick connects and the puck rips into the net.

Piece by piece, we dismantle their cheap tactics. Every dirty hit brings five clean but punishing checks in return. The ice slowly shifts in our favor, though the score stays close. We can't let our guard down.

The clock winds through the first period, both sides getting increasingly physical. I barely make it to the bench between shifts, gulping water and sucking air into my burning lungs. London slumps against me, both of us spent but thrumming with adrenaline.

"Those assholes are looking to pick a fight," Deck mutters, eyeing the Enforcers darkly. "Trying to make us lose our cool."

London's hands tighten around his stick, but he nods. "We give them what they want, and we play right into their hands."

I exhale harshly, rolling my stiff shoulders. "So we keep our heads down. Stay focused on the win." Easier said than done with their slurs still ringing in my ears. Every time I'm on the ice, they're saying all kinds of fucked up shit I'd never repeat. But I trust my team implicitly. If tempers start to flare later on, we'll shut it down.

Right before we retake the ice, London pulls me aside, his eyes burning. "I love you, Riot. Don't let them take this from you." Then we're swallowed back up by the crowd's roar

before I can respond, but he already knows what I would've said.

The hits come faster and harder in the second period, leaving bruises that'll ache for weeks. But we answer every blow. Deck and the defensemen guard us like wolves, never hesitating to lay an Enforcer out flat if they try targeting one of us again.

Twenty minutes left, and we're down by one goal. The Enforcers can smell blood in the water. They're taking more risks, trying to widen the lead before we can rally. A reckless mistake that will cost them if we stay smart.

I pass the puck to Tris, darting for an open patch of ice. But before I make it three strides, an elbow jams brutally into my ribs, making me wheeze. Their biggest defenseman looms over me, grinning cruelly.

"Fucking fairy," he sneers down at me. "Why don't you limp on home? You don't belong out here with us real men."

Red bleeds into the edges of my vision. Every bruised bone in my body screams for retaliation, to make the bastard hurt ten times worse. To show him exactly how much of a *fucking fairy* I am with my fists in his face.

Across the rink, London's eyes find mine, filled with an entire conversation. *Don't let them fuck with your game. Get up and show them they fucked with the wrong guy.*

With a rough exhale, I find my feet. The asshole's smug expression wavers. He wants me to lose it and make this about more than the game. But I won't give him what he wants.

The anger bottled in my chest propels me forward, body angled low. I zero in on the goal like there's no one between it and me, weaving and spinning out of reach whenever they try to block me. The cold air scours my lungs, everything narrowing down to a single purpose—driving this shot home.

My stick pulls back and then connects with a crack that vibrates through my palms. The puck blurs, too fast to follow. An instant later, the buzzer blares as it hits the back of the net.

Fucking hat trick, baby.

The stands erupt, our supporters roaring, but all I see is London's face. The pride and love burning in his eyes makes everything else meaningless.

Over on the bench, Deck is on his feet, grinning like a maniac and banging his stick against the boards as the team swarms me, slapping my helmet and shoving each other in elation. On the Enforcers' bench, that giant bag of dicks glares at me with hatred twisting his mouth into something ugly and inhuman.

"That's how it's done, Kensington!" Tris crows, still pumped from my goal. "Fuck those small-minded douchebags!"

Tris' curse carries just far enough for the ref to hear. He glides over, shooting us a warning glare to watch our mouths. Tris winces, but the reprimand doesn't dampen our spirits. We're within striking distance now, one point from evening the score.

Everything changes after that goal rattles their net. The Enforcers' confidence takes a hit and their plays get sloppy. We're moving like a single beast, defending and attacking in perfect sync. It's like the hockey gods lined up the stars so this game is ours for the taking.

This is our house, our ice, our championship to take. The crowds can cheer for the Enforcers all they want, but they're not the team with destiny on their side tonight. I can *feel* it. These boys are my brothers, forged together by blood and sweat. And we're gonna show the world what true champions look like when that clock runs out.

With five minutes left, we manage to pull ahead by one point. The Enforcers are getting desperate, charging the net in pairs, trying to overwhelm our defenders. Our exhaustion is bone deep at this point, but we dig deep, refusing to yield another inch of ice.

Two minutes left and I knock the puck away from one of their wingers, sending it straight to London. He burns a trail towards the goal. The wingers try to block him, but Knight

appears from nowhere to lay them out with a bone-rattling check. London winds up and shoots.

I hold my breath. I think we all do.

The buzzer blares as London's shot hits home. Their goalie rips his helmet off and slams it against the goal post in frustration. We're up by two with barely any time left—not enough for them to rally back.

The bench explodes, and the team is going crazy, hugging and crushing each other. My pulse is hammering, the trophy within reach now. Everything we endured this year has led to this moment.

The next sixty seconds bleed by in a blur. I can hardly suck air into my burning lungs, but I keep pushing, keep churning my legs. The Enforcers have nothing left, their hits weak as kittens against our iron defense.

Then the final buzzer screams. Silence falls for a beat before the arena just erupts. We fucking did it—battled through injuries, adversity, every goddamn obstacle and landed on top. There's not a force on earth that can touch us now.

Elation hits me like a truck, almost putting me on my ass. But London's there, slamming into me, both of us clutching each other like the world's collapsing around us, my number twenty-nine across his back and his seventeen across mine. And in a way it is—the world we knew is gone, and we're the damn champions standing on the smoldering remains.

“Holy shit, Golden Boy, we did it!” His voice breaks as he grabs my face and kisses me right on the ice, in front of the crowds and cameras and everyone. But I don't give a single fuck who sees and neither does he.

We're whooping and losing our shit as the boys swarm us, piling on until I can barely stay on my skates. But damn if this isn't the most alive I've ever felt.

Deck drags me and London into a crushing hug, grinning wide as the sun. “Holy crap, you did it, you lunatics!” He's bursting with joy.

As the Enforcers skate by, their glares are pure venom. Their captain spits on the ice, muttering his hateful bullshit. My fists clench, blood pounding for retaliation. But I force it down and turn away—we've got nothing left to prove to them. We left it all on the ice.

The NCAA rep steps out holding that gleaming trophy as the crowd chants our name. When he passes it over to Deck, the cheers get deafening. We pass that beauty around, voices cracking from screaming, tasting victory sweeter than any damn thing on earth. Well, except London. He's my favorite flavor.

In this moment, with the team that's become my family crushing me in celebration, I know one truth deep in my bones—all the hell I walked through this season to get here was worth it for this single moment of absolute triumph. There's no sweeter thrill than standing on top of the heap at the end, brothers-in-arms at your side. This one's gonna be on replay even when we're old and gray.

Doing it with London makes it perfect.

I lift that heavy trophy high, meeting London's eyes across the chaos. Everything we survived to make it here flashes through my mind—the brutal practices, the clashes, the shit with my dad. But here we stand, out and goddamn unstoppable together.

We earned this, every brother bleeding and sacrificing for it. But it means more than just a title. It's proof that we stood tall against bullies and haters and came out on top. Proof that no one can tell us who deserves to be here or who we give our hearts to.

The team crushes us in, rowdy as hell, celebrating the win. But all I see is London—his wild smile, his eyes lit up with that brutal passion I fell for. We didn't just win a championship tonight—we opened the damn door for others like us who've been told they don't belong. And this? This is just the start.

DECK

THE BITTERSWEET SCENT of sweat and celebration still lingers in the locker room air. We're all riding the high of our big win, but there's an undercurrent of sadness too. This is it - the very last time we'll suit up together as a team.

Next year there'll be a different set of guys and we'll start the climb all over again.

I drag my bag out of my locker, empty now except for a few abandoned rolls of tape and a sock I was too lazy to pick up. Strange how a place that started out so unfamiliar now feels more like home than my dorm room. We've shed blood and tears on this concrete floor, fought and bonded within these four walls. It's gonna be hard to leave it all behind.

Across the room, Tris is regaling some of the younger guys with the story of how he scored the winning goal against Davidson College with a broken thumb. Their awed faces remind me this is still all new for the freshmen. The nostalgia and sadness haven't sunk in yet.

Riot's neatly folding all his sweaters and stacking them in his bag. That man runs on order and routine—probably already has next season's schedule color coded and memorized. The thought makes me smile.

Beside him, London laughs and flicks a balled up piece of tape at Riot's head. Riot scowls, but there's no heat there anymore. Hard to believe those two started out ready to tear each other's throats out last fall. Now they gravitate into each other's space like binary stars.

My eyes catch on Knight across the room, silently shoving gear into his bag. He's been moody and standoffish all week, ever since Riot and London came out to the team. I thought he was getting over the initial shock, but now...

Now I'm not so sure. There's an edge to him lately that makes my teeth grind. And the way he avoids looking at me for more than a few seconds? That stings more than I'd ever admit out loud.

Water streams in the shower stalls as guys start rinsing off the remnants of our celebratory night—champagne, confetti, rooftop shenanigans. We closed the bar and partied until sunrise. But we made it to the team banquet on two hours' sleep, still giddy as kids on Christmas morning.

Coach's speech got more than a few of us choked up. I'm not too proud to say I teared up at the end when he pulled out a bag of orange slices like the ones they used to hand out after grueling Juniors practices. It was a bittersweet bookend to a hell of a journey.

But one person was conspicuously absent from all the festivities. Knight slipped away early and brushed off my questions with terse excuses. Shutting me out and killing the friendship we once shared once and for all.

Irritation simmers in my chest, remembering how coldly he dismissed me. After everything we meant to each other once upon a time, I deserve better than the brush off. But every attempt to reconnect gets rebuffed. It's like he's a stranger now, not the boy I grew up playing pickup games and causing trouble with.

Across the locker room, someone mentions our last game against Evergreen, Knight's old team. I tense, waiting for his reaction. For a long beat, nothing. He just continues silently sorting gear, back turned, shoulders rigid.

Eli shakes his head, chuckling. "Man, their defense was out for blood that game. Remember that massive dude, House, who kept trying to flatten Kensington every chance he got? Bet that bastard's still pissed he couldn't rattle you." He playfully nudges Riot with his elbow.

Riot smirks. “If that guy wants round two, he knows where to find me. I’ll happily break his jaw again.”

The locker room erupts with laughter and mock cheers. Riot’s never backed down from a challenge, and London’s got his back now too. His arm’s slung around his boyfriend’s waist like they’re totally comfortable. Those two are a fucking force and I wouldn’t want to be on their bad side.

My gaze flicks over to Knight just in time to see his shoulders stiffen. His bunched muscles and clenched jaw scream louder than any words. I can practically feel the discomfort rolling off of him.

None of the other guys notice, though. They’re too busy recounting plays, reminiscing about their favorite memories and trash talking all the teams who couldn’t hack it against us. For them, it’s lighthearted and fun—the last chance to revel in the season before we take off.

But for Knight, every word seems to wind him tighter. I watch emotions play across his face, knowing his thoughts like my own so many years ago. Dragging up the past won’t do any good, but I can’t just stand by silently either. Not when I know something’s up with him.

I grab my shampoo and step into the showers before I do something stupid like call Knight out on his shit here in front of everyone. But the conversation we’re gonna have is long overdue.

The anger in my chest swells the more I think about his distance after high school. Being ghosted by your best friend *sucks*. It left me a goddamn mess, like I lost one of my limbs, but I’m not hurt anymore.

Okay, that’s a lie, but I’m more pissed off than angry now. I twist the shower handle roughly, welcoming the scalding spray as it pelts my back. Scrubbing my skin aggressively with the soap as I deal with my emotional bullshit.

By the time I shut the water off, the locker room is quieter. Most of the guys have cleared out, off to continue the celebration or nap off our late night of partying. Riot and

London left a few minutes ago trading *fuck me* looks that are still weird as hell to witness.

Part of me envies what those two have found together. Meanwhile, a chasm has opened up between Knight and me that feels impossible to bridge most days. Not that it's the same. Knight and me, we're not like that. Our relationship was friendship only. No bennies.

I like chicks and, as far as I know, so does he.

Doesn't mean his distance doesn't hurt like a bitch. I don't even know what I did. One minute he's my best bro, the next he's gone from my life like a fucking ghost.

I grab my towel and step back into the main room, mostly empty now except for the stragglers. Knight's still here, though, and the second he sees me, he starts packing his shit faster so he can escape. But I'm done.

"Hey, we need to talk."

Knight tenses at my voice but doesn't turn. "I've got nothing to say to you."

I bristle at his dismissive tone. "Well, I sure as hell have things to say to you. And you're damn well gonna listen." I turn and grab my boxers, dropping my towel and pulling them on. I feel like I'm pulling on armor as I get dressed, needing the layers between us to protect myself from his weapon of a tongue.

At that, Knight whirls to face me, anger flashing in his stormy eyes. "Don't tell me what to do, Warren. You lost the right to have a say in what I do a long time ago."

His bitter words hit like a blow to the solar plexus. "What the fuck are you talking about? What the hell did I ever—"

"Save it!" he snaps. "I don't know what delusions you've cooked up in your head, but leave me the hell out of them."

He moves to storm past me, but I grab his arm. The contact sends a jolt through me, emotions I've tried to bury for too long surging back up. Knight stares at my hand, conflicted.

But just as quickly, his face shutters again and he rips his arm away.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

The harsh command feels like a slap. “Why won’t you talk to me, Maddox?” I ask helplessly. “We used to—”

“Used to. But things change.” His jaw clenches, old grief flashing in his eyes before the shutters come down again. “We’re not those dumb kids anymore.”

The callous edge to his voice cuts sharper than any skate blade.

“You’re right. We’ve both changed.” I step closer, searching those stormy blue depths I used to understand like my own. “But that doesn’t erase everything we went through together. Everything we were to each other. You were my best fucking friend. My brother.”

Knight’s face twists with pain before he covers it with anger. “Just leave the past where it belongs.”

Fuck, Knight Maddox is a stubborn asshole.

He shoves past me roughly, making for the exit. But I pivot and grab his wrist again before he can flee.

“No, damn it! I’m sick of walking on eggshells and pretending I don’t miss the fuck out of you.” Desperation makes my voice break. “Something made you push me away. Talk to me. Please. I want my best friend back.”

I don’t say it, but I need him. I’ve been floating through life for three goddamn years with a Knight-shaped hole where he should’ve been. Now that he’s here, I’m not letting this go.

Knight trembles, staring at my hand on his wrist with an agonized expression. When he meets my eyes again, his are glassy with tears. I stumble back. Knight Maddox has *never* cried, including when he broke his collarbone when we were twelve.

“I can’t.” His tortured whisper tears me open.

I falter, throat clogged by this unbearable agony that's between us now, and I don't even know why. "Knight..."

"Forget it." He rips away from me again. "I stopped caring a long time ago."

The lie shears off another piece of my soul. He spins on his heel, storming for the exit, and this time I know better than to grab him again. But I can't just let it end like this.

"You're wrong, you know." My voice halts him at the door, his shoulders rigid. "You've never stopped caring. Not about the past. And sure as hell not about me. Just like I never stopped caring about you."

Knight doesn't turn, doesn't react at all except for the tightening of his fists.

"When you're ready to talk about whatever's going on with you," I say, "you know where to find me."

For a long beat, he just stands there frozen. The noise of people packing up drones on in the background, filling the gulf between us. Then the door creaks open and Knight's gone, leaving me more lost than before.

I'm not sure how long I stand there staring after him, emotions churning. But the bang of a door snaps me from my daze.

Eli steps around the corner, regarding me with knowing sympathy. "Everything okay? Sounded pretty intense between you and Maddox."

I scrub a hand over my face, exhaustion seeping into my bones. "I don't know anymore, man. But it's clear he's still battling some demons. I'm trying to be patient, but..."

Eli grips my shoulder. "You've got a big heart, Deck. Don't let this fuck you up. He'll come around, eventually. Real friends don't give up on each other when shit gets hard."

I can't decide if I regret confiding in Eli about Knight throwing our friendship away like garbage or not.

I nod wearily, hoping he's right. Needing to believe I haven't lost my best friend completely. That the boy who had

my back through anything once upon a time is still in there somewhere behind those brick walls.

But some wounds cut too deep to ever fully mend. And the scars they leave behind... those last forever. Right now the way he's treating me—hell, the way he's treated me for the last three years—is scarring the fuck out of me to the point I don't know if I'll ever be able to fully forgive him.

Tris wanders over, slinging an arm around Eli's shoulders. "So what's got you losers looking so depressed? Get some bad pussy last night or something?"

Eli just shakes his head at Tris' usual bullshit. But I appreciate the distraction. Dwelling on could-have-beens will get me nowhere good.

"All good here, man," I say, forcing myself to shelve the storm inside for now and focus on the people who are here. "Just tough closing up shop on such an epic season, you know?"

Tris nods somberly. "Straight up. Felt like I was leaving a piece of myself back in that locker when I cleared out my stuff." He perks up. "But that just means we gotta start planning the mother of all reunions once finals are done."

Eli chuckles while I crack a smile despite everything. Tris has always had a gift for punching through any bad mood. And his reunion idea isn't half bad—a chance to gather up all the crazy bastards who made this ride so damn unforgettable before some of them graduate or move on to the pros.

We spitball plans for a blowout reunion bash until the maintenance guys kick us out to finish their cleaning. Outside, the sun's going down, but campus is still buzzing with people.

Tris and Eli head off to grab a bite with some friends, leaving me to roam solo for a bit. I spot Riot and London acting all couple-y on a quiet corner of the quad, walking side by side and holding hands like it's nothing. Even from a distance, their connection is obvious in the way they're always finding little ways to touch and how they can't stop grinning at each other like they're in their own little world.

But watching Riot and London gives me hope that I can get my best friend back. If they could get over their rivalry shit and end up together, Knight and I can get past whatever issue he has and become friends again.

And who knows—if they can thaw years of bad blood, maybe there's hope for some old wounds to finally scab over.

The evening breeze ruffles my hair as I watch my friends, my brothers, get their happily ever after. I just wish I could shake the feeling that something's missing from mine. And it's not just Knight anymore. It's... something else. Something deeper and more elusive than I can put into words.

But I'll figure it out eventually. Just like I'll figure out how to bring my best friend back from the dead. Figuratively, of course.

I have to. Because losing him for good would be like losing a piece of myself. And I don't think I could survive that kind of wound without bleeding out completely.

EPILOGUE

LONDON

5 YEARS LATER...

THE CROWD'S ROAR SHAKES THE DAMN WALLS, THEIR CHEERS for Riot electrifying the air. I can feel it vibrating in my chest as my pulse hammers. Thirty thousand voices blended into one earth-shattering shout.

Riot's name.

My eyes find him across the ice, helmet off, his signature jet black hair wet with sweat. My name in black ink etched on the side of his neck. His chest heaves, cheeks flushed, as he lifts his stick to acknowledge the crowd.

The fans are losing their minds for him.

My husband.

This is it. His last game in the league.

Part of me wishes I could freeze this moment and live in it with him forever.

But I'm suited up to face him as a rival tonight. It's one last throw-down between us out here on NHL ice. I've already promised to destroy him.

Riot expects no less from me.

Now when we lock eyes from opposite sides of the rink, it's electric. Our trust and intimacy off the ice only amplifies the thrill of going head-to-head out here.

Gotta admit, that hunger to dominate each other on the ice never faded. If anything, being married stoked the flames. Tonight, we battle as rivals with the taste of each other on our tongues. There's nothing better.

My gaze rakes over Riot, remembering all the stolen moments between us—in locker rooms, empty rinks, hotel rooms, bus rides. Six years of memories hit me, of us fighting and fucking with the same fire. From hated rivals to husbands. He's as much a part of me now as hockey.

Knowing this is his last time on the ice as a pro... it leaves an ache in me words can't capture. But I know our story is far from over.

They dim the lights and play some tribute on the jumbotron. Clips of his most legendary plays to a soundtrack of rock music blasting, showing the highlights of his career.

Even on that screen his skill is breathtaking—the way he handles that puck, commanding the ice like a warrior king. Relentless. Unyielding. Built to dominate this sport in a way few can match.

He could play another ten years if he wanted. But he's set his sights on something bigger and he's ready to walk away.

Watching the video, I remember how bad I wanted to destroy him when we first met. How I was obsessed with proving I could eclipse his shine with my grit and audacity alone.

Little did I know he'd become my whole goddamn universe one day.

The crowd's on their feet before it even ends, losing their minds for him all over again. I join them, banging my stick too—Golden Boy's earned every ounce of praise tonight.

Across the rink, Riot turns to me, eyes burning. Years of memories pass between us in silence.

Let's give them one hell of a last show, Golden Boy.

The puck drops and we collide, lost to it all—the crowd, the arena, everything but each other out here.

A few hours later, when the game's over, I've got him pressed against the boards. Our bodies fit together, same as always, both of us flying high after this final stand-off.

We trade breathless laughs as I rest my forehead against his.

"I let you win, Hotshot," he says with that smirk I love.

I laugh, nipping his lip. "Bullshit. I owned your ass fair and square."

That cocky smirk widens. "Keep telling yourself that."

Pure fucking happiness wells up in me, sharp and overwhelming. I kiss him hard before we have to leave the ice.

Cameras surround us, but it's just background noise now. We're used to it. Riot kisses me like we're the only two people alive, ending his last game how we began—obsessed and wrapped up in each other.

It wasn't always like this. When we first went pro, being openly together was unheard of. We caught hell those first few seasons—slurs hurled at us on the ice, bigoted bullshit spewed online daily.

But we weathered it, standing tall together. And over time, hearts and minds slowly changed. These days, we're just another hockey couple to most fans. It's no big deal anymore when Riot pulls me in close after the buzzer for those few times a year we play against each other, both of us flying high on the thrill of competition.

No more hiding who we are from the world. We carved out this space together, pushed boundaries and kicked down doors until we could just exist as us.

Eventually we come up for air, both dazed. His teammates bang their sticks across the ice.

"Get a room already!" someone shouts, laughing.

Riot flips them off, eyes never leaving mine. "I'm proud of you, London. For everything you did out here tonight." His voice cracks. "And everything you gave me off the ice."

Emotion clogs my throat. I grip his jersey. No words are enough. “I’d bleed for you however many times it took to get here.” I crush him close, unwilling to let go. But change is coming for us. “You and me? We’re just getting started.”

I step back reluctantly as his teammates sweep him up, shouting congratulations despite their loss. Riot joins in, with his signature understated joy. But his eyes keep finding mine across the chaos.

One last time, I etch every detail into memory. The sweat making his skin slick. His damp hair curling at his neck. The glint of his tongue ring peeking out as he laughs under the lights. The black ink all over his skin. This is how I’ll picture him when these days are behind us both.

The crowd chants Riot’s name until the arena empties. Their cheers will echo in this stadium for years, immortalizing his legendary career. As for his legacy off the ice, it’s our love that will be forever carved into hockey history. What we fought for and overcame matters just as much as the trophies in the case. Kids like us deserve to see their dreams realized too, no matter who they love.

If our journey planted seeds of change on the way, helping clear the path for others, then it was all worth it. Watching Riot take this final lap to celebrate a hard-earned end, I know that’s the real victory here. The work’s not done, but we made a dent, enough for me to find hope.

MOONLIGHT FILTERS INTO OUR BEDROOM, SILVER RAYS cutting through the dark. I watch Riot’s bare chest rise and fall as he sleeps. Even at rest he looks coiled, honed from a lifetime of pushing human limits. I run my fingertips across my name inked into the skin of his neck. It’s still so surreal that he chose me.

My lips quirk, remembering last night. After the game’s high came the crash. Too wired for sleep, we stayed up christening every damn room, celebrating this milestone.

It's our first real home together. No more hotel rooms or stolen nights between cities or team-owned apartments. This is our fresh start. I'm not ready to hang up my skates yet, but with Riot retiring, we bought this place knowing we needed to set down roots.

The thought makes me smile. Riot Kensington settling down? Who would've guessed it back when we were rivals tearing up the ice at Hollowgate?

I shift closer, breathing him in. Waking beside him still feels sacred, this gift I'll never deserve but got anyway.

Riot stirs under my gaze, blinking awake. "Hey, creep. How long've you been staring at me?" His scratchy morning voice ignites a flare of heat in my gut.

I grin, tracing the lines of his abs. "Long enough to get very dirty ideas about round two."

A smirk tugs at his lips. "More like eight, you insatiable bastard." He kisses me slow and rough, stubble scraping my skin.

"You love it," I murmur against his mouth.

"I do." His eyes burn with that same fire from the ice, lighting me up inside. "And I love you."

He never fails to get me hard, and my cock thickens between us. "Show me how much."

Riot chuckles, low and dirty. "Always ready for a fight, aren't you?" He rolls on top of me, pinning me down with his weight. "Guess I'll have to teach you a lesson then, Lancaster."

I grin up at him, arching into his touch. "Bring it, Golden Boy."

He bites my nipple in warning, making me groan. "Don't call me that."

"Why not? It's who you are."

"Because it fucks me up," he growls. "Just like this fucks me up." He grinds against me, our cocks sliding together.

I smile, knowing he'll never admit how much he loves it when I call him that. But I know better.

He kisses me again, deep and possessive, as we rock together. It's still so damn hot feeling him over me like this—the way he takes control and makes me beg for every inch.

He swallows my cock as he shoves my boxers down, teasing my hole with his fingers. I'm still stretched from last night's fuckfest, ready for him to fill me up all over again.

Riot growls in approval, slicking himself up before pushing inside of me. The stretch burns so good as he sinks into me, claiming me all over again.

I wrap my legs around him, urging him to take me harder. He gives me what I want, gripping my hair as he slams into me with a grunt. The bed creaks under us, but we don't care. We're lost to each other, just like always.

Riot fucks me until we're both panting and spent. We collapse beside each other, breathless.

"Fuck," he groans. "You make me crazy."

I grin, tracing circles on his chest. "Good crazy or bad crazy?"

He chuckles, rolling onto his side to face me. "Both." His gaze softens, eyes crinkling at the corners. "But I wouldn't have it any other way."

I pull him close, kissing him again. "Me neither."

We lay there for a long time, trading kisses and lazy touches. I never thought I could have this—someone to love and be loved by in return. But here we are, defying the odds.

"What time's the appointment again?" Riot breaks the silence by asking.

Right. *The appointment.*

I glance at the clock, nerves kicking in. "In six hours," I laugh. "Plenty of time." I hope I sound more chill than I feel.

Riot nods, eyes suddenly far away. He slips from the bed, dragging both hands through his disastrous bedhead, looking

like he just got fucked as he pulls on sweats.

Fuck, these moments are my favorite.

I know that pensive look. My pulse picks up. “You good?”

He pauses. “Yeah, just...” He exhales harshly, facing the window where moonlight outlines his powerful frame in silver. “Big day. You know?”

I come up behind him, chin on his shoulder. “Talk to me. What’s going on in that head of yours?” I keep my voice gentle despite my own anxiety churning. I want to do this, but only if he does.

Riot relaxes into me marginally as he gathers his thoughts. “It’s stupid, really. I’m so fucking excited about this, but...” He shakes his head, conflicted. “Guess it’s just nerves. I mean, this is unknown territory, right? Are we really ready for this?”

The vulnerability in his tone makes my chest ache. I turn Riot to face me, gripping his stubbled jaw. “You’re gonna be the most badass dad ever, Riot. Our kid’s gonna be lucky as hell to have you.”

He swallows hard, emotions playing across his face before he shutters them again. “And you’ll be a great dad too, Hotshot.” The nickname makes me smile despite everything. “We’ve got this. Right?”

I nod firmly. “We do.”

Riot exhales, some of the tension draining from his body. “Good.” His kiss is brutal as he pulls me close. “I can’t wait to see you with our kid.”

“Me neither.” I kiss him back, letting the worries slip away.

Riot’s eyes turn glassy. He pulls me closer, exhaling shakily. “You always believe in me, London. Even when I don’t.”

I smile. “Good thing you locked me down, then. Gotta have someone to call you on your bullshit.”

A choked laugh escapes him. He kisses me softly. “I’d be lost without you. In every way.”

We linger there a moment, soaking each other in. Building courage. Then his eyes sharpen with resolve.

“Let’s go start our future.”

THE CLINIC WAITING ROOM IS HUSHED, SUNLIGHT FILTERING through gauzy curtains. A few other hopeful couples chat or flip through magazines. The anticipation vibrating the air is palpable.

Riot grips my hand tight, knee jerking up and down. I squeeze back, a silent message—I’m here. I’ve got you.

A nurse appears with a clipboard, smiling brightly. “London? Riot? She’s ready for you.”

We glance at each other and rise on shaky legs to follow her. After weeks of prep, this is the moment. Our future is about to change forever.

She shows us into a cozy room. “Your surrogate will be in shortly. Congrats again!” She grins excitedly and takes her leave.

Riot exhales harshly, dragging both hands through his hair. “Shit, I’m way too sober for this.”

I chuckle, rubbing his back. “You’ll do great. Just be your grumpy but secretly marshmallow fluff self.”

Riot and I exchange nervous looks as we settle into the chairs. He leans in close, voice low. “You know we can run out of here right now, right?”

“I know, but I want this. Do you?”

He nods. “I do.” I grab his hand and kiss his knuckles.

The door creaks open and a woman walks in—our surrogate. She smiles warmly, shaking both our hands before taking a seat across from us.

“Hi, I’m Mara. I’m so glad you guys reached out,” she says brightly. “I can’t wait to help you make your family.”

Her enthusiasm eases some of my nerves. Riot’s too, by the way he visibly relaxes beside me. We’ve done all the research and prep, but it’s still nerve-wracking having this conversation with her.

We talk for a while about the process and what we’re looking for. Mara’s kind and patient, answering all our questions without making us feel stupid.

“So, you guys ready to make this happen?” she asks with a grin.

Riot exhales shakily, nodding. “Yeah, we’re ready.”

We’ve been talking about this for a year, but it still feels surreal. We’re really doing it.

Mara smiles. “Great! I’ll bring the nurse back in.”

She grabs the nurse, and they walk us through the next steps, explaining the process and timeline. It’s a lot of information to digest, but we’re ready.

Afterwards, we head back to our place in silence. Riot’s quiet, lost in his thoughts. I don’t press him, knowing he’ll talk when he’s ready.

When we get home, Riot sinks onto the couch with a sigh. I take a seat beside him, pulling my hat off and tossing it aside so I can rest my head on his shoulder.

“You okay?” I ask gently.

He nods, eyes far away. “Yeah, just... a lot on my mind.” He exhales shakily, leaning into me more fully. “I want this so fucking bad.”

I smile, kissing my name on the side of his neck. “Me too.”

Riot turns to face me, eyes glassy. “I never thought I’d have this—a family of my own. It feels like a dream.”

“It’s real,” I promise him. “We’re gonna do this together. We’re gonna have a baby.”

He nods, exhaling slowly as he gathers himself. “I love you, London.”

I laugh and grab his face between my hands, kissing him hard. “No turning back now, Golden Boy.”

He laughs. “Never.”

And we’ll face whatever comes together. Because that’s what we do—we fight and claw our way through the bullshit until we come out the other side stronger than ever.

Now we get to do it as parents. And I can’t fucking wait.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, MARA CALLS US TO SAY SHE’S pregnant. Riot and I were so shocked that we couldn’t say anything for a minute before we started cheering and yelling. It’s finally happening.

The pregnancy goes smoothly, with Mara keeping us updated on every step. We visit her regularly and watch our baby grow inside of her. It’s surreal seeing the changes in her body, knowing that soon we’ll be holding our child in our arms.

Finally, it’s time for the big day. Mara’s due any minute now, and Riot and I are a wreck of nerves. We’ve been camped out at the hospital for hours, unable to sit still.

When Mara goes into labor, we’re both there beside her, holding her hands and encouraging her through each contraction. She’s amazing, pushing through it all like a champ.

After a few hours of labor, our baby is finally born. A tiny bundle of squalling pink flesh with a shock of black hair and Riot’s nose.

Our son.

Our happily ever after.

The End...

(Want more Riot & London? Flip the page.)

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Want a glimpse at London and Riot's life six years in the future? [Click here to read now!](#)

ALSO BY HEATHER ASHLEY

For a full list of my available books, please click [here](#) or go to heatherashleywrites.com/also-by.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Ashley writes dark & steamy forbidden stories with lots of breeding kink.
Follow me for more:

[Website](#)

[The Wild Ride Crew](#)

