



Bitter Pucking Rivals (Hunks Who Puck #7)

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Category: Sport

Description: Ive spent years perfecting the art of hating Theo Sanders.

Its easy when hes on the other side of the ice, playing for our rivals, the Wildwood Wolverines. Easy when hes being his usual obnoxious self, all wild plays and wilder gloating. Easy when I can channel everything I feel into checking him into the boards.

Then some genius decided to put us on the same team for hockey camp.

Seven days.

One locker room.

Zero escape.

I told myself I could handle it. Keep my distance. Stay professional. But Theo Sanders up close is different. Hes still insufferable, still gets under my skin, still makes me want to scream. But now Im noticing things I shouldnt. The way his eyes light up when he laughs. How graceful he is when hes not trying to destroy me on the ice. The fact that his shower is right next to mine.

The worst part? Sometimes I catch him looking at me too.

This week is going to be torture. Because the only thing more dangerous than being Theo Sanders enemy?

Is realizing I might not hate him at all.

This short read is a steamy contemporary new adult hockey romance featuring the enemies to lovers trope, a gay (male/male) pairing, and it is part one of a two-part story within this series.

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HAYDEN

I like being up at this hour, when the sun isn't even out yet and the temperature is at its coldest point of the day.

But with fall solidly under way, the dread is beginning to set in.

Thanksgiving will be here before I know it, and my life will become a lot more tumultuous than it is right now.

There will be no more quiet mornings like this, enjoying some stillness and peace before heading to practice or class.

There will be no more watching the sunrise in solitude, free to explore my own thoughts.

Back home, obligations and dinners and family reunions are the source of a lot of my stress. Someone's always got something to say about you. Someone's watching to make sure you say the right thing. There's a lot of small talk and judgment and headaches and—Well, you get the point.

Luckily, I have the regional training camp coming up. That will serve to distract me for the time being, allowing me to forget that soon enough I'll be heading home to holiday hell.

With midterms having just wrapped up, hockey is about the only thing I have to distract me.

Some of my other teammates—like headstrong Dom and overthinking Declan—struggle with the academic requirements of remaining on the team at times.

I have plenty of my own problems, but academics aren't one of them.

Hayden Parker, academic achiever and star hockey player .

I can hear their voices, sometimes mockingly, sometimes endearingly as the other guys give me crap for having my shit together.

Boy oh boy is it going to be a wild ride spending an entire week at training camp with them.

“You ready, Hayden?” Ansel, my roommate, asks me the loaded question as he slings his ridiculously large bag against his shoulder.

It must be tough being a goalie and carrying all that extra gear, but Ansel doesn't seem to mind much.

He looks at me with his surprisingly well-rested demeanor and his eyebrows raise at the pathetic sight of me still sitting on my bed.

With the way he's staring at me, you'd think I'd slept until noon.

“What are you moping around there for? You're not sick, are you?”

” Without respecting my personal space, Ansel places the back of his palm on my forehead.

Almost immediately, I smack his hand away. “Your hand's way too cold,” I protest, finally standing up but not without a huff. “I'm fine. Don't get all soft on me, Ansel.”

Not paying him any mind, I reach for my backpack.

I've got the clothes I need tucked in there with my school supplies, while my hockey bag contains my stick and the gear I need for practice.

If there's one thing I hate about being a student athlete, it's having to lug all this extra stuff around.

In that sense, graduation can't come soon enough.

"Well, you're cranky already, so I guess everything's pretty normal with you, huh?" Ansel teases as I open the door. He closes it behind us and whips out his key, making sure our dorm room is locked.

I roll my eyes at Ansel's words. "Ha ha. Very funny," I reply, my voice dripping with sarcasm as I start to walk towards the elevator.

As I do, the dorm room in front of ours opens up as well, and Evan comes out hauling as much luggage as we are.

I stop and wait for him, even though I know it's going to take ages for the elevator to arrive anyway.

Evan locks his own dorm room, and I'm kind of concerned because—last time I checked—he's rooming with a certain firecracker. He looks at us like there's nothing wrong, though, while he pockets his keys. "What's up? Is Hayden having a fit already?"

It's been four years of me being on a team with some of these guys; I'm used to their ribbing by now. I would even go so far as to say that my day is never complete until I hear at least one remark from one of the guys about me being distant or aloof.

“Yeah. Don’t worry,” Ansel says as him and Evan trail behind me on the way to the elevator. “Maybe some coffee will brighten him up.”

I press the down button and face the two buffoons behind me.

“I’m right here, you know,” I say, fully aware that my response will only further serve to rile them up.

People have told me that my natural expression looks like I’m about to trip someone on purpose—but what’s a guy meant to do about that?

I can’t help that I’m a serious guy. “Besides, where’s your roomie, Evan?

Don’t tell me he bailed on this training camp,” I say, watching as the number on the elevator display indicates that the elevator has almost reached our floor.

“Oh, you know him. He woke up extra early today so he can have an extremely early breakfast with Maisie,” Evan tells us.

My face scrunches up in disgust at how the usually loud-mouthed and abrasive Dominic is going out of his way to do a cutesy and sweet at 5AM for a woman. A woman! Who would’ve thought?

“You know, I’m beginning to think I don’t know Dom at all.

I never would have imagined him doing something that sappy,” I admit, making sure my tone indicates genuine surprise instead of shade.

“And I told you guys about how they were acting that time we caught them skating at the arena, right? Look where they are now.”

The elevator opens and we squeeze ourselves in with our bags of gear in tow. Ansel can't help but scoff at my remark. "I mean, we all kind of saw that coming, didn't we? He probably was the last person on earth to realize his feelings for Maisie."

Evan lets out a snicker, shaking his head. "Dude has come far, though."

"Can we please stop talking about other people's love lives?" I say, suddenly desperate to change the topic before we go any further with this. "I'm sleep-deprived as it is, and talking about this for too long might put me to sleep."

Look, I'm not trying to be bitter about this.

In fact, I'm genuinely not bitter about it at all.

I'm well aware that people might think otherwise given how I act anytime the topic comes up at length, but it's a long story.

A long story that has to do with my fears about dating and whether or not I'll ever find a woman who can make me feel the way that guys like Dom feel once they find their person.

So refusing to talk about it is just easier.

It allows me to bury my feelings and my fears, instead dedicating my time to more productive uses of my brain power.

Who knows? Maybe if the rest of the guys were less concerned with dating, they wouldn't struggle with their grades so much.

But what do I know? I'm just Hayden the aloof overachiever, perpetually single with no signs of that changing.

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HAYDEN

The cold morning breeze sends a jolt to our systems as Ansel, Evan, and I haul our asses through the streets of Manhattan.

Even with the sun not yet up, there's still ample hustle and bustle here in New York City.

Warm city street lights illuminate the gray pavement we're walking on and I think of all the people snuggled up with a warm blanket or hot cup of coffee right now.

Most of the stores we pass are closed, of course, but there's still the gentle rumble of the city's comings and goings as the sun prepares to make its appearance and mark a more figurative start to a new day.

Having grabbed coffee and taken a brisk walk, we end up at back on the confines of campus, our sights set straight on Somerset's ice rink.

As our destination comes into view, we see a massive bus bearing our school crest. It's waiting right in front of the rink as a man in a button-up and slacks loads a stack of hefty luggage into the bus's storage.

And guess who's over there, bright-eyed and eager to help the gentleman from the bus company?

I guess it should come as no surprise.

He spots us instantly, almost like he has a sixth sense about where his players are at any given moment.

“Well, what do we have here?” Julian says, taking a break from helping load luggage.

“I’m glad to see you guys have chosen to be early birds today.

” Julian’s smile is warm and there doesn’t seem to be an ounce of exhaustion on his face.

I have no idea how he’s brimming with sunshine when the sun itself is still hiding.

“Seriously guys,” he continues, patting each one of us on the back, “it’s nice to see you guys taking camp seriously. ”

Oh, Julian. Always so polite and positive.

Occasionally, his positive demeanor rubs off on me.

Julian is totally the kind of guy that’s a positive influence through and through.

But it’s too early for positivity today.

My body—even after the chilly walk and a fresh cuppa—is craving a quiet corner and a few more hours of sleep.

“Okay, Julian,” I say, “you can stop being a dad now.” Carefully, I put my hockey gear inside of the compartment, saving Julian the trouble of helping load the luggage.

“Good morning to you too,” Julian responds plainly, shaking his head and stepping aside as Evan and Ansel follow suit with their gear bags.

“You know,” Evan begins, narrowing his eyes at Julian. “Now that I think about it, you do come off sort of like a dad sometimes.” He chuckles. “Guess you’re gonna have to take care of all of us during this trip, huh? Wonder how long until Dom or Cato get on your nerves.”

Julian brushes off Evan’s comments. “Please,” he says. “I can handle them.” Julian leans against the side of the bus, his demeanor calm as other teammates begin to arrive. “It’s the other teams that I’m worried about.”

Ansel hums in agreement. “We’re going to be doing this training camp with Wildwood University, among other colleges, right?”

” It’s more of an observation than a question, and I can’t help but fall silent whenever the Wolverines are brought up in conversation.

They’ve been our rival for so long that I should be used to them by now, but they’ve always stressed me out.

Match after match, I fail to make peace with our rivalry; I just can’t do it for some reason.

“Hoo boy. Hopefully, they aren’t as rowdy at camp as they are on the ice,” Ansel adds.

Ansel’s statement might as well be a joke, given how unrealistic it is.

If I know anything about the Wildwood Wolverines after all these years, it’s that they’re not afraid to talk shit and stir the pot.

Those guys love chaos. And yes, they have a lot of bark—but annoyingly, they have a lot of bite to back it all up.

Every time we go up against them, there's a cold sweat running down my back.

I know that we'll be met with rigid defense and piercing offense.

The stakes are always high, and all the while, they hurl a couple of taunts here and there to throw you off mentally.

Maybe it's their game plan; maybe they want their opponents to be irritated by them, that way we'll be off our game and easier to beat.

I'm ashamed to admit that it's kind of worked a couple times on me, including the very first match of this season.

This is my last year as a Seagull and I wanted to start the season off with a win, but I felt so constricted that night.

Every time I thought I had a clear shot, Wildwood's goalie managed to intercept my play.

I can remember so vividly how all the pucks I hit that night were only sent back with exasperating skill.

"Nice try, pretty boy!" Their goalie had taunted me so loudly that first game, and I couldn't stop myself from feeling vexatious about it.

It's frustrating when you work hard to penetrate a defense, only to fail in epic fashion.

Not to mention, if it weren't for my own failure, we would have won that game.

I know Ansel blames himself a lot for missing that block, but I silently did the same.

I've still been blaming myself, in fact.

I can't shake the feeling that I played too sloppily.

Taking a deep breath, I run a hand through my still-damp hair.

When the strands pass through my fingers, they fall lightly on top of my eyes, prompting me to move them away.

I need a haircut, but more importantly, I need to stop dwelling on something that happened months ago.

It's not like me to be so hung up on a mistake that I can't do anything about now, but it's that goalie's voice that echoes through my head, reminding me of my mistakes.

Even now, he gets under my skin so easily, and the thought of partaking in a training camp with him is already souring my mood.

I take a couple more breaths, pulling my sweatshirt closer to my body.

I should have worn extra layers. Maybe I need another coffee or something?—

“Hey, there!” The bubbliest and cheeriest voice fills the air, and I don't even need to look to know who it is.

I've been having countless encounters with her over the past couple of months, and I know it's partially my fault considering I pushed Ansel to pursue her.

She's kind, I'll give her that. But it's still early and I have a lot on my mind.

“I just finished a graveyard shift over at the coffee shop, and I got coffee for

everyone!” Aria is bouncing on her toes with excitement as she expertly handles multiple drink trays, each loaded with fresh coffee.

For someone who’s just worked a graveyard shift, Aria doesn’t seem tired at all.

Ansel, of course, immediately helps his girlfriend with the trays of coffee. When he gets a good grasp of everything, he places a quick kiss on Aria’s lips, which almost makes me gag. “Thank you so much, babe,” he says to her in a way that sours my empty stomach.

Julian nods towards Aria, friendly as always. “This is very thoughtful of you, Aria. How much do we owe you?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that! It’s all good.” She shrugs. “I wanted to bring something for Ansel and his best friends.” I can’t lie; as much as I want to be nauseated by Aria and her antics, there is something the tiniest bit infectious about her incessant effervescence.

I begin to tune their conversation out, though, as Julian and Aria go back and forth about how the team can’t just let her pay for the coffees out of her own pocket, with Aria insisting that her generosity is meant to be a donation.

Either way, I don’t really care. I just want to lay my head against the bus window and pass out.

But with the rest of the team not here yet, standing outside and leaning against the bus will have to do instead.

“Ansel and Aria are nice together, aren’t they?”

” Evan says, striking up a conversation as he leans against the bus as well.

He and I observe the two from a distance, watching how they interact with one another.

Ansel tends to put blame on himself a lot, and it makes him this gloomy dude who kind of brings everyone else down.

But Aria's endless enthusiasm seems to be rubbing off on him, making him a more positive and optimistic guy to be around.

It's like they're too halves of a whole. They offset each other well.

Still, I let out a tiny scoff. "Yeah," I say to Evan. "I guess."

Look, I acknowledge the truth about Ansel and Aria's suitability, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm just not really that into the concept of relationships.

I don't get the appeal—even when I do see how two people are meant for one another.

And Ansel and Aria, or Dom and Maisie—or any of the other couples popping up left and right—aren't likely to change that fact about me.

Gosh, I think I either need to get punched or to get laid. I'm annoyed by my own cynicism.

Exasperated by all this small talk before sunrise, I let out a breath, trying to calm myself down.

I walk over to Ansel and grab a cup from one of the trays he's holding, but neither he nor Aria notice my presence.

They're lost in each other's eyes as they talk in a hushed tone, their faces close to one another.

I contemplate making a snarky remark, asking how they'll survive without one another while Ansel is at camp.

But I decide against it, resigning myself to simply snag the extra caffeine I need right now.

After all, Aria does make a really good cup.

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HAYDEN

A rather loud thud wakes me up from my nap.

Strangely enough, all that coffee I chugged did nothing to prevent me from falling asleep the moment we hit the highway.

But I guess all's well that ends well, because I feel more well-rested and ready to tolerate my rowdy teammates on this long road trip.

“And what we have here on your right, ladies and gentlemen... are roads,” Dom, being the idiot that he is—and probably bored out of his mind being stuck on this bus—stands at the front of the bus and pretends to be a tour guide.

Ansel snorts a little bit, unable to hide his amusement. “And what about on the left, sir?”

I consider closing my eyes and trying to nap again, but now that I feel rested, I think it'll be damn near impossible to sleep on this bus full of unrestrained college dudes.

“Oh, and would you look at that! Over to your left would be more roads— but these roads feature some cars!” Dom gestures wildly as he performs, each quip earning a ripple of chuckles from the rest of the guys.

The jokes themselves aren't that funny, but I will admit it's Dom's delivery that's carrying this whole bit he's doing.

“Dom, sit down. You’re going to hurt yourself.

” Naturally, Julian, the team dad, can’t help but be worried over his giddy and reckless child.

Seeing as how Coach Edmund has gone ahead to the training camp a couple of days in advance, Dom really is the one in charge of everyone during this eight-hour trip.

Of course, Dom doesn’t really listen. He never does.

I don’t know why Julian even tries to get him to sit still; it’s futile.

“And over here by the front row seat, gents, is the most beautiful man in existence. Never ever have I seen such nice and tight muscles on a guy’s arms.” Dom drapes himself over Julian, sitting on our captain’s lap as he pretends to be a lovesick fan.

This earns even louder laughter from the bus.

Nathan and Cato seem particularly entertained, while Julian seems to be contemplating whether it’s worth potentially injuring Dom to get him off his lap.

Lucky for Julian, Dom moves on to the next guy he’s about to poke fun of.

“And over here, in the middle of the bus, you’ll find the newbies of the year.

How are you doing there, guys?” Dom addresses rookies, and honestly they’re the ones getting the most chuckles out of this, so I’m glad Dom gives them a moment to shine.

“Terrible. The entertainment sucks.” Jared playfully rips into Dom’s routine.

He's gotten so much confident throughout the months, and it's kind of surprising seeing him grow from a timid and quiet guy to someone who's brave enough to loudly and boldly tease Dominic—especially considering that Dom can be an intimidating person to try and one-up.

Cato eggs on the pseudo-criticism. "Ooh," he says, "what a burn. You're not just gonna stand there and take it, are you, Dom-man?"

My loud and brash teammate shuts up for a couple of seconds, feigning shock.

He then brings out his phone and starts playing a song I vaguely recognize.

"Well, if you want me to step it up, Mr. Jared Pullman... you should have just said so." Dom emulates the low and sultry voice of a seductress as he strips off his jacket, wearing the white tank top he's wearing underneath.

Slowly, he starts to dance to the rather sensual jazz song that's playing—although calling it dancing is a bit of a stretch.

Admittedly, Dom is stiff as a board, but he's making up for it by showing off his muscles.

And Dom's got some really nice and toned ones if I do say so myself...

I feel my eyes go wide as I process where I've just let my thoughts roam. I'm not... I'm not checking him out, am I? Then again, it's kind of hard not to check Dom out when the rest of the team is encouraging his dancing, as sexy as it may or may not be.

"Yeah, Dom-man! Woot woot!" Evan's now along for the ride, and the more seniors who cheer for this whole charade, the more it gets chaotic. Now even the quiet kids are whooping for Dom's lunacy.

“Take it off,” Declan jokes. “Take it off!” He can’t keep his chant up for long, though, as he’s overcome with laughter and bursts out into what can only be described as a cackle.

As for me? Well, I can’t help but be overwhelmed.

I’m not here to spoil anyone’s fun, but I literally just woke up and now Dom’s dancing like a stripper as he moves forwards and backwards down the aisles of the bus.

Usually, I’d just ignore Dom. But when you’re stuck on a moving vehicle with him, he’s pretty hard to ignore.

And not to mention that his figure is a sight for sore eyes.

I try to avoid lingering stares in the locker room, but the sight of Dom’s sculpted physique makes me flash through images of my teammates.

Their ripped abs. Their defined triceps.

Their strong quads. The way their biceps flex when?—

I shake my head, needing to rid my mind of these thoughts.

This isn’t like me. I’ve never looked at any of my teammates that way before, and I shouldn’t look at them that way now.

Yes, they’re objectively handsome. If the whole team made a thirst trap calendar, the puck bunnies on campus and throughout the city would likely sell the copies out in one day.

But I'm not attracted to their bodies; I'm only stating facts.

Yeah, that's it. Facts . By admitting how good looking some of my teammates are, I'm just telling the truth.

Tuning out of the show ahead of me, I turn to the window and watch the endless roads spanning out in both directions. Those roads remind me of possibilities. Of choices. Of new directions.

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HAYDEN

We all take up several booths as we get our fill. Our collective energy is boundless, but my personal vibe is a little low at the moment. I'm rattled by the thoughts I'd had back on the bus; I can't begin to process the heaviness of it right now. I just hope the other guys don't notice.

"Well, you're a lot less snarky today, Hayden," Declan says. There goes my hope of flying under the radar. "Is something up?" Declan is sitting right next to me, so it's not exactly a surprise that my being quieter than usual has gotten his attention.

I take a sip of my milkshake. It's dense and probably contains more sugar than I typically have in a week, but I couldn't come to a retro diner and not order one.

"No, yeah, I'm fine," I lie without a second thought.

What was I supposed to say? That I was thinking about their bodies for a good five minutes back in the bus?

I don't even know how they'd react to that, much less what they'd think going forward.

So, the best course of action here is to just make something up. "I think road trips just burn me out."

"I feel that," Declan says, not seeming to pick up on my fib. "Sitting around on a bus for hours and hours gets to you."

“You should get some air while we’re stopped. That should help give you a second wind.” Ansel’s suggestion is perfectly kind and valid, but it only serves to make me feel even guiltier for the way I’ve just lied.

I find myself staring outside the diner, seeing the cars pass by as the wind blows through the trees.

I haven’t seen this much greenery in a while.

“You know what,” I say after a moment, “I just might.” I take a final sip of my milkshake before standing up.

Without making much of a fuss, I quietly exit the restaurant, leaving the rest of the guys to eat their waffles and sundaes in peace.

As I step outside, the air is crisp; it’s the very epitome of autumn’s cool embrace.

The leaves flutter in shades of oranges and reds as they hang on by a thread, the trees themselves nearly ready to shed for the year.

I walk around a little bit, being sure not to stray too far away from the bus that’s parked next to the “convenience” store that really looks more like a supermarket complex.

It’s a pleasant surprise when I find a bench I can sit on a little ways from the diner.

“Well, Hayden, look how far you’ve come,” I say to myself as I sprawl out on the bench.

After a deep inhale and an even deeper exhale, I feel my body release some of the tension that has been building.

And not just today, since my intrusive thoughts on the bus, but also the tension that's been building as I realize my college career is over.

When preparing to become a college athlete, plenty of people told me that it would be physically and mentally taxing.

But what people didn't adequately warn me about was just how much it would fly by in the blink of an eye.

The thought of being considered a full-fledged adult in just a few months is daunting.

Just when I truly feel settled in this phase of life, a different phase is right around the corner.

I would never say this to my teammates, but I've grown fond of waking up every day and looking forward to hockey practice, and then coming home and seeing Ansel at his desk, racking his brain as he does his homework.

Right next door, Dom and Evan are always either eating something gross and unhealthy that they will share with us, or maybe they'll barge in through our door just to show us a funny video they saw on the internet.

I guess it's kind of a small life, but it's one that I've come to love.

I'm not quite ready to give this routine up.

The cold air billows through my air, reminding me of what a privilege it is to be here right now.

The bad news is that I can't stop the passage of time.

The good news is that I can allow myself to be a little sad about that.

The best news? Well, I can make the most of my remaining time in college—before this chapter of my life is done forever.

However, there's always been a little regret about my college career, if I'm being honest. Seeing Ansel and Dom be so happy in their new relationships has highlighted how I've never pursued a serious relationship with anyone I've been with.

There were a few girlfriends here and there, of course, but even then, I never really felt that connected to them.

They were spectacular ladies, but I just didn't love them in the way that Ansel loves Aria or Dom loves Maisie.

The guys, as rowdy and obnoxious as they are, are more emotionally intelligent than a stranger might think.

They try to cheer me up sometimes, saying that there's someone out there for me, insisting I just have to be open to it.

And maybe they're right, but I'm tired of hearing that.

Sometimes, love just sucks for people, and I feel like I'm meant to be one of those people who is unlucky in love.

“You look like someone just kicked your dog.” An unfamiliar voice calls out to me from behind.

Immediately, I turn around, thinking it may well be a stranger who's up to no good.

Standing a few feet away from me is a guy with a devious smirk, staring me down as if my contemplative moment is the most amusing thing he's seen all day.

I'm right that the guy is up to no good, but he's no stranger.

"What are you doing all the way out here, away from the protection of your Seagull friends, Hayden Parker?"

It's the goalie of the Wildwood Wolverines, the one who's blocked every single one of my shots thus far in the season.

I only really know his last name from his jersey as I've never bothered to look him up.

Clearly, that doesn't seem to be the case for him, considering he already knows my name.

There's a dangerous glint in his blue eyes that instantly sets me off, almost like he's looking down on me.

"Careful out here, Sanders. You might be roadkill if you don't look where you're going," I reply with the driest tone I can muster.

Come to think of it, up until now, I haven't been that snarky today.

Dom's usually my target for any sarcasm I need to get out of my system, but the universe has provided me with a fresh target on this lovely autumn day.

"Where's the rest of your weasel friends?"

Tucked their tails and ran home already? "

To my surprise, Sanders lets out a chuckle and sits down on the opposite side of the bench with me. “Your mouth’s always so venomous, you know that?” He crosses his legs by putting his left ankle on his right knee. “Makes me wanna shut you up real nice.”

I roll my eyes at his retort, not buying it whatsoever.

I look back to the convenience store the size of a chain mall and see some of his teammates messing around with each other.

I’m pretty sure that their team captain, Xavier, just slid an ice cube down one of their newer recruits, which is currently causing them to erupt with laughter.

I look back to the guy right next to me, not really knowing what to say.

This is the first time we’ve talked to each other outside the rink.

Coach Edmund did say that this training camp is a chance for all the teams to establish friendships with one another, so maybe dialing up the snappiness isn’t the right play here.

I let out a breath, trying to collect myself.

We’re not in the rink, so there’s no point in trying to trash talk this guy.

“Sorry,” I say. “This has just been a really long trip.” I’m not sure that my apology will buy me any good favor, and I want to scratch my eyes out when Sanders lets my words hang in the air for an awkwardly long beat of time.

At last he chortles, his body relaxing as he pulls his hood off and reveals a mop of dirty blonde hair. From the side, I can clearly see the outline of his jaw, with its sharp

lines that complement his nose and— Wait, what the fuck am I thinking about right now?

“See something you like?” Sanders says, catching me off guard as an intense heat rushes across my cheeks and up the back of my neck.

“My, my. The least you can do before checking me out is ask for my first name, you know.” In just a few sentences, he has me backed in a corner.

It’s like he’s in my head, invading my mind.

And now I feel just like I do on the rink when facing him: vulnerable.

This guy knows which buttons of mine to push in order to make me lose my footing.

But I’m not one to back down without a fight.

“I could have sworn you looked a lot scarier under your helmet, but I’m just in utter disbelief at how dainty you actually look,” I say, clawing my way out of this figurative hole.

The way his scarlet lips tug up into a smile sends me a really bad signal. He thinks he has the upper hand.

“So, you think I look pretty?” Sanders counters me almost immediately, knocking the wind out of me although I’m still seated.

Typically I’m the clever one in my friend groups, and here I am, getting knocked around effortlessly.

“Hayden Parker,” he continues, “I didn’t know you were that much of a flirt!

You can at least take me out to dinner first before you try to sweet talk me. ”

I almost let out a groan of annoyance, but that would mean I’ve let him win. And I don’t want him to win. On the bright side, I have the entire week ahead of us to deal with this guy, so there will be plenty of opportunities to get the upper hand as the days go on.

“You’re demented,” I say emotionlessly, standing up and starting to walk away from him.

“It’s Theo, by the way,” he informs in a shout before I’m fully out of earshot.

I don’t know why I turn around to face him again, but in an instant I’m staring at his white teeth and his blue eyes shining bright underneath the afternoon sun. “But you can call me anything you want—so long as you keep those lovely gray eyes on me.”

Another intense heat surges to my skin’s surface, prompting me to turn away for good this time. I refuse to let him see me flustered like this. At least, not again.

When I approach the diner, I can see the boys about to leave, so I wait for them outside, rubbing my hands together to warm myself up.

My cheeks may still be stinging, but the rest of my body is responding to the chill of the air as we move further north.

As my palms heat up, I place them on my still-flushed cheeks and let out a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness it’s starting to freeze out here; my body’s need to stay warm is a good coverup for the fact that I guy from the other team has made me blush like a schoolgirl.

Stupid Theo Sanders and his stupid little comebacks. I'll get him. I swear on it. I.
Will. Get. Him.

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HAYDEN

At this point there's no denying that there's something about road trips that take the life out of me, but thankfully, we've made it to Canada. The sun is nowhere to be found, there's snow on the ground, and I'm not prepared for the chill-you-to-the-bone cold that people have warned me about.

Our bus slows to a stop at a compound that's just on the outskirts of the city. There are other buses pulling up, as well as a few that are already parked in this massive lot. In the distance, there's a courtyard where some players are loitering as masses of us alight from our team vehicles.

In my peripheral vision, I can see the Wildwood University bus, and I'm trying my best to not look at Theo Sanders, but I can't lie about the fact that his words have left me in slight shambles.

I've bantered with the guys before, and it's not a rare occurrence for us to so-called "flirt" with our friends.

It's not romantic, of course, as it's just joking around and messing with one another, but I have never— ever —seen someone flirt with their enemies.

Theo's throwing me off guard, to say the least. I'm not quite sure what it is about him that allows him to get under my skin so easily.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't our favorite rivals." Xavier greets us boisterously as he and his team walk over. Weirdly enough, he's the first to offer Julian a handshake. He

isn't typically this polite, but I have bigger things to focus on than his sudden pleasantries.

Julian shakes Xavier's hand. "Nice to see you again, Xavier," he says before turning to the group of guys behind the captain. "Wolverines," he courteously adds. "Looking forward to a fun week with you guys."

Xavier's smile is scaring me, because that man is beaming from ear to ear. It's completely unusual and incredibly unsettling.

"Oh, I'm sure it will be a blast!" Xavier exclaims, patting Julian's shoulder twice. "We'll see you guys inside," he says to the rest of us. Only a few guys have the courtesy to respond with a nod or a wave, likely because this is all too freaky for anyone who's used to Xavier's wild ways.

With that, the Wolverines leave us to go inside the main building, where no doubt our coaches and the rest of the staff are waiting for us. Players from other colleges also make their way inside in a slow drip of people, leaving only us Somerset players out in the cold.

I share a look with Ansel, and he seems as weirded out by this as I am.

But there's a change in the air, and out of the blue, I'm starting to get a slightly giddy feeling about this whole training camp.

"I think things just got a little more interesting, old buddy," I say to my roommate as I wrap my arm around his shoulders while we walk to join the rest of the players.

"You might just be right, my friend. Just don't trip on your face, yeah?"

"Ansel teases, poking my sides as we enter through the door where we're greeted by

a spacious open area that seems to be the compound's event hall.

There's a large LED screen on the other end of the hall, showing us welcoming messages and fun facts about Toronto.

"Don't worry," Ansel continues. "I'll make sure to pick up the slack if you do. "

When we first heard of this divisional training week, I expected a cute little camp where I would have to share a room full of bunk beds with my team or something.

But, from the looks of it, this experience will be more like a five-star hotel, complete with ornate trophies and hockey paraphernalia, ornate flooring and molding, and a huge skylight here in the lobby that looks straight up to the cloudy sky.

We're informed that a welcome ceremony is about to unfold, and each player is to line up with their respective team in preparation.

Coach Edmund walks up to the podium placed in front of the LED screen, leaving behind a table with the rest of the coaches as he apparently prepares to give a speech.

Out of all of the coaches here in the event hall, Coach Edmund looks the most experienced.

Sure, I could be biased, but it is what it is.

"Welcome to the training camp, boys." Coach Edmund's greeting is warm as ever, accompanied by his signature smile and soft tone.

As per usual, his delivery comforts me like a reassuring hug, his kind demeanor instilling in me the confidence I need to take this week's challenges and meet them head-on.

“Over the next week, you all will participate in an intense training program that aims to build camaraderie within your respective teams, while also helping youngsters like you establish friendships with fellow hockey players from other teams,” Coach Edmund explains.

I can’t help but look at the Wildwood Wolverines all lined up right next to us.

A little ways up front from where I am stands Theo.

Somehow, Theo has detected me looking right at him, because not a second later, his dirty blonde head turns around to face me.

His blue eyes catch mine, but this time, I don’t falter.

Theo smiles at me, his face brimming with sunshine as opposed to his usual cold demeanor.

And this time, I blush without turning my head.

“And I know you all are a little tight and stiff from your long road trip, so your coaches and I think that maybe a friendly match would do everyone good so you guys can loosen up,” Coach Edmund continues, once again catching my attention.

I’ll admit, I kind of zoned out a little bit there, but I’m surprised to find that we’re getting into the thick of things so quickly. I haven’t even gotten to my room yet.

What surprises me even more is that there’s a mischievous grin spreading across Coach Edmund’s wise face. I’ve been under his wing for four years, and so have Julian, Dom, Ansel, and Evan. We all share a look, knowing that a curveball is about to be thrown our way.

“But just for the fun of it,” Coach Edmund says, anticipation building with every word, “your coaches and I have also agreed to do these matches with randomized team members.”

A wave of shocked responses wash throughout the crowd of hockey players, and slowly, a tumultuous racket starts building up when it becomes clear that a fair amount of the guys are against the idea.

Coach Edmund can only chuckle into the microphone, but the rest of the coaches stand up from their seats to send stern warnings to their respective teams, effectively shutting up the loud jeers and protests.

I’m kind of fired up myself, my emotions torn between excitement and dread. But the latter emotion isn’t exactly productive, given that it’s clear that we’ll have to participate in these team shake ups whether we like it or not. Resigned, I sigh and close my eyes. Let the games begin .

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HAYDEN

After the welcoming ceremony is concluded, we're escorted to an adjacent building. A thick glass door separates us from whatever's on the other side of the door, and once said door is open, the whoosh of cold air confirms that we're headed straight into the frosty clutches of an ice rink.

But there's more than one rink here. As we file deeper into the building, it comes clear that there are four rinks in this massive building. My jaw drops as I process just how big the footprint of this building is.

"This place didn't look so big from the outside," Declan says under his breath. I nod my head in agreement. I've seen two-rink arenas before, but four? I guess people around here take hockey very seriously.

The staff escorts us to the stands and I admit it's weird to be on this side of the rink. Meanwhile, the coaches head to a small stage that's lodged between the nearest two rinks. This time, it's Coach Montgomery—head coach of the Wildwood Wolverines—who's on the mic.

"Alright, boys, when I say your name, I want you to come down and line up in front of us," Coach Montgomery instructs as he explains that he's about to start announcing the roster for the first team.

We're not left with any time to talk amongst ourselves and prepare to be split up, which noticeably rattles Julian.

Quickly, he gestures for us to huddle up. “Okay, boys, just make sure you play fair and please don’t tarnish Somerset’s reputation,” Julian says as succinctly as he can, but he’s only really looking at one person while he makes his plea.

“Is there a reason you’re staring at only me, Julian?”

” Dom questions, trying to feign innocence.

Unfortunately, the mischievous grin he’s failing to hide isn’t doing him any favors.

Julian only shoots him one stern look, but it immediately destroys Dom’s little act.

“Alright, alright. Sheesh. I’ll make sure to behave, Dad .”

A couple of us laugh at this new thing forming where we call the captain our dad, and it’s honestly both on-point and amusing at the same time. Julian doesn’t seem too bothered by it—as long as we behave otherwise.

“First team, here we go,” Coach Montgomery says. It’s clear that he’s taking pleasure in this chaotic first exercise. He begins reading off the paper in his hand. “Miles Cooper, Brooklyn Bates...”

Miles looks at us rather nonchalantly. For being the youngest member of our team, he sure has found his footing rather quickly. “See you guys at dinner time, I guess?” He waves goodbye as he stands up and rushes to line up in front of the coaches.

Brooklyn Bates, however, is taking his sweet time going from the Wildwood Wolverines’ area to the line forming near the stage.

The dude creeps me out, if I’m being honest. He always has this severely disinterested and disconnected look in his eyes, but every time he’s in the rink, he’s a

freaking beast. It's like he bottles up all of his energy, and the only place he lets anything out is on the ice.

Coach Montgomery continues to call names for the first team, the roster a mix of guys from each college.

Next comes the second team. "Ansel Adams, Logan Valdez..." Coach Montgomery noticeably winces when he mentions the latter's name. "Julian Myers..."

Ah, damn it, I think. I wanted to be in Julian's team.

Not to mention Ansel is not on my team, either.

My heart sinks to my stomach as I realize things aren't looking too good for me.

See, forming a hockey team involves ample consideration regarding player chemistry.

There's nothing more comforting than playing a game and knowing the people on your team understand how you think and will always back you up.

In my case, I'm not very vocal, but Julian and Ansel are the ones who have the best understanding of how I play on the ice, and now I'm not on their team.

Great . I can only hope that I'll have some of my teammates on whatever team I end up on.

The initial two teams already reaped like three of our guys, and there's still six more teams to be formed.

Coach Montgomery continues listing off the remaining teams. My pulse races increasingly quicker as the Somerset roster thins out.

Dom and Jared get sent to the third team, while Evan, Cato, and Gabe get assigned to the fourth team.

Nathan gets teamed up with Marcus Little from Wildwood over at the fifth team.

And that leaves the sixth and final team for the night, which I'm defaulted to since my name hasn't been called.

For fuck's sake, this is like high school all over again.

"Guess they're not splitting us up, huh?" Declan says. He tries to play it cool, but I know for a fact that he's relieved as hell to be teamed with a familiar face. I feel the same, but I'm playing it much cooler than he is. That is, until I realize?—

Coach Montgomery clears his throat after taking a sip of water. He did just list off a lot of names, so I can get why he's parched. "Would the remaining players please line up? Don't make me call your names one by one because I'm not going to," he says, an expectant look on his face.

I let out a huff, not really wanting to look over at the Wolverine's side.

"Come on, let's go before we get shouted at," I say to Declan after a moment.

I stand up and drag my feet to line up in front of the coaches.

Declan stands on my left, while the person who lines up to my right is none other than that bothersome Theo Sanders.

Even out the corner of my eye, I can see the tiny smirk on his face.

But wait! There's more! Joining us on this absolutely fabulous final team is the

intense and mouthy team captain of the Wolverines, Xavier Bishop.

While some of these Wolverines aren't exactly my favorite guys, there's no denying that our team is fairly stacked. So if I have to play with the enemy, I might as well be paired with some of the best, right?

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HAYDEN

I'm in the locker room with my brand new team when the thoughts from earlier resurface.

It's strange, my sudden, inescapable, intrusive thoughts.

I've been in the boys' locker room a million times before, and I've never been even the slightest bit embarrassed until now.

It's an irritating sensation, being frustrated with myself.

But I have to shake the frustration before I get out on the ice. There's simply no other option.

And let me make this clear: I'm not completely oblivious.

Moving away and studying at Somerset has opened my eyes.

I've broadened my horizons and adopted a more cosmopolitan worldview.

So it's not lost on me that these... these feelings ...

they could be the result of years of repression.

Mindless repression, maybe. But repression nevertheless.

Yet there's a part of me that thinks I'm overthinking. Reading into things. Spiraling about the what if . All I can think about right now is: How will I know? How do I find out? Where is my answer? It's an endless loop of rhetorical questions meant for me and me alone.

"Yo, are you even listening to me?" A voice brings me back to reality, making me look up from the ground. Lost in my thoughts, for a moment I expect to be in the Somerset University locker room. But when I see Theo's topless figure tower over me, I'm quickly brought back to reality.

Almost right away, my face flushes at the sight of his abs and chest right in my face. "Wha—What is it you want?" I stammer.

Ordinarily, I don't stammer. It's not what I do. But here I am, stumbling all over my words as if I've just learned to speak.

Theo doesn't seem to catch on to my being tongue tied, though, as he simply rolls his eyes at my harsh tone. "I was making a truce with you, you idiot," he says, offering his hand. "At least just for this game," he adds, sticking his tongue out playfully as his blue eyes scream of bad news.

I don't really have a choice. I have reputations to upkeep: mine and the Somerset Seagulls' as a whole, so I have to give it my all and work well with these new teammates of mine.

"Just don't get in my way, and we'll be fine," I tell Theo since he's taking the right winger position.

Declan offered to take the goalie position, which is Theo's usual role.

But this is training camp, and we're mixing it up in the spirit of personal and athletic

development.

“So, are you gonna shake my hand or are you going to leave me hanging?” Theo wiggles his hand, but I’m trying so hard to not stare at his body that it takes me a moment to register the gesture.

Finally, I accept his handshake—albeit a bit harshly, considering our hands smack together and make quite a loud sound.

Our hands touch for only a second or two, but it’s enough time for me to kind of like how his rough, calloused hand feels against mine.

“Are you happy now?” I ask him, trying not to let my breath catch.

I look up carefully, making sure that my gaze doesn’t linger too long on that beautiful body of his.

Unfortunately, his face is equally as pretty, so I end up staring anyways.

to not look at his fucking beautiful body, but it doesn’t help that his face is equally as pretty.

Theo smiles at me in satisfaction. “Oh, you have no idea.”

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HAYDEN

We're midway through the first game of training camp and I'm already change.

Not physically—although it has sunk in that this camp is going to be rigorous as hell.

It's the mental exhaustion that's already taking a toll, though.

I can't quite find my rhythm on the ice, and the whole experience is a bit unsettling for me.

"Come on, Parker, pick up the pace!" Xavier shouts to me as I manage to take possession of the puck from Logan Valdez. Theo and Xavier are near me, ready for support as the opposing team tries to topple my footing.

"You're not gonna have that for long at this speed, Parker!" Logan taunts as he tries to body-check me rather aggressively. The guy's smaller than I am, but he sure does have a lot of gusto. I don't even know how I manage to keep the puck with how aggressive he's being.

We're up against the team containing Julian and Ansel, and while they have also mixed up their roles on the team, I still can't get past them.

They simply know me too well as an offensive player.

Julian's currently the goalie, and out of the three times I've gotten the puck, not one of them have passed through his defense.

I didn't know Julian had any proficiency at playing goalie, so I'm quite surprised to be honest. But leave it to Julian of all people to be good at literally everything.

"You can do better than that, Hayden!" Julian cheers me on after successfully rebounding the puck I've just shot, with Ansel taking the lead and skating back to our defensive zone.

"Stop coddling me, Dad. " I manage to choke out a joke even though I'm running out of breath trying to keep up with Ansel.

"Stop talking to your former captain and listen to your current captain!" Xavier yells as he glides across the ice. Even though he's busy trying to keep up with Ansel's speed, he manages to startle me with just how his voice is. I still haven't gotten used to it.

Theo, on the other hand, shoots me a very quick glance. It's the kind of look that lets me know that he's making fun of me in his head, but I try not to let it rattle me. Sure, he's the one who initiated a truce. But I shouldn't expect anything more than that from him.

By the time I get it together and move my feet, I'm way behind. So behind, in fact, that Ansel has already taken his shot before I can even get back in our zone. And to my surprise, Ansel's shot is wildly accurate and flies right past Declan.

"Ah, damn it! When did you get so good at this?" Declan grills Ansel as he gets back in position. Ansel replies by doing a little dance, effectively making fun of Declan in a playful way. At least those two are having a good time.

"Fuck," I swear under my breath, disappointed at myself.

The play stops and Ansel skates over to me with a slightly concerned look on his

face. “You okay?” he asks. “It’s not like you to be this slow.” Ansel is my best friend, but even though I know he means well, this interaction is just rubbing me the wrong way.

“I’ve just gotta warm up, I guess.” I grit my teeth, not wanting to snap at Ansel.

He’s still my teammate and my roommate, and the one I’m really mad at is myself anyway.

Although I’m not exactly elated at the fact that I don’t feel any support coming from my teammates.

It feels like I’m out here on my own and I just need a second.

One second, I swear to myself, and I can get in the right headspace to keep up.

Not to mention, I wish Theo would back me up properly instead of just hovering all around me. I didn’t even see him attempt to get the puck back after Julian blocked it. Like what the fuck is that?

It’s fine. I mean, it’s not fine if we want to win.

But if we don’t want to win, then yeah, I guess it’s fine.

So I skate back into my position, trying not to let the lack of team chemistry get the best of me.

I can’t help but steal a few looks at the other rinks around us, though.

My other teammates seem to be enjoying their new teams. I can see Dom and Jared vibing with their new teammates.

Hell, even the weird matchup of Nathan and Marcus seem to be hitting it off.

Those two are the last two people from Somerset and Wildwood that I would expect to be all buddy-buddy, and yet—no matter which rink I look at—I seem to be the only one miserable around here.

“Got your head in the game, Parker?” Xavier checks in with me as the refs are about to restart the play.

“Yeah,” I answer snappily, not wanting to talk any further.

Theo audibly snorts and the fact that he’s joining the pile-on fills me with a rage that I can barely contain. “You haven’t scored a single point this entire game. Honestly, man, you didn’t even change positions and I’m the one outperforming you,” he says, swinging around his stick like an idiot.

“Hey, that’s not fair. Hayden’s had a long day,” Declan says in an effort to defend me. I didn’t even know he was listening. But I put my hand up to stop him from speaking up for me any further.

“You’re not the only one who was stuck on a bus for eight hours,” Theo says dismissively, finally putting his stick down in front of him. He leans against it as if it’s a fence. “Just say you’re trash and we can all move on.”

That’s it. The fuse I’ve been keeping in check for so long this entire match—no, this entire day —has just gone off. Slowly, I skate towards my enemy, seething with anger.

“Hayden, whoa. Hey, calm down.” Declan calls out as he tries to skate as fast as he can towards me to stop me, but he’s not quite used to all the goalie equipment attached to him, so he’s stumbling along the ice a bit.

Xavier tries to get in between me and Theo as I approach him. “Come on, Parker, it’s just a stupid practice game. There’s no need to?—”

I push Xavier aside rather roughly, but he manages to follow by my side.

Pretty soon, Declan’s at my side as well, and I’ve already made quite a commotion that even Julian and Ansel are starting to make their way over to me.

The refs are whistling for us to get back in position, but the shrill tone of the whistle only serves to aggravate me even more.

Standing a few feet away from me now is Theo. He’s still wearing that smug look on his face and leaning against his hockey stick as I size him up.

“Fuck you and your stupid truce,” I spit, swinging my stick upwards in a blaze of fury.

As I do, I can feel nothing but my heartbeat as Theo’s ocean eyes morph from pompous to indifference.

Countless voices around me are trying to yell at me to stop, but my stick is already swinging downwards, breaking as it makes impact on Theo's hockey stick.

A brittle crack echoes throughout my ear as his hockey stick flies in the air and lands on the ice split in two, sliding along with the piece of mine that broke off.

Silence lingers in the air. I’m not sure if it’s because my ears are ringing too much and I can only hear my own heartbeat, but I can’t hear anyone else. I’m just staring directly at Theo’s eyes, refusing to back down.

Before I know it, Julian has me by the jersey and is pulling me to the benches, his

usually calm but strict demeanor now angry and disappointed.

“I ask you to do one thing. Keep a cool head and not make a scene, and you can’t even do that.

” He scolds me in the sharpest tone I’ve ever heard him use, shoving me off the ice so hard that I almost trip and fall.

“Shower and cool off, Hayden. You’re not coming back on the ice today,” Julian barks, not giving me a chance to speak.

Following his suit, Xavier also drags Theo off the ice with the same force, but to Theo’s dismay, he actually trips and falls onto his ass.

“Get your fucking mouth in check, Theo, or you’re gonna regret it.

” Xavier reprimands his fellow Wolverine, but his voice is a lot more unforgiving than Julian’s.

I watch the two captains skate back into the ice and apologize to the refs on our behalf.

After that, Xavier subs us in with players from the other colleges, not giving us much thought anymore.

This is the first time I’ve ever been kicked off the ice, but strangely, I don’t feel guilty. I can’t even stand being next to Theo right now, so I walk back to the locker room, not paying any mind to him as he trails behind.

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HAYDEN

Theo follows me into the locker room because of course he does.

He clearly wants to make my life miserable.

There's no shortage of locker rooms in this massive facility, and yet Theo has to trudge in here along with me and continue to be a thorn in my side.

I run the shower in the background as I get out of my clothes, hoping the sound of the water will help soothe my rage.

"Can't you go change in another room?" I ask in the most reserved tone I can muster.

"In case it's not clear, I kind of don't want to be around you right now.

" My temper is still boiling, the rage pulsing through my body and making me feel warm.

I take my shirt off, hoping the chilly locker room air will help cool me off.

"My stuff is here, dipshit. Plus, what makes you think I'll obey you ?" Theo dismisses me, taking off his jersey as well as he runs a towel through his wet hair. He hasn't learned his lesson, and apparently I haven't either, as I'm not ready to let this go.

"Oh, I can tell from how you play that you obey no one. All you ever think about is

yourself, and everyone else is shit compared to you, isn't that right?

"I'm nearly foaming at the mouth at how fucking furious he makes me.

"Praise Theo! Hail Theo! He can't do anything wrong because he's Theo!

"I parade around the locker room, flailing my arms around with frustration.

Theo's indifferent face scrunches. "At least I'm not dragging my feet just because I hate who I'm teamed with," he counters, finally showing emotion as he stands up and walks towards me.

He effectively stops me from walking around the room as he blocks the way and continues his seething takedown.

"Oh, poor me. I don't like what I'm doing, so I'll make it everyone else's problem.

Poor me, pity me. Fuck you, Hayden. I'm so sick of this in-distress act you put up so everyone adjusts to you!"

"I'm not the one who's spouting useless shit to his own teammate out there on the ice!" I ball my fists at my side and fight the lightheadedness that's suddenly threatening to strike.

"News flash, idiot, the world doesn't revolve around you!" Theo pokes at my shoulder as he comes closer to my face.

I let out the deepest breath I've ever exhaled in an effort to control my trembling fists.

"Don't touch me," I warn Theo, my voice low and almost inaudible.

Theo walks one final step, his forehead almost touching mine.

Ever a dickhead, he slowly raises his hands in front of my chest. “I won’t obey you, Parker,” he says, his voice just as hushed and dangerous.

Fearlessly, he shoves me roughly, his bare hands making contact with my exposed chest and making me take a few steps back from his strength.

This is it. The moment I completely and irreversibly lose my mind.

No matter how hard I try to rein myself back in, I can’t bring myself to do it.

It’s like my body has disconnected from my brain and it’s moving on its own as all my senses feel heightened and the heat of this stupid locker room turns me into a different version of myself. Nothing makes sense anymore.

Nothing .

Because I can’t even begin to explain to anyone why I’m doing what I’m doing while in the fit of my rage.

All I know is that I press my lips against Theo’s aggressively, and he groans into the kiss as his hands travel up my back.

I pull his hips against mine roughly. Our mouths feel like they’re fighting rather than kissing, and it happens in an instant, but something shifts and suddenly every single cell in my body feels alive.

This is a first. I have never kissed a guy in my life, but when Theo pushed me, it lit a fire that I hadn’t known was extinguished.

My impulses took over and I wanted to do nothing else but dominate him—but not in the way I’d been wanting to dominate him moments before.

Somehow my focus went from fighting to fucking, and I don't know where this will leave me when all is said and one.

Mindlessly, my teeth lightly graze his bottom lip, which earns another moan—this one more lustful than the last. He's not speaking so much as grunting, but the guttural tone gets me going all the more as my cock twitches delightfully, begging to be attended to.

Everything is so heat-of-the-moment that I don't even realize that I've pushed him right next to the showers as the sound of running water intensifies in my ear, and Theo and I seem to share the same idea as we begin to remove each other's gear, all the while our mouths are still clashing against each other in a heated rage.

"You're fucked in the head, Parker," Theo says the moment we split for a breath, his blue eyes dark and his pink lips swollen. Being dominated by me is a good look for Theo, but the vexed expression in his face still manages to piss me off.

"Yeah?" I challenge, letting go of him and putting my hands up in the air as my hockey pants start to fall from my hips.

"Then we can stop this. We can pretend nothing happened," I tell Theo, creating a small distance between our bodies.

I don't know where my self-control is coming from, especially as I'm seeing his beautiful physique slowly being exposed to me.

Theo looks down at my crotch, and I can see the outline of my raging boner peeking through the top of my gear. He looks back up again and swallows hard. "You're sick," he says, which earns an eye roll from me.

I push him against the wall again, pinning him by placing my hands on either side of his head.

I lean in for a kiss, but stop at the very last moment and quickly pull away.

Without a doubt, I see Theo trying to chase my lips with his, and it's that motion that almost makes me snap.

"I saw that," I say, looking directly into his conflicted eyes.

"Fuck you, Hayden," he swears under his breath, and I must be fucked in the head to find it as sexy as I do.

"Choice is up to you, Wolverine." I place a soft kiss against his clavicle and get a whiff of his sweat.

It's mouthwatering, the scent of him. Mouthwatering and enticing as fuck.

"We can forget all about this and hate each other forever or... I can fuck you until you remember nothing but the shape of my cock."

I watch something flash in Theo's eyes for just a moment, and then he pulls me by my neck and gives me a hungry kiss, his anger now dissipating into pure, carnal lust. Desperately, Theo begins to strip me down to my underwear.

I do the same to him, except I leave his jockstrap on.

When I get full access to his ass, I grope it as roughly as I can, still letting out some of the leftover rage that's pent up inside.

Theo's ass is fat in the best way; I lift him up by his rear end and carry him as he wraps his legs around me.

Together we enter the hot shower and I pin him against the wall.

Theo relaxes into the steady stream of water and I feel my body do the same, easing into the pleasure of it all. I take this as an opportunity to suck on his neck, with the selfish intention of being the one who marks him. Claims him. Fucks him.

“You idiot,” Theo says breathlessly, picking up on my intention. “That’s going to leave a mark.” But somehow I get the feeling that Theo doesn’t really care whether it does or not, because he can’t help but grunt in pleasure as I continue.

“Shut up,” I say, putting my fingers on his mouth as I hold him up with my other hand. I move my hand once it’s clear that Theo gets the point. “Suck,” I command, staring him down to tell him that I’m serious.

Slowly, Theo’s soft tongue comes out of his mouth as he licks the ridges of my fingers.

He makes a quiet moan as he takes my pointer finger entirely in his mouth, and the wet heat is driving me crazy.

He continues sucking each finger, coating them in spit as he takes his time.

I’m beginning to feel impatient, and so is my cock.

“You make too many demands,” Theo says when I pull my fingers away.

“Quiet,” I tell him, reminding him who’s boss.

My lubed-up fingers find their way to his hole; the hungry expression on Theo’s face tells me he wants me to touch it.

Indeed, Theo screams out multiple swear words as I gently prod my finger inside, trying to get him to loosen up.

Theo might be my enemy, but I don't want to hurt him.

So when he mutters that I'm a brute and should be more gentle, I take note.

"Shh," I coo, trying to calm him down as I feel his extreme tightness cling around my finger. "I'm not going to hurt you," I assure him. He nods and I insert another finger. The way his muscles are constricting against my digits only serves to make my dick twitch with anticipation.

Theo's lips are an aroused scarlet invitation, calling to me as I lean in and kiss him again. I feel his hole relaxing as he pulls away and moans my name.

I pull out my fingers, fully aware of what Theo wants right now. I know he's too proud to say it out loud, so I shut him up with my lips again, biting on his bottom lip so I can hear that moan I love so much.

"You're right. I do think you look pretty," I confess as I graze my finger against his entrance again. "I mean... look at you," I say as I finally unveil my cock.

Theo scoffs, although a satisfied smirk hides behind his faux-disdain.

"Fuck you," he says, pretending to still have seething anger.

And yet he turns around and places his hands against the shower walls, confirming that he wants this.

Needs this. "Fuck you so much, Hayden," he says as he feels the tip of my dick press against his cheeks.

I press inside Theo slowly and I swear I might bust at the sensation of my tip sliding into his constricting entrance. My dick has never felt a hole this tight. This satisfying. "I fucking hate you too, Theo," I say, my breath catching as I sheathe my manhood

fully inside him.

Theo lets out the most enticing moan as he gets used to my shape. On my end, I've discovered my new favorite sensation as the heat of his asshole is already rotting my brain

Theo gives me the go signal. "Move, you idiot."

I place tender kisses on his back. "Relax," I remind him as I slowly pull out my member just to the point where his hole is tight around my tip.

I fully push myself back into him, and this time, his moans are a lot softer as he settles into the sensation of getting fucked by me.

I'm already at my limit, I don't think I can hold back for that much longer as my hips immediately start picking up the pace.

"Hayden, Hayden, wait—" Theo screams out in ecstasy, and that's when I know I've hit the right spot. "Again, again," He pleads, his nails clawing in ecstasy.

Complying, I continue to thrust my dick into that same spot, and each time I do, I can feel his legs go limp.

"You like that?" I say, my voice low and hungry.

"Your mouth's not running so much now that I'm fucking you.

" I continue to press into his tight heat.

"Come on, Sanders, tell me what you fucking feel. Tell me how much you hate me. I fucking dare you."

Theo can't even come up with a coherent response anymore. All he can manage to get out are his sounds of pure intense pleasure as I relentlessly fuck into his favorite spot.

"Tell me," I repeat, biting on his shoulder as I continue pumping my dick inside him at an animalistic pace.

When Theo fails to speak, I pull out and turn Theo around.

He gasps as I do so, pleasant surprise in his eyes when I pick him up and pin him against the shower wall before entering him again.

Within a few strokes I manage to find his magic spot again, and something about watching his hard member between us takes my arousal to a new level.

I close my eyes, wanting to remember this feeling.

These sounds. Theo's touch. The feeling of his hard cock pressed between our toned bodies.

"Tell me how I'm making you feel, Sanders. Fucking tell me," I growl into his ear.

But Theo doesn't need to speak. His cock twitches and he begins shooting out hot ropes, the spray landing on his chest and rubbing onto mine as I continue fucking him.

"Good," Theo says after a moment. "I feel fucking good."

"I know you do," I grunt. Theo's hole tightens up in response to his orgasm, and the pressure around my cock feels so good that there's no escaping my own climax.

Instinctively, my mouth reaches for his, our lips locking again as I finally ejaculate

inside him, my legs almost giving out with his weight and the intense wave of pleasure running through my sore body along with the hot water.

Theo places a soft hand against my jaw as he kisses me back.

It's the first kiss that feels like adoration instead of tension—like two old flames reconciling and telling each other that they've missed one another.

This moment with Theo feels like my becoming whole.

Like I've been waiting for this moment with Theo.

My person. I don't know how to explain it, but I can feel it. There's a knowing deep in my chest.

I won't lie: I'm new to this. I've never had these kinds of feelings for a guy, and I don't know what's up ahead for us after this.

But then again, training camp has just begun.

There's plenty of time for Theo and I to figure things out.

Plenty of time for us to master this little game we've started.

TO BE CONTINUED