



On Thin Ice (The Games We Play Book 1)

Author: *Denver Shaw*

Category: LGBT+

Description: As captain of the LA Grizzlies, Ryan 'Ry' Bennett's life is all about hockey and pushing himself to the limit. A future in the major leagues would fulfill his life-long dream, but at 32, it seems like a far-off goal, especially as he watches younger, more promising players earn their chance.

Then he skates into Ry's life.

Twenty-two year-old Alexander 'Xander' Harrison, a ray of sunshine, turns Ry's world upside down. From their first clash at training camp to the late-night conversations that reveal the man beneath the surface, Ry finds himself drawn to Xander in ways he can't explain. Xander's everything Ry's not – carefree, optimistic, and unapologetically himself.

Ry never thought he'd find love, especially with a man. But Xander shows him that love doesn't care about expectations or pasts.

It just is.

When a league shake-up threatens to tear them apart, Ry knows he can't let go without a fight. Because in the end, love isn't about the games we play. It's about the person we choose to stand with, no matter what.

Total Pages (Source): 43

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

Last season...

I stepped onto the glistening ice, the chilly air biting at my skin. The arena lights were intense, but not blinding. My eyes adjusted quickly. It was more than just another game for the LA Grizzlies – it was the final game of the division semifinals. A must-win situation for the team. We hadn't made it to the playoffs in the last two years... just thinking about it caused my heart to thrum with the weight of the elusive achievement.

"Bullet, Bullet, Bullet," the crowd chanted, their voices merging into a unified battle cry that echoed off the cold, hard ice and into my veins. The sea of supporters looked amazing wearing our colors: teal, turquoise and maroon.

Across the rink, Xander Harrison, the Giants' newly minted left wing, skated with a confident ease that made my blood boil. His fans were almost as loud, calling out his nickname, "X-Man." Our eyes locked, his icy blues piercing mine, setting the stage for the confrontation we both knew was inevitable. Freshly called up to the PHL, he was already making waves. His debut with San Diego had been during game one of the playoffs against us.

We'd lost.

We were evenly matched at each encounter; only sheer luck and will helped us to pull off the two back-to-back wins in games three and four.

Even though it grated on my nerves to admit it, Xander was good. Damn good. The kind of good that could turn into something formidable with time and experience. He'd shown up out of nowhere in that first game and had already started proving himself a threat.

I remember noticing then that he stood a couple inches over my six-foot frame – an insignificant detail perhaps, but one that irked me in some inexplicable way. And now here we were at game five, each team boasting two wins apiece and this final match serving as the tiebreaker to advance us to the division finals.

The roar of anticipation from the crowd yanked me back to reality as they began counting down to the puck drop. I hadn't even heard the National Anthem being played. How could I have missed it?

"Focus, Ry," I told myself, shaking off the distraction.

The game started, and Xander and I were instantly at odds, fighting for control of the black biscuit. Our bodies collided, our breaths mingled, and our competitive spirits intensified.

"Watch yourself, old man," he taunted, smirking at me as we jostled for position.

"Old man? You're gonna eat those words, kid," I shot back, determined to wipe that smug look off his face.

Xander and I remained locked in a battle of wills. We marked each other closely, neither giving an inch, every move calculated to thwart the other's advance. In the heat of the game, his shoulders flexed under his jersey as he fought for the puck, his arms bulged as he drove forward.

"Come on, Bennett!" Sam, one of our extra forwards, called from the bench, his

mischievous grin offering a brief moment of levity. "Take him down a notch!"

"Working on it," I grunted, pushing back against Xander as we skated down the ice.

We exchanged hit after hit, shot after shot, neither of us giving an inch. Sweat dripped down my face, my muscles screamed in protest, and every breath felt like fire. But I couldn't give up – not with so much at stake.

A Giants defenseman headed my way, closing in fast, stick extended. Trying to cut off my angle. But I saw that slight hesitation in his eyes. Maybe he was anticipating a pass? No time to overthink. Had to trust my instincts.

I fired a slapshot. The puck sailed wide, high over the crossbar.

The crowd's groans echoed in my ears.

Damn it. How did I miss that? Should've buried it.

My teammates looked at me, some with encouragement, others with frustration.

I'd let them down.

"Nice try, Bullet," Xander said mockingly. "But you're gonna have to do better than that."

"Watch me," I growled, my eyes locked onto his, the challenge accepted.

"Come on, Ry," Jester, our defenseman, shouted as he clapped me on the back.

"We're Grizzlies. Let's finish this strong!"

"Right," I muttered.

I watched Xander like a hungry dog eying a bone, determined. Our rivalry reached a boiling point during the final period, the score tied at 0-0. We were engaged in a heated battle for control of the puck when our bodies collided with a force that sent shockwaves through me. The crowd roared as we crashed into the boards.

"Get off me, Bennett!" Xander snarled, his breath hot against my cheek.

"Make me," I growled in response, my heart pounding with adrenaline.

His hands gripped my jersey, and before I knew it, we were exchanging blows. I was fueled by a fire that burned deep within me. Our gloves hit the ice, fists flying as we fought for dominance. Each punch was a release, an expression of the frustration and rage between us.

"Break it up, you two!" Coach Mack bellowed from the bench, but it fell on deaf ears. We were consumed by our own battle, the rest of the world fading away.

I was strong, but he matched me blow for blow, his body a testament to his level of fitness, discipline and skill.

"Enough!" The referee finally stepped in, pulling us apart and sending us both to the penalty box. As I sat there, panting and bruised, I couldn't shake the image of Xander's face – his eyes full of fire.

Good.

I wanted to piss him off even more.

But luck and will weren't with the Grizzlies tonight.

Xander found the back of the net a second before the final buzzer sounded, echoing

through the arena like a death knell.

He'd secured victory for his team.

Despite our best efforts, the scoreboard told a story we couldn't escape – Giants 1, Grizzlies 0.

It was the end of the road for us this season, and my heart felt like it was being crushed beneath the disappointment.

"Good game," Xander said as we shook hands at center ice, his eyes never leaving mine. I could feel the heat radiating off him, and I fought to keep my emotions in check.

"Next time," I replied tersely, swallowing down the bitter taste of defeat.

My teammates filed off the ice, their faces etched with disappointment and frustration. I hung back, my gaze on Xander as he celebrated with his team, a triumphant grin plastered across his face.

When I got back to the locker room, Jester clapped me on the back. "Hey, man, you put up one hell of a fight out there."

"Thanks," I managed, my voice tight. "But it wasn't enough."

"Chin up, Bennett," Tank chimed in, his solid frame a comforting presence. "We win as a team and we lose as a team. We'll come back stronger next season."

"Right," I agreed, trying to shake off the cloud that hung over me.

After showering and changing, I found myself lingering outside the rink, staring at

the night sky. The cool air helped clear my thoughts, but I couldn't stop thinking about how Xander bested me tonight.

"Ry?" Alyssa's voice broke through my reverie, her dark hair framing her concerned expression. "You okay?"

"Fine," I lied, forcing a smile. "Just needed some air."

"Alright," she said, not entirely convinced, but then her expression turned sultry as she pressed her voluptuous body to mine. "Need me to take your mind off tonight? You know I'm always willing." Her tiny hand glided southward and grabbed my dick.

It was soft. There was no sign of life in it.

"Thanks, Lyssa," I murmured, stepping back. "But not tonight." Sure, she was one of my hookups, but I wasn't up for it tonight, not after a defeat like the one we just had.

She shrugged, but not before she tried to hide her disappointment. She knew the score, though; all of the women I hooked up with knew it. My main goal was to make it to the NAPH and take care of my family. I couldn't waiver or lose my focus and get into any relationships or entanglements. At thirty-two I didn't have much time left to achieve my dreams, so I had to be smart about how I lived my life.

I watched Alyssa walk away before turning my attention back to the stars.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

I walked into the rink for our first team practice of the season, and I couldn't help the feeling of excitement that came over me. It was good to be back in the rink. It had always been my happy place, the place where I felt most at home, the most myself. I'd loved everything about it from the first time I laced up my skates and hit the ice.

The crisp coolness of the air, the sounds of stick against stick and pucks sliding across the ice, the smells. Yes, the smells. Hockey gets a bad rap for the rather pungent odors associated with the sport. Hockey locker rooms – at least those at any level lower than the NAPH – are something of an olfactory nightmare. They're definitely not for the faint of heart. But come on! You try skating around and fighting for the puck for two or three hours in full pads and tell me how good you smell. But after playing this sport for most of my life, even the smells of the locker room soothed me. And I couldn't wait to experience it all again this season.

Admittedly, it took me a while to completely – well, mostly – shake off last season's playoff loss against the Giants. If I was honest, there was still a bit of lingering disappointment and frustration around that loss. And anger. Oh, there was definitely some anger. But that had mostly been aimed at Alexander "Xander" Harrison, the "X-Man" himself. Oh, and I definitely sneered that damned name in my head.

Since I'd been running a little late, I heard the raucous sounds of laughter from the locker room well before I made it to the door. Once I stepped in, I knew exactly what all the laughter had been about. As usual, Jester was acting a fool. And as usual, he was aiming the brunt of that foolishness right at Tank. He loved to get the big man riled up! It looked like Jester had been showing off his Magic Mike moves because

he was currently shaking his ass right in Tank's face and trying his best to give him a lap dance, which Tank was having absolutely none of.

"Get your skinny little ass off me, Jester!" Tank unceremoniously dumped Jester onto the floor. Only a mountain of a man like Tank could get away with calling Jester skinny. He wasn't a beast like Tank – who was? – but few would call him skinny. Lean, yes, but the man was solid. And of course, Jester took Tank's teasing in stride, getting up on all fours and twerking his ass in Tank's direction.

"You mean this skinny little ass, big boy? You like it, don't you? Ohhhh, me so horny, Tank. Me love you looong time."

Before I even registered Tank moving, he'd grabbed his stick and whacked Jester right across his twerking ass, which everyone found insanely funny.

"Ow, man! That really fucking hurt! What the fuck did you do that for?" Jester whined, sporting a pout to rival any toddler.

Once Tank caught his breath from laughing, he put his hand out and helped Jester up off the floor. "You deserved it, you asshole. And "me so horny"? Really? What is this? 1989? Update your references, dude."

"How dare you! 2 Live Crew are classic! They'll never go out of style."

"They already went out of style... much like your sense of humor, Jester," Coach Mack interrupted as he walked into the locker room. "Now, sit your ass down. We got work to do."

Jester sat down without saying another word but not before working up another epic pout. Tank grinned widely and roughly punched Jester in the shoulder, nearly knocking him off the bench. But Jester was laughing as he righted himself.

We rarely took any of the teasing in the team seriously, especially when it came from Jester. I took a seat next to Maestro, who'd greeted me with a welcoming smile and a fist bump when I walked in, and waited for Coach to begin.

Coach looked around the room once to ensure everyone was paying attention before he started speaking. "First off, I want to say how proud I am of everyone's efforts last season." He paused, letting his gaze sweep across the room, making eye contact with each player. "You all gave it everything you had. I know that, and I appreciate it."

He took a step forward, his hands clasped behind his back. "Unfortunately, things didn't work out the way we'd hoped," he continued, his voice steady but filled with determination, "but it's a new season and a new chance to prove ourselves." He nodded, as if to reinforce his words. "I believe we can and will go all the way this year."

Coach took a moment to walk slowly in front of the benches, his eyes scanning the faces of his players. "But to do that, we need to give ourselves the best possible chance to succeed." He stopped, turning sharply on his heel to face the team head-on. "And it's in that spirit that I have an announcement to make."

He allowed a brief, dramatic pause, his eyes glinting with anticipation. "We've signed a new player who I believe will be an integral part of our winning strategy for this season." Coach glanced at the doorway, then back at us, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "This person has already shown great potential and drive in the playoffs last season."

Coach then gestured toward the door. "So, without further ado, please help me welcome to the team our newest left wing, Alexander Harrison."

Coach looked straight at me and I couldn't hide my shock, which quickly turned to anger when I saw Xander fucking Harrison walking toward us. With that carelessly

tousled blond hair of his, he looked like a cross between a surfer dude and a damn boy bander. For his part, Xander seemed to be perfectly at ease as he sauntered into the locker room, smiling and first bumping my teammates as if he'd known them all of their lives. That motherfucker! He was dressed down in a teal t-shirt and a pair of gray sweats that were fitted a bit too tight for my liking. Sweats were supposed to be a little loose and comfortable, not a casual version of skinny jeans for God's sake. But why did I care how tight his sweats were? Or how that too-tight fit emphasized the sizable bulge between his legs? Jeezus! What the hell was wrong with me?

Before I knew it, he was standing in front of me, smiling so widely his dimples were popping. Of course he had fucking dimples! He put his hand out for me to shake, telling me he was really looking forward to hitting the ice with me. Oh, he'd be hitting the ice, alright, preferably with my skate up his ass. But I just gritted my teeth and smiled – although, I'm sure it looked more like a grimace – and said, "Welcome to the team." Inside, I was still fuming, though. What the fuck was Coach thinking? This was going to be a disaster. How were we supposed to play on the same team? We couldn't stand the sight of each other, despite Xander's outwardly friendly demeanor. And to my absolute horror, Maestro scooted over and made a place between us for Xander to sit. I glared at my traitorous goalie then turned my whole body away from Xander so quickly that my legs bumped into Tank, who was seated beside me. He gave me a quizzical look, then turned his attention back to Coach.

I had mostly been tuning Coach out as he droned on about Xander's impressive stats and about how quickly he'd risen through the minors. But my attention snapped back to him with laser focus when Coach Make-My-Life-a-Living-Hell said he was assigning Xander and me to be practice buddies. God-fucking-dammit! And he even used that term, "practice buddies." Was this the damned pee-wee league now? I honestly did not think I'd ever heard that term leave Coach's lips in all the time I'd known him. Guess he was saving it for a special occasion just like this. The bastard!

"Bennett, you run Harrison through our warm-up routine," Coach Mack instructed,

his voice carrying the weight of authority. “Then I want you two running drills. Put your heads together and figure out how to best use each other’s strengths.”

Coach flipped through the pages on his clipboard, making quick notes before locking eyes at Xander and me. “You’re teammates now. Make the most of it. You two learn how to effectively work together, and there won’t be a team in this league that can defend against you.”

Coach Mack’s eyes swept across the room, ensuring everyone was on the same page. “Alright everyone, get suited up and hit the ice. Let’s do this, gentlemen!” He clapped his hands together, the sound echoing through the locker room, and headed for the rink.

As the team started moving, I followed right behind him, my mind racing. I wanted to catch him before he left the locker room.

“Coach, can I have a quick word?” I said to his retreating back.

Without even turning to address me, he said, “Later, Bennett. Right now, just get your gear on and hit the ice.”

And with that, he had summarily dismissed me. So, having no other option, I suited up and headed out to the rink... and to Xander Goddamned Harrison.

Throughout the warmup, we were ok... mostly. We did everything side by side and competed for speed. Or endurance. Or strength. Like I said, mostly ok. At least we weren’t actively trying to kill each other. That is, until we started scrambling for the puck. Honestly, the way we fought for that thing, you’d have thought we were still on opposite teams. For my part, I mostly tried to ignore him. I knew I was doing the opposite of what Coach had said to do in the locker room, but I couldn’t help it. Every time I looked at that asshole, he was smiling at me with a shit-eating grin on

his face that I could see right through his helmet. I swear, I even saw those damned dimples of his. He didn't say anything to me at first, but once he started to realize I wasn't ever going to pass to him, no matter what, he began taunting me and generally just trying to get under my skin. As if that was hard to do. Just his damned presence on this team infuriated me.

“Hey, old man, are you going blind? I've got a straight shot to the goal!” Xander shouted at me when I refused to pass the puck to him. Then he started leaning into me as he skated past, saying things like, “Those old legs of yours gonna make it, Bennett?” and, “You're a little slow there, man. Did you forget to drink your Ensure this morning?” and, “Take your time, grandpa. I'll just wait for you in front of the goal.” I finally had enough when the asshat literally skated a circle around me as we flew down the ice toward the goal. He skated a motherfucking circle around me! I was livid! How dare he insult me like that? How dare he make a fool of me like that? So, the next time he skated up to me, I tripped him with my stick. “Oops! Sorry man, my bad!” I yelled as I skated past him.

By that time, a red-faced Coach had reached his limit and called us both over. I could practically see the steam coming off of him. I was surprised the man hadn't melted the ice he was standing on.

“What the fuck are you two doing out there?” he asked, looking first to me, then Xander.

He gave Coach his best boy-next-door innocent look and replied, “Well, I'm just trying to play hockey, but Bennett seems determined not to let me. He's completely ignoring me out there, Coach.”

“He's just never in the right spot,” I defended. I knew I was in the wrong – Coach knew it too – but I wasn't about to admit it. So instead, I doubled down. “Maybe if he weren't so busy showboating, he'd be where I needed him to be, and we could

complete a damned goal. Is it my fault he's useless as a teammate?"

I thought Xander's head was going to pop right off. My mind helpfully inserted a cartoon image of him literally blowing his top, complete with steam shooting straight up in the air. It was all I could do to stifle a laugh. But one look at Coach's infuriated face, and my humor died a quick death. I could see the muscle twitching in his jaw as he gritted his teeth, trying to control his anger.

"You two are supposed to be on the same goddamned team now. And I want you to start fucking acting like it. I wanted you to be Xander's mentor, Bennett, not his tormentor."

For a second, I felt legitimately bad about some of my actions on the ice – some of them, not all of them. Then I saw Xander's smug grin, and I wanted to punch him in his damned pretty-boy face!

"Now, get back out on the ice and act like the professionals you're supposed to be. Bennett, you've been at this a lot longer than Harrison, so stop ignoring the kid and share some of your hard-won expertise."

As we skated back out, Xander was still fucking smiling at me. I fixed him with a glare and said, "Pay attention, kid, and you might learn something."

Xander's smile morphed into a full-on smirk as he taunted me with his words. "Oh, yeah? You gonna teach me how to make a game-losing goal?"

My gloves were off before I'd even registered I'd done it as I all but attacked Xander, slamming him up against the plexiglass surrounding the rink. I got one good hit in before I was dragged off of him. Jester held me back while Tank did the same for Xander. Before we could break free, Coach's voice rang out loud and clear.

“Bennett, Harrison, get your asses into the locker room and wait for me. The rest of you get back to work.”

Shit! Coach is pissed! And rightly so. Xander and I hadn't even made it two minutes before throwing hands. What is it about this guy that gets under my skin so much?

Xander and I slowly trudged to the locker room and sat as far away from each other as possible, waiting for Coach while pretty much looking anywhere but at each other.

When Coach walked in, slamming the door behind him, both of our heads snapped up and towards him.

“You two, get over here in front of me. I'm not going to get a crick in my neck turning back and forth between you.

I looked over at Xander and he looked just as unhappy as I felt, but we both reluctantly and very slowly moved toward each other.

When we were about a foot apart on the bench, Coach looked between us and graced us with an eye roll so dramatic, he could have passed for an angsty teenage girl.

“What. The. Fuck is wrong with you two? Are you trying to piss me off? Or are you just too stupid to care?”

We both opened our mouths to reply, but he cut us off before we could get a word out.

“Shut up. I don't care. What I do care about is the fact that two of my top players are acting like schoolyard bullies fighting for playground territory instead of professional hockey players. You do understand you're teammates now, right?”

Again, we both opened our mouths to reply, but Coach cut us off with a look.

“How well do you know your stats from last season? Do you know in which games you both had your best stats of the season?” Coach asked as he again looked between us.

This time, we didn’t even attempt to answer him.

“Your best stats of the season were when you played each other. The two of you repeatedly brought out the best in one another. That’s why I pushed for this trade. I figured if we could replicate that when you’re on the same team, you would be unstoppable. And I still believe that can happen... if you can get your heads out of your respective asses, that is.”

We both stared at him, mouths hanging open, dumbstruck by this information.

“Close your mouths before you start catching flies. I want you to look at each other.”

When we did nothing, he yelled, “I said, look at each other!”

We slowly turned to awkwardly look at each other, waiting for whatever Coach would say next.

“The man you’re looking at is your best shot at a spot in the NAPH. You make each other better. And if you’re not smart enough to make the most of that, there’s no hope for either of you.”

At that, he clapped each of us on the shoulder, and then left.

We were still sitting there dumbfounded when the rest of the team loudly made their way into the locker room, shaking us out of our stupor. And as I found myself drawn

into the after-practice reverie, I kept sneaking glances at Xander and wondering if Coach just might be right. For some reason, the thought made me a little uneasy. And even more disconcerting, every time I snuck a look at Xander, he was looking right back at me.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Xander

My tires crunched over gravel as I pulled into Eagle's Peak Challenge Course parking lot. With my stomach twisting and turning, I stepped out of my car and I took in the rows of obstacles stretching out before me.

After being traded from the Giants, I was still adjusting to my new team. I hadn't hit my stride yet, still feeling things out, since not too long ago the Grizzlies were one of my fiercest opponents and now they were my teammates. And except for my cousin West living in Tennessee, I didn't have anyone else I could talk to. It wasn't like my parents would miss me – we barely talked, and they seemed eager to get off the phone every time I called.

"New team, new start," I muttered to myself as I grabbed my gear and headed towards the course.

Some of the guys were already there, laughing and joking around. My eyes flickered around the group. Bennett hadn't arrived yet. Not that I was looking for him or anything; it was just an observation. We weren't exactly best friends – more like enemies stuck on the same team. But I was determined to make the best of my time here and prove myself.

"Hey, Z!" Jester called out with a grin. "You ready to show us what you've got?"

I smirked, resting my gear on the ground. "You better try to keep up."

"Ooh, confident. I like it," he replied, clapping me on the back.

Our banter carried on, the air filled with good-natured ribbing. Jester lived up to his name, cracking jokes that had even stoic Tank chuckling. A thought was niggling at the back of mind. Where was Bennett? Not that it mattered, of course.

But just as I finished my thought, the air shifted.

Bennett's deep voice cut through the chatter, "Sorry I'm late, guys. Traffic was a nightmare." He jogged over, a sheepish smile on his face.

His tight-fitting black t-shirt did little to hide his muscular build. His hair looked like the sun had lovingly touched it with its rays, and it looked like he'd run his fingers through the thick strands. Intense green eyes scanned the group, not lingering on me for even a moment.

"Alright, gentlemen!" Coach boomed. "The goal of these challenges is to build strong bonds of trust and camaraderie." His gaze swept over us, calculating and stern. "Time to pair up for our first challenge." He began assigning pairs, his decisions seemingly random.

"Xander," he called out, and I straightened up. "You're with Bennett."

"Great," I muttered under my breath. More time spent with Bennett. Just what I needed. His eyes met mine briefly before skittering away, his expression unreadable.

Our first challenge involved navigating a maze while blindfolded, relying on our partner's instructions. As luck would have it, I was the one who was blindfolded while Bennett guided me.

I bet the universe was having a laugh at my expense.

"Left, Harrison." His tone was a winter chill, cutting and unyielding.

Trusting him, I veered left only to earn an intimate introduction to a cold stone wall.

"Son of a... Bennett!" I groaned, clutching my throbbing nose. "A little heads up next time?"

His snort reverberated through the maze. "Maybe if you actually paid attention."

I rolled my eyes beneath the blindfold – not that he could see it. His words stung more than they should've. We were supposed to be teammates here.

"Bennett," I sighed, trying to keep my frustration at bay. "Just help me get out of this damn maze."

By the time we finished, I was ready to rip off my blindfold and throttle him. But instead, I took a deep breath and tried to remind myself that this was all part of building trust and teamwork – or so Coach said.

Next up was a relay race. Bennett and I were the anchor legs for our respective teams. I glanced sidelong at Bennett, catching the way his jaw clenched, the muscles working beneath his skin like coiled springs. A telltale sign he was in the zone, focused and ready.

"Alright, guys, on your marks!" Coach's voice boomed across the track.

I felt a surge of adrenaline, my muscles tensing in anticipation. My gaze drifted back to Bennett. There was something about the way he squared his shoulders, the intensity in his eyes. For him, this was a competition, not unlike when he was on the ice.

He's like a racehorse waiting for the gate to open. And no, just fucking no; that wasn't admiration, it was only an observation.

”Get set!” Coach’s voice rang out.

I glanced at Bennett once more, but this time his eyes were already on me. Our eyes locked for a split second.

And then, the starting gun cracked, shattering the silence. The track was noisy as everyone cheered their teams. Sometimes the exchange of the baton was clumsy at best, but every team wanted to emerge the winner.

Tank passed the baton to Bennett, a few heartbeats ahead of Jester’s handover to me.

Bennett exploded off the line like a bolt of lightning a fraction of a second in front of me, the muscles in his legs propelling him forward with explosive power. I followed suit, the baton gripped tightly in my hand.

I pushed myself harder, striving to match and then better Bennett’s pace. The wind whipped past my face. I gritted my teeth, determined not to let Bennett beat me.

As our teammates cheered us on, I felt the burn in my muscles and the pounding of my heart. Adrenaline pumped through my system, making me forget for a moment the animosity between us.

With just a few meters to the finish line, we were neck and neck. I gasped for breath. And then...

Bennett crossed the finish line mere seconds before I did.

”Good race,” I offered, trying to extend an olive branch.

”Likewise.” Bennett looked at me, a flicker of something like respect in his eyes. But just as quickly, it was gone, replaced by that familiar scowl. He nodded his head

curtly and walked away.

"Man, you two need to sort out your issues," Jester said, clapping me on the back as we regrouped for the next activity – trust falls.

"Tell me something I don't know," I muttered under my breath, watching as Bennett headed over to Coach. He appeared calm and collected despite the physical exertion, while sweat trickled down my back, my heart still racing from the competition.

After trust falls and other team building exercises, we made our way to a nearby clearing where a picnic-style lunch had been set up for us. The smell of barbecue wafted through the air, making my stomach growl. I grabbed a plate and piled it high with all sorts of deliciousness – a grilled chicken wrap, roast beef and swiss cheese baguettes and fresh fruit salad.

"I could eat this every day." I took a seat on the grass next to Jester, who was already chowing down on his meal.

"Same here, bro," he agreed, mouth full of food. "This is some good stuff."

I noticed Bennett sitting across from me, quietly eating his food. As if sensing my gaze, he looked up, his green eyes meeting mine for a moment before he casually looked away.

"You're pretty quiet," Jester said. "Everything alright?"

"Uh, yeah," I lied, forcing a smile. "Just really focused on the food, you know?"

"Sure thing, man." Jester winked at me before turning his attention to another teammate, launching into a story about one of his infamous pranks.

I tried to focus on the conversation around me, but my mind kept drifting back to Bennett. Why did he have to be so damn difficult? We were supposed to be teammates, working together toward a common goal. But instead, it felt like we were constantly at each other's throats.

"Alright, let's move on to zip-lining," Coach Mack announced, his booming voice cutting through my thoughts. "Xander, Bennett, you two are up first."

My stomach tightened. Of course, Bennett and I had to be paired together for the double zip-line. So much for avoiding him for the rest of the day.

"Let's just get this done," Bennett muttered, grabbing a harness and tossing one to me. As he strapped himself in, his biceps flexed under the strain. "Ready?" His voice was curt.

"Born ready," I replied, doing my best to sound nonchalant. We stepped up to the edge of the platform, and with a deep breath, we launched ourselves into the air.

We zipped across the forest canopy and the rush that came with it was exhilarating. I caught fleeting images of Bennett's wide-eyed thrill. Gusts of wind tangled his hair.

Despite the deafening roar of the wind, his laughter burst free and managed to reach my ears. The sound caught me off guard. It was so unexpected, I suddenly realized it was the first time I'd heard it. And something dawned on me. Bennett was an intense man. The kind of man that seemed to have the weight of the world on his shoulders. I'd seen him smile, but laughter? That seemed like something he rarely did.

"Ready to eat my dust?" Bennett taunted when we reached the next platform, his smirk igniting my competitive spirit.

In response, I tightened my grip on the handlebars. The wind whistled past us. The

world blurred around me into streaks of green and blue as we descended, the ground rushing up to meet us.

Later, Coach Mack gathered us together to discuss the importance of teamwork, communication, and trust in both hockey and life. They asked each of us to share our experiences and insights from the day's activities.

"I learned that sometimes you have to put aside your personal differences to achieve a common goal," Maestro said, his warm smile encouraging others to open up.

"Trust is earned, not given freely," Tank added, nodding solemnly.

"Laughter really is the best medicine," Jester chimed in, grinning mischievously. "You can't take everything seriously all the time."

As my teammates took turns sharing their insights, I mulled over what I wanted to say. How could I express my thoughts without igniting an argument with Bennett?

"Xander, how about you?" Coach prompted when it was my turn.

"Uh, yeah," I began, choosing my words carefully. "I realized that sometimes, even if you don't see eye-to-eye with someone, you can still find a way to work together. It might not be easy, but it's possible."

A few heads nodded in agreement, but I could tell Bennett was analyzing my statement, searching for any hidden meaning.

"Interesting insight," Coach nodded, looking between me and Bennett. "And you, Bennett?"

"Communication is key," he replied, his voice steady. "Without it, we're just

stumbling around in the dark – both literally and metaphorically.”

”Exactly,” I agreed, stealing a glance at Bennett. ”Maybe it’s just two people who haven’t figured out how to work together yet.”

”Or maybe it’s a matter of adjusting our own perspectives,” Bennett added, his voice cool but his eyes burning into mine. ”Being open to change and learning from each other.”

It was like we were both speaking in code, trying to communicate our frustrations without letting the others in on our secret language.

”Great point, Bennett,” Sam chimed in. ”And sometimes, it’s all about taking a step back and understanding that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. We can’t expect everyone to be on the same page all the time.”

”Very insightful, gentlemen,” Coach Mack praised, oblivious to the veiled messages being exchanged. ”It’s important to remember that teamwork doesn’t mean we all have to be best friends, but we need to respect each other and find ways to collaborate effectively.”

The conversation continued, but I sat there and wondered if Bennett and I would ever move past this invisible barrier that separated us. We were both fiercely competitive, but beneath it all, I respected the man, and I hoped one day we would truly be teammates who kicked asses on the ice.

”Alright, boys,” Coach Mack announced as the sun dipped below the horizon. ”I think we’ve made some great progress today. We’re going to wrap things up here, but I want you all to take what you’ve learned and apply it on the ice.”

As the team began to disperse and gather their belongings, I found myself walking

side by side with Bennett, our shoulders nearly brushing. Seemed like we ended the day with a truce, but how long would it last?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

The moment I stepped onto the ice, the atmosphere in the arena hit me like a tidal wave. Fans roared with anticipation as we began our warm-up routines. It was the regular season opener, and as luck would have it, that night was the Grizzlies' home opener.

I tightened my grip on the "puck sniper" – yes, dammit, my stick has a nickname – even while my mind wandered back to our pre-season performance. We'd won three of four warm-up games, yet I felt like shit. I wanted to shake off the nagging feeling that I hadn't given it my all, but it was hard to do so. Even though the pundits had been singing my praises, deep down, I believed I could do better. If I was all that good, I would have been busting my ass in the NAPH, rather than busting it in the PHL.

Xander skated up to me with a bright smile, his dimples and straight teeth on full display, but there was a hint of wariness in his blue eyes. "Ready for a good game?"

"We'll see about that." My tone was gruff, too gruff. I didn't mean to be such a grumpy fucker, especially toward him, the newest member of our team, and I really felt bad about how I'd been treating him. But I couldn't seem to stop myself.

His smile faltered for a moment, but he quickly shook off the sting of my words... and bad attitude, and skated away.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, he was an essential part of the team. He excelled in both offense and defense, making him a force to be reckoned with.

Despite the tension that existed between us, I knew he had what it took to make it big.

"Alright, boys, let's get to work," Coach barked, snapping me back to reality, the reality of a game we had to win.

The team moved into position. I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins as the countdown began.

The first period was a blur, bodies and blades colliding in a frenzy of motion on the ice. We were all in, every sinew straining, each exhale a silent war cry. Yet our opponents mirrored our every move. The atmosphere was charged with an undercurrent of tension that set my senses on edge. My heart drummed a wild rhythm against my ribcage.

The whoops and whistles of the fans swelled and receded like an unpredictable sea storm. Their collective voices rose to thunderous peaks with every play we managed to pull off, only to plummet into disheartened murmurs with each chance that eluded our grasp.

"Pull it together, Bennett," I chastised myself quietly, wincing as another near miss sent jolts of frustration coursing through me.

Our performance was riddled with mistakes: passes failing to find their targets, shots veering wide off the mark. An epidemic of blunders had taken hold of us. Only Xander remained untouched by this plague of missteps. He moved across the ice with surgical precision and fluid grace.

Jester and Tank, our defensemen, struggled to keep up their guard while Maestro at the goal was besieged from all sides. I tried to keep up my end as right wing but it was like trying to catch smoke – elusive and frustratingly out of reach.

And then it happened – the other team scored against us, a sharp sting that cut through the chaos around us, just like the shrill note of the whistle the referee blew to signal the goal.

Xander's performance stood out like a lighthouse in our tempestuous sea – but even his brilliance couldn't stem the tide alone.

When we retreated to the locker room for the first intermission, my heart pounded. The game was far from over, and I knew we needed to strategize if we wanted to come out on top.

"Alright, guys, we need to tighten up our defense," Coach barked as he drew lines and circles on the whiteboard, outlining our new plan of attack. "Let's make sure we're covering Adam and Jackson because they're kicking our asses."

The second period saw a noticeable increase in intensity. Bodies collided harder, skates cut deeper, and tempers flared higher. And Xander moved with the grace of a predator, his steel-blue eyes locked onto his target. But we were still behind, one to nothing.

The second intermission brought a chorus of heavy breathing and muttered curses from the team. We were battered and bruised, but we were still in the fight.

"Remember, it's not about individual glory," Coach reminded us. "It's about the team. Now, let's finish this."

And finish it we did. The last period was a grueling battle, both teams fighting tooth and nail for victory. In the throes of the third period, we were still trailing our opponents, a single goal carving the difference between us and them. The clock was our enemy, each tick echoing in my ears like a countdown to defeat. Three minutes left on that merciless timer and Coach made a call that he didn't make very often.

Maestro, our goaltender, was pulled off the ice, and I watched him trudge off, his usual fortress-like presence replaced by Sam, our extra forward.

Risky? Hell yes. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Since Maestro was no longer guarding our net, every inch of it was vulnerable to attacks from the opposing team. But with Sam, who'd positioned himself near the other team's net to screen the goalie and capitalize on rebounds, an undercurrent of anticipation buzzed beneath my skin.

As Xander stepped up his game, I couldn't tear my eyes away. He moved with a predator's grace across the ice, his focus laser-sharp on our opponent's goal post. My heart raced in anticipation as he took the shot – and then, it happened. The puck whizzed past their defenders. I felt, rather than heard, a collective gasp sweep through the arena, my own breath catching in my throat. And then, impact. The puck hit the back of their net, a jolt of excitement running through me. The arena erupted into cheers, but I barely heard it above the pounding of my heart. I joined in as the scoreboard lit up with the game-tying goal.

But Xander wasn't done yet.

He struck again – another bullet-like shot, the biscuit piercing through the other team's defenses before they could even recover from his first attack. Two goals within minutes – just like that! The roar from our side drowned out everything else as euphoria gripped us tightly.

Our risky play had paid off – thanks to Xander's deadly precision, he had tipped the scales in favor of the Grizzlies. I stole a glance at him, noting the wide grin that seemed to reflect our collective elation.

"Good game, guys!" Coach shouted, high-fiving us as we filed off the ice.

I scanned the faces around me – flushed and shining with accomplishment – and acknowledged for perhaps the first time in a long while how much these guys mattered to me. We pulled it off, I thought, we really fucking pulled it off.

My chest swelled with pride, but my mind kept drifting back to Xander's performance. He'd been truly mesmerizing during the game. When I was his age, I didn't have half the talent and skill he had. If he continued like he was doing, the trajectory was clear for him – the NAPH.

"Bennett, Xander!" Eva Garcia called out as we made our way toward the locker room. She was a seasoned journalist. Dressed in slacks and a blouse with a matching blazer over it, she exuded confidence. A pair of stud earrings completed the ensemble. "Can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Of course," I said. "Let me grab my stuff from the bench and I'll meet you in a bit."

Xander murmured something in a similar vein, gesturing toward his skates.

"Absolutely, no rush. I'll be right here whenever you're ready."

Xander and I didn't waste any time getting back to the reporter.

"Congratulations on your win," she began, turning her attention to Xander. "You were a real standout tonight. How are you feeling after that win?"

Xander ran a hand through his tousled hair, a sheepish grin on his lips. "I feel great, honestly. The team really came together tonight."

"Amazing," Eva nodded, clearly impressed. She then turned to me, her gaze piercing into mine. "And what about you, Bennett? How do you feel after a close win?"

"Exhilarated," I admitted, my heart still racing from the adrenaline rush of the game. "It's always a challenge when the competition is this fierce, but it makes the victory even more rewarding."

Eva's eyes traveled between us. "Now, let's talk about the dynamics between the two of you," she said, her tone gentle yet probing. "You both bring unique strengths to the team. How do you work together to complement one another on the ice?"

"We've got a... good rhythm going," I said, trying to keep it light. "Xander's like a whirlwind on the left, stirring things up. Makes the defense work for it, I'll give him that."

"Xander, you're the new sensation, breaking records and turning heads," Eva said. "How do you navigate the pressure that comes with being in the spotlight?"

His grin unwavering, Xander met her gaze head-on. "Pressure's just another part of the game for me. I thrive on it. But at the end of the day, it's all about the team's success. I'm just here to do my part."

As Eva peppered him with questions, my attention was drawn to him. I found myself covertly watching him from beneath my lashes, an action that was out of character for me. My gaze traced the contours of his mouth as he spoke, the way his strong hands clasped the microphone with a sense of purpose when emphasizing a point, and even the subtle sheen of perspiration on his forehead following our triumph on the ice.

Why was I noticing these details about Xander? The question gnawed at me. I'd seen other players countless times, both in and out of their gear. Sure, they had heads, and limbs – four each to be precise – but beyond that? If you asked me about Tank's eye color or whether Jester gestured when he spoke or even the exact shade of Sam's and Maestro's hair, I would have been stumped unless I went out of my way to look.

Yet here I was, observing Xander with an intensity that baffled me. He wasn't just another rookie; he was someone who had only been around for a few weeks and whose conversations with me were limited to grunts and growls mostly.

Despite this lack of interaction, I knew things about him that surprised me. His eyes were a unique medium gray tinged with blue undertones. His hair was a mix of sandy blond and light brown, with streaks of gold catching the light. And yes, he did gesture animatedly with his hands when he got excited.

I felt like a stranger in my own body – this wasn't how Bennett acted. Could it be stress? Was the pressure to perform causing me to behave oddly? As much as I tried to rationalize it away, one thing remained clear: something about Xander had captured my attention in a way no one else ever had before.

Eva turned to me, her hazel eyes locking onto mine. "Bennett, you've had a taste of the NAPH on several occasions, only to find yourself back in the PHL. How do you approach these setbacks, especially with players like Xander making waves?"

I felt a twinge of frustration at her question, but I refused to let it show on my face. Instead, I focused on the feel of my hockey stick in my grip, the rough texture grounding me as I searched for the right words.

"Every player faces challenges," I replied, concealing my unease with a smile. "I've had my share. But setbacks only fuel my determination." I glanced at Xander, who stood tall beside me, his blue-gray eyes glittering with... with concern? Eva's line of questioning had touched a nerve, perhaps on my behalf. I pressed on with my rehearsed response, echoing my teammate's sentiment, "And as Xander said, pressure is part of the game. It pushes us to be better."

"Your history together goes beyond the current team," Eva continued. "Both of you have a connection to a legendary player, Angus Steele."

I looked at Xander, my eyebrows rising slightly. I hadn't known this.

"How has his influence shaped your careers?" Eva asked.

Xander's eyes flickered with admiration as he spoke. "Angus Steele is a hockey legend. I grew up idolizing him. His skill, his tenacity – they're what inspired me to pursue this path."

A surge of discomfort coursed through me. My jaw tightened as I struggled to maintain my composure. "Seeing him succeed reminds me of what's possible if you stay dedicated and focused."

"Bennett, you and Angus Steele started your careers together. How does it feel to see your former teammate's success in the NAPH while you navigate a different path in the PHL?"

Her question cut like a knife, slicing through the facade of composure I tried so hard to maintain. It took all of my willpower to resist the urge to glance at Xander. Why, I wondered, as frustration simmered beneath my skin. It's not like I could be rescued from this line of questioning. The comparison stung, dredging up the undeniable parallels between Angus's meteoric rise and my own tumultuous journey through the ranks of PHL hockey. But the truth was, I had never been one to shrink from a challenge – and the relentless determination that had driven me to this point would continue to push me forward, no matter what obstacles stood in my way.

"Angus's success is well-deserved," I replied, smiling to mask my discomfort. "We started together, but I've faced my own journey and so has he. It's a reminder that everyone's path is unique. I'm here to contribute to the Grizzlies in my own way."

Feeling Xander's taller stature beside me, I sensed he was using those extra three inches to shield me from Eva's relentless scrutiny. But then again, I couldn't shake

the nagging suspicion that I was reading too much into it. We were just teammates, not friends, plain and simple.

"Alright, gentlemen, one last question for both of you," Eva said, her eyes dancing with mischief. "What are your goals for this season, individually and as part of the team?"

"Individually, I aim to continue playing the best that I can," Xander answered first. "But my primary goal is to help the team reach new heights. We're here to win."

I nodded in agreement, swallowing hard as I searched for the right words. "My goal is to contribute in any way I can. Team success is the ultimate goal, and I'll do what it takes to achieve that."

"Thank you, Bennett and Xander, for your candid responses." Eva's smile didn't falter. It was one of the things I'd admired about her over the years: her demeanor was always warm and friendly, even when she asked the tough questions you wished to avoid. "I think I speak for everyone when I say we're excited to see what the season will bring."

Then she disappeared into the throng of reporters and cameras. The moment she was gone, I turned to Xander.

"Good game," I muttered, extending my hand in a show of sportsmanship.

"Likewise," he replied, his voice low and husky as he clasped my hand in his own.

A strange warmth bloomed in my chest, catching me off guard. I frowned, puzzled by the unexpected reaction. Did Xander feel it too? I glanced at him, searching for... what? Answers? Understanding? I wasn't sure what I was looking for.

It was only a handshake, a fleeting moment of connection, but it left me feeling strangely exposed.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Xander

I stole a glance at Bennett, my mind immediately flashing back to opening night when he called me “kid.” The memory was still vivid, the tone of his voice lingering in my ears. Sure, he had a decade on me – he was 32 and I was just breaking into my twenties – but that didn’t make me some naive child. We definitely saw the world through different lenses; mine were tinted with optimism while his were clouded with cynicism. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t be serious when it mattered.

After playing four home games, winning three and losing one, the team had a couple of rest days before we headed to Phoenix. We were now in the team bus en route to the Escape Emporium for some team bonding activities. Bennett was seated two seats down from me, on the opposite side of the aisle, staring at his phone – probably looking at some stats, as he was prone to do. I took the opportunity to study his face – well, his profile – as we rumbled along. And as if he could sense that I was looking at him, he whipped his head around.

His eyes were dark pools, betraying nothing of his thoughts, leaving me wondering what secrets he held. His stone-faced expression remained unaltered, showing no anticipation or excitement. It was as if he was protecting himself from any joy the world might offer.

Even now, when most of us were buzzing with adrenaline, shooting the shit with the person sitting next to us, Bennett sat there unaffected – unsmiling. He always carried that dark cloud with him. I wonder if anything could crack through that tough exterior?

The dim glow of the Escape Emporium sign flickered. It took us a few minutes to park and get off the bus.

"Alright, boys," Coach Mack clapped his hands together as we stepped into the dark room, "we're here for some team-building fun. Let's split up and search for clues."

Of course we were split into groups and assigned different rooms. As fate would have it, Bennett and I were paired together. By this time, I wasn't surprised anymore; it seemed he and I were destined to be partnered whether we wanted it or not. The look on his face clearly showed his disapproval of the arrangement, but I wasn't about to let his mood dampen my spirits. Determined to make the best of the situation, I flashed him a grin. "Ready to solve some puzzles, Bennett?"

He simply sighed, already scanning the room for any hints of what we needed to do. I shrugged and followed suit. I refused to let this man steal my joy.

The room was styled like an old explorer's study, with dusty bookshelves lining the walls, ancient maps spread across a large oak desk, and relics from distant lands scattered about. The dim lighting and flickering candles added an air of mystery and adventure.

The first puzzle was a series of numbers etched into a wooden panel on the wall. Bennett stepped forward, examining the numbers closely.

"These look like coordinates," he muttered, tracing his finger along the markings.

I furrowed my brow, trying to make sense of it. "Coordinates for what?"

Bennett shot me a look, his green eyes narrowing slightly. "Not sure yet. Let's see if there's anything else."

For several minutes we moved around the room, searching for hidden compartments and clues, finding things here and there. Bennett seemed to be in his element, his focus unwavering.

"Found something." I pointed to a small keyhole hidden beneath a loose floorboard.

Bennett nodded, reaching into his pocket for a set of keys he'd found. With a satisfying click, the floorboard lifted to reveal a hidden compartment. Inside, we found a worn leather journal filled with cryptic notes and diagrams.

"Looks like we're getting somewhere." Bennett flipped through the pages.

We spent some time deciphering the journal, piecing together clues.

"Check this out." I unrolled an old, weathered map I found tucked away in a corner. Bennett grunted in acknowledgment, his piercing gaze immediately focusing on the faded parchment. Together, we began working on deciphering the cryptic symbols and solving riddles.

"Are you always this... intense?" I bit back a smirk as I watched Bennett furrow his brow, studying the map with utmost seriousness.

"Are you always this... obnoxious?" he retorted, shooting me a glare that would've sent a lesser man running.

"Guilty as charged." I laughed, feeling a strange thrill.

"Let's focus on this cipher." Bennett pointed to a series of strange symbols scrawled across the edge of the map. "It's got to have something to do with the locked door."

"Or maybe we should take a closer look at that painting over there," I suggested. The

painting depicted a medieval knight battling a fierce-looking dragon, their actions almost lifelike.

"Fine, you check out the painting, but I'm telling you, this cipher is key." Bennett grumbled, clearly annoyed by my nonchalance.

"Whatever you say, Captain Serious." I sauntered over to the painting with exaggerated swagger. I heard Bennett huff behind me, and I couldn't help but grin.

"Look at this." I pointed to a hidden switch beneath the gilded frame of the painting. With a click, the canvas slid aside, revealing another cryptic message scrawled on the wall.

"Alright, alright, you found something," Bennett begrudgingly admitted, joining me at the wall. "But now we need to figure out what it means."

"Teamwork makes the dream work," I quipped, winking at him as we set about deciphering the message together.

He grunted in surprise when I blurted out the correct interpretation of the code, earning us access to the final puzzle.

"Nice one, Xander." His voice was somewhat gruff. Did I detect some admiration?

"Thanks." I felt a surge of pride at his praise. "Let's tackle the last one."

We approached the locked chest in the corner, its iron reinforcements gleaming in the dim light. We worked side by side, getting the chest opened. Our fingers brushed against each other. The touch sparked a flurry of butterflies in my stomach.

Stay focused, Xander, I reminded myself, trying to ignore the way my stomach

somersaulted. It was just a brush of fingers, nothing more. But why does it feel like a whirlwind in my gut? Bennett's hands were steady, his focus unwavering on the chest before us. Yet, that simple touch... Why did it leave me with a flutter of butterflies inside? It had to be the adrenaline of the challenge, nothing else. I felt the same way during a game. Keep it together, Xander. Keep. It. Together. Ignore the damn butterflies!

"Got it!" I exclaimed as the lock clicked open, revealing a key tucked inside. Bennett chuckled at my excitement, and before I knew what was happening, we were wrapped up in a spontaneous hug, caught up in the exhilaration of our success.

"Good job, Sunshine," Bennett grumbled playfully as we pulled away.

Sunshine, the nickname repeated in my mind, and for a moment, I was caught off guard. It's not a name I was used to, not one I'd ever been called before. But as I looked into Bennett's eyes, catching that teasing glint, warmth spread through me.

Sunshine, I repeated inside my head, trying it out. It was... surprisingly nice. A little silly, maybe, but it felt right coming from Bennett. I never thought I'd be the "Sunshine" to his "Grumpy," but somehow, it fit. We balanced each other out, at least today, opposites that strangely complemented each other.

The way he said it, with that playful tone, made me want to lean into the nickname, to embrace it. Maybe it was a sign that reinforced our standing on the team: rookie and veteran player, left wing and right wing, teammates. Whatever it was, I found myself grinning back at Bennett, a warmth settling in my chest.

"Couldn't have done it without you, Grumpleberry." I watched his reaction closely.

Surprise flickered across his face, quickly followed by a subtle shift that I couldn't quite place. His lips twitched into a half-smile, a rare display of amusement.

”Grumpleberry, huh?”

Bennett considered the nickname. There was something oddly fitting about it, if I do say so myself, although the name had slipped spontaneously from my lips. It was the perfect reflection of his often reserved nature that clashed with my own sunny disposition. Despite myself, I felt a surge of satisfaction at the nickname, a secret pleasure in the way it’d rolled off my tongue.

“Yes, Grumpleberry,” I repeated, tongue in cheek.

He smirked. ”Watch it, Sunshine.”

The banter between us was natural, comfortable, and I couldn’t suppress the grin that curved my lips. Maybe calling Bennett ”Grumpleberry” wasn’t such a bad idea after all, especially when it elicited that playful smirk from him.

The moment we Grizzlies entered the private karaoke haven, excitement surged through me. This was the last stop on our day’s team bonding adventure. Neon lights bathed the room in an otherworldly glow, while disco balls scattered fragmented rainbows across our grinning faces. A small stage stood at the front, ready for us to unleash our inner rock stars. Anticipation buzzed in the air as my teammates bantered, swapping song suggestions and teasing each other about the upcoming vocal showdowns. ”Alright everyone, listen up!” The host, an energetic young man dressed in a flashy suit, clapped his hands to get our attention. ”Welcome to your team bonding Karaoke Night! There are a few rules: one, have fun; two, don’t break anything; and three, absolutely no backing out of a challenge. Got it?”

”Yeahhh!” We cheered in unison.

I glanced over at Bennett, who stood near the back, arms crossed and a slight frown on his face. He looked a bit lonely and out of place among the laughter and

camaraderie.

"Hey," I called out to him, grinning, "you're not going to be a wallflower all night, are you?"

"Hardly," he replied, rolling his eyes. "I'm just waiting for the right song."

"Perfect time to find it, then." I grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the song selection area, where our teammates were already engaged in competitive banter.

"Xander, what's the deal?" Bennett protested, albeit half-heartedly, trying to pull away. "I'm not ready yet."

"Come on, it's all in good fun. You won't let your teammates down, will you?" I teased, giving him my best puppy-dog eyes.

"Fine."

As we both browsed through the song list, Bennett scoffed at the options. "These are all cheesy pop songs, Harrison. Are you kidding me?"

"Cheesy or not, they're fun," I countered, before spotting something unexpected. "Ah! Here we go, a classic rock ballad."

Bennett looked at me skeptically but finally nodded. "Ok, cool."

"Alright, everyone! Give it up for Jester, our first brave volunteer," the karaoke DJ announced.

Jester strutted onto the stage with the confidence of a rock star. I grinned, knowing his performance would be nothing short of entertaining.

"Get ready to have your ears blessed!" Jester shouted into the microphone, causing a round of laughter. As he started belting out Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer," his voice was nowhere near in tune, and he exaggerated his dance moves, turning the song into a comedic act. To be honest, our eardrums needed a prayer.

As the evening progressed, my teammates took turns going up to the stage, each performance unique and amusing in its own way. The venue provided snacks and drinks, which fueled our high spirits. Glancing over at Bennett, I noticed him watching the performances intently, a small smile playing on his lips. He seemed more at ease than earlier, and I felt proud of my small role in that change.

"Come on, Xander, when are you getting up there?" Sam nudged me, drawing me out of my thoughts.

I shrugged, allowing myself to be pulled into the festivities. "Patience, my friend," I replied with a wink. "My time will come."

It was nice seeing everyone let loose and enjoy themselves, as we bonded over our love for karaoke... apparently.

The atmosphere shifted when Coach Mack and the rest of the coaching staff stepped onto the stage, much to our surprise. Their rendition of Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" had us all on our feet, cheering and clapping as they showed off their hidden talents and sense of humor.

Maestro, who was standing to the right of me, eyes wide, formed his mouth into an O. "Wow, Coach can sing." His respect for the man who usually only gave us orders and tough love on the ice was evident. "There's more to him than I thought."

"Did you imagine we'd see them like this?" Bennett asked.

The question snaked its way into my ears, his voice barely piercing through the noise around us. He had leaned in close, so close I could smell the distinct blend of his cologne and body wash. It was an unfamiliar sensation, this acute awareness of how another guy smelled. The fragrance was fresh yet warm, a combination I couldn't quite place. It left me unsure of what to make of it all.

"Never in a million years," I replied, grinning. "But it's nice to see everyone's human side, you know?"

"We get to see him in his element sometimes, but it's the first time I've seen him on stage like this," Bennett said.

Maestro was still looking at Coach and his staff as they wrapped up their performance.

Bennett's eyes met mine for a brief moment before returning to the stage.

"Xander and Bennett, you're up!" the DJ announced, and my heart began to race. I could feel the adrenaline pumping through me, ready to take on the challenge of singing a duet with Bennett in front of our cheering teammates.

"Alright, let's go." I grabbed Bennett's arm as we headed towards the stage. He seemed hesitant but followed along, his eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape route. "It's all about having fun," I whispered to him, trying to ease his nerves. "We got this."

"Easy for you to say," he muttered under his breath, but I caught a glimpse of a smile on his lips.

When "Islands in the Stream" by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton started, I took a deep breath before belting out the opening lines. Surprisingly, my voice didn't crack,

and I was invigorated by the energy of the song and the excitement of performing alongside Bennett.

As I sang, I noticed Bennett's eyes widen in awe, the small smile still present on his face. It was an expression I hadn't seen from him before – one of vulnerability and genuine enjoyment – and it made my heart swell with happiness.

When it was his turn to sing, Bennett reluctantly took the mic, visibly bracing himself for the judgment of our teammates. But as soon as he opened his mouth and began to sing, the room fell silent, captivated by the deep, gravelly tone of his voice that fit perfectly with the song. He didn't try to imitate Dolly Parton's soprano; instead, he sang in his natural, resonant register. This guy revealed a talent I didn't know he had.

I cheered, clapped my hands and bounced on my feet to the beat, hoping the energy I exuded was infectious enough to encourage him to let loose and enjoy the moment, something I'd rarely witnessed from him.

Then came the part when we shared the mic and sang together, our voices melded in harmony, creating a performance that left the team in awe.

When the song came to an end, the room erupted in applause and cheers, with our teammates whistling and shouting our names. Bennett's face flushed a deep shade of red, but he couldn't hide the grin that spread across his face.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" I clapped him on the back as we returned to our seats among our friends.

"Alright, I'll admit it," Bennett conceded with a chuckle. "That was actually kind of fun."

"Kind of?" I nudged him playfully. "You were amazing up there!"

”Thanks, man. So were you.”

By the end of the night, Bennett and I sang and laughed along with the rest of the team, the karaoke night turning into a memorable bonding experience. As I watched Bennett let go of his grumpy demeanor for once and truly enjoy himself, I felt a fondness for this new side of him that I hadn’t seen before, well, except for earlier that day.

”Here”s to more nights like these.” I raised my glass in a toast.

”Cheers to that,” Bennett agreed, clinking his glass against mine before taking a sip.

”Alright, everyone. One last song to close out the night!” Coach Mack boomed. The team members whooped and hollered, gathering around the stage for a final group performance.

”Any suggestions?” Lily, our physiotherapist, asked as she held the mic.

”Something upbeat and fun,” Jester said, a playful twinkle in his eyes.

”Classic rock always gets people going,” Maestro suggested, earning nods of agreement from the rest of the team.

”Perfect.” Coach Mack grinned. ”Let”s do ”We Will Rock You” by Queen.”

As we all took our positions on stage, I noticed Bennett hesitating at the edge of the platform. I smiled at his reluctance – it was just so very Bennett. With a mischievous grin, I grabbed his arm and pulled him up onto the stage with the rest of us.

”Come on. You can”t miss the grand finale.”

"Fine," he grumbled, rolling his eyes. But even as he tried to hide it, I could see the hint of a smile at the corner of his lips.

The iconic beat started, and we began stomping and clapping together, our voices joining in unison as we belted out the lyrics. I glanced over at Bennett enjoying the moment, and warmth spread through my chest.

As we chanted, "We will, we will rock you," we swayed together, the energy in the room electric.

"Nice job," someone shouted from the audience.

"Thanks for a great night, everyone," Coach yelled as the song came to an end. We all took a bow, earning a round of applause and whistles from the team staff that weren't on the stage.

"Who knew you guys had such hidden talents?" Lily joked, patting Bennett on the back.

"Apparently, we're full of surprises." I grinned, glancing at Bennett, who was basking in the afterglow of our group performance.

As we began saying our goodbyes and heading off for the night, I felt an overwhelming sense of connection with my team. Sure, we had a long season ahead and there were bound to be victories and hopefully no or very few defeats, but this night of laughter and music had brought us even closer.

"Hey, Xander," Bennett called out as we walked towards the exit. "Thanks for pushing me up there tonight. It was... fun."

"Anytime," I replied, clapping him on the shoulder. "That's what teammates are for."

”Teammates,” he echoed, his intense green eyes meeting mine for a moment before he broke into a smile.

”Teammates,” I agreed, feeling that warmth in my chest again.

And as I surrendered to the comfort of my pillow later that night, a realization pierced through the foggy veil of sleepiness. For the first time, during that karaoke night, Bennett had refrained from addressing me as “kid.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Xander

The seats on the plane were assigned on our flight to Winnipeg for our series against the Wolves. I found myself next to Bennett, who was gazing out the window with a furrowed brow. The hum of the passengers and the low rumble of the engine filled the air, creating a tense atmosphere. I fidgeted slightly in my seat, nervous about the prospect of rooming with him for the upcoming games.

Determined to break the ice, I cleared my throat and said, "Ever been to Winnipeg before?" What a stupid question! Of course Bennett has been to the Gateway to the West. We all have.

"A few times," he grunted in response, not taking his eyes off the window. "Not my favorite place."

I smiled at that. At least he didn't seem to think I was a complete fool. "I heard the cold keeps the mosquitoes away. Maybe that's a plus?"

He cracked a small smile at that. "Yeah, if you like frostbite."

I leaned back in my seat as the plane shuddered slightly during its ascent. My mind raced, trying to think of something else to say.

"Got any favorite movies to watch during flights?"

"Not really." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Usually just sleep or listen to music."

"What kind of music are you into?"

His shoulders lifted and fell in another shrug. "Depends. Mostly 90s rock." He wasn't looking at the window anymore.

I nodded appreciatively at that. "Nice, can't go wrong with the classics. Got a favorite band?"

"Orion Skye."

"Oh cool. I've heard of them. "Heaven In You," right?"

"Yeah, that's one of their hits."

"I'm more into newer stuff, like Imagine Dragons and Twenty One Pilots."

Bennett smirked. "You mean the modern classics?"

"Guess so. Different eras, same love for music."

"Exactly."

A silence falls between us for a moment. I shift in my seat, determined to keep the conversation going.

"Ever read any good books on these trips?"

"Not much of a reader."

"What about TV shows? Binge anything lately?"

”Watched The King of Queens reruns.”

”Nice choice. Doug and Carrie always crack me up.”

Bennett just nodded, staring out the window again.

I pulled a deck of cards from my bag. ”Wanna play a game? We could play something simple like War or Crazy Eights.”

Bennett glanced at the cards, then at me. He sighed, but I caught a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. ”Alright, fine. Let’s play Crazy Eights.”

I shuffled the cards and started the game, and I kept the mood light with small talk.

”What about hobbies? Besides hockey, of course.”

”I like fishing. It’s peaceful.”

”Fishing, huh? Never pegged you for an outdoorsy guy.”

He smirked. ”Don’t let the grumpy face fool you.”

We laughed together and I felt a sense of accomplishment as Bennett started to open up, even if just a little.

”Got any big plans for the offseason?”

”Probably head to my folks’ place at Maple Valley. What about you?”

”Not sure yet. Might visit my cousin West in Tennessee. We haven’t seen each other in ages.”

”Sounds like a solid plan. Family time is always good.”

Our conversation flowed naturally after that, punctuated by rounds of our card game and stories about life outside hockey.

By the time we started our descent into Winnipeg, I thought I’d made some progress with Bennett.

”Hey,” I said before we disembarked, ”thanks for humoring me with the game. Made the flight go by faster.”

He nodded, and for once his smile seemed genuine. ”Yeah, wasn’t too bad.”

Bennett and I were roommates at the hotel – no surprise there. I’d stayed at this hotel when I played with the Giants. The moment we entered the room, Bennett motioned for me to choose which of the two queen beds I wanted. I rolled my luggage toward one of them, while he went toward the other.

The room was a standard double, furnished with the essentials: dresser, desk with a chair, bedside tables, and a television. There was an en suite bathroom with a shower. Basically neutral colors and minimal frills.

Across from me, Bennett was methodical as he stowed away his gear, his gaze occasionally straying over to me.

”So, captain, any pre-game rituals I should know about?”

”Yeah. Meditate on not messing up.”

I laughed at that, but he didn’t crack a smile. His face remained serious, though there was an unmistakable glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Come on," I prodded him further. "You must have some superstition or routine. Like, do you always put your left skate on first or something?"

"I just focus on the game."

Undeterred by his no-nonsense demeanor, I stretched out on the bed and grinned at him.

We spent the next few moments in comfortable silence, each lost in our thoughts.

He broke the silence after a while. "Alright," he said with an air of authority. "Time to hit the sack. Big game tomorrow."

"Got it, captain," I responded cheerfully. "Sweet dreams."

"You too, rookie," he replied as he turned off the lights.

Maybe sharing a room with Bennett wasn't going to be so bad after all.

Not surprisingly, the arena was mostly packed with Winnipeg's fans. My pulse quickened as I sat on the bench, eyes glued to the ice. We were tied at one apiece in the third period, still anyone's game.

Bennett and I had been in sync all night, weaving through the Wolves' defense. They were relentless, but we held our ground.

Midway through the third period, disaster struck. One of our forwards, Landon, took a hard hit into the boards and went down, clutching his knee. The arena fell silent for a moment. Winnipeg's fans started booing as the referee signaled for a stoppage in play.

The trainers rushed onto the ice, carefully lifting Landon onto a stretcher. The crowd's booing grew louder, but we focused on our teammate, hoping he was okay.

Coach shouted, "Bennett, Harrison, you're up! We need a play!"

I glanced at Bennett, who nodded sharply. We took the ice, determination in our strides. The puck dropped, and the game was on again. Bennett shouted, "On your left!" as he passed the puck to me, deftly dodging a defenseman. I took off, heart pounding, eyes locked on the goaltender.

The Wolves' fans booed every time we touched the puck, their jeers a constant reminder of the hostile territory we were in. Yet, it only fueled our determination.

"Watch the right!" Bennett called out, blocking another defender. I skated hard, feeling the burn in my legs. The Wolves' defense closed in, but Bennett was there, taking a hit to clear my path. I faked a shot, then slipped the puck past the goaltender. The red light flashed.

Goal.

The bench erupted. As we skated back, I gave Bennett a nod. He returned it with a subtle tilt of his head.

And something shifted between us. Hell if I knew what it was.

Back on the bench, Coach clapped us both on the back. "Good job, boys," he said gruffly. The game continued, but the intensity never let up. We faced penalties, players in the sin bin, and even a few fisticuffs, but we held our ground.

And won.

Because we had practice and then another game the next day, the team opted to retreat to our hotel rooms.

The door to our room clicked shut behind us. I threw myself onto the bed, my heart still pounding from the thrill of the game. Bennett, always one for order, started to meticulously sort his gear.

"Man, what a game!" I let out a laugh. "Did you see the look on Coach's face when we scored the winning goal?"

"Yeah," Bennett grumbled a response. "Probably thinking we should've done that sooner."

Despite his gruff exterior, Bennett had a way of making me chuckle. "For such a grump, you sure do know how to make a play."

He paused at that and shot back a slight smirk. "Just doing my job."

"Well, it was pretty awesome." With an appreciative nod, I propped myself up on my elbows. "You know, we make a pretty good team."

"We do, don't we?" After his words hung in the air for a moment, silence settled between us.

I pulled out my phone and began scrolling through messages, not bothering to call my parents. They wouldn't be interested in whether the Grizzlies won or lost or how I'd played anyway. A thought crossed my mind then and I looked up at Bennett. "Gonna call the fam about the game?"

"Planned on it."

"I'll give you some privacy then..." I started to rise but was stopped by Bennett's dismissive wave.

"No need... they'd love to meet you."

"Meet me? Over the phone?"

"Yeah," he said with an indifferent shrug. "My sister Chloe's a fan."

A grin spread across my face at that news. "Alright then..."

As Bennett dialed and put the call on speakerphone, anticipation bubbled inside me like soda pop. The sound of a bright voice filled our room after just three rings.

"Ry! Did you guys win?"

"Yeah," Bennett replied. "Close game, but we pulled through."

"That's awesome! Oh, is Xander with you?"

"Yes, LoLo," he said dryly, shaking his head. "He's my roommate."

A squeal pierced the air from Bennett's phone.

"Can I say hi?"

Bennett motioned for me to come closer. Leaning into the phone, I had a huge smile on my face.

Another squeal.

“Oh my god, Ry. It’s really him.” Bennett’s sister grinned broadly, her face lighting up the screen with infectious enthusiasm. “Hi, Xander, I’m Chloe, but everyone calls me LoLo. I’m such a fan!”

I chuckled, waving at the screen. “Hi, LoLo, nice to meet you.”

“You’re even cuter on video!” she blurted out, then quickly covered her mouth, blushing.

Bennett smirked. “Careful, LoLo. You’re embarrassing the guy.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry about it. It’s nice to meet a fan.” Glancing at Bennett, I continued, “Your brother’s been showing me the ropes. Couldn’t have done it without him.”

Bennett rolled his eyes at my comment but I caught a hint of a smile on his face.

“Ry, you’re so lucky to have Xander as your roommate. He’s amazing!”

“Yeah. He’s alright.”

“Just alright, huh?” I nudged Bennett playfully and he grunted in response.

“Xander,” Chloe piped up again. “You should totally come visit us in Maple Valley sometime.”

“I’d love that,” I said. “Thanks for the invite.”

“Hey, ConAir!” Bennett called out suddenly, and the screen shifted to show a grinning teenager about Chloe’s age. “Say hi to Xander.”

“Hey Xander, I’m Connor. But to Ry, I’m ConAir, ConDuit... or whatever, depending on his mood.”

“Hi, Connor,” I said, chuckling. “Nice to meet you.”

“Connor’s my twin,” LoLo interjected proudly. “But you probably figured that out.”

“Yep, we’re the dynamic duo,” Connor added with a laugh.

”Are Mom and Dad home?”

”They went for a walk,” Chloe replied.

Connor added, ”Yeah, they”re doing great, though.”

The siblings continued talking, catching up on each other’s lives. Bennett’s laughter filled the room, a sound that made me smile without thinking. It made me feel like his smile – his laughter – was the goal I should aim for every day. Seeing him so relaxed and happy with his family made the grumpiness he often showed seem like a distant memory.

“Alright, ConCave, LoLo, we’ve got a big day tomorrow,” he said, still chuckling. “Say goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Ry. Goodnight, Xander,” they chorused, their voices full of warmth.

“Goodnight, LoLo, Connor,” I said, waving as Bennett ended the call.

Bennett turned to me, a small smile playing on his lips. “They’re a handful, but they mean well.”

“They seem great,” I said. “You’re lucky to have a supportive family.”

“Yeah, they keep me grounded.”

We continued talking about the highlights of the game we played, but my mind wandered back to LoLo and Connor’s vibrant personalities and Bennett’s interaction with them. It had been like observing a different person altogether – not grumpy or serious but light-hearted and warm. It was as if he’d made a 180-degree turn when it came to his family.

Bennett

It took me years to feel at ease hosting our team's podcast. Over time, my delivery had improved – if I do say so myself. But tonight was different; it was my first time co-hosting with Xander.

He was already adjusting the microphone and sinking comfortably into his seat before I'd even managed to find my bearings. His face lit up with an infectious grin.

The room was cozy yet functional, with soundproof walls adorned in hockey memorabilia. Our team's logo was proudly displayed on posters and banners. In the middle of the room, a circular table served as the broadcast command center. Microphones were poised and ready for action. Behind them, a large monitor displayed the podcast's logo. The room hummed with the presence of electronic equipment.

"Welcome back to Roaring Success, your favorite hockey podcast," I began, glancing at Xander. His eyes sparkled. "I'm Ryan 'Bullet' Bennett, and with me is the ever-charming Alexander... er... 'X-Man' Harrison."

"Charming?" Xander scoffed, rolling his eyes. "More like intimidatingly handsome."

"Ah, so humble," I deadpanned. "Anyway, the Grizzlies' three-game home stand starts tonight as we host Calgary."

"Indeed," Xander agreed, leaning forward. "We're back in LA and taking our three-game winning streak into tonight's contest against the Comets on home ice, which

means our odds are good.” Xander’s fingers drummed out a rapid beat on the table.

”Let’s break down our recent victories against Phoenix.”

As we analyzed the key plays, Xander’s enthusiasm bubbled over. He was a natural, settling into this gig as if he’d been born for this very thing. I had to hand it to him, the guy knew how to keep things interesting.

We got into the nitty-gritty of our impending showdown with Calgary next. ”Here’s to hoping the fellas don’t get amnesia mid-game and actually pass me the puck this time,” I quipped, shooting a sidelong glance at Xander.

A sly grin began to stretch across his face. ”Ahh. Let’s hope Bennett doesn’t trip over his own skates like he did during practice.” His voice was filled with amusement as he recalled the comical scene of my stumbling and flailing on the ice to our listeners.

Xander’s quick-witted joke caught me off guard, and I erupted into a fit of hearty laughter. My stomach ached from the force of it, but I couldn’t stop. His eyes widened as if he was taken aback by my outburst of laughter. Even I was surprised by how much his humor affected me.

I started feeling a bit self-conscious at my unexpected display of mirth, but he put me at ease when he smoothly transitioned to a new topic.

”Speaking of skating blunders,” Xander began with a twinkle in his eye, ”I think we should do a segment on Bennett’s Greatest Hits next time.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. ”Oh trust me, there would be enough material for a whole series.”

”Well, let’s see what our wonderful listeners have to say,” Xander announced, scrolling through messages on his phone.

I watched as his eyes lit up, a grin spreading across his face. ”Listen to this one: ”@RoaringSuccess, Bennett’s game face could probably scare away a grizzly bear.””

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t keep a small smile off my lips. ”It’s called focus.”

“Can you imagine what it’s like for his teammates who see his face every day?”

“Yeah, yeah, Sunshine. Keep ‘em laughing.”

”Whatever you say, Grumpleberry.” Xander chuckled before answering a call from a young fan named Timmy. ”Hey, Timmy, what’s your question?”

”What’s your favorite pre-game snack?” Even from across the line, I could tell that Timmy was barely able to contain his excitement.

”Great question, Timmy.” Xander launched into an animated explanation about his love for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, practically bouncing in his seat.

My mind wandered to my own pre-game routine: coffee, black as sin. Because who needs luck when you’ve got caffeine?

Xander turned to me, an eyebrow raised. “And what about you, Bennett?”

”Me? I prefer a nice cup of coffee to wake me up... and scare away the sleep demons.” I flashed Xander a playful wink.

And yeah, he seemed taken aback by that wink too.

We read a few more messages and took some more of our fans' calls, and then moved on to the next segment.

"So, Bennett, any rituals or superstitions you want to share? You know, aside from your grumpy bear game face?"

"Very funny." I feigned a serious expression. "I'm not one for superstitions, but I do have a ritual of checking and rechecking my gear before every game." I demonstrated, my fingers miming the motion of tightening straps. "Gotta make sure everything's in place."

"Ah, so that's why you're always the last one out of the locker room," Xander teased, then launched into his own ritual. "I listen to 'Can't Hold Us' by Macklemore Ryan Lewis on repeat." With a grin, he mimicked playing air guitar, complete with headbanging and exaggerated facial expressions.

Air guitar to "Can't Hold Us"... only Xander, I mused, watching my co-host's demonstration. I'd seen him doing it in the locker room before games. At least he's got the energy for it.

"Some players carry lucky charms around. Do you have one, Grumpleberry?"

"Actually..." Bennett reached into his pocket and pulled out a worn-out hockey puck, holding it up for the camera. "This is my lucky charm. It's from my first professional goal twelve years ago. Not that it did much for me last season. Seems like it's working again now." I turned the puck over with my fingers.

"Wow, didn't expect that from Mr. Practical over here." Xander chuckled, shaking his head in amusement.

"Alright, time for some predictions for tonight's game," I declared, steering the

conversation back on track. "What are your thoughts, Xander?"

"I predict we'll score within the first five minutes and Calgary won't even see it coming."

"Optimistic as ever," I mused. "I think it'll be a tight game, but we'll pull through in the end."

Xander groaned playfully, sticking his tongue out at me.

"Careful, Xander. You might just jinx us with all that confidence."

He shot me a playful glare. "Oh, come on, Bennett. Where's your sense of optimism?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Buried deep beneath all that sunshine you're radiating, I suppose."

As the podcast continued, we bantered and disagreed on hockey strategies, and I thought of my own game and what I needed to improve. I gotta put in some extra time at practice to get my shots on target. Maybe lay off the caffeine before games.

It was nice to hear fans reacting in real-time, their comments ranging from heartfelt messages to teasing remarks about our on-ice chemistry.

But a thought suddenly struck me and I was surprised I hadn't noticed before now. Xander had managed to coax out a version of me I barely recognized. Our exchanges were peppered with light-hearted banter and punctuated by the rich sounds of our laughter around us. It was so different from the usual silence or serious discussions that marked my daily routine.

Before this, playfulness had been an alien concept to me, like a word in a foreign language I hadn't bothered to learn. My life revolved around the ice – training, competing, and striving for perfection with unyielding focus. Off the rink, I was wired for discipline and intensity; there was no room for frivolity. I even had a no-hookup rule this season. It was going to be 100 percent hockey because I had a league to get promoted to: the NAPH.

But there he was, Xander with his infectious grin and effortless charm, gradually chipping away at my self-imposed rigidity. His presence was like a warm sunbeam melting away my icy exterior layer by layer. I found myself engaging in playful teasing, laughing freely at his jokes and even initiating some of our sillier conversations.

It was strange yet liberating at the same time. Like stretching out muscles that had been tensed up for too long or taking off a pair of tight skates after a long day. The more time I spent with him, the more these unfamiliar feelings began to seem natural.

And the more I thought about it, I realized that aside from my family, Xander was one of the few individuals who could draw me out and make me laugh so freely.

I marveled at the man; it was as if Xander held up a mirror reflecting back an image of Bennett that knew how to relax and have fun. And surprisingly enough, I liked what I saw.

"Alright, that's it for today." He flashed me a grin. "Thanks for tuning in to Roaring Success; we'll catch you next time."

"Stay fierce, everyone," I added with a smile, feeling the warmth of camaraderie between us as we signed off.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

The team gathered in the conference room to discuss our charitable and volunteer services during the season. Charles from the community relations department had just finished outlining our goals when he invited us to share our thoughts. I could feel my throat tightening as I prepared to voice my idea.

Clearing my throat, I began, "I wanted to bring up something important. As you all know, October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month."

Jester was quick to respond. "Yeah, I remember those pink jerseys from last year."

"Exactly. But this year," I paused for effect, "I think we can do more than just wear pink."

Tank's eyebrow shot up; his silent question hung in the air between us.

"I was thinking we visit breast cancer patients at the hospital," I said before anyone could interrupt. "And maybe organize a fundraising campaign for research and treatment."

"I think it's a fantastic idea," Coach said. "We could use our platform to make a real impact on the community."

Charles's smile was broad and real. "Love the idea. We can coordinate with the hospital to schedule the visit and set up the fundraising campaign. It will take us about a week to coordinate everything."

“Count me in,” Maestro said. “My aunt beat breast cancer, so this cause is close to my heart.”

Coach Mack’s nod of approval sent a wave of satisfaction through me. “That’s the spirit. Let’s show our support and make a difference.”

“Thanks guys,” I couldn’t stop the smile spreading across my face. “Together, we can show that we’re more than just a hockey team.”

Xander’s grin mirrored my own. “I’m honored to be a part of this team.”

A week after Charles gave his word, we found ourselves walking along the sterile halls of Summitview General Hospital. The smell of antiseptic hung in the air as hospital staff guided us toward the oncology ward. A knot tightened in my stomach, memories of my mother’s battle with breast cancer surfacing.

We split up to meet different patients, Xander and I pairing up. We spent the afternoon with patients who were fighting their own war against breast cancer. With each autograph signed, every photo taken, and each conversation shared, I felt a humbling sense of admiration for these warriors.

Later that day, we met Sarah – alone in her room and lost in thought as she gazed out the window. She looked at us, a flicker of recognition and surprise crossing her face.

“Hi, I’m Ry, and this is Xander,” I said gently, trying to break the ice. “We’re with the Grizzlies.”

Sarah managed a small smile. “I know who you are. My kids are big fans.”

I could feel the lump in my throat grow when she mentioned her children.

"How old are your kids?" Xander asked, his voice warm and inviting.

"I have a six-year-old and a nine-year-old."

My heart clenched at her words. "When I was eight, my mom got her diagnosis." Clearing my throat, I continued, "One of her biggest fears was leaving me behind when I wasn't old enough to fend for myself."

Sarah's eyes filled with tears. "That's my biggest fear, too. I don't want them to grow up without their mother."

Xander stepped closer by my side, and I could feel his eyes on me. He was a sentry, protective, making sure I was doing okay.

"You're incredibly brave, Sarah," I said. "It's obvious how much you love your kids. That love is a powerful thing – it gives strength, even in the darkest times."

She nodded, wiping away a tear. "I try to stay strong for them, but it's hard. Sometimes I feel like I'm failing them."

"You're not failing them," I said firmly. "You're fighting. That's the most courageous thing you can do. And it's okay to lean on others when you need to."

We spent the next half an hour talking with Sarah. Xander made her laugh with stories of his years playing high school and college hockey, and I shared more about my mom's journey and how she found strength in the love and support around her.

I'd always been guarded about my mother's battle, but today I'd peeled back the layers for Xander and all the patients we visited to see. When you were a scared child not understanding exactly what was wrong with your mom, but knowing it was serious enough that her life was at risk, you braced... protected yourself from feeling

the pain. That didn't mean that every time I woke up in the morning, I wasn't scared that Mom had passed during the night. It didn't mean that every day when I got home from school I wasn't afraid to hear she'd passed. I was living in two worlds: one in which I went to school, performed well during hockey games, and tried to be a good kid so I wouldn't cause added problems for my parents, and in the other, I feared for my mom's life.

My mind flashed back to my mother's battle with breast cancer – her strength, her determination... but also the way our neighbors stepped up for the family. Taking turns babysitting me while Dad took Mom for treatments or visited her at the hospital. Bringing home-cooked meals. The list could go on. The memories of those difficult years would never fade.

Seeing Sarah's struggle brought back so many memories, but it also reminded me of the strength and resilience that came from love and support.

Yet I was happy ConMan and LoLo weren't born during that traumatic period in our family's life. Glad that the mom they knew was healthy and happy and wholly there for them.

I drew in a shaky breath and brought myself back to the present.

When we were leaving, Sarah took my hand. "Thank you, Ry. Thank you for reminding me that I'm not alone."

I squeezed her hand gently. "You're never alone, Sarah."

Xander glanced at me as we walked down the corridor. "You okay?"

I nodded, though my mind was still heavy. "Yeah, just... thinking there's still so much to do in this fight against the disease."

He gave me a small, understanding smile. "You're making a difference, Bennett. More than you know."

I returned his smile, feeling a warmth spread through me.

Back at the team lounge, I perched on the edge of a worn leather couch.

Coach Mack stood at the center to address us about our visit. "Thanks for showing up." His eyes scanned the room. "Would anyone like to share their thoughts?"

Xander, who was sitting next to me, said, "Seeing how much our visit meant to those patients... it really puts things into perspective."

Maestro nodded in agreement with Xander, his expression solemn. He shared about seeing his aunt struggle through her illness, and how today reminded him why supporting these initiatives was important.

Tank chimed in thoughtfully after Maestro finished speaking. "The kids especially... It hit me hard," he confessed quietly. "Some of them are scared their loved ones won't make it. I wish no child had to bear that burden."

Jester took over the conversation then, looking serious for once. "I didn't realize men could get breast cancer too," he admitted sheepishly before suggesting that we include that fact in our awareness efforts.

The room filled with nods of agreement.

Not long after, the others left to get ready for practice, leaving Xander and me behind. I was emotionally drained.

I stood there, exhausted. Xander stepped closer, standing directly in front of me. I

stared at him, not able to decipher the expression in his eyes. I didn't know what he read in mine, but one of his arms rose and his hand cradled the back of my head. I drew in a shaky breath and pressed my head to his shoulder. His other hand went around my shoulders. And as if my body had a mind of its own, I leaned into him. We stood like that for what seemed like an eternity.

It was a draining day spent visiting cancer patients, but somehow, standing here with Xander, leaning into his embrace made it all worth it.

Too soon, we slowly drew apart, but not before sharing a look – one that said more than any words ever could.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Xander

The day after our visit to the oncology ward, I found myself at an extravagant charity event, surrounded by the elite class who donated large sums to various causes. These events were always the same – glittering chandeliers, champagne flutes, and forced smiles. I was there because pretending to dote on their only child made Ronald and Judy Harrison – a.k.a. my parents – look good. Despite being an adult living on my own, I still attended when they asked. Some part of me still longed for their unconditional love and support, though I knew it was a fool's hope.

As I sat at our table, feigning interest in the endless small talk, my mind wandered back to yesterday. Meeting those patients had been exhausting, but it had also stirred something deep inside me.

And then there was Bennett.

His vulnerability stirred something in me. My hands had reached out instinctively to him. He'd moved closer to me. I was sure it was done subconsciously because Bennett wasn't the kind of guy who showed any weaknesses if he could help it. I could still feel the weight of his head on my shoulder, the way he leaned into my touch.

My father, engrossed in conversation with a local politician, barely noticed when I slipped my phone out of my pocket. I opened the team's group chat and scrolled through the contacts until I found Bennett's number. Without overthinking it, I typed a message.

Me:Hey, Bennett. How you doing?

I tapped my foot, waiting for a response. The room buzzed with conversations about philanthropy and whatever else, but all I could think about was whether Bennett would reply.

It took a good ten minutes before my phone vibrated with a message.

Grumpleberry:Skating. You?

His response made me smile. Typical Bennett.

Me:At some fancy donor event for my parents. Boring as hell. Want some company?

There was a pause, and I imagined Bennett frowning at his phone, debating whether to let me join him.

Grumpleberry:If you can stand the cold, sure.

I chuckled, pocketing my phone. My parents were deep in conversation with other guests, their attention far from me. Slipping away from the table, I made my way out of the venue and headed to the rink – I always kept clean gear in my car.

When I arrived, the cold air was a welcome relief from the stifling opulence of the event. I spotted Bennett skating alone, his movements fluid and powerful. He saw me and skated over, his expression a mix of curiosity and irritation.

”Couldn’t stand the event, huh?” he said, a hint of a smirk on his lips.

I shrugged. ”I’d rather be here.”

The cold air bit my cheeks as Ry and I glided on the ice, our blades cutting through the frosty surface. The rhythm we fell into was comfortable and familiar. We needed no words, just the silent understanding that passed between us.

I could hear the soft whisper of our blades against the ice, a sound as soothing to me as a lullaby. The smell of the chilled air plus the faint scent of Ry's cologne, an earthy aroma that somehow seemed to fit him perfectly.

His movements were fluid and graceful; mine more forceful. I could feel my muscles straining with each push off from the ice, my breath fogging up in front of me with every exhale.

We began our drills then – weaving around makeshift pylons, racing each other from one end of the rink to the other. Despite our camaraderie, there was always an undercurrent of competition between us – it was part of what made us who we were.

Ry pulled ahead in one race, his laughter echoing across the rink. "Bet you can't catch me," he taunted without looking back.

A grin spread across my face as I pushed off harder from the ice. Oh yeah? "Watch me." A surge of adrenaline propelled me forward faster than before.

Bennett won.

As we slowed to a stop, panting and laughing, I caught Bennett's eye. "How about we grab some hot chocolate? There's a café not far from here."

Bennett looked at me, considering. "Alright, but you're buying."

We changed out of our gear and headed out into the night. The rink sat on the edge of town, surrounded by quiet streets and softly glowing streetlights. The air was cool,

with a hint of autumn lingering. The stars peeked through the clouds, casting a gentle light over the quiet streets.

The walk to the café was filled with a comfortable silence. Our breath puffed out in little clouds as we talked, and our footsteps echoed on the quiet sidewalk. The town was calm and peaceful, a stark contrast to the event I'd left behind.

"So, what's it like hobnobbing with the elite?" Bennett asked, his tone teasing.

I rolled my eyes. "About as fun as a root canal. They only care about appearances and donations, not about the actual impact. Like their recent donation to Pacific Crest University—more about the name on the building than the students inside."

Bennett smirked. "Sounds like a blast."

"Yeah, a real thrill," I said sarcastically, nudging him with my shoulder. "What about you? How do you usually spend your days off?"

"Mostly skating or working out. Keeps me focused," Bennett replied, his tone a bit more serious. "I like the routine."

As we walked, the conversation flowed easily.

We settled into a cozy corner of the café, a charming little spot with rustic wooden tables and shelves lined with books and trinkets. Soft yellow light from hanging lamps bathed the room in a warm glow. The hum of quiet conversations and the clinking of cups created a comforting backdrop.

"So, tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't know from watching you on the ice," I said, leaning back in my chair.

Bennett looked thoughtful for a moment. "I used to play the piano. My mom taught me when I was a kid."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "Do you still play?"

He shook his head. "Not really. After she got sick, it was hard to keep up with it. But sometimes I miss it."

"That's a shame," I said, truly interested. "Maybe you should try picking it up again. It might be a good way to unwind."

"Maybe," Bennett said, a small smile playing on his lips. "What about you? Any hidden talents?"

I laughed. "Not really hidden, but I love music. Used to play guitar in a band during high school. It was nothing serious, just for fun."

Bennett's eyes lit up with curiosity. "Do you still play?"

"Yeah, when I have the time. It's a great way to relax and forget about everything else." A thought crossed my mind. "Well, that's something we have in common; we played an instrument but either life or hockey got in the way."

Bennett nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

We continued talking about our childhoods. I learned that Bennett had a soft spot for fishing and that he found solace in the simplicity of routine and solitude. In turn, I shared my love for traveling and how I'd always wanted to see the Caribbean, particularly Antigua and Barbuda. My best friend in high school was from the island country and boasted that it was only 108 square miles but had 365 beaches, one for every day of the year.

As the night wore on, I realized just how much I enjoyed Bennett's company. Beneath his gruff exterior was a thoughtful, passionate person who cared deeply about the people in his life. It was a side of him that I felt privileged to see.

The café began to empty out, and we eventually decided it was time to head back. As we stepped outside, the cool night air hit us, but I felt a warmth inside that had nothing to do with the hot chocolate.

"Thanks for tonight," Bennett said as we walked back to the rink.

"Anytime," I replied, smiling at him. "I had a great time."

He glanced at me, a hint of his usual grumpiness returning. "Yeah, well, don't expect to make a habit of it."

I chuckled. "Wouldn't dream of it."

We stopped in front of the rink, the lights casting long shadows on the pavement. To be honest, I wasn't ready for the night to be over.

"See you tomorrow?"

He rolled his eyes but couldn't hide a small smile. "Yeah, yeah. See you tomorrow."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

I woke up to the gentle chirping of birds outside my window. Still half asleep, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand to check the time. A message from Xander caught my eye. Timestamp – 6:42.

Sunshine:Why do cows have hooves instead of feet? Because they lactose! *laughing emoji*

I rolled my eyes, a smirk tugging at my lips. Is he really cracking puns this early in the morning? Tapping the screen, I read my reply before hitting send.

Me:You're ridiculous. It's too early for bad jokes.

Sunshine:Just thought I'd brighten your morning, Grumpleberry.

I snorted softly, typing out a quick retort.

Me:Congrats, you succeeded in being annoying.

Sunshine:What are your plans this morning?

A sliver of sky peeked through a gap in my curtains; its blue hue was clear and bright. My weather app confirmed what I suspected – clear skies and mild temperatures.

Me:The weather's perfect for fishing.

There was a brief pause before his message came through.

Sunshine:Never been fishing before. But I've eaten expensive fish, does that count?

My heart pounded slightly faster as I typed out a reply.

Me:Wanna come along? I'll show you how it's done.

Where did that come from?

Sunshine:Sure! When and where?

Me:Meet me at my apartment in an hour. I'll send you the location.

I quickly sent him my address and directions to my apartment building.

Sunshine:On my way!

A strange flutter stirred inside my rib cage, a sensation I couldn't quite pin down. The thought of Xander swinging by my place had somehow triggered it, yet I was at a loss to understand why.

After a quick breakfast, I gathered my fishing gear from the closet. A couple of rods, a tackle box, and a cooler were all I needed.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Xander.

Sunshine:Almost there. See you in 10.

There I stood, on my own porch, the thrum of expectation pulsing through my veins like a silent drumbeat, waiting for Xander.

His car pulled up and he rolled down the window and grinned at me, his face lighting up with the kind of joy you’d expect from a child on Christmas morning.

“Ready for my fishing lesson, Grumpleberry?”

“Get out and help me load this stuff, Sunshine.”

As he made his way towards my apartment, I found myself studying him with an intensity that surprised me. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen Xander outside the rink, away from our team – but it felt different this time. As if I was truly seeing Xander the man, not just Xander the teammate or Xander the hockey player.

At over six feet tall and built like a tank, there was no denying that Xander was good-looking. Yet now, as he strode towards me with an easy confidence that radiated off him in waves, a strange sensation stirred within me, akin to how my body reacted when I saw a woman whose beauty took my breath away.

As he drew closer still, I could make out his eyes – a striking blue that pierced right through me. And when he smiled at me – genuinely smiled at me – his dimples popped and everything else fell away. My gaze dropped involuntarily to the cleft in his chin – it was absurd how much attention I was paying it.

In that moment, it felt as though I was truly seeing him for the first time all over again.

Together, Xander and I loaded the gear into my car. The rods slid snugly into place, angled diagonally across the back seats, while the cooler and other essentials found their spot in the trunk.

“Let’s hit the road.” My voice was unintentionally gruff.

“Sounds good.”

As we drove, the scenery changed from urban sprawl to serene countryside. Tall trees lined the road, their leaves turning subtle shades of yellow and brown mixed with the evergreen foliage, typical of a Los Angeles autumn. We arrived at a secluded lake, surrounded by nature’s quiet beauty. The water lay still, mirroring the clear blue sky above. It was a peaceful spot, far removed from the noise and bustle of the city.

Xander looked around, taking in the scenery. “It’s beautiful.”

“My favorite spot,” I said, taking out the fishing gear.

We set up our gear near the shore.

As I guided his grip on the fishing rod, our fingers brushed, sending a jolt through me. Then, as I showed him how to bait the hook with a plastic worm, his hand moved even closer to mine and there was that zing again, making me pull back slightly, confused by the sensation.

“You okay?” Worry etched lines on Xander’s forehead.

“Yeah, just making sure you don’t mess this up.” My voice cut through the air, with a harsher edge than I intended. “Alright, let’s see if you can catch something.”

Laughter bubbled out of him then. “Don’t worry, sensei. I’ll be a good student.” Xander cast out his line with all the grace of a newborn deer. I watched, amused. “So, when should I expect to catch my first fish?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Patience, Sunshine. Could be five minutes, could be an hour. Just gotta wait and see.”

Xander grinned, settling in. "Guess I'll have to practice my zen then."

He shared stories from his childhood, about begging his dad to take him fishing and the disappointment when it never happened.

"He never had the time," he said, a hint of sadness in his voice. "Eventually, I just stopped asking."

"Well, you're here now." The words were an attempt to lighten the mood. "And you're not doing too bad for a first-timer."

His face split into a grin that reached his eyes. "Thanks."

I felt that zing again, but I tried to ignore it. It's the fishing. But ignoring him was like trying to deny the existence of gravity – impossible given the way his smile seemed brighter than the sun, his eyes lit up when he laughed, or he ran his fingers absent-mindedly through his hair when he was thinking.

About an hour later, Xander got a bite. He glanced my way, eyes wide, silently pleading for help.

"Easy now," I said, stepping closer. "Keep the line taut. Reel it in slowly, don't rush it."

He fumbled with the rod, struggling to follow my directions. The fish thrashed in the water, and despite Xander's best efforts, it slipped away. He let out a frustrated sigh but quickly shrugged it off with an easy grin. "Well, that was fun. I almost had it."

I shook my head at him, warmth spreading across my face in a small smile. "Nice try, but you'll get it next time."

”Do you think fish can sense fear? Because I’m pretty sure that one did.”

Xander’s retort was so unexpected, it took me by surprise. Involuntarily, I threw my head back and burst into laughter. I didn’t peg him as someone who’d admit how frightened he was, but to do it in such an adorable way was even more unexpected.

Wait! What?!

Adorable?

There were only two people in my entire life I’d ever called adorable, and they were my siblings: Connor and Chloe when they were babies.

As my laughter subsided and I dropped my gaze, it landed on Xander’s. His eyes were locked onto me intently. It was almost as if my laughter had taken him by surprise and captivated him in that moment.

A nibble at my bait brought my attention back to the reason why we were there. As I expertly reeled in the catch, I offered more guidance for Xander’s benefit: ”Watch closely... Keep your line tight but not too tight... Let the fish tire itself out.” My eyes flicked towards him periodically to ensure he was paying attention.

Another bite came soon enough for Xander and despite still fumbling with the rod, there was determination etched on his face. Exhaling, I moved behind him, my hands covering his on the rod to guide him. My voice dropped lower as I said, ”Like this...” The closeness sent a shiver down my spine – an unexpected reaction that left me momentarily breathless.

As the fish broke the surface, Xander’s excitement was infectious, and despite myself, I found a smile on my lips even as my heart pounded against my ribs and goosebumps prickled over my skin from our close contact.

“Look at that,” he said, holding up the fish in wonder. “My first catch.”

Retreating quickly to regain my composure, I muttered, “Yeah, yeah. Good job.” And immediately felt bad about my under-whelming response. “Not bad for a beginner.” It was hard to ignore the strange warmth I felt at his excitement.

His smile lit up his face. “Thanks, Ry.”

That simple gratitude coupled with him using the derivative of my first name for the first time caused a strange flutter in my stomach.

“Let’s focus on catching some more.”

We caught several more fish – mostly bluegill and sunfish. I managed to snag a decent-sized bass, and Xander got a crappie that he was particularly proud of.

By the end of the day, we had a good haul and decided to keep a few for dinner. Xander was beaming, clearly enjoying the experience despite his earlier struggles.

We teased each other, yet beneath it all, there was an undeniable connection growing between us – one that left me feeling both excited and confused.

As we settled by the water’s edge, I handed Xander a small knife and a fish, instructing him on the art of descaling.

“Alright, Sunshine, pay attention. This is where the real work begins.”

“Got it, Grumpleberry.”

His initial attempts were clumsy – more so than I’d expected – but there was something infectious about his enthusiasm. Each time he met with a particularly

slimy or slippery patch on the fish, his expressions ranged from shocked to disgusted and back again. It was all I could do not to burst into laughter.

"You're doing great," I offered, trying to stifle my laughter.

He shot me a mock glare. "Easy for you to say. You're not the one getting fish guts all over your hands."

I shrugged, unable to hide my smirk. "Comes with the territory, Sunshine. You'll get used to it."

Despite his initial reservations, Xander proved to be a quick learner, his movements becoming more confident with each scaled fish. Even as he wrinkled his nose at the messier parts, his determination never wavered.

As we worked side by side, the sun cast a warm glow over us, and the gentle lapping of the water provided a soothing backdrop. I found myself stealing glances at Xander when he wasn't looking, noticing the way his brow furrowed in concentration and the infectious laughter that bubbled out of him whenever I teased him.

I shook my head, trying to push aside the unfamiliar flutter. Focus, Bennett. Just focus on teaching him how to descale a damn fish.

But no matter how hard I tried to ignore it, I couldn't shake the awareness of his presence beside me, the warmth of his smile, or the way his laughter did stupid things to the organ in my chest.

And as the sun dipped below the horizon and we gathered up our freshly descaled fish, a sense of contentment settled over me.

Xander

"I can't wait for us to get started on the fillet," I said, stepping into Ry's apartment. Ry's apartment? Holy heck! When did I start referring to Bennett as Ry?

"Don't get too excited; it's just fish." Ry grumbled, though I could see the hint of a smile.

I took a moment to look around, taking in Ry's place. It was modest and meticulously tidy. The living room was small, furnished with a worn but comfortable-looking couch and a couple of mismatched chairs, facing a TV mounted on the wall. Beneath it was a shelf with a gaming console and a few games. A simple coffee table sat in the center, stacked neatly with hockey magazines and a remote control. The walls were adorned with a few framed photos – most of them of Ry on the ice, but a couple of what looked like family photos as well.

The kitchen was equally simple but functional. The counters were clean, with just a coffee maker, a toaster, and a few other essentials on display. A small dining table with two chairs stood by the window, which looked out onto the apartment complex's parking lot.

"Nice place," I said, meaning it. It felt lived-in and comfortable.

"Yeah, well, it's not much, but it's home." There was a hint of modest pride in his voice. "Now, are you gonna help with these vegetables, or are you just here to admire the decor?"

I chuckled, moving to the sink. "I'm here to help, of course. But seriously, it's nice. Suits you."

Ry grunted in response, but I could tell he appreciated the compliment.

On a whim, I'd sent the pun about cows and hooves and lactose that morning. I was still feeling a high from skating with him the night before – just the two of us – and then spending more time together talking about everything and nothing at the café. I never thought that that would lead to me having one of the best days of my life.

Ry's invitation to go fishing with him must have been as much of a surprise to him as it was to me. But I wasn't complaining. I never expected to enjoy fishing the way I did, and wished I'd learned how to do it sooner. Thanks, Ronald! I mentally berated my dad. But then again, it is what it is. No use regretting the relationship I'd had with my dad – well, both parents, actually – because I couldn't change a thing about it.

I was determined to learn as much as I could from Ry, both on and off the ice. His focused expression softened into a small smile as he glanced over at me, and for a moment, warmth spread through me that had nothing to do with the heat of the kitchen.

Together, we chopped broccoli, carrots, and green beans, chatting easily as we worked. Ry showed me how to cut them up properly, his hands moving with the same confidence and precision he had on the ice. I watched him, my eyes tracing the veins in his forearms as he worked.

"You paying attention, or just daydreaming over there?" Bennett's voice pulled me back to the task at hand.

"I'm paying attention," I said, shaking off my distraction. "Just trying to learn from the master."

”Good,” he grumbled, though there was a warmth in his eyes that belied his tone.

Once the vegetables were steaming, we turned our attention to the fish. Ry demonstrated how to fillet it, guiding my hands with his own. The touch sent a jolt through me, making me hyper-aware of every brush of his fingers against mine.

We chatted easily as we worked. He shared stories about the team over the years, and I found myself laughing at his dry humor and quick wit. A sense of contentment washed over me. Cooking with Ry felt natural, effortless, like we’d been doing it for years. That didn’t stop me from taking in the way his brow furrowed in concentration as he chopped the vegetables, or the strength in his arms, the way his muscles flexed with each motion of the knife. These were things I’d never paid attention to before – not in Ry, not in anyone.

And then there was his smile – rare, almost shy, but undeniably genuine. Warmth spread through me at the sight of it. It was moments like these that made me appreciate him even more, made me realize just how much he was coming to mean to me.

But it wasn’t just Ry’s actions that caught my attention. In the dim light of the kitchen, I noticed the subtle shades of brown in his hair, the way they caught the light and shimmered with hidden depths. It was a small detail, but it made me see him in a new light, made me appreciate the complexity and depth of his character.

As we sat down to enjoy the meal we had prepared together, I was grateful for this unexpected connection, for the opportunity to see Ry in a different light and to appreciate all the little things that made him who he was.

Spending the entire day with Ry had been beyond my expectations. It gave me the opportunity to see so much of him off the ice and to notice things I never did before.

But is that all, though? Isn't there an underlying tension between us? A feeling that I've never experienced with any person before?

After dinner and doing the dishes, we moved to the porch, the cool night air wrapping around us.

"Thanks for today," I said, breaking the comfortable silence. "I learned a lot and had a really great time."

"Me too. You weren't too bad for a rookie."

"High praise coming from you."

At some point, my eyes started to droop. "I should probably head home," I said, covering my mouth to stifle a yawn.

"You can crash on the couch," Ry offered, his eyes widening slightly as if he couldn't believe he'd just invited me to stay. After a moment of what seemed like an internal struggle, he added, "It's late."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

I nodded, too tired to argue, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted between us today. There was a new awareness between us, a connection that I hadn't felt before. It confused me, but it also felt... right.

Bennett

A few days had passed since our fishing trip and the night Xander crashed on my couch. Since then, things had been... different. Not in a bad way, but there was a subtle shift in our dynamic, an underlying tension between us that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

The team was still on our winning streak. Tomorrow we'd be heading out to face St. Louis. Spirits were high, each player pushing their limits, sweat dripping off brows onto the icy rink beneath.

Yet amidst my passion for the game, I couldn't stop thinking about Xander. I was like a moth drawn to light. It was a distraction that left me confused.

I've always been laser-focused on two things: hockey and family. This was new territory for me, my heart pounding at the mere thought of him, my stomach churning with a cocktail of emotions I couldn't figure out.

Was this newfound preoccupation something I wanted? My mind grappled with it even as my heart made its decision.

Xander was the most complicated, uncomplicated person I'd ever met. Coming from old money, he could have easily embodied the arrogance and narcissism often associated with the elite, but he was the exact opposite. Despite being college educated, he approached everything with a childlike wonder, even something as simple as learning how to fillet fish! His innocence was a refreshing contrast to a world tainted by hate, selfishness, and greed. Yet, along with the confusion swirling

within me, there was an unexpected joy that bubbled up whenever he crossed my mind.

The shrill cry of Coach's whistle marked the end of practice, and a collective sigh of relief swept through the rink. The ice surface, previously a battleground of focus and determination, transformed into a playground as my teammates' energy morphed from intense to jovial as they fooled around. Jester and Maestro were the first to break formation, their blades carving erratic paths in the ice as they chased each other around the rink. Tank was next, his hulking frame attempting trick shots.

Xander skated up to me with a grin plastered across his face, "Come on, Grumpleberry, have some fun."

Apparently his taunt was all the urging I needed.

I found myself drawn into their antics, an unfamiliar sensation bubbling up inside me – laughter. It was an odd feeling; usually I'd remain on the sidelines after practice, indulging in solitary drills while others goofed around. But today was different.

"You call that a slapshot?" Xander's words were playful jabs.

My retort came out quicker than I expected, "Pretty big talk for a guy who nearly fell over on his last shot." I was sure the grin on my face matched Xander's.

In response, he lunged at me, trying to knock the puck away. A sudden burst of energy propelled me forward as I dodged him and took off across the ice. Xander was right behind me; our chase weaving through Jester, Maestro and Tank, who'd stopped their frolicking on the ice and looked on with surprise etched onto their faces.

My heart pounded against my chest as laughter echoed off the arena walls – it was exhilarating! Attempting to evade Xander by maneuvering around the arena proved

futile; he was faster than anticipated. We ended up standing there panting heavily, grinning like two fools caught in mischief.

"I guess I won this round," Xander said confidently, his face so close I could feel his warm breath against my skin.

"Yeah, yeah... Beginner's luck," I replied dismissively but the smile stayed on my face.

Then confusion washed over me as I skated away; this wasn't like me. Why did I feel happy and lighter than I had in a long time?

When the guys left, Xander and I remained on the rink. His devilish grin flashed in my direction before he lunged, swiping my hockey stick – my puck sniper – from my hands. The audacity! My focus had slipped for a mere second, and he'd seized his chance.

But I wasn't one to be outdone. I dove for my stolen property. His laughter echoed through the arena. He held my stick hostage behind his back, challenging me with gleaming eyes.

Not to be deterred, I closed in on him. A rush of adrenaline surged through me like an electric current, igniting every nerve ending. My hand found its way around his lean waist while my other arm locked him against me.

"Hand it over, Sunshine."

The scent of his cologne and sweat filled my senses – it was unmistakably Xander – an intoxicating blend that made my heart pound harder against my chest. Our playful scuffle continued as we both wrestled for control over the stick.

I could see every detail of his face – the way his eyes sparkled with mischief, the curve of his lips, the way his hair fell slightly over his forehead. My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt a pull, a magnetic force drawing me closer to him.

Then everything stilled.

His laughter evaporated into thin air and his body tensed against mine. His breath hitched audibly in his throat. His lips parted slightly while his wide eyes bore into mine – intense and unreadable.

My heart tripped over itself in response to this sudden shift – the silence was deafening now. The feel of Xander pressed against me became all too apparent; every angle and curve of his body matched perfectly against mine.

A lump formed in my throat that I forced down with difficulty as heat spread through me like wildfire – spreading from my chest outwards, reaching every corner of my body. The world disappeared as I became hyper-aware of the man in my arms and the stick that lay forgotten between us.

A strange, exhilarating thrill coursed through my veins, a sensation that was entirely new. I'd never responded like this to anyone before. My heartbeat quickened, thudding against my ribs as if trying to leap out of my chest.

My pants felt suddenly tighter, the fabric straining against the unexpected hardness, undeniable proof of my body's reaction to him. A hot flush crept up my neck and spread across my cheeks.

“Ry...” Xander's voice was soft, almost a whisper, and it sent a wave of tingles through me.

Panic surged through me. What the hell was I doing? This was Xander, my teammate,

my friend. I couldn't – shouldn't – be feeling this way. I stepped back abruptly, breaking the moment.

"I... I gotta go." My voice sounded strange to my own ears.

"Ry, wait–"

I was already moving, gliding swiftly.

I didn't stop until I was outside, the cool air hitting me like a slap in the face. I leaned against the wall, trying to catch my breath and calm the storm of emotions raging inside me. What is happening to me? Why am I suddenly feeling things I've never felt before?

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. We had a game to focus on. I needed to push these confusing feelings aside and concentrate on what was important.

Xander

The day after the almost-kiss with Ry, my mind was a whirlpool. Sleep? Forget it. My mind kept replaying the moment over and over again. What had happened between us wasn't clear, but I knew it was significant.

The thing about me was that I'd always known when someone was attractive, regardless of gender. I could appreciate their looks, their charisma, but it never went beyond that. I'd never felt the flutter of excitement, the goosebumps, or the sense of awareness that I felt with Ry. It wasn't just about him being handsome; it was about the little things – the way he furrowed his brow in concentration, his soft smile when he thought I wasn't looking, the warmth of his presence.

I'd never had this kind of reaction to anyone before. It wasn't that I didn't understand attraction. I knew what it was supposed to feel like. I'd just never felt it. Sure, I'd had urges, like anyone else. I'd even self-pleasured, but it was never about someone else. It was just a physical need, not a longing or desire directed at a person. While my teammates were busy hooking up after games, I was more interested in going over the match footage.

With Ry, it was different. It wasn't just physical; it was deeper. It started when I was with him at the oncology ward, his guard down, his vulnerability laid bare. Skating together that night, sharing hot chocolate at the café, fishing, and then making dinner – I was seeing and feeling things I hadn't before.

I wanted – needed – to know what made him tick. What was the significance of the tattoos on his pecs? Why those flowers and a clock with a date on it? What was his

love language?

It wasn't about needing to put a label on it. I was just me, feeling something new and unexpected. Maybe it was about finding the right person, the right connection. Ry made me see things in a way I hadn't before, and maybe that was enough.

Now, on the plane heading to St. Louis, I hoped to find some clarity, to figure out if Ry felt the shift in our relationship like I did. I know, I know... this wasn't the time or place for a heavy conversation. But I was like a kid in a candy store, eager to discover if Ry was open to talking things out. Was it just wishful thinking? Ry was so guarded, and I feared he might retreat back into his shell.

When Ry boarded the plane, I noticed the dark circles around his eyes, the telltale signs of a sleepless night. Usually impeccably dressed, he was vaguely disheveled, not in an obvious way, but enough to catch my attention. His appearance mirrored my own restless state. For a moment, hope flickered within me. Maybe we were both struggling with the same thoughts and feelings. Maybe we could find some common ground.

As he walked down the aisle, my heart raced. I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way he kept his gaze firmly fixed on anything but me. Still, I hoped he would sit next to me, that we could talk and sort through whatever was happening between us. But he approached, and my heart sank when he bypassed my row without a second glance, heading straight for Maestro's aisle.

I swung my head around, watching him take a seat next to our teammate. My eyes met Maestro's, who raised an eyebrow in a quizzical look. I forced a smile, but it was hollow. The disappointment gnawed at me, an ache deep in my chest.

I tried to stay optimistic, thinking that maybe Ry would have a change of heart by the time we got to the hotel in St. Louis. Maybe he just needed some time to process

everything. But it was hard to hold onto that hope when he seemed so determined to avoid me.

Throughout the flight, I kept glancing over at Ry and Maestro, trying to catch any sign that Ry might be willing to talk. He never looked my way. but he was engrossed in conversation with Maestro. It felt like a punch to the gut, and I struggled to keep my emotions in check.

By the time we landed in St. Louis, my resolve was starting to waver. I wanted to believe that we could work things out, but the more Ry distanced himself, the more uncertain I became. Still, I held onto a sliver of hope that maybe, just maybe, we could find a way to bridge the gap between us.

When we finally landed and reached the hotel, I caught up with him. We were roommates, after all. This was my chance to talk things through, to figure out what was going on between us.

"Hey, Ry," I said as we entered our room, my voice barely above a whisper. "Can we talk?"

He barely glanced at me, busying himself with his bag. "Not now, Xander. I'm tired."

I felt a pang of hurt at his dismissive tone. "It's important."

He turned to face me, his expression unreadable. "We need to focus on the game tomorrow. We can talk later."

But later never came. He kept himself busy, avoiding any meaningful conversation. That night, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, feeling a growing sense of unease. The connection we'd shared seemed to have shattered overnight.

The next day, our team hit the ice against St. Louis, but our performance was dismal. The tension from the previous day carried over, and it showed. We barely won, 2-1. It was a win, but not a good one; we played badly. I could feel the frustration and disappointment hanging heavy in the locker room.

Despite the win, I tried to find a moment to talk to Ry, but he brushed me off again. The coldness in his demeanor cut deep, leaving me questioning everything. Why was he pushing me away without giving us a chance to talk things out?

We had another game the following day, and things didn't improve. Ry was distant, and our team's performance suffered. We lost. 3-0. And the winning streak that had brought us so much joy and camaraderie had come to a sudden, crashing halt. Coach was furious. Not because of the loss per se, but because we made the silliest of mistakes on the ice.

As we packed up to leave St. Louis, I couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment and confusion. Ry's coldness was a barrier between us, and I didn't know how to break through. The connection we'd started to build was fragile, and I was terrified it would shatter completely.

Back on the plane, I stared out the window, lost in thought. The thrill of our almost-kiss had turned into a painful memory, overshadowed by the distance Ry had placed between us. A storm of emotions was swirling inside me. I wanted to fix things, to find a way back to the easy camaraderie we'd had. But with Ry shutting me out, I didn't know where to start.

The plane touched down in LA, exhaustion etching deep lines into everyone's faces. Ry looked especially worn out, his usual energy replaced with a muted tension. There was no doubt that as captain of the team, he carried the weight of our defeat twofold.

Ry wasn't the only one I'd noticed during the flight. Coach had been unusually quiet,

a stern look on his face as he reviewed the game footage on his tablet. As we disembarked and headed towards the buses waiting to take us home, he finally addressed us.

“Everyone, straight to the rink. We need to debrief and work this out now.”

There were a few groans, but no one argued. We all knew we hadn’t been playing our best, and Coach’s decision, while harsh, wasn’t entirely unexpected.

As we filed onto the buses, I glanced at Ry, hoping for some acknowledgment, some sign that we could talk about what had happened between us. But he avoided my gaze, sitting next to Maestro again, his body language closed off and distant.

When we arrived at the rink, we were ushered straight into the locker room. Coach wasted no time, launching into a critique of our performance. His words were sharp but fair, pointing out where we’d gone wrong and what needed to be fixed.

“We’re better than this,” he said, his voice resounding in the silence. “You’re better than this. I expect each of you to show up and prove that in our next game.”

After the meeting, we were given a choice: stay for an optional light practice or head home to rest and recover. Most of the team opted to stay, not wanting to let the sting of defeat linger longer than necessary.

I hung out near the entrance of the locker room, watching Ry as he gathered his gear. My heart ached with the need to bridge the distance between us, but I didn’t know how.

“Ry, can we talk?”

He looked up, his expression guarded. “Not now, Xander. I need to focus.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Yeah, okay. I understand.”

He walked away, and the gap between us felt wider than ever.

I turned my attention to the ice, deciding to join the optional practice. Skating laps and shooting pucks helped clear my mind, the familiar rhythm of the game grounding me. But no matter how hard I tried to focus, thoughts of Ry kept creeping in – a constant undercurrent of confusion and longing.

Bennett

He left.

Two days after we got home from St. Louis, I found out Xander was called up to the Newark Eagles. It was a wake-up call in more ways than one. The Eagles needed some depth due to roster issues – injuries and a few suspensions had left them shorthanded, and they saw potential in Xander to fill the gap.

In hockey, the only constant was change. There was a revolving door of players getting called up, sent down, traded, and injured. Despite knowing this, Xander's absence hit me hard. He'd only be gone for a week, but the news left me dazed and struggling to process the sudden change.

I was happy for him. Every player's dream is to make it to the NAPH. More often than not, we don't make it past the PHL. Xander was young, undeniably talented, and had heart. It was the right combination to make it in the majors, so his getting this opportunity wasn't a surprise.

But I couldn't shake the conflict raging inside me. While I was thrilled for his success, I also felt an ache, a sense of loss that I couldn't ignore. We hadn't spoken since we'd almost kissed, and now he was gone, leaving me with my unresolved feelings.

I felt a sharp pang of guilt. I'd treated Xander poorly, ignoring him and pushing him away when he tried to reach out. And now, he was gone, even if only temporarily. Being the last to know about his departure stung deeply. I'd been so wrapped up in

my own shit that I'd neglected the one person outside of my family who could draw me out of my own head, make me laugh, bring the best out of me.

The truth was, I was terrified. The last thing I needed at 32 was a sexual identity crisis. My existence, up until then, was like a well-organized playbook – everything in its place, no surprises. Then Xander happened, like a sudden hit that sent everything flying off balance.

I'd always known myself – or so I thought. But now? It felt like someone had pulled the rink out from under me while I wasn't looking. The man staring back seemed to be a stranger.

Each interaction with Xander was like trying to skate through traffic – it just didn't fit into the “me” narrative I'd spent years creating.

Even my body felt different – one moment buzzing with anticipation... desire... and then frozen stiff with fear the next. Thoughts of Xander stirred up emotions within me: excitement laced with apprehension, longing tangled up with denial.

And my heart? It wasn't just pumping blood anymore – it was leading me down paths I never imagined existed. It yearned for something – or someone – I never thought it would want. There I stood, on the brink of redefining who I was, pushed by unforeseen feelings and circumstances to question everything.

When I got home from practice, I watched his first game with the Eagles. Xander looked amazing on the ice, his skills shining through as he adapted seamlessly to the new team. The puck glided across the ice, and Xander's movements were fluid, each stride powerful and confident. He was in his element, and it showed.

The first period was electric. Xander picked up the puck in the neutral zone, weaving through defenders with ease. His stickhandling was impeccable, and he made a crisp

pass to Brandt, the Eagles” captain, who took a quick shot on goal. The goalie deflected it, but Xander was there for the rebound. He flicked the puck into the net, and the crowd erupted in cheers.

Commentators were quick to acknowledge the moment. ”What a play!” exclaimed the first one, Jamie King, a retired Newark defenseman. ”Xander Harrison is showing some incredible skill and awareness on the ice. He’s fitting right in with the Eagles.”

”Absolutely,” added the second commentator, a hockey analyst named Wesley Hall. ”And look at the chemistry developing between him and Brandt. They’re working together like they’ve been teammates for years.”

Xander skated over to Brandt, who grinned broadly and clapped him on the back. They exchanged a few words, and Xander’s face lit up with a smile that sent a pang through my chest. Was he smiling at Brandt the way he used to smile at me? I clenched my fists, caught in a whirlwind of emotions – pride because he was killing it on the ice, and envy because I wished it was me in Brandt’s place.

As the game progressed, their chemistry became more apparent. In the second period, Brandt made a sharp pass to Xander, who deftly maneuvered around a defender and sent the puck flying into the top corner of the net. Brandt skated over, grinning widely, and gave Xander a fist bump. The ease and camaraderie between them were undeniable.

“Another beautiful goal by Harrison, assisted by the captain,” Hall gushed. “These two are becoming quite the dynamic duo.”

“Agreed,” King said. “You have to wonder if the Eagles might consider making a more permanent spot for Harrison. He’s really bringing something special to the team.”

Every time Brandt acknowledged Xander after a good play, I felt a surge of jealousy. Xander's smile was brighter, his eyes more animated. Was I imagining it, or did he really share a special connection with Brandt?

The third period brought more of the same. Xander and Brandt worked together seamlessly, setting up plays and creating scoring opportunities. At one point, Xander made a brilliant defensive play, stealing the puck and passing it to Brandt, who took it up the ice and scored. The two of them celebrated together, their smiles wide.

"What a play! Harrison with the steal and Brandt with the finish," King said. "This pair is unstoppable tonight."

Hall responded, a smile on his face. "It's rare to see such instant chemistry. The Eagles are lucky to have them both on the ice."

My stomach churned as I watched. Was Xander finding something with Brandt that he couldn't find with me? Was I losing him to someone else?

Was he ever yours?

I couldn't get my brain to stop exaggerating the situation.

The final buzzer sounded, and the Eagles had secured a victory. Xander and Brandt skated off the ice together, still talking and laughing. The sight sent a wave of emotions crashing over me.

I watched the highlights of the second and third games, as well. And like always, Xander was a force to be reckoned with, his talent and determination shining through. But more than that, I saw the joy in his eyes, the pure love he had for the game. It was the same joy I felt when I was on and off the ice with him.

By the end of the week, I'd learned three things: first, I was not as straight as I thought I was; second, I was undeniably attracted to Xander; and third, I liked him. I liked him a lot. More than I'd ever liked anyone before.

I didn't need to test myself by looking at other men. It was Xander – just Xander – who stirred these feelings within me. It wasn't just his looks; it was everything about him. His kindness, his passion, his unwavering support. The way he made me feel alive and seen. This wasn't about questioning my attraction to men in general; it was about acknowledging that Xander was special, that he'd helped to change everything I thought I knew about myself.

I knew I couldn't keep running from my feelings. No more hiding, no more pretending. I wanted Xander, and it was time to take a leap of faith. I needed to talk to him, to apologize – grovel if I had to – and tell him how I really felt. It was terrifying, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try. I had to know if there was a chance for us to be more than teammates, if he felt the same way.

Xander

The rink was eerily quiet, the only sound the soft hum of the lights above. I'd missed this place, missed the familiar scent of ice and the comforting solitude it offered late at night. Newark had been a whirlwind – exciting, demanding, but also strangely lonely. Now, back in LA, I was still caught between two worlds.

I laced up my skates, the ritual bringing a sense of calm. Stepping onto the ice, I took a few slow laps, letting the cool air wash over me. My thoughts drifted to Ry, the unresolved tension between us gnawing at my insides. I wondered if he'd even noticed I was gone.

As I pressed harder into each stride, accelerating around the rink's perimeter, the distant creak of an opening door interrupted the stillness. My gaze darted over to see Ry striding purposefully towards the ice.

My heart stutter-stepped.

His build was unmistakable even from this distance – broad-shouldered and lean with a confident swagger that spoke volumes about his character before he uttered a word.

His face remained stoic and unreadable as always – a mask hiding whatever turmoil might be churning beneath – but his eyes... they held something different tonight. Was it determination? Or perhaps regret?

I squinted slightly as if that would somehow translate his unspoken emotions more clearly to me. But all it did was make me more aware of how much space physically

– and emotionally – still lay between us.

“Ry?” I skated over, my breath catching in my throat.

“Hey,” he said gruffly, his voice echoing slightly in the rink. “Can we talk?”

I nodded, coming to a stop in front of him. “Sure.”

Ry laced up his skates quickly and stepped onto the ice. We started skating slowly, side by side.

“I’ve been an idiot,” he began, his voice low. “I pushed you away, ignored you... and I’m sorry.”

His words were like a balm, soothing the ache that had been building inside me. “It’s okay–”

“No, it’s not.” He cut me off, his gaze intense. “I was scared. Scared of what I was feeling, scared of what it meant. But seeing you out there, in Newark, I realized... I don’t want to be scared anymore. I don’t want to lose you.”

My heart pounded in my chest, the vulnerability in his words hitting me hard. “Ry...”

We both came to a gradual stop, facing each other on the ice. Ry took a deep breath and stepped closer, our skates barely an inch apart.

His hand reached up, trembling slightly as he cupped my cheek, his touch gentle yet firm. “I don’t know what this is, Sunshine. But I know I don’t want to keep running from it... from you.” He drew in a deep breath, then released it slowly, as if he was building up the courage to say something monumental. “Do you–” He cleared his throat, his uncertainty palpable. “Do you have feelings for me, Sunshine? And I don’t

mean just as a teammate.”

Taking a steadying breath, I blurted out my truth, the words flowing with a mix of nerves and sincerity. ”Yeah. I”m into you. Like, a lot.”

His eyes brightened instantly, relief washing over his features.

He drew me closer to him, our skates scraping against the icy surface beneath us. ”Can I kiss you?”

His question hung in the air between us, as delicate as a snowflake and just as beautiful.

”Make my wish come true, Ry.” My voice trembled slightly. ”Kiss me.”

Our lips met in a sweetly hesitant exploration – tentative.

It was a moment of pure magic.

Our arms wrapped around each other for balance. It was everything I’d hoped for and more – soft, intense, and filled with the promise of something new and beautiful.

The kiss deepened gradually; it was not rushed or desperate but slow and deliberate – an unspoken promise woven between us with every shared breath.

In that moment, it wasn”t just our lips that met – it was also our hopes and fears, dreams and insecurities.

In that pure magical moment.

I could feel myself hardening, an unfamiliar sensation that had nothing to do with a

simple physical urge. For the first time that I could recall, my arousal was not about satisfying a basic need. It was about needing Ry.

I felt his hardness pressed against me too, and it sent me spiraling into a dizzying euphoria. The fact that this man – always so serious and stoic – was aroused because of me made my head spin. It wasn't just about the physical response; it was the raw emotion behind it that left me breathless.

When we finally pulled apart, our foreheads resting together, I knew that this was just the beginning of something special.

“That was my first.”

Ry looked at me quizzically. “Your first?”

“My first kiss.”

“You mean with a man?”

“No, I mean my first kiss ever.” My voice trembled with what I just revealed. Would my inexperience be a deal breaker? Should I have kept my mouth shut?

His eyes widened slightly, then softened. A slow, warm smile spread across his face. “Well, I’m honored,” he said, trying to mask his obvious pleasure. “Guess I’d better make sure all your future ones are just as good, huh?”

I laughed. His adorably sweet response only made me like him more. “You’d better.” It was the lightest I’d been in over a week.

We kissed again, and then some more. I don’t think I could get enough of this guy.

We skated a few more laps, hand in hand, and for now, it was exactly what I needed.

Bennett

Being with Xander felt right in ways I couldn't even put into words, but navigating this new dynamic of transitioning from teammates to boyfriends was challenging. It seemed like I wanted to be near him, touch him, taste him at every moment. He was mine, damn it. I had every right to be everything to him both in public and in private. Keeping my hands to myself was like telling me I had to give up skating, stat. I wouldn't be able to exist either way. But things between us were still new, and I didn't want to make any rash decisions.

The day of the auction and game arrived, and the air was electric with anticipation. It wasn't just any game day; it was a day where our team, the community, and the cause of breast cancer research and treatment came together in a vibrant, unified effort. The rink was a hive of activity well before the puck drop, with the hum of voices, the clatter of equipment, and the buzz of excitement filling every corner.

As soon as we walked into the arena, the energy hit us. Fans of all ages, decked out in Grizzlies gear, milled about, their faces alight. The auction and social media selfie challenge were kicking off, and the atmosphere was one of joyous chaos. Laughter and chatter filled the air, mingling with the music that played over the speakers.

"Alright, everyone, let's get those selfies going!" the announcer's voice boomed, crackling slightly over the PA system. "And don't forget to use the hashtag #SkateForACure!"

The organizers had gone all out. Booths lined the edges of the rink, displaying auction items ranging from signed jerseys to one-of-a-kind memorabilia. Overhead,

banners in pink and white fluttered, proudly displaying messages of hope and solidarity.

Xander and I and the rest of the team eagerly dove into the fray. We moved from group to group, smiling for cameras and posing with fans. The flash of phones and the murmur of excitement surrounded us. Each click of a camera was a tiny connection, a moment shared between us and the people supporting our cause.

“Hey, can I get a selfie with you guys?” a young girl asked, her eyes wide with excitement. She was wearing a pink Grizzlies cap that looked a size too big for her head.

“Of course!” Xander replied, his smile bright. We leaned in, and the girl beamed at the screen. She snapped the picture. I swelled with pride. Moments like this one made all the hard work worth it.

Navigating the crowd, I was constantly aware of Xander’s presence, even in the busiest moments. There were times when our pinkie fingers would lock surreptitiously, a silent connection amid the chaos. Sometimes, while I was talking with fans or signing autographs, I could feel his eyes on me, and we’d share a secret smile that made my heart race.

We continued to make our way through the crowd, stopping for more photos and chatting with fans. Their warmth and enthusiasm were infectious. Xander and I even managed a few playful shots together, making goofy faces and laughing. Each photo was a little reminder of why we were doing this, why it was important.

“Smile, Sunshine,” I teased as another fan aimed their phone at us.

“Shouldn’t that be my line?” he shot back, his eyes twinkling with mischief. The camera clicked, capturing our moment of banter.

At one point, Xander brushed past me, deliberately grazing his hand against mine. He slipped something into my back pocket with a mischievous grin. A few beats after he moved away, I reached back and pulled out a small, folded note. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching too closely, I opened it.

So proud to be your boyfriend. We haven't

won our game tonight yet, but I already feel

like a winner.

I smiled and my heart swelled with affection. So he's putting a label on it, huh? I definitely can roll with that.

I caught Xander's eye across the room, and he winked at me. God, this man gives me butterflies.

This was our world, chaotic and beautiful, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

The auction got underway, and the crowd's excitement grew. We took our places on stage, ready to present our donated items to the highest bidders. The first item up for auction was Maestro's jersey. It was a special one, adorned with signatures from the entire team and featuring the Grizzlies logo prominently.

"Do I hear \$100 for Maestro's signed jersey?" the auctioneer's voice rang out, clear and commanding.

Hands shot up immediately, and the bids kept coming, higher and higher.

"\$150!"

“\$200!”

Finally, the hammer fell at \$250, and Maestro’s jersey was sold to an enthusiastic bidder in the front row. The crowd erupted into cheers and applause, celebrating the success of the auction and the generosity of those who had participated.

Besides the players’ jerseys, other items were auctioned, including autographed player sticks, a private meet and greet with the team, customized team gear for pets, a pair of season tickets for next season, and an exclusive dinner with Coach Mack, which sparked a lively bidding war among the fans.

Then came the highlight of the event – the announcement of the Game Day Captain contest winner. The excitement was palpable as the announcer took the stage again.

”And now, the moment we’ve all been waiting for! The winner of our Game Day Captain contest, who will lead the team onto the ice tonight, is... Emma Berkley!”

A spotlight found a ten-year-old girl in the crowd, her eyes wide with shock and excitement. She wore a Grizzlies jersey that looked a size too big, and a huge smile lit up her face. The crowd cheered wildly as she made her way to the stage.

The announcer continued, “Emma submitted a heartfelt essay explaining why she loves the Grizzlies and what being the Game Day Captain would mean to her. Here’s a little excerpt: ‘I love the Grizzlies because they never give up, no matter how tough the game gets. Being the Game Day Captain would be a dream come true because I want to show everyone that no matter how small you are, you can still be a leader and make a difference.’”

The crowd’s applause grew louder, and Emma’s eyes sparkled with tears of joy. Xander and I joined the applause, watching as Emma was handed a special captain’s jersey.

Emma led the team onto the ice, participating in the pre-game ceremony with a confidence and enthusiasm that warmed everyone's hearts. Seeing her joy and excitement was a powerful reminder of the impact we could have beyond the rink.

With the ceremony over, we headed back to the locker room. The energy from the day's event still buzzing through us. Tank, Maestro, and Jester were already hyping each other up.

"Let's crush it tonight!" Tank bellowed.

As team captain, I stepped forward, addressing everyone in the locker room with a confident grin. "Alright, guys, we've got a full house out there and a great cause we're playing for. Let's show them the true strength of the Grizzlies, like a bear defending its territory."

The team roared in agreement, the atmosphere charged with excitement and determination. One by one, the players began filing out of the locker room, ready to hit the ice.

I glanced at Xander, our eyes locking with an unspoken agreement. We lingered behind, allowing the others to head out first. Once the room was clear, I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into a corner.

"Nervous?" I asked, my voice low.

"A little," he admitted. "But I'm ready."

"Me too," I said, brushing my lips against his. "We've got this, Sunshine."

"Yeah, we do," he whispered back, his breath warm against my skin.

We shared a brief, intense kiss. The electricity between us was palpable, but we knew we had to be careful. And we had a game to win.

We pulled away just as the door opened, and Jester poked his head in. “Come on, you two, time to hit the ice!”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re coming,” I grumbled, giving Xander one last look before heading out.

On the ice, it was all business. We were playing the Omaha Spartans, the first game in a series of five. I had to focus, but damn, it was hard when all I wanted was to be close to him. Every time we scored, I had to fight the urge to pull him into a celebratory kiss. Instead, I settled for high fives and pats on the back like the rest of the guys. The normal stuff teammates did.

We won 4-1.

The day had been a huge success on and off the ice.

The locker room was buzzing with post-victory energy. The guys were all high-fiving, shouting, and clapping each other on the back.

The communal showers were the next stop, and normally, this part of the routine was automatic for me. Stripping down, hitting the showers with the rest of the team, joking around, and letting the hot water wash away the sweat and strain of the game. But tonight things were different.

Of course I’d seen naked bodies during my career. I simply acknowledged their existence and moved right along, not even giving them a second thought. But now, one of those naked bodies belonged to my boyfriend, and it took every ounce of willpower not to stare, not to touch. Not to be tempted to taste.

I don't want to rush into sex with him. He wasn't a potential hookup. I planned to let him lead when it came to sex, not that I was assuming because he'd never kissed anyone before – the thought still made me giddy with excitement that he'd reserved his first kiss for me – that it automatically meant he was a virgin. I once had a teammate who was a self-professed man whore and he swore he'd never kissed anyone romantically; it wasn't his cup of tea.

Xander was there, and as much as I tried to keep my eyes on the tile walls or the water streaming down, they kept drifting back to him. We'd seen each other naked before, of course. Hell, we'd been teammates for a while now. But I wanted him, and it was fucking hard to keep my mind in check and my dick from plumping up.

“Hey, Ry, you coming out to The Crossbar after?” Tank's voice broke through my thoughts.

“Yeah, I'll be there,” I replied, trying to sound casual. “Just need a minute.”

Tank nodded, clapping me on the back before heading out with the others. Xander and I lingered, our movements slow and deliberate as we rinsed off, the air thick with steam and tension. The sound of the water cascading from the shower heads was loud in the empty space.

Before I knew it, Xander's soapy body collided with mine from behind, the firmness of his arousal nestling between my ass cheeks, nudging my taint. The heat of his body seeped into mine and his body ground into me with a rhythm that sparked a shudder up my spine. My dick hardened in response.

“Missed you,” he muttered between kisses to my shoulders, causing goosebumps to rise across my skin.

“Missed... missed you too.”

“You did good out there.”

“You did better.” My voice was breathless. ”Sunshine...?”

“Mm?”

“This could end badly.”

He grinned against my shoulder; it felt like mischief and promise. ”Since when do we play it safe?”

My heart hammered out a fierce beat and my dick throbbed. I reached down to stroke myself. The pleasure was sharp and sweet, coiling tight within me until it spilled out in soft moans that filled the steamy air.

On the ice, Xander was all aggression – an unstoppable force – but away from it, he channeled his power differently. His aggression morphed into passion; every touch deliberate, every movement calculated to draw out maximum pleasure.

The man was a fucking pro at this.

“You’re beautiful, Ry... so beautiful.”

Those words touched something inside me. I’d never been called beautiful before. Dickhead? Yeah. Standoffish? Hell yeah. But never beautiful.

A sound ripped from my throat – louder than intended. Xander’s hand clamped over my mouth, silencing my moans as his lips trailed along the back of my neck. His palm was damp and rough, the callouses from years of gripping his hockey stick a unique texture against my skin. The warmth of his hand contrasted sharply with the cool water cascading down around us. The pressure was firm but gentle, a silent

command to keep quiet. Even in the dim, steamy shower, I could feel the strength in his fingers, each line and ridge a reminder of the dedication and hard work we both shared. His touch was grounding, a perfect balance of tenderness and control that made it impossible to think about anything else but him.

Out of nowhere, I came. Ribbons of cum spilled over my fist, leaving me breathless and shaking. Xander wasn't too far behind, his dick pulsing between my legs. We weathered the aftershocks together, making me wish we could do this all over again. But reality intruded. We had to join the team, had to keep up appearances. Plus, we'd already taken a risk doing this; we shouldn't press our luck.

I turned to face him, wrapping my arms around his waist.

"We should go," I whispered, resting my forehead on his.

"Yeah." He sighed, reluctantly pulling away. "We really should."

"Coming back to my place after?"

His smile slowly built, making me breathless. "There you go again, making another wish coming true."

We quickly finished our showers, got dressed, and headed out to The Crossbar.

Xander

The moment we crossed the threshold into Ry's place, he bolted for his bedroom with a burst of energy that left me trailing in his wake. I matched his stride, my heart pounding in sync with the rapid tempo of our footfalls. This was uncharted territory for me – it was the first time I wanted to have sex and the person I wanted to experience that with was Ry. My boyfriend. The realization electrified every nerve ending, not from fear but anticipation.

What Ry and I had done in the locker room showers was beyond amazing. Were we being careless? Absolutely. Did I care? Not when I felt a deep sense of trust and safety with Ry, knowing that that moment was shared with someone who understood and cared for me deeply. Not when I felt grateful and lucky to have found someone who I connected with in a way I'd never connected with anyone else before.

So we'd gone through the motions of meeting the team at The Crossbar and celebrating our win. But I kept glancing at my phone screen, willing the time to move faster so Ry and I could leave and come to his place to continue what we'd started in the showers.

And now here we were.

"You want to do this, Xander? To cross the line?" Ry threw the question at me, his voice laced with a hint of uncertainty. His eyes bore into mine, searching for an answer that only I could provide.

"Yes." My voice was steadier than I felt inside. "I want this... with you."

His gaze lingered on mine, seeking reassurance in the depths of my eyes. Whatever he found there provided him with the confirmation he needed. He moved towards the bedside table, retrieving a small tube and a foil packet from its drawer before tossing them casually onto the bed.

A smirk played on his lips as he sauntered back toward me. The sight sent a jolt through me – anticipation mixed with nerves.

Our lips met in a dance as old as time yet fairly new for us. My arm snaked around his waist, pulling him closer while his did the same. My heart pounded. As we pressed close, I could feel Ry's heartbeat – strong and steady – against mine. It was a rhythm that promised more to come.

We alternated between passionate kisses that left us breathless and gentler ones that teased and tantalized. The rough scrape of Ry's chin against mine was intoxicatingly arousing. Each sound Ry made was like fuel to my desire, driving me to the brink of madness with need. The goosebumps prickling my skin and the uncontrollable tremors coursing down my spine each time Ry touched me were evidence of the intensity of what we were about to do.

The hardness pressing against me through his pants elicited a groan from deep within me; I ground against him instinctively. His kisses trailed along the side of my mouth before finding their way to my ear and neck – each one sending waves of pleasure coursing through me.

Pulling back slightly, I studied Ry's face – flushed and glowing in post-kiss bliss – and smiled at him. His returned smirk told me everything was perfect.

His eyes were filled with affection... and something else – perhaps nervousness or excitement that mirrored my own feelings?

The desire to take our relationship to the next level had been simmering within me, but I needed Ry to understand that this would be my first time. We shed our clothes, and I let my gaze roam over his body. His shoulders were broad and strong, his abs carved like a Greek statue. My eyes wandered lower, taking in the sight of him... fully aroused.

Goddamn. Ry's dick was definitely the inspiration for the eggplant emoji. His pubes were shaved, making his dick appear even bigger. Of course, I'd seen it in the showers at the arena before, but I'd never seen it the way it was right now, hard, pointing north. I wouldn't be bottoming tonight – or maybe ever – because I'd have to work up a helluva nerve to take his dick up my ass.

My hand trembled slightly as I reached out for him, touching another man's dick for the first time. His eyes softened under my touch. A warmth spread across my face that made me feel both vulnerable and powerful at once.

"I want you," I murmured. "But... I've never done this before."

Ry's response was immediate and reassuring. "Doesn't matter," he said softly, "You're mine."

"But... what if I don't do it right?" The uncertainty gnawed at me.

He silenced me with a kiss then pulled back slightly to look into my eyes. "No matter what happens tonight, it will be perfect. Now get on the bed, Sunshine, and lie on your back."

I got onto the bed, and crawled to the center. I watched Ry's thigh muscles flex as he knee-walked toward me and straddled me at the hips. He leaned over me then, peppering kisses across my skin – my thighs, belly and lower still – everywhere but where I craved him most. His breath against me sent a jolt of desire through my body.

My hips gyrated with a life of their own. I was dying for him to suck my dick.

“Ry... pleeeeeease...”

His soft, teasing laughter made me want to grab my cock and put it in his mouth my own damn self, but I willed myself to be patient. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Raising his head, he said, “More than you’ll ever know.”

I growled in mock anger, which triggered more laughter to flow out of Ry’s lips.

The first time his tongue flicked on the tip of my shaft, it was tentative – an exploratory lick followed by a slow glide from root to tip. Gradually he grew more confident with each stroke.

My fingers found their way into his luscious hair as I watched him. His touch was gentle and comforting, his eyes filled with a warmth that made me feel cherished when they met mine.

And when he finally – fucking finally – took all of me into his mouth, my soul left my body. The intensity of the experience was both terrifying and exhilarating. I was losing myself in the moment, my mind filled with pleasure that left me breathless. Up and down, up and down, his head bobbed in a steady rhythm. Feeling the wet heat of his mouth was an experience that defied explanation.

When Ry released me from his mouth, I felt the loss of his heat acutely.

He handed me the condom, and I rolled it down my length – another first for me. To say that I was clumsy at it was an understatement. But Ry was so patient and understanding, I almost wept. He squeezed a generous amount of lube onto his palm and he spread it over my length, sending a tingling sensation through my entire body.

Then he applied the lube on his fingers, some of it dripping down his forearm.

When he was about to reach behind him, I stopped him.

“Let me see.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

He shifted his body, turning away from me. I watched as his gluteal muscles flexed and he delicately inserted one finger, then two, and finally three fingers into his hole. It was an act so intimate, it left me feeling acutely aware of what we were about to do.

Facing me again, he straddled my hips. “You’re ready to take my ass, Sunshine.”

Yes. God yes, I am.

I nodded. This was our first time – a thought that filled me with anticipation as well as anxiety.

He reached out and caressed my cheek with his calloused hand. “Sunshine, I need your words.”

“Yeah.” It was only one word, but I hoped it was enough.

It was, because Ry reached behind him and held onto my dick and lowered himself onto me, our eyes locked in a silent conversation of trust and desire. This moment would forever be etched into my memory as something special.

Ry grimaced and squirmed, trying to get used to the unfamiliar feeling. Instinctively, I grabbed the lube, and squirted some into my hand before stroking his length that had softened slightly to keep his mind distracted from the discomfort.

He continued to lower himself onto me until he was fully seated on my lap.

“You feel so good, Ry.”

He began moving then, slow at first but gradually building up a rhythm that set every nerve ending on fire. I stroked his now hard again dick at the same pace as he was moving above me. He leaned down and his lips found mine while simultaneously riding me.

The build-up was intense – overwhelming even – yet I was filled with a sense of wonderment at this profound connection we were experiencing together. It wasn't just about the physical act; it was about us – our unity on an emotional level that transcended everything else.

I thrust my hips upward, trying my best to hit the right spot.

Oh God. I could feel my balls tightening. Every thrust, every moan made me feel like I was close to heaven. How could any other feeling match this?

When release finally came for both of us, it was powerful and all-consuming – an explosion of sensations that left us gasping for breath. As Ry collapsed on top of me, I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close as we rode out the waves of pleasure together. We lay there in silence, catching our breaths and basking in the afterglow of an experience that had forever changed us both.

I loved this man. Loved the way he made me feel when I was in his presence. Loved his grumpiness and those rare, genuine smiles that lit up his entire face. Loved how

he could command a team with authority, yet always stay humble. I loved the little things, like the scent of the crook of his neck. Loved his strength, his vulnerability, and the way he always knew how to comfort me without saying a word. Now all that was left was finding the perfect moment to tell him.

Bennett

Pulling up to Xander's house, it was obvious to me he'd paid more than our annual salary for it, but I was struck by its simple elegance. Sometimes, I forgot he'd inherited a hefty sum from his late grandfather. But if you talked to him, you'd never guess he was loaded. Xander was down to earth, practical, and didn't flaunt his wealth. He was just... Xander. And that's what made him so special.

When Xander admitted he'd never been on a real date, my brain had been in overdrive, trying to think of something special, something that would make his first date unforgettable. We didn't have a lot of free time between our home and away games, and I didn't have a ton of money to blow, but I wanted it to be perfect.

The idea hit me on my way home from practice one evening. Taking him to a park would be perfect for a simple yet memorable date.

Since the night we made love for the first time at my place, Xander had never left. Every time he stopped by his house to check that everything was okay, he'd bring some of his stuff over to my house. Now, I was happy to see his clothes next to mine in the closet, and I'd also reserved a drawer for him.

But for our first official date, we'd decided that he'd sleep at his place and I'd come over and pick him up. Like his boyfriend should.

I knocked on the door, my heart racing. Tonight had to be perfect. When he opened the door, his face lit up, and that familiar warmth spread through my chest.

This man's smile was literally my daily dose of happiness.

"Hey, Sunshine," I greeted, leaning in for a quick kiss. "Ready?"

His eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Absolutely. Where are we going?"

I smirked, enjoying the suspense. "It's a surprise."

"Hmph," Xander mock-pouted, his expression adorable.

"Trust me, you're going to love it,"

We hopped into my car, and I navigated through the streets of LA.

As we drove, the busyness of the city faded into the background, replaced by a quieter, more serene landscape. After a short drive, we arrived at a secluded park. The area was quiet, but in the distance, you could hear faint laughter and conversations from other visitors. The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow, and the air was crisp but not too cold – perfect for a first date.

"Wow," Xander said, stepping out of the car. "It's beautiful. I've never been here before."

I felt a rush of pride, delighted that he'd never been to this spot. It made the surprise even better. "I thought you'd like it. Come on, I've got something planned."

I grabbed the picnic basket and blanket I'd hidden in the trunk, and we found a cozy spot under a magnolia tree that offered good shade.

"This is amazing," Xander said, helping me spread out the blanket. We settled down, and I began unpacking the basket.

“Sandwiches, chips, and hot chocolate,” I said, handing him a thermos.

He laughed, a sound that made my heart skip. “You thought of everything.”

“Only the best for you,” I replied, brushing a strand of hair from his face.

“I made us a playlist.” I pulled out my phone and opened it up.

Xander’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yeah, don’t act so shocked,” I said, scrolling through the songs. “I put a lot of thought into it.”

Xander chuckled, the sound warm and familiar. “Okay, okay. What’s on it?”

“Some Orion Skye, of course.” I selected a song and let it play. “And a few classics. ‘Wonderwall’ by Oasis, ‘Yellow’ by Coldplay... stuff like that.”

Xander leaned his head on my shoulder, his hair brushing my cheek. “I love it. You’re full of surprises, Ry.”

“I try,” I said with a smile. We sat shoulder to shoulder, munching on our sandwiches and talking about anything and everything. It was refreshing to spend some alone time with each other, the tension of hiding our relationship melting away.

Xander leaned back on his hands and gazed up at the sky. “Did you see that article about the latest LGBTQ+ rights march in New York?”

“Yeah,” I replied, chewing thoughtfully. “Makes you think, you know?”

He smiled, nudging me with his shoulder. “You mean it makes you think that

someday we could do that too?”

“Maybe.” I felt the familiar twist of uncertainty in my gut. “It’s just... we’re in a tough spot. The league has had openly queer players for a while now, but coming out as a couple would be a big deal. Could change the team dynamics in one go.”

“True.” Xander’s tone softened. “But we can’t hide forever, Ry. We deserve to be happy, to be ourselves.”

I glanced at him, appreciating how loving and kind he was. “You ever think about what it would be like? Being out in the open, not worrying about who’s watching?”

“All the time.” A wistful smile played on his lips. “It’s like... I want to shout from the rooftops that you’re mine. But I know we have to be careful.”

We’d been together for six weeks now, and I was falling for him hard. But were we ready to take that step, to come out as queer, and a couple?

Reaching over, I grabbed his hand and squeezed it gently. “We’ll get there. One step at a time.”

Xander chuckled, the sound warm and soothing. “You know, sometimes I forget that you’re the grumpy one. You’re always level-headed.”

“Someone has to be.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re the dreamer.”

“Guilty as charged.” He laughed. “But you like me.”

“Yeah, I do.” My heart swelled with affection... and something more. I thought I knew what that “more” was, but I wasn’t ready to say it out loud yet.

We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, just enjoying the moment.

Xander eventually broke the silence, his voice quieter. “Do you think the team would support us?”

Squeezing his hand again, I considered the question. “I’d like to think so. We’ve got a good bunch of guys. But it’s hard to say. Some might be surprised, others might not care. It’s a mixed bag.”

He nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Exactly.” I leaned in to kiss his temple. “For now, let’s just enjoy this. Our first date.”

Xander’s eyes lit up with a grin. “I’m happy my first date is with you, Ry.”

“Yeah?” Warmth spread through me. “Me too, Sunshine. Me too.”

We lay back on the blanket, our heads touching and fingers intertwined. As the music played, we hummed along, letting the melodies fill the space between us.

“I’ve got something for you.”

“What?” My curiosity was piqued.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, folded piece of paper. “I was going to wait until later, but...”

I took the paper, unfolding it carefully. My eyes scanned the words before reading them aloud, “I knew how this date would end from the very beginning. It was

perfect.”

I gazed at him. “I wanted today to be special. You deserve that.”

He reached over, his fingers finding mine. “It’s special. Because it’s with you.”

“Ry—”

He didn’t let me finish as he leaned in, capturing my lips in a kiss. His palm rested on my cheek, fingers slightly rough but warm and comforting. The kiss deepened, and I felt like I was floating.

When we finally pulled away, breathless and grinning like idiots, Xander whispered, “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” I replied. “I’m just glad you’re happy.”

“I am,” he said, his voice soft but firm. “Happier than I’ve ever been.”

We lay there for a while longer, wrapped in each other’s arms, watching the stars and listening to our favorite songs.

Yeah, everything turned out better than I expected. It wasn’t extravagant, but it was us. And it was perfect.

Eventually, we had to pack up and head back. The drive home was quiet, but it was the kind of silence filled with unspoken words of promise.

As we pulled up to Xander’s house, I turned to him. “I had a great time.”

“Me too,” he replied, leaning in for one last kiss. “Goodnight, Berry.”

“Goodnight, Sunshine.”

Just before he went inside, he turned and waved. I waved back, feeling a warmth spread through my chest.

Driving home, I couldn't stop smiling.

Xander

A barrage of notifications assaulted my senses as I awoke. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I squinted at the blinding light of the screen. Instagram, X, Facebook – each platform ablaze with chatter about me. My heart hammered against my chest like a wild drum as I tapped on the first notification. Confused, I opened the message. It was from Jester.

”Dude, have you seen this?” he’d sent, followed by a link.

Clicking the link, I was taken to a social media post that had gone viral. It showed a picture.

Of Ry and me.

Oh God.

I remembered the moment well. It was a few weeks ago and we’d been at a public park where they set up big screens for community movie nights. Ry and I were sitting close, laughing. Nothing explicitly romantic, but looking at the photo objectively, the intimacy between us was undeniable. Neither of us had noticed someone snapping a photo.

Ry’s voice slipped into my panic-stricken thoughts, groggy from sleep. He shifted in bed beside me, his hair a mess of curls from when I’d grabbed them last night while I was fucking him from behind. His eyes met mine with curiosity and concern.

I wordlessly extended my phone towards him. He took in the picture, his face hardened into a mask of disbelief.

He cursed under his breath before sitting up abruptly. "How did this happen?"

"Looks like we photobombed someone's selfie," I said, feeling anxiety gnawing at my insides like some ravenous beast. "I don't think it was intentional... but it's out there now."

Ry ran his hand over his face with a sigh. "We knew this could happen."

I nodded in agreement as thoughts whirled around in my head like leaves caught in a storm. "What do we do now?"

"We need to talk to Coach and management." Ry reached for his phone.

The seriousness of our situation hung heavy between us as we showered and got dressed in silence before heading out to meet Coach at the arena.

In the car, I found myself staring out the window in an attempt to steady my racing heart. Ry's hand found mine, his fingers intertwining with mine in a reassuring squeeze. "We'll get through this, Sunshine. Together."

Arriving at the arena, we headed straight to Coach's office. Coach was waiting for us, looking concerned but supportive. "Come in, boys. Let's talk."

We told him about our relationship. Coach listened intently. "This isn't ideal," he said finally. "But we need to handle it with care. Let's get the management team involved and come up with a plan."

I released a breath I didn't know I was holding. Although I didn't voice it aloud, I'd

worried that one or both of us would be traded.

The management team was quickly assembled, and we sat down in a conference room. It was surreal, like we were discussing someone else's life. But this was our reality now.

"We need to address this publicly," the PR manager, Fiona Campbell, said. "A controlled media interview would be the best approach. It allows you to tell your story on your terms."

Ry nodded, his hand still gripping mine under the table. "We want to be honest but also respectful of our teammates and the organization. We don't want this to become a distraction for the team."

"Understood," the PR manager said. "Let's work on crafting your statements. We want to make sure you're comfortable with what you're saying."

Over the next couple of hours, we worked with the PR team to prepare for the interview. It was grueling, but we knew it was necessary. When we were finally done, I felt a strange mix of exhaustion and relief.

"We'll arrange for the interview to be aired tonight," the PR manager said. "You'll have our full support throughout this process."

Back in the locker room, the atmosphere was tense. Our teammates had obviously heard about the picture and the impending interview. There was an awkward silence as we walked in.

Jester was the first to break the ice. "You okay?" His gaze flickered between Ry and me questioningly.

"We're dealing with it." Ry's response was calm and collected – always so damn composed even under pressure. "We're going public with our relationship tonight."

Tank, his massive frame a comforting presence, stepped forward. "Let us know what we need to do."

Maestro clapped me on the back. "Proud of you guys."

Looking around at everyone in the room, Jester declared, arms crossed, "If anyone has a problem with Xander and Ry, you'll have to deal with me." Then he fixed Tank with a mischievously wicked stare. "And Tank owes me pepperoni pizza because I knew you guys were hooking up."

I said, "How—" at the same time Ry said, "Who—"

Tank flipped Jester a pair of birds.

The support from our teammates was overwhelming, a wave of relief washing over me – except for Sam and Landon, who looked like they'd just swallowed lemons.

But they were the minority and I found solace in that. With each word of support, the gnawing anxiety that had been my companion all morning began to dissipate.

That evening, we sat down for the interview. Ry and I found ourselves under the harsh glare of studio lights, cameras trained on us like predators. The imposing setup was enough to make anyone feel small, yet with Ry beside me, his solid presence a reassuring anchor, I felt fortified.

The woman who sat across from us was Eva Garcia. She'd interviewed me on several occasions. My mind transported itself back to the first time she'd interviewed Ry and me. We'd recently become teammates and were still virtually strangers. Who knew

we would be interviewed in this kind of situation tonight?

She warmed up with some mild inquiries about our backgrounds before launching into the heart of the matter.

"So," she began, her gaze flicking between us. "There's been a lot of speculation about the nature of your relationship. Can you clarify?"

Ry's hand slipped into mine – an unspoken pact cemented by intertwined fingers, but this time our hands rested on the table for everyone to see, unlike this morning when we had them beneath the table. This small difference mattered so much to me. "Yes," he stated firmly. "Xander and I are together. We have been for some time but chose to keep it private to prevent any distractions for our team."

Eva's face remained impassive as she absorbed this information before posing her next question: "Why did you decide to come out now?"

I took over then, my voice steady despite my racing heart. "It wasn't exactly our decision," I admitted. "A picture of us surfaced online and we figured it was best to address it openly rather than let rumors run wild."

"And how do you think this will affect your team and your careers?"

Ry's brow furrowed as he considered the question thoughtfully. "The League has had openly queer players for years now," he said optimistically. "We hope for support from our teammates and fans alike. We know it won't be easy but we're ready to face whatever comes – together."

Eva's eyes shifted back to me, curiosity etched in their depths. "Xander," she probed gently, "how do you feel about all this?"

The corners of my mouth lifted in a small smile as I squeezed Ry's hand. "I'm relieved," I confessed. "It's terrifying but liberating at the same time. We just want to live our truth and find happiness in it."

The remainder of the interview was a blur of generic questions about our future plans and aspirations. By its end, we were both emotionally spent yet oddly light-hearted. We had done it – wrested back control of our story.

The aftermath was a whirlwind. Social media erupted with reactions ranging from supportive to downright hostile. The management stood by us through it all, though, their support making all the difference in our tumultuous journey into openness.

As soon as we exited the conference room, the team was there to greet us – sans Sam and Landon.

"Extra drills tomorrow, anyone?"

Tank's teeth flashed in a wolfish grin. "Need to bulk up if we're going to shield our star couple."

Laughter boomed through the room. Their solidarity was as clear as crystal; it wrapped around me like a warm blanket, flooding my veins with relief.

I stole a glance at Ry. Our eyes locked and his lips curled into an intimate smile – an unspoken promise that we were going to weather this storm together. We had each other; we had our team. What else could we possibly need?

When everyone left, Ry tugged me into a secluded corner. "You were phenomenal today."

My heart pounded against my chest as I leaned into him, my lips brushing against his

earlobe. "We both were... I'm so proud of us."

His lips pressed against my forehead, his touch gentle and reassuring. "We'll get through this, Sunshine. Like I said before, one step at a time."

"Yeah, one step at a time."

As we walked to the car, hand in hand, I felt a sense of peace. With our relationship out in the open, I had a new sense of freedom. We could hold hands in public, share a kiss after a game, and just be ourselves. It was liberating and brought us even closer together.

We still had to juggle our professional commitments with our personal lives. Practice was intense, games were demanding, and we had to stay focused. But now, we had each other's support openly, making it all more manageable.

Xander

The phone call came unexpectedly, disrupting the quiet of our evening together. I glanced at the caller ID, my stomach twisting with unease as I recognized the number. It was my parents.

I knew it was only a matter of time before Ronald and Judy would contact me concerning whatever they'd heard about what was happening in my life. It only took them 24 hours after the news broke. I hoped they'd react positively, finally see me for who I was, but deep down, I knew they'd probably stick to their old-fashioned ideas about what was proper and what people thought.

Beside me sat my rock in human form – my partner, ready to weather the storm with me.

“It's the parentals.”

His brows furrowed and his eyes were worried. “Need me to handle them for you?”

The phone rang a second time.

“I'll do it; but I'm grateful that you wanted to.”

Drawing a deep breath, I answered the phone on the third ring, steeling myself for whatever was to come. “Hello?”

Ry drew himself closer to me, our thighs touching on the couch, his arm around me.

It was enough to ground me.

"Xander, darling," came Mom's voice – sickeningly sweet on the surface but tinged with an undercurrent of disapproval. "We need to talk."

Ice formed in my veins. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

"About what?" I guarded my words, bracing for the onslaught.

"We returned from Australia and we heard these... these... rumors." Dad's frosty tone sliced through the phone line like a scalpel.

Rumors. Their euphemism for my relationship with Ry, as though it were a dirty secret.

"What rumors?" I demanded, my patience wearing thin.

"You know exactly what we're talking about," Mom retorted, her irritation seeping through every syllable. "This... relationship of yours. It's tarnishing our family's reputation."

My anger surged. "Tarnishing your reputation?" I scoffed, incredulous. "This is about my happiness, Mom. Happiness with someone who cares about me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Xander," Dad interjected dismissively. "This... phase of yours needs to end. You're young, you'll grow out of it."

Grow out of it? As if my feelings for Ry were something fickle that would fade with time.

"I'm not going to apologize for who I am," I declared resolutely, struggling to keep

an even tone amidst the internal chaos. "And I'm certainly not going to apologize for loving him."

"You're throwing your future away," Mom spat out venomously. "And for what? A washed-up hockey player who's never going to make it in the NAPH?"

That was it; the straw that broke the camel's back. They had always dismissed my dreams of playing in the NAPH, never believed in me. And now, they used Ry's career as a weapon against me, belittling him as if he was worthless.

"Ry is more than just a hockey player," I retorted, my voice rising with righteous anger. "And he's a better human being than either of you could ever be."

Silence hung heavy on the line, the weight of my words sinking in.

"You're making a mistake, Xander," Dad finally said, resignation in his tone. "But it's your life."

"Have you ever thought about how your actions might have affected my life?" I said, the words tumbling out, fueled by years of hurt. "How many babysitters did you hire to raise me? How many times have you forgotten to come to parent-student conferences? Let me answer that for you: Every. Single. Time. Did you come to my high school and college graduations? No. Do you know how many hockey games you've seen me play? Two. Can you believe it? One. Two. How do you think I felt when my friends boasted about the good times they had with their families? How do you think I felt when their moms and dads were there at conferences and games and graduations? But I loved you anyway. So don't pretend to be perfect because you're not."

With that, the line went dead, leaving me trembling with fury and pain. I didn't even notice that tears were carving tracks down my cheeks until Ry thumbed them away. I

crumbled in his arms and he held me close, offering silent solace while I released the pent-up emotions that had been festering within me for years.

It was the official severing of ties with the people who brought me into the world, but in that moment of raw vulnerability, I realized I didn't need them. I had Ry, and he was more than enough.

Bennett

Hours had passed since the confrontation with Xander's parents, and the quiet of my apartment felt like a fragile sanctuary. The dim light of the bedside lamp cast a warm glow over us as we lay entwined under the blankets. I cradled Xander against me, his head fitting perfectly into the hollow of my chest, his breath rhythmically rising and falling against my skin.

A swell of pride filled me for how he'd handled himself. Telling his parents the truth about who he was and standing firm against their outdated views took guts. He hadn't backed down, hadn't apologized for being himself. But one thing he'd said kept replaying in my mind, resonating deeply.

Xander had said out loud what I'd wanted to say but hadn't. Not because I was scared, but because I'd been waiting for the perfect moment to tell him. Listening to him tell his parents there was no apology for loving me made me realize there was no perfect time to tell the person who held your heart that you loved them. Because when it came to the thing called love, it played by its own rules, no matter the game.

I shifted slightly, the rustling of the blankets breaking the silence. "Did you mean it?"

Xander looked up at me, his eyes clouded with confusion. "Mean what?"

"The part about not apologizing for loving me," I clarified, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He lowered his gaze, his fingers toying with the edge of the blanket. "Yeah."

My heart hammered in my chest as I used my finger to gently tilt his chin up, bringing his eyes back to mine. “Say it again.”

His eyes, wide and vulnerable, searched mine for a moment before he murmured, “I love you.”

A surge of emotions threatened to choke me as those three words resonated in the air between us. I’d imagined what hearing them would sound like from his lips, and now that I had, it was even more beautiful. Cupping his cheek gently in his hands, I brushed away a stray tear with my thumb. “I love you too, Sunshine. More than I could ever put into words.”

He smiled then, a radiant, beautiful smile that lit up his entire face. “Really?”

“Really,” I confirmed, my voice thick with emotion. “I’ve wanted to tell you for a while, but I was waiting for the right moment.”

As his fingers traced lazy patterns on the tattoos on my chest, I leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “Remember when we first met? How we couldn’t stand each other?” I chuckled softly.

“Yeah,” he smiled at the memory. “It’s funny how things change.”

“Not just funny. It’s amazing. You’ve changed my life, Xander. You’ve shown me what it means to love and be loved.”

“I can’t imagine my life without you.” His voice broke slightly. “You’re my home, Ry.”

He hugged me tighter, our foreheads touching. “And you’re mine. Always.”

I smiled when he flipped over and started nipping and nibbling the crook of my neck, my nipples, my belly button, then back up again. My dick hardened.

“When the captain fell, he fell hard for the rookie.”

This guy’s such a tease.

Chuckling, I said, “Oh yes, he did. The rookie captured his heart.”

He shifted above me, straddling my chest, and reached for the headboard. The sight of his dick so close to my face sent sparks down my spine. He was magnificent in this moment – confident and commanding. He positioned himself just within reach of my mouth.

“Gonna feed me your cock?”

“That’s the plan.” His grip tightened on the headboard, muscles rippling under his skin as he sought leverage for what came next. The anticipation was exquisite; it heightened every sensation. He grabbed his dick, and used it to tap my lips. I opened up, and he slipped his length inside my mouth. I felt each pulse of his arousal in time with the pounding rhythm of my heart.

I matched Xander’s rhythm as he moved inside me, my hand stroking myself in time with his thrusts. My tongue explored him – tasting and teasing until he came, spilling cum into my mouth. I savored every drop while continuing to pleasure myself.

Then it was Xander’s turn to taste me. His eyes held mine captive as he shuffled down the length of my body and then took me into his mouth.

Jeezus. The heat. The suction. The man. Those were all I needed to release myself – thick strands of pleasure pulsating through me.

This time, we didn't need to declare our love out loud; our actions spoke louder than any words ever could.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

I stepped out of the bathroom, a trail of steam curling around me. The scent of bacon and coffee wafted through the air, a sure sign that Xander was up and about in the kitchen. It was the first day of our mid-season break, and he was already making it special.

My phone buzzed on the bedside table, pulling my attention away from the delicious smells. A video message icon flashed on the screen; it was from Xander. Curiosity piqued, I swiped to play the message.

My sunshine filled the screen, his face sincere. "Berry," he began, "my love for you goes beyond words." He paused for a moment before continuing with an earnestness that made my heart flutter. "Our life together... It's an adventure, you know? And there's no one else I'd rather share it with." I could hear his heart in every word he spoke.

Wow.

This man.

I paused the video to catch my breath. My sunshine loved to kid around and I loved that about him. But then there were the moments when he got serious, reflective. And I was never prepared for them.

From my vantage point near the entrance of our bedroom, I had a clear view into the kitchen where my sunshine stood watching me watch him. His eyes were soft and a

tender smile graced his lips.

I hit the play button again.

”And for tonight,” digital Xander added, an impish spark lighting up his eyes, ”check your drawer – not where we keep... well, you know...”

I burst out in laughter at his vague reference to our secret stash. It was as if he was shy about openly admitting that”s where we kept our arsenal of lube, condoms, and an assortment of sex toys. His bashfulness about it was endearing. Heat suffused my cheeks as I recalled the times we”d delved into that drawer together.

I hit the stop button and glanced at him. “Are you playing shy, Sunshine?”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile, even as he gestured for me to continue playing the message.

“... but the second drawer,” digital Xander said.

His cryptic instruction left me puzzled but intrigued enough to follow through.

I yanked open said drawer, and my eyes caught something unexpected. Nestled amongst our belongings were two tickets for an Orion Skye concert that night.

A flood of memories came crashing back to me. It took me back to the day when we were gearing up for game seven in a series against the Giants – a repeat of last season”s match-up. Jester had been relentless with his taunts, telling Xander he should count himself lucky that he was on our side because the Grizzlies were going to thrash Xander”s former team. Jester had even gone as far as wagering that I”d be the one to score the winning goal.

Xander's eyes had twinkled with mischief as he looked at me and retorted, "We'll see about that." Then he threw down a challenge, promising me a reward if, indeed, I scored the deciding goal. In jest, I'd suggested he ought to get me tickets to see Orion Skye – my favorite rock band.

I did score that winning goal and Xander... well, let's just say he celebrated in his own passionate way. He'd fucked me so good that night, I'd seen stars. But I hadn't expected him to take my offhand comment seriously.

My heart swelled with warmth at this thoughtful gesture from him; it was so quintessentially Xander. Tossing both my phone and the tickets onto our bed, I strode towards him – my personal ray of sunshine. His smile was a lighthouse guiding me home after a long journey at sea.

In the blink of an eye, I closed the gap between us. And crashed my lips to his. The taste of Xander's lips, a heady combination of sweet and salty, hit me like a freight train. It was a searing kiss, fueled by love. I could hear my heart drumming in my chest, beating out a rhythm that echoed his name – Xander. His lips were warm and inviting, responding to mine with equal fervor. A silent exchange of love and gratitude passed between us in that intimate moment.

"Sunshine," I breathed out, the word a ghost against his lips before I withdrew for the briefest of moments. A much needed gasp of air filled my lungs before I eagerly returned to him. "Let me thank you properly." My words trailed off as I lost myself again in the intoxicating sensation of his mouth on mine.

I sank to my knees on the cool floor. My hands trembled slightly as they reached for the waistband of Xander's gray sweats, pulling them down with an almost reverent slowness. He wasn't wearing any underwear – a fact that sent a thrill of anticipation through me.

The sight that greeted me was nothing short of breathtaking – Xander in all his glory, hard and ready for me. My mouth watered at the prospect, and without further ado, I leaned in.

“You’re beautiful, Sunshine.” I breathed him in.

The first touch was exploratory – a tentative lick that had Xander shuddering above me. His taste exploded on my tongue – salty and uniquely him. It didn’t cease to amaze me that every time I did this, it felt like I was doing it for the first time.

Encouraged by his reaction, I took him fully into my mouth.

His low groan echoed through the room as he threaded his fingers through my hair, guiding me. The sensation of him filling my mouth was overwhelming yet addictive – every ridge and vein imprinted on my memory as if it were Braille.

His scent filled my nostrils – musky and masculine with a hint of body wash still lingering from his shower. It was intoxicatingly raw and primal; it spurred me on.

I set up a rhythm then – slow but unyielding. His moans grew louder with each bob of my head until they became desperate pleas interspersed with guttural utterances of my name.

He let out a cry so loud it seemed to bounce off the walls. I could feel his release, hot and pulsating in my mouth. The taste of him, even more intense now, filled my senses.

Savoring the moment, I soaked in the sensations, allowing them to etch themselves into my memory. Eventually, I pulled myself away and rose to my feet. His eyes glazed over with satisfaction. Seeing that pure joy reflected on his face made me the happiest man alive. This was an intimacy we shared – raw and unfiltered – and it was

something I wouldn't trade for anything else in the world.

Xander's fingers weaved through my hair, gripping it tightly.

His mouth crashed against mine with an urgency that was both startling and thrilling. As our lips moved together, he murmured against them – his words were electric currents racing down my spine. "I love tasting myself on your lips," he confessed, his voice husky.

His hand moved lower then, reaching for me with an insistent grasp. But I caught his wrist gently, halting him. "Let's save that for when we come back," I suggested softly. "I want to spend the whole day wanting you."

Xander

The sun hung low in the sky as Ry and I cruised down the highway, windows rolled down, wind whipping through our hair, and music blaring.

"You know," Ry shouted over the roar of wind and guitar riffs, "this is one of my favorite Orion Skye songs, 'Whispers in the Night.' It was their first hit." His green eyes sparkled.

"Really?" I leaned closer to hear the lyrics over the wind. "I don't think I've heard it before."

"You were just a kid when it came out," he teased, flashing me a mischievous grin.

"Hey now, watch it!" I playfully punched him in the arm.

He chuckled. "I love to tease you, Sunshine."

"I know," I smiled up at him, feeling content and carefree in that moment.

We continued to immerse ourselves in Orion Skye's catalog. Suddenly, a silver sedan cut sharply into our lane, its horn blaring. Ry reacted in an instant, shouting and throwing his arm across my body to shield me as he swerved to avoid a collision. The aggressive driver continued without slowing down.

"You okay?" Ry's wide eyes scanned me from head to toe before quickly returning to the road.

“Yeah.” My heart pounded with adrenaline. “What about you?”

“Good, good.” Ry tightened his grip on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white.

“Just keep an eye out for reckless drivers.”

“I will.”

I let out a shaky breath of relief. It was a close call.

By the time we pulled into the parking lot of RockRidge Amphitheater, the stupid, careless driver had receded into distant memory. The floodlights, standing tall like sentinels, greeted us, casting an ethereal glow against the darkening sky. I could feel the bass reverberating through the ground beneath my feet, vibrating through the car as we parked.

“Feel that?” I asked Ry as we climbed out of the vehicle.

He nodded, his eyes sparkling. “Mhm.”

I took a deep breath, inhaling the mingling scents of freshly cut grass and sizzling food from nearby food trucks. The cool breeze carried with it the promise of a night filled with raw energy.

Ry grinned at me. “Smells like a carnival.”

I chuckled, nodding in agreement. “And sounds like one too.”

Ry linked his arm through mine as we made our way towards the entrance, the sound of laughter and cheers growing louder with each step. We joined the snake-like queue

winding around the amphitheater's perimeter. Eager fans were adorned in band t-shirts and leather jackets. I could feel the excitement building within me. Electricity danced along my skin.

When we finally stepped inside, the sight that greeted us was nothing short of breathtaking. The stage loomed large before us, bathed in a kaleidoscope of colorful lights that danced and flickered.

I reached out to touch the rough surface of the railing, feeling the cool metal beneath my fingertips as I leaned forward to take in the spectacle before me. It was a moment of pure magic, a fleeting glimpse into a world where anything was possible, and I was grateful to be experiencing it alongside Ry.

We were weaving our way through the masses when a familiar face surfaced in the crowd. "Xander? Is that you?"

I froze, my brain struggling to process the unexpected sight. "West?" I blurted out, my voice tinged with disbelief.

"Yeah, it's me." West's grin was wide.

My surprise gave way to warmth as I wrapped my cousin in a hug. Spotting West at a rock concert was like finding a diamond in the rough; our family ties were more frayed threads than tightly woven fabric. Yes, I knew I was waxing metaphorical, but it was the truth. Our mothers, two sisters living states apart, weren't close. They never were. Not even when they were kids. So it was hardly surprising that West and I weren't as close as one might expect for cousins.

A year or two younger than me, West's presence stirred up memories of shared Thanksgiving dinners from our childhood. But those family gatherings had gradually dwindled over time, replaced by sporadic likes on social media posts – our only form

of contact these days.

"I can't believe you're here!" I said, stepping back from the hug. "What are the odds?"

West's smile spread across his face as he introduced the man beside him. "This is my boyfriend, Shane."

"Hey man, good to meet you." I extended my hand to Shane.

Their love story was one I'd pieced together from West's online posts – snippets of struggle followed by hard-earned happiness.

I remembered West growing up straight as an arrow in a privileged world – like mine – yet often wearing a cloud of unhappiness. Seeing him now with Shane, his joy was palpable; he looked light-hearted and free. It didn't matter who West loved; his happiness was all that counted. And I could relate – never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd fall for a guy myself. But here we were, both finding our own versions of love and happiness.

"This is my boyfriend, Ry." I introduced Ry, who extended his own hand in greeting.

"Hey, guys," Ry said over the noise as he shook their hands.

Shane's eyes lit up when he explained that they were in LA because their friend Liam, who was the lead for Liquid Flames, was opening for Orion Skye. They had come along to support Liam with some other friends, who were probably wondering where they'd disappeared to.

With promises to reconnect soon, we parted ways and got even closer to the stage, where the view was incredible.

The air was alive with the energy of the crowd, their voices rising in unison as they sang along with Liquid Flames, belting out their cover of Coldplay's "Yellow." The song was older than I was, but I loved it. I sang along too. Glancing at Ry, I was delighted to see him bopping his head to the beat of the song, a small smile playing on his lips.

Then Liquid Flames transitioned to a more upbeat tune, one that I'd never heard before, but Ry obviously had. He was singing, but I couldn't make out his voice in the midst of the noise of the crowd.

I felt a surge of energy course through me. Seizing the moment, I grabbed my boyfriend's hand and pulled him into my body.

"Come on, let's dance!"

Ry hesitated for a brief moment before giving in, a wild grin spreading across his face. Together, we lost ourselves in the music, spinning and twirling with reckless abandon. The crowd around us cheered and clapped, their energy fueling our own.

I couldn't help but marvel at Ry's transformation. His usual calm and composed demeanor was replaced by a carefree spirit. He wasn't like this everyday – he wouldn't have been my Grumpleberry if he was – but every time he let go, every time he embraced a moment of pure joy and spontaneity, I fell more in love with him.

"Can't believe how much fun this is!" Ry's eyes were shining.

"See? You just needed to let loose."

When the song came to an end, we stood there catching our breaths, grinning like fools.

Liquid Flames finished their set to thunderous applause.

"They were amazing." I definitely had to tell West how much I enjoyed his friend's performance.

"I know, right? Just wait until Orion Skye hits the stage."

After a brief intermission, the lights dimmed once more. The crowd surged forward, anticipation crackling in the air.

Suddenly, the stage exploded with light as Orion Skye burst onto the scene. The lead singer, Lennon, with his wild mane of hair and commanding presence, belted out the lyrics of their song, "Stardust Dreams." Then they executed a seamless segue to "Golden Hearts," an acoustic ballad we'd been listening to in the car.

"Wow!" Ry shouted. "That's what I call skill."

The stage lights flickered, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across Ry's face as he closed his eyes, losing himself in the music. I couldn't tear my gaze away from him, struck by the raw emotion etched on every inch of his chiseled features and the way his lips moved softly, singing along to the lyrics.

"Can you feel it, love? Can you taste the fire?" Lennon's voice soared into the night, the passion behind his words sending the fans into a frenzy.

Without thinking, my hand reached out, finding Ry's and intertwining our fingers together. His grip tightened around mine, anchoring us to each other amidst the pulsating energy of the crowd. We swayed to the rhythm, our connection wordless but powerful as we surrendered ourselves to the beat.

"Damn." Ry's eyes fluttered open as the song reached its crescendo. "This is..."

incredible.”

”Right?” I grinned, still holding his hand.

As the last notes of the song faded, the crowd erupted into squeals and applause.

Lennon stepped back from the mic, allowing Declan, the bassist, to take center stage. ”This next one is for all the couples out there,” he announced, strumming a gentle melody on his guitar. ”It’s called ”Savvy”s Galaxy.””

I glanced at Ry, noticing the way his eyes glistened with emotion as he listened to the romantic lyrics. Taking advantage of the slow tempo, I wrapped my arms around him from behind, our bodies swaying gently to the music.

”You have become my muse. You’re the one that I choose...” Declan crooned, his voice soothing and filled with love. I rested my chin on Ry’s shoulder, feeling the warmth of his skin against mine as we melted into each other.

”Feels like this song was written for us.”

Ry turned his head slightly, his lips brushing against mine, and smiled. ”Maybe it was.” His breath tickled my ear. ”Maybe this entire night was meant for us.”

I pressed a kiss to his sweat-damp cheek. Surrounded by the sea of fans, Ry and I were lost in our own world. The closeness, the intimacy we’d shared throughout the night was truly amazing.

We stayed like that, my arms wrapped around Ry’s waist from behind, our hands clasped in front of him. The rest of the concert was a blur of lights, music, and shared moments between us. We laughed, danced, and sang our hearts out. We swayed together, lost in the music and the moment, our bodies pressed close until the final

notes of the encore faded away.

"Thank you, and goodnight!" Lennon shouted after the fourth encore, and the arena exploded with one final burst of applause before the band disappeared backstage.

Slowly, the crowd began to disperse, leaving behind discarded cups and torn ticket stubs. As we made our way toward the exit, Ry suddenly stopped in his tracks, his gaze fixed on something near the stage.

"Wait right here," he said, squeezing my hand before releasing it and darting towards the stage.

Curious, I watched as he bent down and scooped something up from the ground. He returned, a triumphant grin on his face, and pressed a small object into my palm. Security guards were busy directing the flow of people, and the immediate area around the stage was now accessible.

"Look what I found," he beamed, revealing a worn guitar pick emblazoned with the Orion Skye logo. "A memento from our first concert together."

My heart smiled at the gesture, the significance of the tiny token not lost on me. Tucking the pick carefully into my pocket, I knew it would always be a reminder of this magical night – of the way Ry and I had come alive beneath the stage lights, fueled by the power of music and the undeniable pull of our connection.

"Thank you," Ry whispered, pulling me in for a tight embrace. "Tonight was... indescribable."

"Best. Concert. Ever."

Ry laughed, squeezing my hand. "Definitely up there," he agreed.

We walked arm in arm and guess who we got a chance to speak to before we left? Some of the members of Orion Skye. What a time!

When we finally reached the car, I turned to Ry with a grin. "So, what do you say we make our own music at home?" I waggled my eyebrows suggestively.

He leaned in for a kiss. "I've been wanting to sink my cock in your ass the entire day."

"So what are we waiting on?"

Making love to Ry would be the perfect ending for the day. As we drove home, a feeling of contentment settled over me. This was what happiness felt like.

Bennett

The heat of Arizona hit me as soon as I stepped off the plane, but it was nothing compared to the fire that surged through my veins. The word ecstatic didn't adequately describe the way I felt – I'd been called up by the Pasadena Pythons, just in time for their away game against the Tucson Cardinals. Pythons wanted to have a couple of backup players available, since they anticipated needing additional support during a busy part of the season.

When I entered the arena where the team was practicing, the locker room was already abuzz with activity. The familiar scent of sweat and leather filled the air, and the guys greeted me with cheers and backslaps. Most of them knew me from my previous stints on the team, filling in when players were injured or otherwise unavailable. But this time was different; this time, I was determined to make the opportunity stick.

"Bennett!" The voice cut through the cacophony of player chatter, pulling me out of my own thoughts. I turned to see Angus Steele, the left wing who'd once been my teammate back in the day, at a time when we'd shared locker room banter and post-game beers. His approach was confident, his hand already extended in greeting.

"It's been ages, man." I shook his hand, even as I took note of his well-kept appearance – he looked like life had been treating him well.

"Bennett, you old dog," he responded with a hearty clap on my shoulder. "Still tearing it up in LA?"

I nodded. The question fell heavy in the air between us, but it could have just been

me and my stupid insecurities about not reaching my full potential on the ice. "Doing what I can," I said, feeling an invisible weight settling on my shoulders.

For a split second, an unexpected surge of jealousy coursed through me. It wasn't about Angus's success or his effortless charm; it was about Xander. My mind flashed back to a time when I thought my boyfriend might have felt something for Angus – a pang that still managed to sting even now.

But just as quickly as it came, the moment passed and I found myself laughing at one of Angus's jokes – nostalgia replacing jealousy as we reminisced about our shared past in hockey. Our conversation flowed easily back and forth like a well-practiced drill on ice.

While Angus and I exchanged playful jabs, my thoughts strayed to Xander, my partner in love and life. I found myself envisioning a future where we both had made it to the NAPH, skating on the same team. It was more than just a dream; it was a wild aspiration that seemed almost too good to be true. As lovers, as teammates, as each other's constant support – we would live the fantasy together. My sunshine's laid-back personality would blend seamlessly into any environment, his easy smile lighting up locker rooms and post-game celebrations alike.

Some of the other Pythons congratulated me and exchanged friendly words. Their encouragement fueled my determination even more: I needed to seize this chance and show everyone, including myself, that I belonged at this level.

We geared up for practice, and I took a moment to steel myself. I could feel Xander's presence with me, his love and support giving me the strength to face the games ahead.

Stepping onto the ice for practice, the chill of the rink seeped into my bones. The familiar scrape of blades against the surface echoed around me as my temporary

teammates zipped past, focused and intense. My heart raced with anticipation, and I closed my eyes for a brief moment, grounding myself. Stay focused. You've trained for this.

Coach Hicketts called out to me, his voice carrying over the icy expanse of the rink. "Give them a taste of your talent, Bennett."

My heart pounded as I pushed off from the edge, my blades slicing through the ice with a satisfying crunch. The world blurred around me as I gathered speed. The cold air whipped against my face. I could almost taste the anticipation in the air – tonight was game night and we were all itching to get out there.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my temporary teammates Luke Wylie and Casimir Krygier huddled at one end of the rink, their heads bowed in intense conversation. Their sticks tapped rhythmically against the ice – non-verbal communication that only hockey players understood.

Over by the goalpost, Jordan Dell was crouched low, like a cat ready to pounce. His eyes darted back and forth as he anticipated each incoming shot. His gloved hand moved with lightning speed, snatching almost every puck out of mid-air.

"Ace! Hayes! Gus! Get your asses over here!" Coach Hicketts barked out orders to our forwards, Akeem, Hayden and Angus, who were idly skating around. They instantly fell into line and skated toward Coach, their faces serious but determined.

I slowed down when Coach beckoned me to join the other forwards. We shared curt nods – an unspoken pact that we were prepared for whatever came our way.

"As forwards," Coach Hicketts started once we had all assembled around him, "you are key tonight."

His words hung heavy in the crisp air as we absorbed them. This wasn't just another game; it was THE game and we all knew what was at stake. The Pythons hadn't been doing that great this season, the antithesis to how we Grizzlies were performing in our league.

I tightened my grip on my stick, the puck sniper. The worn texture of its handle provided a comforting anchor amidst the adrenaline coursing through my body. Let's do this... for ourselves... for our team... for victory... After Coach issued some instructions, the forwards went about our drills while he summoned the defensemen.

"Nice work, Bennett," Angus called out, grinning, as he effortlessly maneuvered around me. "Keep it up."

"Thanks, man," I panted, sweat already forming on my brow. One shift at a time. Make every play count.

Later that night during the game against the Cardinals, I was filled with a mix of nerves and excitement. The arena buzzed with energy and the crowd roared with excitement. The Cardinals had home ice advantage.

My palms were damp in my gloves, but I refused to let my anxiety get the better of me.

As soon as the puck dropped, the game exploded into action. We battled fiercely, exchanging scoring opportunities and delivering hits with brutal precision. My heart raced in my chest, fueled by a surge of adrenaline.

I was immediately struck by the heightened intensity of the game at the major league level, as I usually was when I got these golden opportunities to play there. The pace was faster, the hits harder, and I fought to hold my own, determined to make an impression. As I weaved through my temporary teammates, I could almost envision

Xander beside me, his steel-blue eyes shining with pride and encouragement.

When I scored the first goal, a rush of happiness flooded through me, lifting my spirits.

"Way to go, Bennett!" Luke Wylie shouted, clapping my shoulder with a grin.

"Keep it up, boys!" Coach Hicketts shouted from the bench, yet his voice was barely audible over the roar of the crowd.

We continued to dominate, and when the final horn sounded, we emerged victorious with a score of 3-0 against the Cardinals. The locker room erupted in cheers and celebrations, and I was swept up in the euphoria of the win.

"Great job out there today, Bennett," Angus said as I towelled off my sweat-soaked hair.

"Thanks," I replied, unable to keep the grin from my face. "Couldn't have done it without you guys."

We were a whirlwind of excitement, exchanging high fives, fist bumps, and hugs as we celebrated our victory. Exhausted but elated, we headed to the hotel, knowing that rest was essential for us to perform well again tomorrow. No time for lingering celebrations; it was back to business as we aimed for another win.

The adrenaline from the game still pulsed through my veins, making it hard to wind down, but I couldn't wait to share my excitement with Xander. As soon as the team got back to the hotel, I headed up to my room, grateful that I wasn't sharing it with another player. My heart still raced as I stripped down to my boxer briefs and picked up my phone. With a quick swipe, I FaceTimed my boyfriend.

And there he was, in all his naked glory.

In our bed.

I drank in the sight, a feast for my starved eyes. His golden hair tumbled down like cascading sunlight, catching the dim light in our bedroom and turning it into a halo around his head.

It was no secret that my boyfriend was hot, and I counted myself lucky to get to touch him, taste him, breathe him in to my heart's content. But now that we were hundreds of miles away from each other, I appreciated the gift that he was even more. His body was a work of art, every muscle sculpted as though by an artist with an eye for beauty and strength combined. His broad frame filled my vision, each contour and curve etched into my mind like lines on a map leading to undiscovered treasures.

And there... Oh God! The sight of his cock left me breathless. Long and thick, it stood proudly against his thigh, commanding attention yet not demanding it. It was just another part of him – natural, unashamed.

A wave of desire washed over me. My heart pounded as my gaze roamed over him again and again. The raw masculinity emanating from him was intoxicating; I felt drunk on it.

"Damn," I whispered to myself under my breath as I watched him unabashedly. He's fucking beautiful... and he's mine. "Hey, Sunshine." My voice was gruff. "How was the game against SF?" We Grizzlies had had a home game against the San Francisco Falcons. While I was away in Arizona, one of the reserves had stepped up to fill my spot on the ice.

"We barely scraped by, but we pulled off the win. Final score ended up 4-3," Xander leaned in, grin widening.

I raised an eyebrow. “You come through with that goal you promised?”

He chuckled. “Not just one, but two. Tank and Jester each snagged one too.”

“Hell yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“And what about you? Keep your end of the bargain?”

“Got it done, 3-0. Nail-biter from start to finish. Potted the first one; Steele handled the rest.”

His grin lit up my world. “Congratulations, baby. I knew you’d crush it. How’s my ice tiger?”

”Grrr.” Who would have thought I could be this childlike? ”I’ll ignore the fact that you just called me that.”

He laughed, and I fucking missed that sound deep in my bones. ”I love you, Berry.”

”Love you more. Wish you were here with me.”

His expression changed, heat flaring in his eyes. ”Prove it.” His words were a husky demand, and I swallowed hard. ”Show me just how much you miss me.”

I glanced around my hotel room. It was obviously empty, but still, the thrill of possibly getting caught made my cock twitch. Pulse racing, I tugged at the waistband of my boxer briefs. My cock sprang free, slapping my stomach. ”Like what you see?”

Xander’s breath hitched. ”Fuck, Ry, that’s... I want to taste it.” His voice was hoarse, and I could practically feel his mouth on me. ”I want to taste you, hear you moan my name.”

"Oh, fuck, Sunshine. I wish you could for real." I slipped my underwear down my legs and tossed it beside me on the bed. My hand wrapped around my shaft, stroking myself to full hardness.

"I know, baby, me too. But for now, just think about me, got it? When you're touching yourself, pretend it's me, okay?"

"Yeah, I can do that." I mumbled, my mind swirling with images of Xander on his knees, those perfect, pouty lips wrapped around my cock.

"That's it, Ry," Xander cooed, his voice like honey. "Tell me how you'd fuck me if I were there."

"I'd tease you first, strip you slowly, trail kisses down your body, until you were begging for me."

"God, Ry," Xander moans. "I'd beg, baby, I'd beg for you."

I moaned, stroking myself faster. "I'd spread you open, tease your hole with my tongue until you were trembling. Then I'd tease just the tip of my cock inside."

My lover's hand was on his dick, matching my movements, stroke for stroke. "Ry, fuck," Xander whimpered, and I could hear the desperation in his voice. "Ry, I want you. I want you so bad."

"I know, Sunshine, I know." I growled. "I want you too. I'd make you feel so good." My hand worked me faster now. "I'd slide in your hole, inch by inch, taking my time, savoring every moan, every gasp you made."

"Fuck, Ry, yes," Xander cried out, and I could see him, thighs trembling, fingers gripping the sheets. "Faster, Ry, I can't take it anymore!"

"I'd fuck you so hard," I managed through gritted teeth, eyes closed, my orgasm barreling towards me, images of Xander's face behind my lids, his sounds of ecstasy fueling my fire. "And when I came, I'd fill you up, marking you as mine."

"Ry!" Xander shouts. I knew that sound. Sunshine was coming. "Oh God, Ry, that's... that's..."

My orgasm crashed over me, and I breathed Xander's nickname like a prayer. "Sunshine, fuck, Sunshine."

After we caught our breath, I was finally able to speak, my voice husky. "Next time, I'll be the one on my knees for you."

Bennett

The aroma of freshly made guacamole and the sound of ice clinking in glasses filled the air as Xander and I hurried to set out snacks and drinks for our guests. I felt a flutter of excitement in my chest, mixed with a slight edge of anxiety. Hosting gatherings wasn't something I'd done before meeting Xander, but somehow he'd managed to bring out a more sociable side of me.

I was back in LA after my successful two-game stint with Pasadena, and the team had emerged victorious on both occasions. Even better, the Grizzlies had been on an eight-game win streak and were on our much-anticipated holiday break. To say we'd been killing it on the ice was an understatement, and I was man enough to admit that my boyfriend outshone us all. Speaking of my boyfriend, he and I were heading to my folks' place in Maple Valley the next day, Christmas Eve.

"Think we have enough chips?" Xander asked, his eyes twinkling mischievously as he glanced at me.

"Only if Jester doesn't devour them all within the first five minutes."

Just then, the doorbell rang, and we shared a quick, anticipatory look before rushing to open the door. As our teammates and friends filed in, Xander and I greeted them with broad smiles. He was such a people person. So at ease with himself and others. I didn't know what he saw in a crotchety old man like me. But I was glad he decided to keep me, love me, you know? He could have had his pick of anyone he wanted, but he wanted me. Sometimes I couldn't believe how lucky I was that a great person like him wanted and loved me despite me not being the most lovable person.

”Hey, Ry! Xander! Nice place you got here,” Jester called out, immediately making a beeline for the snack table and jolting me out of my musings.

”Thanks, man.” I tried to suppress a chuckle as he started loading up a plate with chips and dip.

As everyone settled into the living room, lively conversations sprang up, filling the space with laughter. Xander and I circulated among our friends, ensuring everyone felt comfortable and included.

The look on my teammates’ faces about a week ago when Xander and I invited them had been priceless. In all the years I’d been on the team, I’d never done something like this before. When Xander brought it up, I wasn’t feeling it, but he convinced me by giving me the blowjob of my life... and so here we were.

”Still buzzing from last night’s game, huh?” Tank’s biceps bulged as he mimicked a particularly impressive check he’d delivered.

”That game was legendary!” Maestro shot back, a grin spreading across his face.

Xander, Jester and I exchanged amused glances.

We relived the glorious 5-1 victory of the previous night, getting into a lively discussion about the twists and turns of the game – from Jester’s jaw-dropping slapshot that had whistled past the opposing goalie like a bullet, to Xander’s two-minute penalty for high-sticking that had us all biting our nails down to the quick.

The banter flowed as easily as a well-executed power play. We ribbed each other about missed opportunities and celebrated clever moves with hearty laughter and playful jabs.

"Let's hope we can keep that momentum going," Coach Mack added, his imposing figure commanding attention even in such a casual setting.

Xander slipped an arm around my waist. I smiled at the intimacy of the gesture.

"Definitely, Coach," I agreed.

As the evening went on, I felt more and more at ease in this new role as host, thanks in no small part to my boyfriend being by my side. My heart swelled with gratitude for the way he'd helped me open up and connect with our teammates on a deeper level. I glanced around the room with a feeling of satisfaction. I knew without a doubt that I wouldn't trade these moments for anything.

"Hey, why don't we break out some games?" Xander suggested. "We've got a pretty great collection."

"Sounds fun." Jester rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"Alright." I grinned at the thought of teaming up with Xander against our friends. "Let's form teams. Xander and I will partner up and take you all on."

"Ooh, a challenge." Tank laughed, flexing his muscular arms playfully. "You're on!"

We agreed on Pictionary and we all paired up – Tank and Jester, Maestro and Coach Mack, and my boyfriend and me, of course. They insisted that since we were the hosts of that day's gathering, Xander and I should go first. Our other guests decided to play card games.

Xander's face was a mask of concentration as he pulled out a card from the deck. He glanced at it briefly, his eyebrows knitting together before he picked up the marker with an air of determination that would have been better suited for a battlefield than a

game of Pictionary.

His hand flitted about, leaving behind scribbles that looked more like hieroglyphics than anything recognizable to modern humans.

"Is it... a tree?" I ventured tentatively, squinting at the bizarre collection of lines.

"Nope," Xander replied without missing a beat, adding another squiggle to his "masterpiece."

"A dinosaur?" Maestro guessed from the sidelines, earning himself a mock glare from Coach, who reminded him it wasn't their turn yet.

"Wait! Is it... a spaghetti monster playing golf?" Jester chimed in with an absurd guess that sent us all into fits of laughter.

Xander just shook his head in mock exasperation while I wiped tears from my eyes.

"Baby," he pleaded dramatically. "Please tell me you see it."

I stared hard at his drawing once more, but all I saw was chaos on canvas. "A rocket launching?"

"Come on, X-Man, is that supposed to be a dog or a mop or a dog on a mop?" Trust Jester to say something silly, but maybe he was onto something.

Amidst the laughter, I realized how much I loved being Xander's teammate off the ice. Our connection went beyond the physical; it was a partnership built on trust, understanding, and mutual support. And when it was just us against the others, I was invincible. Although at this moment, I couldn't for the life of me figure out what on earth my sunshine had drawn.

"What is it?" Maestro groaned, staring at Xander's stick figure drawing.

"Seriously?" Xander laughed, shaking his head. "It's a scuba diver."

"Obviously," I teased, rolling my eyes playfully.

"Alright, you two," Coach interjected, grinning broadly. "It's Jester and Tank's turn."

With each round, our competitive spirits and determination to win grew, but Maestro and Coach emerged the winners. "Congratulations," I called out, clapping them on their backs.

Xander and I sucked at Pictionary, but I didn't care. Looking around the room at our friends – our found family – I knew we'd already won something far more precious than a board game.

"Guys, let's take a break and refuel," Xander suggested, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Good idea. I'll grab some more snacks and drinks."

Xander trailed behind me as I made my way into the kitchen.

Our hands moved simultaneously towards the same bag of pretzels, brushing against each other. That simple contact sent an unexpected surge through me. My body was a live wire whenever I thought about my boyfriend, and even more so when we were in the same room.

Without warning, Xander's arm snaked around my waist, pulling me closer. His lips crashed onto mine in a passionate kiss. It was raw and intense.

His breath was hot against my ear as he whispered words laced with desire, "I've been wanting to do this for hours." The husky timbre of his voice made me even more aroused.

The moment was shattered by Jester's voice from the doorway. "Hey, you two! Get a room!" he bellowed out with laughter. A chorus of light-hearted teasing followed from our friends.

"I swear, it's like we're magnets for interruptions." I grumbled, rolling my eyes as I pulled away from Xander's embrace. "Can't a guy get a moment of peace around here?"

"Alright, alright," Xander grinned, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "Let's get back to the games."

We played different genres of music. Sometimes the room was filled with the rhythmic pulsing of EDM beats, at other times the raw energy of rock music, or the infectious rhymes of hip-hop and rap tracks. As the night unfolded, I found myself engrossed in a heated match against Tank in my favorite video game.

"Hey Ry, try this," Xander called over the noise, holding out a steaming mug. Earlier in the evening, we'd set up a DIY hot chocolate bar. It was a hit; guests eagerly huddled around it, crafting their own cozy concoctions.

I moved away from the gaming console to join him. The table was laden with different types of hot chocolate – dark, milk, white – each one promising its own unique blend of warmth and sweetness. We also had a variety of toppings: fluffy marshmallows waiting to melt into gooey goodness, whipped cream ready to add that perfect dollop on top, chocolate chips for an extra cocoa kick and colorful sprinkles for those who wanted a touch of whimsy.

I took a tentative sip of the hot chocolate my boyfriend had prepared for me. “Ahhh, baby.” I swooped in and stole a kiss. “It’s delish.”

Xander’s cheeks flushed a rosy pink. “Glad you like it.”

“I do,” I said before taking another sip.

”And don’t forget these, guys.” Xander motioned towards bottles filled with peppermint and caramel syrup.

The room quieted as we took our time, savoring our drinks. For once Jester was doing something constructive with his mouth instead of yapping.

”How about some live music to wind down?” Maestro grabbed his guitar he’d put in the corner of the room when he arrived.

”Sounds great.” Xander settled into the couch next to me, our fingers interlocking as we watched our talented friend take center stage.

Maestro strummed the first chords of a familiar tune, his voice rich and soulful as it filled the room. I could see the way his passion for music captivated our friends, their smiles and nods of appreciation only encouraging him further.

Maestro sang, and Coach’s eyes were on him. It was a look I recognized all too well – admiration – but there was something else, some other emotion I couldn’t quite pinpoint.

When Maestro finished the song, the room erupted in applause. He looked up, his eyes meeting Coach’s for just a moment before quickly looking away, his face flushed pink.

”Bravo!” Jester hollered, clapping enthusiastically. The rest of us joined in, praising his performance and requesting more songs.

As the night wore on, friends began to say their goodbyes, leaving Xander and me at the doorstep, waving them off.

”Tonight was amazing,” Xander murmured, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. ”Thanks for opening up your home like this.”

”Thank you for making it feel like a home,” I replied, my heart swelling with gratitude and love.

We shared a tender moment, breathing in the same air, our foreheads touching.

All too soon we had to close the door and turn to clean up. I couldn’t help but smile. I was already looking forward to the next time we hung out with our friends. Is this even me? Maybe an alien has taken control of my body.

At the end of the day it didn’t matter anyway. The connection, the warmth, the sheer joy of being with my sunshine – that was what truly counted in my life.

Xander

My nerves were on edge as Ry and I set out for his family home. His hands were steady on the steering wheel, a stark contrast to the flutter in my chest. We'd FaceTimed them a few times since Ry and I'd come out, yet there was still a twist of unease nestled deep within me. This was all new – not just the trip, but the idea of spending time with someone else's family.

The relationship I had with my parents as a child – before our recent blowout – felt more like a business deal than anything else. The only times they seemed to remember they had a son were during those drab business parties they threw – events where I played my part as the obedient son while they played at being loving parents in front of their wealthy friends.

Christmas – the so-called “most wonderful time of the year” – was anything but for me. It served as an annual reminder that I was just a prop in my parents' world – a lonely rich kid whose existence mattered only when it boosted their image.

But this year might be different. Despite my jitters about navigating unfamiliar family dynamics, there was this spark inside me that wouldn't go out – an excitement that whispered this Christmas with Ry's family might actually live up to its reputation.

“Ready?” Ry asked, glancing over at me with a reassuring smile. It was as if he could sense my nervousness.

I took a deep breath, pushing aside my nerves. “Yeah, I'm ready,” I said with more confidence than I felt. For once, Christmas held promise instead of disappointment.

"Hey, do you mind if we make a quick stop at my parents' place?"

Ry raised an eyebrow. "Your parents' place? Why?" His eyes searched my face for clues before quickly returning to the road.

"It's a surprise. They're in Paris—" I knew this because Judy kept tagging me on her social media posts. I guess she wanted to keep up the appearance that all was well with the Harrison family, "—and I want to show you something."

Not surprisingly, his curiosity got the best of him, and he had to ask questions. "Come on, Sunshine. Give me a hint. What's this surprise about?"

I chuckled, enjoying keeping him on edge. "Nope, not telling. It's more fun this way."

He let out a playful huff, his lips curling into a small smile.

I gave him directions, which he followed without a hitch. "Almost there."

The wrought-iron gates of my parents' estate loomed before us as we pulled up. Ry's eyes widened, taking in the impressive sight.

"This is your home?"

"Yeah, it was until I left for college." For reasons I couldn't fathom, I was embarrassed. "It's... something else, right?"

"Xander, I knew your family was loaded, but..." Ry's voice trailed off, leaving the statement hanging in the air.

I shrugged it off, not wanting to dwell on the material aspects of my life. "You know

I would've exchanged all this for the support and unconditional love of my parents, right?"

Ry looked at me, his eyes filled with understanding. He drew me into a hug, his arms wrapping around me tightly. "You've got my unconditional love and support, Xander. Always."

We held each other close, whispering words of love and affirmation into each other's ears. He felt like the missing piece I'd been searching for my entire life.

"Come on," I said, pulling away slightly, my hand still gripping his. "Let me show you around."

As we walked through the foyer, Ry took in everything. The high ceilings adorned with crystal chandeliers made us look small, the polished marble floors reflecting our every step. Intricate moldings framed the walls, and expensive art pieces caught the light just right, illuminating their beauty.

"Wow, this is... impressive," Ry admitted, craning his neck to take in every detail.

"Wait till you see my room," I said, leading him up the sweeping staircase. "That's where the real magic happens."

"Magic, huh?" Ry's voice held a teasing edge as his hand found a confident hold on my ass cheek and squeezed it playfully. "I think we make magic every time we fuck."

His words drew an amused snort from me, and I couldn't help but respond with a saucy comeback. "Really? Didn't know you were some kind of bedroom sorcerer."

Before I could even process his reaction, he was all over me. He tackled me with such force that we both stumbled backward, not even registering that we were on the stairs.

His lips crashed onto mine and I reveled in the sweet slide of his tongue.

But as abruptly as the kiss started, we pulled apart. A devilish grin stretched across Ry's face as he backed away slightly. His smug expression brought back the reason why we were here – I had something upstairs in my bedroom that I wanted him to see.

My heart raced with anticipation as we approached my old bedroom. I wanted him to see the truth behind my passion for hockey.

"Here it is." My hand trembled slightly as I reached for the doorknob, taking a deep breath.

As the door swung open, I stepped back, allowing Ry to take in the room.

"Wow, Sunshine..." Ry's voice trailed off as he stepped inside, his hand reaching out to touch one of the posters. "I had no idea..."

I stepped beside him, our shoulders brushing and the warmth of his body radiating against mine. "I wanted you to know how much you mean to me, Ry. You inspire me, on and off the ice."

His eyes swung around the room and took in the room in its entirety. It was adorned with hockey memorabilia, posters lining the walls, and various merch items scattered throughout the space. All with him in it.

Ry's gaze locked onto mine, searching for answers in the depths of my gaze, his eyes wide. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing with the motion. "Sunshine...?"

"Yeah." I nodded, a smile forming on my lips. "I'm your biggest fan, Ry." Why am I suddenly feeling so shy? My face is damn hot, man.

”But I thought Steele was your hockey idol.”

”His game was important for me to study, but it was you who really got to me; I just didn’t realize it back then,” I admitted. ”I was nine when I caught my first glimpse of you on the ice, scoring a double against Calgary. That moment, something clicked – I knew I wanted to be a left winger... and I dreamed of being on the same team as you, sharing the forward line.”

”Sunshine...” Ry’s voice was barely above a whisper.

”I know it’s a lot to take in,” I murmured, ”but I wanted you to see... everything.”

Ry breathed out, his fingers gently tracing the line of my jaw, sending sparks of electricity dancing across my skin. ”Thank you. This means more to me than you know.”

Our lips connected in a soft, sincere kiss. Everything outside of this moment faded away, replaced by the heady sensation of Ry’s mouth on mine.

When we finally broke apart for air, Ry gently pressed his forehead to mine, and his lips broke into a smile.

Ry’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He plucked it out and glanced at the screen. “It’s LoLo. She wants to know why we aren’t there yet.”

Bennett

Pulling up to my childhood home, I felt a familiar rush of nostalgia. The place was modest – nothing fancy – but it was home. Mom, or Lisa as everyone else knew her, stood waiting on the porch, her face lighting up like a Christmas tree when she saw Xander and me.

”Ry!” She enveloped me in a hug that could rival a bear’s. ”And Xander, welcome,” she said, turning her attention to my boyfriend with an equally warm embrace.

Inside the house, Dad – James – was reclining in his favorite armchair while Connor and Chloe were engaged in some sort of sibling rivalry over who got control of the remote. The sight of them made my heart swell; this was family.

I’d never imagined this moment – introducing a male partner to my parents. Not out of any prejudice; it was just that all my life I believed I was straight. If someone had quizzed me three months ago about my ideal partner, I would have sketched a woman – hair color irrelevant, body shape inconsequential, equipped with a sharp wit, a heart for others, and an emotional intelligence that could temper my innate grumpiness.

Yet there he was: Xander. A tall, muscular, sexy man with a radiant personality as bright as the sun, that lit up any room he entered. The warmth spreading through my chest wasn’t only because of the way my family accepted Xander but because of the recognition that love didn’t adhere to predetermined blueprints or societal norms. Love wasn’t in the playbook, but then again, neither was he. Watching Xander effortlessly charm my family, I realized how beautifully unpredictable life could be.

But as we settled into the evening, I thought of the predictability of life. No matter what was happening around us, the clock continued to tick away. I couldn't help but notice how much older my parents seemed since my last visit. It wasn't drastic but subtle changes – a few more lines etched onto their faces, their movements slightly slower than before... It hit me like a punch to the gut: time wasn't standing still for any of us. But still, their faces were lit up by the joy of having their children around them.

I glanced around at the place where I was raised – the worn-out couches, the chipped coffee table – and felt a pang of regret. Growing up in the Bennett household meant stability and unconditional love – qualities money couldn't buy – but it didn't mean financial comfort. And now? Now it was my turn to provide that for them. My hockey career had to take off soon so I could give them more than this. They deserved all the finer things in life after all they'd done for us kids.

Laughter filled our small living room once again when Chloe playfully shoved Connor off the couch amidst cheers from Xander. I smiled. This was home, and it was perfect in its own way.

"Any single guys on the team, Ry?" Chloe's eyes twinkled mischievously as she pointed to a photo of our team on Xander's phone.

"They're way too old for you, LoLo," I shot back, unable to hide my grin. She's kidding, isn't she? "Plus, they spend more time in front of the mirror than on the ice."

"It's not that serious, Ry. Dad's like seven years older than Mom."

Before I had a comeback, Mom popped her head from the kitchen. "I was twenty-two when I met your dad, young lady," she said with mock sternness. "I was an adult."

"Mom!" My sister's cheeks flushed pink. "You're embarrassing me in front of our

guest.”

Xander raised his hands in mock protest. “Hey, I’m just here for the entertainment.”

Chloe threw a pillow at him, laughing. “Alright, alright, I’ll back off. But seriously, Ry, if there’s ever an opening for a team mascot, let me know.”

“Only if you promise to wear a giant foam grizzly costume,” I shot back, chuckling. “And how’s indoor track treating you?” I asked, shifting focus. “Still outrunning everyone?”

She rolled her eyes at me, but her shining eyes gave away her pride. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

I turned to Connor who was still sprawled on the floor from Chloe’s shove. “And our resident basketball star? Still missing three-pointers?”

“Only when I’m aiming for your head.” He grabbed a cushion and tossed it at me.

Chloe and Connor – inseparable twins always ready with a comeback. And there I was – their elder brother and favorite target – always stirring the pot just for fun.

Xander’s lips curved into an amused smile. “Hey, Ry,” he chimed in, picking up a cushion “maybe you should focus on your assists here at home too.” And then he tossed the cushion my way. It landed on my head with a soft thud.

The living room erupted in laughter once more, and what ensued was a pillow – cushion – fight for the ages. The perfect blend of family chaos and camaraderie.

Later that evening, the twins and I huddled around our Christmas tree, armed with garlands and ornaments, ready to decorate the bare branches in true Bennett tradition.

"Ry," Chloe called out from behind me. "Pass me that star ornament."

I handed her the glittering piece without looking away from Connor's attempt to drape tinsel over his head like a wig. "You look like an alien who crash-landed into a craft store," I commented dryly.

Connor stuck his tongue out at me while Chloe snorted with laughter beside him.

Meanwhile, Xander had been roped into kitchen duty alongside Mom. Their heads were bent over a steaming pot on the stove. The rich scent of Mom's famous Christmas Eve stew wafted over to us – a hearty concoction of beef chunks slow-cooked in red wine with carrots and potatoes. My stomach growled loudly at the promise of it.

I watched Dad set out plates of freshly baked gingerbread cookies next to mugs of hot cocoa topped with marshmallows.

And when we sat at the table to eat our simple, yet delicious meal, Dad regaled us with colorful tales of his construction days. His deep chuckle filled the room as he recounted mishaps involving misplaced bricks and stubborn cement mixers.

Hours later, for the second time that day, a pang of guilt twisted my gut. The first time was when we arrived and Mom said that Xander and I would stay in Connor's room during our short stay there. And now, as I watched Connor haul his pillow and blanket to the living room couch, I felt just as guilty. His room, which used to be mine before I left for college, was now serving as a makeshift guest room for Xander and me.

"Hey, it's no biggie." Connor shrugged it off with a nonchalant air. The corners of his mouth twitched upwards in an reassuring smile.

Inwardly, I winced. "ConMan, you sure?" My voice wavered slightly, betraying my concern.

Connor gave my shoulder a playful punch. "Absolutely, Ry. Think of it as me doing my brotherly duty, sacrificing my comfort for the greater good of our honored guests." He dramatically gestured towards the couch, as if presenting it to us like royalty.

I chuckled, grateful for his light-hearted nature. "You're a true hero, ConAir. But seriously, I still feel bad about this. You should be the one in your bed, not us."

He waved off my concern with a dismissive gesture. "Nonsense, big bro. Besides, I heard the couch is great for your back," he added with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Who needs a fancy mattress when you have state-of-the-art couch technology?"

I had to laugh at his attempt to lighten the mood. "You're a real comedian, you know that?" We bumped each other's closed fist. "Thanks, ConDuit. I owe you one."

"Hey, what are little brothers for, huh?" His grin widened. "Now, go get some rest. I'll be out here catching up on my beauty sleep. Don't worry about me."

With a final nod of gratitude, I headed back to join Xander in the room. It sucked that I couldn't do better for my family yet. At least Connor was a good sport, and I tried to remind myself, like my brother implied, that it wasn't a monumental sacrifice on his part.

Nestled together in the bed, Xander radiated a kind of warmth that made me feel comfortable. We flipped through old photo albums. Each page held a snapshot of my past, some more cringy than others.

"Would you look at this," Xander chuckled, pointing to an old picture of me sporting

a bowl cut. "Quite the fashion statement, Ry."

I rolled my eyes playfully at him. "Oh, like you were any better with those comically oversized glasses you used to flaunt on social media?"

Our banter continued until Xander's attention was drawn to a particular photo, his voice trailing off in surprise.

"Ry... is this..." His finger hovered over a picture of my mother's mastectomy tattoo – an intricate design of red and blue begonias intertwined with a clock and July 27th etched beneath it – the day of her cancer diagnosis, forever etched in my mind.

"Yeah," I acknowledged softly, feeling a lump form in my throat.

The tattoo was one of the first things I'd paid for when I started getting professional hockey paychecks, a decision made after Mom opted against breast reconstruction surgery following her mastectomy. Instead, she wanted to do something to reclaim her body... to turn her scars into something beautiful. Begonias were her favorite flowers, symbolizing growth, strength, and resilience, she'd often said.

Xander's gaze shifted from the photo to where similar artwork adorned my chest, which was presently hidden beneath my t-shirt. "Ry... your tattoo..."

"Yeah." The design of my tattoo mirrored Mom's but bore a different date – five years after her diagnosis, when she was declared cancer-free.

"When Mom had cancer, the fear that gripped me was like nothing else I'd experienced before – wondering if she would die; watching her grow weak with treatments while Dad juggled construction work and caring for her. But she fought and she survived, and now her strength was etched into our skin and our family's history."

Xander slipped his hand under my t-shirt and his fingers traced the tattoo with a tenderness that made my heart flutter. I saw understanding in his eyes – a silent acknowledgment of its significance.

”Ry, I had no idea...” His words trailed off, both surprise and empathy in his voice. ”I mean, I knew about your mom’s cancer but...”

I leaned in to kiss him softly, preempting his next sentence. ”It’s okay, Sunshine. I knew you were curious about it.” I pressed his hand, which was still tracing the tattoo, against my chest.

His curiosity was one of the things that endeared him to me. Mom’s cancer journey wasn’t something I talked about often but he deserved to know.

”Thank you for sharing this with me, Ry,” he murmured.

”You’re part of my life now,” I replied with a gentle smile. ”I want you to know everything about me... the good and the bad.”

We shared a quiet moment of understanding before we returned to flipping through the photo album.

On Christmas morning, I woke up to the smell of cinnamon and pine. The Bennett household was alive with the hum of holiday cheer as we all shuffled out of our rooms, rubbing sleep from our eyes. Mom and Dad exchanged sleepy smiles.

We all chipped in to prepare breakfast and then gathered around the table. Pancakes stacked high, bacon crisped to perfection, and scrambled eggs so light, they melted in my mouth. We laughed over cups of hot cocoa topped with marshmallows melting into sweet oblivion.

Afterwards, we moved to the tree twinkling with lights and tinsel. The presents piled underneath were nothing fancy – just simple tokens of love wrapped in festive paper. We had a tradition in our family: instead of expensive gifts, we opted for fun novelty items that would bring laughter rather than empty wallets.

Xander's gifts were thoughtful. For Mom, he found this hilarious apron printed with "World's Okayest Cook." Dad received a mug proclaiming "Bald is the new Sexy," which sent him into fits of laughter while he rubbed his hairless head gleefully.

Chloe squealed when she unwrapped her gift – a sparkly unicorn shower cap – and immediately put it on her head. Connor's face turned beet red at his present: a t-shirt emblazoned with "World's Best Brother... Sometimes."

The rest of the day passed in a blur as we played board games and card games that made us laugh till our sides hurt. And, of course, Chloe and Connor started a mock snowball fight with balled-up wrapping paper.

My heart was light as I looked around at my family enjoying each other's company.

Inside me stirred an emotion stronger than joy – contentment maybe? It wasn't about the presents or even the delicious food (though that certainly helped). It was about us, the Bennetts and the newest member of the family, my boyfriend Xander. It was about this moment, cozy and warm, filled with love and laughter.

And as I sat there, sipping on my eggnog and watching my family in their Christmas sweaters, I couldn't help but think: This is what Christmas is all about.

Xander

When we got back to the Bennetts' residence after we'd taken a walk around the neighborhood, we saw Connor holding a controller, but his focus was not on the video game he was playing. His brow furrowed with worry lines that were too deep for his age. Ry shot me a questioning look and I subtly tilted my head towards the door – maybe I should give them some space. But Ry shook his head, motioning for me to stay put.

“What’s up, ConTract?” Ry said, sitting beside his brother.

I sat on Connor’s other side.

“Just thinking, you know?” He swallowed hard. “I don’t think I should go to college.”

Ry’s eyebrows furrowed. “Is there a reason why?”

“We can’t afford it.”

His words hung in the air. The family’s financial struggles weren’t news to me, but hearing it from Connor – it was different.

”B average won’t get me a scholarship and working part-time just means splitting focus.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair. ”And then there’s student loan debt...”

I glanced at Ry; his face reflecting the weight of Connor's words.

I could cover Connor's college fees several times over. God knows a PHL paycheck could barely cover housing, much less college tuition fees, so it would probably take more than Ry's savings to meet the cost. Yet something held me back from voicing these thoughts out loud; it didn't seem right; Ry was a proud man. In the meantime I would be a comfortable presence.

Ry looked Connor straight in the eye. "You will go to college and get your degree in game design. Get me?"

Connor met his brother's gaze unwaveringly. "Got you."

"Let me worry about college. Your job is to study hard and get good grades. Promise me that."

"I promise."

The brothers hugged and my heart was filled with relief. Connor's focus should be on being a teenager and not adult issues like paying bills.

It wasn't long after that Ry and I headed upstairs to get ourselves ready to head back to LA.

Xander

The door to our apartment shut with a soft click, and Ry leaned against it, his chest heaving from the exertion of the night's game. His body was a canvas of bruises and aches – a testament to the fierce battle we'd fought on the ice against Edmonton. He'd also been pushing himself really hard during practice, which got me scared. Since his tense conversation with Connor, I could see the weight of worry on Ry's shoulders.

"Damn, that was rough," he muttered, forcing a smile despite the obvious pain etched on his face.

A knot of dread twisted in my chest, and my gaze locked onto him as he grimaced with each labored step. I'd been on the receiving end of brutal games before, but watching Ry bear the brunt of it stirred discomfort within me in a way I couldn't put into words. The sting of defeat was still fresh, making our journey back home heavy with silence.

The game had been an uphill battle from the start. Our defense was solid with Tank and Jester holding their ground like immovable fortresses, their skates carving angry lines into the ice as they fended off aggressive advances. Maestro was a wall in front of our net, swatting away puck after puck with an agility that was almost cat-like.

But then the power play for Edmonton began. Our team found ourselves a man down after Landon, one of our forwards, was called for tripping, and the pressure mounted. Ry sped across the ice, attempting to fill the gaps in our formation, but our opponents exploited our disadvantage with ruthless efficiency. Despite Ry's lightning speed and

valiant efforts, Edmonton managed to capitalize on the power play, netting three goals in quick succession. It was a frustrating turn of events, and as the goals piled up against us, the tension on the ice became palpable.

As for me on the left wing, I tried to break through their defense line only to be met with a brick wall every single time. The sound of the horn signaled the end of our struggle. It wasn't just the physical exhaustion that weighed on us, but also the bitterness of defeat on our home turf that stayed with us long after we left the rink. With another game looming in just two days, there was no time to dwell on our defeat, though. We'd have to shake it off and get back on the ice tomorrow.

"Here," I said, guiding Ry towards the couch. "Let me help you."

I stripped him of his clothes and settled him onto the cushions. Determined to ease his discomfort, I fetched the ice pack, wrapping it carefully in a towel. Then I dimmed the lights and queued up a familiar comfort sitcom – a rerun of *The King of Queens* – hoping it would help him relax.

"Sunshine, I'm not ready for the retirement home just yet," Ry protested with a chuckle as I approached, but his eyes spoke volumes of gratitude.

"Shh." I applied a cold compress to his aching muscles. "Let me take care of you." Before knowing and loving Ry, those words would have felt foreign to me because I wasn't one for grand declarations, but something about Ry made me want to be and do everything for him.

The time ticked by and his breathing slowed down. His eyelids dropped as the cold seeped into his weary muscles and hopefully offered some relief. When fifteen minutes were up, I gently removed the ice pack from his legs, hoping he wouldn't wake up too abruptly. At that moment, Doug Heffernan was in the middle of one of his trademark rants about something trivial, providing a light backdrop to the room.

Ry stirred slightly, his eyelids fluttering as if he was about to wake up. I held my breath, hoping he wouldn't be startled awake by the sudden absence of the cold compress.

I slid in beside him, snuggling close. We were both tall and broad, but I didn't mind being crowded on the couch with him. I slung my arm around his middle, wanting to be close to him.

"Xander?" Ry whispered during a lull in the show.

"I guess I woke you up, huh?"

He raised my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss on the back of it, then another. "Thank you."

"Anytime," I replied softly, intertwining our fingers. "I've got to apply the ice pack on your muscles again in about an hour."

Ry's gaze met mine; the intensity in his green eyes set my pulse racing. "Plan to do anything to pass the time?"

Laughter from the TV filled the room. Time slowed down as our faces inched closer, and my breath hitched in anticipation. I couldn't believe that after all of these months had passed, every hug, every kiss, every fuck felt like I was doing it with him for the first time. I hoped that feeling lasted for the rest of our lives.

"Sunshine?" His lips brushed against mine. The sensation ignited a fire within me.

I captured Ry's bottom lip with my teeth, gently tugging at it. He responded eagerly, his tongue teasing the edge of my mouth, seeking entrance. I granted him access, and he explored every inch, leaving no part untouched.

”God, you taste so fucking good,” Ry murmured against my lips, his voice heavy with lust.

”Likewise,” I managed to gasp out, feeling my body flush with heat under his hungry gaze.

His hands roamed my body, tracing the lines of muscles beneath my clothes. I found myself moaning softly into the kiss as Ry’s fingers grazed over a particularly sensitive spot on my side. My heart pounded wildly.

”Well?” Ry asked, pulling back slightly.

“Well, what?”

“What are we going to do to pass the time?” He wagged his eyebrows. Yeah, I knew what my man wanted.

I shrugged, feigning ignorance. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“Maybe you should sit on my dick.”

“Weren’t you the one in pain?”

“My muscles hurt, not my dick.” Ry looked pointedly at his hardness. “Now sit on it already.”

“Deal,” I stood. “I’ll be back in a few.”

”God.” Ry growled when I got back. His eyes hungrily roved over my nakedness. ”You’re fucking beautiful, you know that?”

I grinned, feeling a thrill of excitement course through me. "Oh, I think I might have an idea, Ry. You make me feel beautiful."

"Come here," Ry purred.

Crawling towards him, I couldn't take my eyes off his gaze, which seemed to pierce straight through me.

I straddled his hips, feeling the heat of his body beneath mine. The air between us crackled with electricity as we shared a wicked grin.

Now that I understood the deeper meaning behind the intricate tattoos adorning his pecs, more than just for aesthetics or because it was a trend, I couldn't resist leaning in closer. With a sense of reverence, I planted gentle kisses on each and every inked design, tracing my lips along the curves and lines. The rough texture of the patterns against my skin made my heart race with anticipation as I explored the art on his body.

Ry trembled slightly under my touch, his breath hitching as my hands roamed over his well-defined abs. I wanted to touch him everywhere at once. My fingers tangled in his hair, still damp from the shower he took at the arena after the game, pulling him closer as our tongues danced together. His hands found their way to my hips, gripping them tightly as he pressed me against him. Our bodies moved in sync, desperate for more contact, more heat.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," he murmured, leaning in for another hungry kiss.

"Keep talking like that, and I might fall for you all over again."

"Don't stop falling, baby."

"Can't get enough of me, huh?"

"You have no idea." Ry's voice was thick with lust as he watched me intently. "Show me how much you want this."

I squirted some lube we'd left on the side of the couch that morning onto my fingers before slowly, deliberately circling my entrance.

Yeah, you guessed it. I'd taken Ry's eggplant up my ass a few times by then. Don't ask me to recount what it was like bottoming for the first time, which was right after the Orion Skye concert. Let's just say it was a comedy of errors that had a happily ever after ending.

With a shuddering breath, I pressed one finger inside, feeling the familiar stretch and warmth welcoming me. Ry's voice, husky and raw, echoed in my mind. His words weren't poetry or sweet nothings; they were raw and carnal. "Can't wait to be inside you," he growled. "Want to shoot my load so far up in you, you'll taste my cum." And soon I added a second finger, then a third, each movement causing a delicious friction that made me crave more. A craving only Ry's dick could satisfy.

"Fuck, Sunshine," Ry groaned. "You're so beautiful like this, getting yourself ready for me."

I coated Ry's impressive length, my own desire growing as I imagined sinking down onto him. "I can't wait to take all of you."

"God, yes. Ride me, baby."

"Just sit back and relax; I'll do all the fucking." Slowly, I positioned myself above him, feeling the head of his cock pressing against my entrance. Steeling myself, I took a deep breath before starting to sink onto him, our bodies merging together.

"Fuck," I whispered, feeling Ry's thickness stretch me in an exquisite blend of pleasure and pain.

He moaned, gripping my hips as he urged me closer, deeper. "You have no idea how amazing you feel."

My breath hitched as I continued lowering myself onto him, my body trembling with anticipation and need. The connection between us felt like fire, consuming us both in its heat and intensity.

"Talk to me, Ry," I begged. "Tell me what you want."

"Hard, Sunshine." Ry's voice was thick with desire.

Taking his command to heart, I began moving my hips, riding him with an increasing urgency. The friction between our bodies sent intense waves of pleasure through me, and I moaned in ecstasy.

Ry gasped. One of his hands gripped my waist and the other my hip. "You feel incredible. So tight... so hot."

"Fuck, Ry." I panted, sweat coating my brow as I continued to fuck myself on his thick shaft. "Your cock feels so good inside me... like it was made for me."

"Damn right." He growled, his eyes locked onto mine, full of lust and passion. "I can't get enough of this ass. You're driving me wild, baby."

"Is that so?" I teased, smirking despite the overwhelming sensations coursing through my body. My muscles clenched around him involuntarily, drawing a deep groan from Ry's lips.

"Argh! If you keep doing that, I won't last much longer." A sensual smile formed on his lips, betraying his enjoyment.

"Maybe that's what I want," I replied coyly, increasing my pace as I bounced up and down on his rock-hard length. "I want you to lose control, Ry. I want you to come undone because of me."

"Fuck," he swore, his fingers digging into my skin as he fought to maintain his composure. "You're going to be the death of me."

"Then let's make it a beautiful death," I whispered, leaning down to capture his lips in a searing kiss. Our tongues tangled together, mirroring the fervor of our bodies' connection.

Ry moaned into my mouth, his breathing becoming more ragged. "I'm getting close."

"Me too." I felt the familiar coiling of pleasure in my core. "Come with me, Ry. Let's."

"Yesss." Ry's hands slid up to cup my face as the intensity of our movements reached a fever pitch.

My man cried out, his body tensing beneath me as we both surrendered to the torrent of ecstasy that crashed over us. The heat of his release filled me, and the sensation pushed me over the edge as well.

My own climax stole the breath from my lungs. I collapsed onto Ry's chest, the aftershocks of our pleasure still coursing through us as we clung to each other, hearts pounding in sync.

"Damn," Ry murmured after a moment, running his fingers through my hair. "That

was... something else.”

”Best little death ever?” I joked weakly, earning a chuckle from him.

”Absolutely.” He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. ”But I’d like to stick around on this side and enjoy you for a long time.”

”Deal,” I whispered. I wanted to snuggle with my lover for a little while, but I had to clean us up and apply the ice pack on his sore muscles because we had practice the next day.

Bennett

Dawn's soft light filtered through the curtains as I tiptoed out of bed a few days later, careful not to disturb Xander's sleep. Today was a special day, and I was determined to make it unforgettable. Barefooted, I headed to the kitchen to start the ball rolling.

Cracking eggs into a bowl, I whisked them, imagining the smile that would soon grace my baby's face. Bacon sizzled in the pan, its aroma mingling with freshly brewed coffee. The breakfast tray was shaping up beautifully.

"He's going to love this." I tried to ignore the nagging thought that the bacon might be a tad too crispy. I placed sliced strawberries on the plate, arranging them meticulously.

Balancing the tray, I slipped back into the bedroom. Xander's sleepy eyes met mine with a smile, like a sunflower opening up in the morning light. His gaze landed on the breakfast-laden tray, and his face brightened, a sight that flooded my chest with warmth.

"Happy first of many birthdays together, babe." Emotions welled up inside me. I cleared my throat. "I hope we get to celebrate all your future birthdays together."

His soft "Thank you" was followed by him pulling me down for a kiss that tasted of sleep and morning breath but was sweet nonetheless. It was tender and full of promise.

As we broke apart, I noticed his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. My heart

dropped, fearing I might have stirred up a painful memory.

“My parents... they never really celebrated my birthday.” Xander’s face twisted into a wistful expression. “Being born on December 30th seemed like the worst luck in the world, at least to my mom. ‘Alexander, dear, your birthday is just too close to New Year’s Eve.’” His voice softened with a hint of bitterness. “My earliest memories are of their annual New Year’s Eve party, where they entertained their wealthy friends and business associates and claimed they were celebrating my birthday too.” He paused, staring out the window, lost in thought. “They never had a separate celebration for me.”

With a nonchalant shrug, he pulled himself out of the painful memory and continued speaking. “As I grew older, I learned to ignore my birthdays altogether.” He swung his gaze to me and said, as if the thought had suddenly struck him, “How did you know it was my birthday?”

“It’s my business to know everything about the man I love.”

Xander chuckled, but there was an undercurrent of emotion in his laughter. “I’m embarrassed.” His cheeks flushed a deep red, and he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. His eyes darted away, unable to meet mine. “I can’t believe how emotional I am over a stupid birthday...”

I stepped closer and gently tipped his chin up, ensuring our eyes met. “The only people who should be embarrassed are the ones who failed to acknowledge their son’s existence. And there’s absolutely nothing stupid about your birthday.” I hoped my voice was steady and reassuring to his ears, but just in case, I held his gaze for a moment longer, letting my words sink in. Then I smiled and lightly squeezed his shoulder. “Now let’s eat before breakfast gets cold. And brace yourself, babe. I have a lot planned for you today.”

My boyfriend's eyes sparkled. "This is my first truly celebrated birthday," he said as he set the tray carefully on the floor. His gaze shifted back to me, intense and predatory, like a hungry lion sizing up its next meal. "Lose the robe, Ry."

My mind went blank for a moment. "But..." I stuttered, taken aback by this change of events.

"Off. Now." His command was firm as he positioned himself at the center of the bed, legs splayed invitingly.

Swallowing my surprise, I complied and let the robe slide off my body.

"Get the lube and come here," he instructed again, patting his lap.

Well, that was an invitation I couldn't refuse. With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I quickly followed my man's instructions. The warmth from his hand seeped into my skin as it wrapped around the nape of my neck, pulling me into a dizzying kiss while simultaneously prying the lube from my grip. He deftly applied it to both our cocks before tossing the tube aside.

"Wrap your legs around me," Xander whispered against my lips as he hoisted my thighs onto his shoulders. Obliging him willingly, I tightened my grip around his neck with anticipation humming under my skin.

With my legs draped over Xander's broad shoulders, I pulled him closer – his hands gripping my hips as our bodies moved in a rhythm that was as merciless as it was passionate. The friction between us was intoxicating – the way our erections slid against each other, setting a pace that had my heart pounding in my chest.

"Xander," I gasped out, my voice hitching as the pleasure spiked. His name tasted sweet on my tongue, like the finest of wines or the rarest of delicacies. His grunts of

satisfaction were music to my ears, low and primal, driving me further into this wild frenzy.

The scent of him filled my nostrils – sweat and musk mingling with the faint hint of his body wash. It was an intoxicating blend that made me dizzy with desire.

Our eyes locked together; his were dark and intense, burning with passion. The sight of him, strong and powerful yet so tender in his touches, overwhelmed me.

“I need you,” he breathed out against my skin, his lips brushing against mine in a tantalizing tease before claiming them with fervor. His words echoed in my mind like a mantra, reinforcing what our bodies already knew – we needed each other.

My fingers dug into his back while our groins continued their dance, every brush of skin against skin drawing out moans from both of us. The sensation was overwhelming, our bodies slick with sweat.

“I can’t hold back...” That familiar tightening sensation coiling within me was like a spring ready to snap at any moment.

His response came through gritted teeth, “Neither can I...” And then we surrendered to the pleasure together; climaxing in unison as we rode out wave after wave until we were spent, our bodies entwined.

Later, when we entered the locker room to get ready for our pre-game preparations, Xander discovered the other surprise I had orchestrated. Balloons floated from the ceiling, banners adorned the walls, and streamers crisscrossed them. In the center stood a table with a birthday cake decorated in our team colors: teal, turquoise and maroon, surrounded by a group of our smiling teammates. Jester, wearing a silly birthday hat, busted out an impromptu dance that had us all in stitches. Then he presented Xander with a card signed by everyone.

"Damn, Ry, you really went all out." The birthday boy grinned, his eyes sparkling.

"Anything for you." I'm not gonna lie; I was relieved that the surprise had been successful. "Now let's win this game for your birthday."

The guys cheered.

As we prepared for the game, my mind kept drifting back to that sleepy smile, my lover's body pressed against mine. Love and desire coursed through me.

Focus, Bennett.

The arena lights cast a warm glow on us as we entered the final period, sweat glistening on our bodies. Our breaths came out in huffs, visible in the chilly air. Xander was playing like a dream

"Come on, boys! Let's do this for Xander!" Adrenaline coursed through my veins.

"Copy that, Bullet!" That mischievous glint in Jester's eyes never faded even in the heat of battle.

With teamwork and sheer will, we fought tooth and nail against our opponents. Each goal was a victory not just for us, but for Xander's birthday too. When the horn sounded, we emerged victorious with a score of 3-1. We could hardly contain our excitement as we threw our arms around each other, celebrating our hard-fought victory.

"Damn, you guys were on fire tonight." Xander beamed as we made our way into the locker room.

"Of course, we had to give you a proper birthday win." I grinned, leaning in for a

quick kiss before we were pulled apart by our teammates, clapping our backs and sharing hugs.

The night was filled with camaraderie, but it was the moment we returned home that I had truly looked forward to.

"Thanks, Ry. This day has been incredible." Xander wrapped his arms around me, his body fitting perfectly against mine.

Warmth and fulfilment washed over me, knowing that I had brought so much happiness to the man I loved. The meticulous planning and execution – every bit of it was worth this moment. Settling into the familiar contours of our worn-out couch, I pulled Xander close to me. In my hands, a customized keepsake box rested, its polished surface gleaming in the muted light. I handed it over to him, watching as his fingers traced the engraved words etched on the lid – "To My Sunshine. Strength. Love. Victory. Always. Berry."

"Open it," I encouraged gently, my heart pounding in anticipation of his reaction.

My boyfriend's eyes widened as he took in the intricate design and craftsmanship. He carefully opened the wooden box, revealing a small collection of our shared memories – photos, ticket stubs, the pick from the Orion Skye concert, and other mementos from our relationship.

"This is amazing." His voice was thick with emotion. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Every moment we've shared has been priceless. I wanted to give you something that symbolizes our love and commitment to each other." My own emotions threatened to overwhelm me.

"Words can't express how grateful I am for everything you've done today," Xander murmured, pulling me into a tight embrace. "I love you, Berry."

"Love you too, Sunshine," I held him close, our hearts beating in sync. "And if you ever tell anyone about the bacon, I'll deny it."

Xander

Steam enveloped the glass shower doors as Ry and I took turns lathering each other's bodies, water cascading down our skin. Our lips met in a heated kiss, tongues dancing together while our hands roamed freely. Goosebumps raced across his shoulders as I trailed kisses along his neck and collarbone, venturing to his hardened nipples.

"Sunshine, you make me feel so good." Ry moaned, his breath rapid and shallow.

I circled behind him, pressing my chest against his back, and licked a slow, deliberate line up his spine. He shuddered at my touch and I gently nudged him toward the tiled wall. My erection strained against his lower back, the urgency building within me.

"I want to make you feel incredible."

As I gazed at him from behind, my heart skipped a beat. His backside was undeniably perfect. "Your ass is the cutest, sexiest thing I've ever seen." I couldn't resist dropping to my knees in front of it, my fingers trembling with anticipation. "I want to worship every inch of you." The heat radiating from his body was almost suffocating, but I couldn't get enough.

Ry arched his back, inviting me closer and driving me wild. My senses were overwhelmed by the intoxicating scent of his skin and his toned muscles flexing under my touch. I parted his cheeks, burying my face between them, and inhaled deeply. "God, I love how you smell." His scent was intoxicating – a mixture of eucalyptus and wood sage and man filled my nostrils, making my heart pound against my chest like a wild drum.

"Xander..." Ry whimpered my name, his legs quivering.

Forming a small "o" with my lips, I blew a gentle stream of air onto his hole. He moaned louder and glanced back at me with a playful smirk. "Are you blowing out a candle on a cake or something?"

"Your ass is more delicious than my birthday cake."

"You say the sweetest things." Another groan escaped his lips. "No wonder I'm so in love with you."

A rush of warmth spread through me at his words, and I let out an openmouthed gush of warm breath over him again, teasing him, making him anticipate what was to come. I paused for a moment, drawing it out before diving in, my tongue exploring his hole.

Ry's moans filled the steamy shower, each sound driving me further. I was lost in the taste, the sensations, and the pure essence of him.

"Tell me what you want, Ry," I whispered, my tongue gliding over his entrance, teasing him mercilessly. His moans grew louder, the sound mingling with the steady patter of water droplets in the shower.

"Sunshine... please," he whimpered, his fingers curling into fists against the tiled wall. I reveled in the control I had over him, and yet, I wanted nothing more than to make him feel incredible.

"Please what?" I asked playfully, my mouth forming a ring around his sensitive hole. A low chuckle escaped my lips when his body trembled beneath me, unable to find the words to express his desire.

"Please... just do it," he finally managed, grinding his hips back against me. "I need you so bad."

"Your wish is my command," I murmured, pressing my tongue deep inside him, alternating between the flat part and the narrower probing tip. My free hand gripped his hip, steadying him as I continued my sensual exploration.

"Fuck, Sunshine." Ry gasped, his voice trembling with pleasure. "You're making me crazy... in the best fucking way."

I smiled at his compliment, my own arousal mounting as I heard the sincerity in his voice. "Good, that's exactly how I want you."

I continued pleasuring him, letting my teeth graze his ass cheek gently, earning a delightful little butt shake from Ry. God, that was the second cutest, sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

"More," he begged, spreading his legs wider, giving me access to his most intimate parts. I swiped my tongue along his taint, causing his legs to buckle. I rose to my feet quickly, catching him before he could fall, my arms encircling his waist.

"I've got you." It was then I realized Ry's dick hadn't been touched yet – his arms had been bracing him against the wall while I devoured him. "Now it's time for the main event." I turned him around and lifted him so he could wrap his muscular legs around my waist.

My name escaped from his lips, a low and guttural groan. I couldn't look away from the intense desire burning in his eyes, like a wildfire waiting to consume us both.

I positioned myself at his tight entrance, the anticipation causing me to tremble slightly. The world slowed as I pushed into him gently, feeling the way his body

yielded beneath mine.

The sound of his sharp intake of breath echoed in my ears as I continued my slow invasion, each thrust sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. His heartbeat was a frantic rhythm against my chest, matching the pace of my own.

"Xander," he gasped out between ragged breaths, his voice sending chills through me. His hands clung to me tightly as if he was afraid I would disappear if he let go.

"Hold on," I whispered back into his ear, each word laced with promises of pleasure yet to come. My mind was filled with thoughts only of him – how he felt beneath me, how he tasted on my tongue... Every sensation amplified by our connection.

As I moved inside him, every moan and sigh from Ry fueled me further.

His name fell from my lips over and over again like a mantra as our bodies moved together in perfect harmony – Ry and Xander... Xander and Ry... Until there was no beginning or end to us anymore – just us lost in each other.

"I'm close," Ry whispered, his body tensing. And then, with a blissful cry, he found his release; the sight of him unraveling before me was all it took to push me over the edge as well.

"Fuck, Ry," I breathed, feeling my own orgasm wash over me like a tidal wave as I filled him. The world outside the shower ceased to exist, and in that moment, it was just us – united, connected, and completely, utterly lost in each other.

As the rush subsided and reality began to creep back in, I glanced at my lover. He was coming down from his high as well.

"What's the time?"

He released an arm he had around my neck and glanced at his waterproof watch. His eyes widened. “Damn it! We’re late.”

I hastily disentangled myself from him and we both rushed out of the bathroom. Glancing at my own watch, I couldn’t believe how much time had passed. Forty minutes had evaporated like the warm water droplets on our skin.

We had a podcast slot to fill. The thought sent adrenaline rushing through my veins as we raced against time to get dressed and head out to the arena.

Traffic was another beast altogether: unpredictable and unforgiving. My mind reeled with thoughts about potential shortcuts and alternate routes to get us there faster while battling against my post-coital haze.

The shift from intimate serenity to this frantic scramble was jarring – like being yanked from a warm dream into a cold reality. But there was no denying it; we had let ourselves get carried away with passion and now we were paying for it – racing against time.

The arena had a life of its own – a living thing made up of players yelling and sticks clashing, reverberating through the walls. The place reeked of sweat-soaked jerseys and day-old popcorn – an odd blend that somehow smelled like home to me. The chill from the ice rink seeped into the corridor, nipping at my face as we darted past.

The thud-thud-thud of our footfalls echoed off the bare concrete under us, broadcasting our lateness in no uncertain terms.

As we neared our destination – the podcast studio – I could already feel its familiar hum vibrating through my bones. It was a small room tucked away in the corner of the arena. The scent of burnt coffee wafting from its entrance mingled with the lingering aroma of cold steel and rubber from players’ gear nearby.

Every detail around me was amplified by adrenaline – each sound sharper, each smell more potent – wrapping me tightly within this world that revolved around hockey pucks and radio waves.

”Xander,” Ry huffed, ”I swear if we’re late because you couldn’t find your socks...”

”They’re not just socks, Ry,” I retorted between gasps for breath. ”They’re woven from the hair of a rare Tibetan yak.”

Ry snorted as we skidded around a corner, narrowly avoiding a collision with an unsuspecting janitor.

We burst into the broadcast room. Sliding into our seats with seconds to spare, we slapped on our headphones and grinned at each other.

”Close call,” I muttered under my breath as Ry chuckled.

The microphone was live now and there was no turning back. We launched into an animated breakdown of last night’s game, the adrenaline from our mad dash still pumping through my veins.

”Let’s not forget about Jester and Tank,” I said enthusiastically, ”those two defensemen were like brick walls out there.”

Ry chimed in. ”Absolutely. And Maestro? What a performance! He was practically doing ballet in that goal post.”

Our banter flowed effortlessly as we dissected plays and praised performances.

”And let’s give ourselves some credit too,” Ry added cheekily towards the end. ”A 4-1 victory isn’t something to sneeze at.”

I laughed heartily before adding my own shout-out, "That's right. Bullet and X-Man – scoring goals and taking names."

A smirk tugged at the corner of Ry's lips as he scrolled through his phone, searching for fan reactions. "Ah, here's a good one." He held up his screen for me to see. "@RoaringSuccess, I'm counting down the minutes until puck drop."

"So are we." We'd nailed the series against Chicago last night and were getting closer to punching our tickets to The Cup playoffs.

Ry's thumb swiped to reveal another message. "And this one says, "Can't wait to hear the X-Man and Bullet spill some locker room secrets."" He glanced over at me. "Looks like our fans are dying for some behind-the-scenes dirt. Think they can handle the prank war stories?"

I let out a mock sigh, shaking my head. "They'll eat it up. Remember when we filled Tank's locker with ping-pong balls? He was finding those things for weeks."

"Yeah, and guess who had to listen to him whine about it every single day? Me."

"You were a good sport about it, though. And what about when we swapped Maestro's coffee with decaf? The look on his face when he couldn't figure out why he was so tired."

"Yeah, well, he kept trying to blame me for it. Like I have nothing better to do than mess with his coffee."

I smirk. "Classic. But hey, can't spill all our secrets. Gotta keep some tricks up our sleeves."

"Absolutely," Ry gave me a pointed look. "A little mystery keeps things fun. Plus, we

need to make sure we still have pranks left to pull on each other.”

”Exactly.” I was unfazed. ”Who knows what we”ll come up with next?”

Ry muttered, ”Hopefully something that doesn”t end with me cleaning up a thousand ping-pong balls.” But there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

The instant I flipped the switch for the call-in segment, I heard a familiar voice, one of our team’s die-hard fans. ”Hey, X-Man and Bullet, love the show!” The excitement in his voice was palpable.

”Thanks, man! What”s your question?” I asked, ready for the usual game-related queries.

”Well, it”s more of an update. Just saw on social media – Xander, you”ve been called up to the Newark Eagles, permanent. How do you feel about that?”

The words slammed into me like an unexpected body check, leaving me momentarily breathless. My heart pounded. A rush of excitement surged through me – after all, the Newark Eagles were in the major league. ”Wait, what?” I managed to stammer out, my mind racing; maybe I’d misheard.

”Yeah, just now. It”s all over social media. Congratulations, I guess?”

But just as swiftly as the excitement came, it receded, replaced by a gnawing anxiety that began eating away at my composure. Thoughts of Ry flooded my mind and how this colossal change could potentially destabilize our bond.

I struggled to process the news. No official briefing had come my way, and yet here I was, hearing about this possibly monumental shift in my life from a loyal pair of ears on the other end of the line. What were the chances that it was nothing more than a

rumor?

Ry's hand gripped mine under the table.

"Uh, we appreciate you calling in," I said, trying to steady my voice.

I fought to keep my expression unreadable as panic threatened to rise within me. My thoughts whirled around this unforeseen twist of fate like a cyclone. Memories of Ry flashed before my eyes – his smile when we joked around after practice sessions, his comforting presence during those late-night conversations about dreams and fears.

Would these moments become just memories now? Would distance create a chasm between us too wide to bridge? The uncertainty was suffocating, each question stoking the fires of fear within me.

This wasn't just about moving teams or cities; this was about risking something precious for an uncertain future – something akin to gambling with your heart at stake.

Oh God. I feel like an actor thrown into a play without any script or direction – unsure of what's awaiting me on stage.

Newark held promise, yes, but at what cost? Would the thrill of playing in the major league be worth the potential loss of something – someone – irreplaceable? The weight of these questions threatened to crush me as I struggled to navigate through this storm of emotions.

The smell of electronic equipment hung heavy in the room, suddenly becoming suffocatingly real. My heartbeat drummed loudly in my ears, drowning out the persistent hum of studio equipment and distant city noise filtering through the soundproofed walls. My palms were slick with sweat against the cool plastic of my

microphone as I tried to regain control over my racing thoughts. It felt as if gravity had increased tenfold; each breath became an effort, each blink was slow-motion.

My gaze flickered towards Ry instinctively. Catching sight of the tempest brewing in his usually calm eyes was like a punch to my chest. It was evident he was as taken aback as I was, but damn if he wasn't weathering it like a seasoned sailor in stormy seas. He squeezed the hand he still held, a gesture of comfort that spoke volumes, and mouthed, "We'll figure it out."

Despite this unexpected twist thrown into our call-in segment, Ry and I soldiered on with our podcast. We transitioned back to engaging with our listeners so seamlessly you'd think our world hadn't shifted on its axis. Internally though, it felt like I was grappling with a whirlwind of emotions, trying to comprehend my imminent departure and its possible repercussions on my relationship with Ry.

I found myself stealing glances at him throughout the show but his face had transformed into an unreadable mask. And then just when we were wrapping up, there was that familiar vibration against my thigh. With a hand that trembled, I slipped the phone from out of my pocket – Coach Mack's name flashing on my screen.

Bennett

The news hit me like a freight train. Had Xander really been traded to Newark? A tightness gripped my chest, while a knot formed in the pit of my stomach. My heart hammered against my ribs. The icy fingers of dread gripped me at the implications this held for us. Yet, I had to swallow my raging emotions; we were still broadcasting live, our listeners hanging on our every word.

His phone, which he still held in his hand, stopped vibrating. Xander glanced at it as if he didn't know how it got there.

And then a thought suddenly hit me. Only this morning, I was having the time of my life with him. Now there was the possibility that our lives were about to change drastically. Was it for the better or for the worse? I didn't know. But the thought was a scary one.

I couldn't help but recall the first time I laid eyes on him, an encounter on the ice that would forever alter the course of our lives. The memory played out like a scene from a movie, the crisp air ringing with the sound of skates slicing through the ice as our eyes met across the rink, not with love but with heated intensity because we were both hungry for the win. First we were rivals, then teammates, and friends, and now he was the love of my life.

I tried to maintain a facade of calm. But beneath the surface, I was drowning in a sea of uncertainty. What would his trade mean for us? For our future? The thought of being separated from Xander, of watching him chase his dreams from afar and not by his side, filled me with a bone-deep ache I couldn't shake.

"Next up." They were two syllables, but each one was hauled from deep within me as we continued with the podcast.

Below the table, Xander's hand sought mine – a silent squeeze that spoke volumes. One minute, his touch was a lifeline, grounding me in the midst of the storm, offering solace and strength when I needed it most. But in the next minute, it did little to quell the ache blooming in my heart at his looming departure. The hum of equipment seemed amplified, reverberating through the room.

Another memory surfaced, this one tinged with laughter and warmth as the team huddled together in the locker room after a hard-fought victory, our bodies still buzzing with the adrenaline of the game. Xander's infectious grin lit up the room as he recounted a particularly epic play, his enthusiasm contagious as we basked in the glow of our shared victory.

But amidst the moments of euphoria were others tinged with a bittersweet nostalgia, like the time we sat together on the balcony of one of the hotels we stayed at when we were on the road, lost in quiet conversation as the city twinkled below us. It was a moment of intimacy that was now all the more precious in the face of our uncertain future. When I stole a glance at Xander, these memories settled over me like a heavy blanket, a reminder of all that we stood to lose when he left.

Why was I being negative? Why was I being my glass-half-empty self again? As Xander and I wrapped up the podcast and bid farewell to our audience, questions whirled in my head. What would my boyfriend's trade mean for us? How could we manage being miles apart? Could we weather this together or would it rip us apart?

"Ry," Xander began, his voice tentative, "about what that caller said..."

I nodded, knowing exactly what he was referring to. "I know. It caught me off guard too."

My boyfriend's gaze searched mine, his eyes reflecting the same uncertainty that churned within me. "Do you think there's any truth to it?"

I hesitated, grappling with the enormity of the question. "Honestly? I'm not sure. But even if it is just a rumor, it's got me thinking..."

"About us," he finished, his voice barely a whisper.

I nodded again, a lump forming in my throat. "Yeah. About us."

Silence settled between us, heavy with our shared apprehension.

"We'll figure it out, Ry," he said, repeating my earlier words to him, his voice steady. "Together."

Xander's words were like a lifeline, anchoring me in the midst of the uncertainty swirling around us. "I know," I replied, squeezing his hand in reassurance. "But it's scary, you know? The thought of being apart..."

Xander's grip tightened, his thumb tracing soothing circles against the back of my hand. "I know," he whispered. "But no matter what happens, I'm not going anywhere. You hear me? We'll find a way to make it work."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, overwhelmed by the depth of his commitment.

I rose to my feet, my arms opened wide. "Come here, Sunshine. Let me congratulate you the way you deserve."

Despite the storm clouds circling around my heart, I locked eyes with him when he also stood. I wanted him to see the sincerity of my words.

His brow furrowed slightly before he stepped into my arms. "We don't know yet... you know how fans can get things wrong. It could just be a rumor." He rested his forehead on my shoulder, and I wrapped him in a hug that felt like a lifeline.

Reality pressed down on me like a leaden blanket.

Using my thumb and pointer finger, I tilted his chin up. "The Eagles would be fools not to snatch you up. And if my memory serves, they're no fools."

He looked at me uncertainly. "You really think so?"

Pressing my forehead against his, I whispered, "I know so."

"But what about us?" His voice was barely audible.

I gave him butterfly kisses on his cheeks. His lips. His forehead. With each press of my lips against him, I felt his body relax against me, little by little. "We'll work things out." I slipped my hands on the back of his head and fingered the soft curls. "You can't get rid of me that easily." I leaned in, tenderly pressing my lips against his in a kiss. Eventually, I pulled back, feeling a bit reluctant to part from the sweetness of his lips. "You got a message from Coach, didn't you?"

My boyfriend's eyes widened as if he'd forgotten he'd received a message from the man. "Yeah, he said I needed to see him at his office, stat."

"Time to go, babe."

A wave of panic threatened to swallow me whole but as we left the podcast room and navigated through the maze-like corridors of the arena, I forced myself to put on a brave face.

But inside... inside I fought a battle of emotions. On one hand was my wish to support Xander in achieving his dreams – he deserved this opportunity more than anyone else I knew. On the other hand was a gnawing fear; fear of losing him to a world beyond my grasp.

We needed to have that difficult conversation about our future, but for now, I would focus on being there for him. His happiness brought me comfort. And ultimately, my love for him outweighed everything else, and I only wanted what was best for him.

Xander

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what lay ahead. With a hesitant knock, Coach invited me in and I pushed open the door and stepped into the office, leaving Ry waiting for me in the hall. Framed photos lined the walls, showcasing teams over the years. On his aged cedarwood desk, there were photos of Coach, who appeared a good twenty years younger, and a blonde woman with a beaming smile holding a bundled up baby.

His steady gaze met mine, and a knot formed in my stomach. He motioned for me to sit in one of the chairs facing his desk.

I sank into the chair. My palms were clammy and my nerve ends coiled like snakes in my gut. "Coach, is it true? Have I been traded up?"

He sighed heavily, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Yes. The news leaked before we could officially tell you. I wanted to be the one to inform you personally."

I felt like the ground had shifted beneath my feet. "Why didn't I hear about it sooner?"

He looked me in the eye, his expression a mix of regret and resolve. "It wasn't an easy decision. You've been an important part of this team, but the Eagles made an offer that the higher-ups couldn't refuse. You're moving up to the major league."

The major league. The words should have filled me with elation, a dream come true. But all I could think about was leaving Ry behind. "Newark," I muttered, the distance

hitting me like a slap. "That's hours away. It's not like Pasadena. How am I supposed to—"

Coach's face softened. "I know, Xander. It's a big change. But this is your chance to play at the highest level. I wish it could have been with Pasadena, but things don't always work out the way we hope."

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to steady my thoughts. "So, what happens now? When do I leave?"

"You'll need to report to Newark by the end of the week," Coach said gently.

By the end of the week? That was the day after tomorrow. How were Ry and I supposed to grasp the tidal wave of change that was about to crash into our lives with my impending move to Newark? Caught up in my internal storm, I nearly missed the next words out of Coach's mouth.

"They're excited to have you, Xander. You're going to be a key player for them."

I nodded numbly, the reality of the situation starting to sink in. My life here, everything I'd built, was being uprooted in an instant. "I understand, Coach." My voice was quiet, subdued. I stood. "Thank you for everything."

The man who was about to be my former coach stood as well, extending his hand. "Thank you for being one of the best. Newark is lucky to have you on their team."

Hearing the news of my trade from sunny California to dreary New Jersey stirred up a whirlwind of thoughts within me. I had managed to sidestep the life my parents had meticulously planned for me: being confined in a starched suit behind an office desk, performing tasks that held no appeal for me. Instead, I was stepping into a life that resonated with my passion, far removed from their scrutinizing and often

disapproving eyes. It was a victory, though not without its bittersweetness. I knew better than to expect their blessings or approval – those were things I'd spent my entire life chasing but never quite attaining.

As I reached for the door handle, I paused and turned to face the man who had returned to his seat. "Do I have any say in this, Coach?" I asked, knowing the answer but needing to hear it out loud.

He shook his head, sympathy in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Xander. The deal's done. You need to report to Newark in two days."

I nodded numbly, the reality sinking in even deeper. My life was changing whether I was ready or not. The trade was non-negotiable; everything had been finalized and approved by the league. I was obligated to move to my new team. But it wasn't just about swapping jerseys and changing locker rooms. It was more than the shift from minor league to major league, more than the daunting prospect of facing off against unfamiliar faces in a different conference. The implications were far-reaching, seeping into corners of my life I'd never thought hockey could touch.

I would have to adjust – not just to a new city, but to an entirely different rhythm of life. I'd be thrust into a whirlwind of new team dynamics, trying to find my footing among relative strangers who'd soon be teammates. Would they accept me? Would I fit in?

And most importantly, what about Ry? He'd worked just as hard as I had, and he deserved his shot in the majors too. I wanted his dreams to come true, not just for him, but for us. If he made it to the majors, maybe... just maybe, we could play for the same team again one day. The idea of being separated was almost unbearable, but the hope of a future together in the majors gave me a sliver of comfort.

But what if that didn't happen? What if Ry never got his chance, or what if we ended

up on teams on opposite coasts? The uncertainty gnawed at me. I didn't want to hold him back, but I also didn't want to face this new chapter alone. I was torn between the thrill of advancing my career and the fear of losing the love we had and the closeness we'd built.

This was an incredible opportunity. I had to make the most of it, for both of us. If I played my heart out, I could get noticed by the right people, build connections, and create a buzz that might reflect back on Ry. I could vouch for him, talk him up to scouts and coaches, and maybe even get him a tryout or two.

Plus, if I became a standout player, the media would come knocking. They'd want to know my story, and I'd make sure they knew about Ry too. Our bond, our journey together – it could bring him into the spotlight.

Oh God, I was super scared. Long-distance relationships were tough; everyone knew that. But knowing it and living it were two different beasts altogether. Could we withstand the strain? Could our bond survive miles of separation and weeks at a time apart?

The uncertainties swirled around me like a tornado, obscuring any semblance of clarity or calmness I might've had before this news hit me. A major life change was on the horizon, its size and shape as yet unknown.

But one thing was clear amidst all these swirling thoughts: this trade wasn't just going to change my career – it was going to change everything. And I didn't know how Ry and I were going to make this work, but I had to believe that we would.

We had to.

Bennett

The door to Coach's office swung open, and Xander stepped into the hallway. He looked sturdy but fragile, like a glass statue. His blond hair, usually tousled, was even more disheveled, as if he'd been anxiously raking his fingers through it during his short conversation with Coach.

His eyes met mine – those eyes that usually sparkled like the ocean on a sunny day were dull, their shine dimmed by his internal struggle. Was it more than a trade to the majors that had passed between him and Coach to leave him looking so... conflicted?

"Sunshine," I began, my voice echoing slightly in the empty corridor. But words failed me as I saw joy and apprehension etched deeply across his features. It was clear that whatever had transpired in that office had left him balancing precariously on an emotional tightrope.

Seeing Xander like this stirred something deep within me. His turmoil felt like my own. Our bond was that strong.

Xander paused, his gaze flicking down to the floor before meeting mine again. He swallowed hard. "It's true." His words hung heavy in the air between us. "I'm heading to Newark. Day after tomorrow."

A wave of emotion crashed over me – pride for my boyfriend, fear curling cold in my stomach at the thought of him leaving, and this gaping hole that opened up inside me at his words.

“Told you they’d snatch you up.” My voice came out hoarse. I gripped around the edge of his jersey and drew him to me. “Sunshine, I’m proud of you.” Cupping his cheeks with both hands, I pressed my lips to his.

Inside though? Inside, it felt like someone was carving out a piece of me with a dull knife.

Intertwining my fingers with his, I led him to our special spot. The arena’s noise faded into a dull hum. Tucked away amidst the sprawling concrete was a small alcove, hidden behind a forgotten maintenance door. It had just enough room for two people to sit shoulder-to-shoulder, surrounded by rough stone walls that were cold and damp to the touch. A single dim lightbulb overhead cast long shadows.

We settled into silence.

Pride welled up at his impending success; yet it was tinged with melancholy – akin to watching your favorite ship sail off into the sunset while you’re left stranded on shore. “I’m happy for you. You know that, right? This is your dream.”

Xander’s response came softly as he traced patterns on my hand with his fingers. “But it’s not what I dreamed for us.”

I swallowed hard, the boulder in my throat making it difficult to speak. “I know. But we’ll figure it out. We always do.”

He looked up at me, his eyes filled with determination and sadness. “I just wish we could do it together, you know?”

“Me too,” I whispered, squeezing his hand. “But this is your chance. You have to take it.”

Xander nodded, his lips forming a thin line. "Promise me you'll keep pushing, that you'll get up there with me."

"I promise." The words were both a vow and a challenge. "We'll make it happen. Just a little longer apart, and then we'll be together again."

I wrestled with this bittersweet mix of joy and sorrow as I studied our fingers laced together. As Xander's departure drew nearer, I felt like a kite about to lose its string; excited for him to soar yet terrified at the thought of standing alone on solid ground.

He pulled me into a tight hug, his breath warm against my neck. "I believe in us, Bennett. I always have."

I held him close, trying to memorize the feel of his embrace, knowing it might be a while before we'd have this again. "I believe in us too, Sunshine. Always."

Determined to make the most of our dwindling time, Xander and I went back to the apartment. The place, filled with memories, seemed louder as his departure loomed. After sharing a frozen pizza in silence, we sank into the worn-out couch and cuddled, letting the familiar fabric cradle us as we grappled with our imminent separation.

The conversation turned introspective. "I'm really proud of you," I said, my voice shaking. "And I'd tell you that a thousand times every day if I could. But... it feels like I've missed my shot, you know? It's a strange combo – happiness for you and pain for me."

Xander's voice was soft as he replied, "If only there was a way for you to join me..."

My mind wandered off to my family – their dreams all interwoven with mine. "I wish it was just about us." As I looked at him, I tried to keep my emotions in check. "But there's more at stake here. My family is counting on me. This isn't just about making

it big in hockey; it's about their future too." I let out a sigh before continuing, "If I make it to the majors – that's college tuition for Connor and Chloe. That's a new house for Mom and Dad where they don't have to worry about leaky roofs or drafty windows anymore."

The thought of Mom sparked another concern – her health. She'd been cancer-free for years now but what if it came back? Making it big would mean affording better treatments if needed.

Tears welled up in Xander's eyes as he looked at me. "If you would allow me to..."

I shushed him gently by kissing him fully on those plush lips of his. Yet his words hung in the air, a reminder of the weight I carried. But as heavy as it was, it was a burden I chose to bear alone for my family.

Xander's arms wrapped around me, his fingers tracing familiar paths on my skin. The physical touch was comforting, but it was more than that – it was the unspoken connection we had, the way we could draw strength from each other in times like these.

"No matter what happens," I found myself whispering into the quiet room, "I want you to know that I'll always be here for you. We'll figure this out together."

He took a deep breath, his fingers entwined with mine. "Ry, I know this isn't going to be easy. But every moment I've spent with you has shown me how strong we are. We can handle this."

I squeezed his hand, feeling the future pressing down on us. "I've never been more sure of anything. You're not just my boyfriend; you're my everything. Distance can't touch what we have."

Xander smiled, a mix of sadness and hope in his eyes. "When I think about the future, I see you in it. Maybe not in the same room every day, but definitely by my side."

"I see the same thing. And we'll make sure it happens, one day at a time."

He leaned in, resting his forehead against mine. "Promise me you'll never doubt that. Even when it gets tough."

"I promise," I replied, feeling the warmth of his breath on my skin. "And promise me you'll remember that no matter where you go, a part of you stays here with me."

He nodded, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "I promise, Ry. We'll get through this."

His words sank into me and settled somewhere deep within my chest. There were no guarantees about what tomorrow would bring, but while the future was uncertain, our love was not.

Yet beneath all this hope and reassurance lurked a gnawing fear – one that was hard to shake off. In less than 48 hours, I knew I would have to let him go. It was a reality that left me grappling with my own vulnerabilities – a stark contrast to the image of strength I'd always strived to project.

As Xander's grip tightened around me and his breath warmed my neck, doubts began creeping in again. Would we really be able to make it work? Would our love withstand whatever storm came our way?

But even as these thoughts swirled in my mind, I held onto Xander tighter still – not wanting to let go just yet – drawing comfort from his presence while I struggled with my inner turmoil in silence.

Xander

The morning sun streamed in, casting long shadows across the room as we busied ourselves with my departure. Bags lay open on the floor, slowly getting filled with my belongings. Ry and I tried to keep things light, our laughter echoing off the walls – a hollow sound that couldn't quite mask the undercurrent of sadness.

As I watched Ry fold my clothes with meticulous care, reality sunk its teeth into me. The countdown had begun; each tick of the clock was another moment slipping through my fingers like sand. I tried to etch every detail into memory – Ry's furrowed brow as he folded my shirts just so, the way his laugh lines crinkled when he smiled... Every second was precious now.

I felt exposed, vulnerable – like an open book for anyone to read. My chest tightened at the thought of being miles away from everything familiar – from Ry. But beneath all that fear and uncertainty was a glimmer of excitement – a new chapter waiting to be written. And as much as I hated goodbyes, I knew this wasn't really one. It was just... see you later.

His hands paused over a pair of mismatched socks – one green, one blue. "These are your lucky ones, right? Don't want you blowing your first game in Newark."

"Wouldn't dream of it." I grinned at him, my heart twinging at his attempt to keep things normal. "Remember game 3 against Buffalo?" The locker room after the game had been a pressure cooker of tension, with everyone stewing in their own disappointment. Ry had been sitting on the bench talking to no one, his brooding eyes fixed on the floor.

Ry's eyes lit up with the memory and he chuckled. "How could I forget? That was a disaster."

"I told you, 'Tough break out there, but we'll bounce back next time.'"

He shook his head, grinning. "I was so pissed – we could have won if our heads were in the game. But I can't believe I said, 'Save your pep talks for someone else, kid' to you."

"Yeah, that was rude."

We both burst into laughter.

"I think one of my favorite memories was when we visited Fur Ever Homes Animal Shelter. Remember the Pomeranian that caught your attention?"

"My attention? It was you who was like a kid in a candy store."

I grinned, feeling the warmth of the memory. "Ahhh. But it was Grumpleberry whose fingers were itching to pet her."

He rolled his eyes. "Only because she was fluffy."

I couldn't resist needling him further. "You secretly adored her," I said, just as I had done back then.

Ry laughed, shaking his head again. "Yeah, yeah. Maybe I did. She was cute."

"Got a little something for you." I fished out a small plush toy from my bag. A Pomeranian, a tiny replica of the one we'd admired at the animal shelter not too long ago.

His eyes ballooned with surprise. "For me?" His voice held an equal measure of disbelief and amusement.

I simply nodded and passed him the plushie, our fingers brushing in the exchange. His laughter bounced around us, light-hearted and playful as he squished the toy in his hands. The back-and-forth banter that ensued felt like a tangible representation of what we were – tender moments peppered with affectionate ribbing.

"Hold on," I cut in before he could retort to my last jest. "There's another thing." Once again, I delved into my bag. Handing Ry a container filled with neatly folded notes, I took a deep breath, the weight of the moment settling between us. "I wanted to give you something to hold onto while we're apart," I explained, my voice steady but my heart pounding. "Every note has a little message for you. And don't worry, you'll know when to read each one."

His brow furrowed in curiosity as he studied the bottle. "How will I know when to open them?"

I smiled, pulling out the first note from the bottle. "See this one? It has today's date on it. Start with this."

Ry unfolded the note, his eyes scanning the words. I could see the emotion welling up as he read aloud, "'Ry, even though I'm leaving tomorrow, we have today. Let's live it to the fullest.'" He looked up at me, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Xander, this is... it's perfect. How did you find the time to do something like this?"

I shrugged, a soft smile accompanying it. "I'd do anything humanly possible to make you happy, Ry. You mean that much to me."

Ry set the container aside and closed the distance between us, wrapping me in a tight embrace. The warmth of his body against mine, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat –

it all felt like home.

We stood there for a moment, just holding each other, letting the impending separation melt away in the comfort of our shared silence.

His eyes were deep pools of emotions that reflected my own feelings back at me. “Thank you,” he whispered, his voice thick. “This means everything to me.”

I pulled back slightly, looking deeply into his eyes. “Love you, Berry.” My heart pounded against my chest as though it wanted to leap out and join with his.

His lips curved into a soft smile at my nickname for him. “Love you too, Sunshine.” I’d never stop loving the way the endearment rolled off his tongue so naturally; it was as if he had been saying it forever.

Ry lowered his head then, and our lips met in a kiss that set every nerve ending on fire. It wasn’t just a kiss; it was an affirmation of our bond, our connection. He kissed me like I was the only thing that mattered in this world – like he’d been wandering through an endless desert and had finally found his oasis.

As Ry’s lips moved over mine with a passion that left no room for doubt about his feelings for me, I got lost in the moment. Each taste of him was like a sip from the fountain of life itself – sweet and intoxicating. His touch gave me goosebumps, and a wave of warmth surged through my body like a wildfire. My dick hardened. I wanted to fuck him so hard, he’d feel me inside him until we saw each other again.

He gently pulled us apart, despite my protests for us to take things further. Grinning, he dipped into a bag in his closet. “I’ve got something for you too.”

Ry handed me a signed team jersey, a collective farewell gift from my former teammates. “It’s a reminder that you’ll always be part of our squad, no matter where

you are.”

As I traced the inked words, each signature felt like a handshake, each message a hug. Jester’s message leaped out in bold, bringing a grin to my lips: If you meet The Great One, tell him I taught you everything you know. Just don’t laugh too hard when he believes it! I burst out in laughter, drawing my boyfriend’s attention to Jester’s witty farewell.

Ry chuckled, his eyes crinkling with fondness. ”Leave it to Jester to lighten the mood.”

I nodded, a warmth spreading in my chest. ”I’ll make sure to remember his wisdom if I ever cross paths with Gretzky. And hey, a little laughter never hurt anyone.”

But Ry didn’t stop there. He revealed another gift – a keychain adorned with two charms: a pint-sized hockey stick and a compact compass. “The hockey stick’s meaning goes without saying; the sport is our mutual passion.” Then he took in a deep breath before exhaling slowly. “But the compass is to remind you that no matter which city you travel to, no matter how far apart we are, you must navigate your way back home to me.”

“God, Ry. You’re killing me here.”

“I’ve got one more thing for you.” Ry dangled an envelope in the air.

“And what’s this?” I took it from his hand.

“It’s a little something to keep us connected while you’re away. Open it, baby.”

I carefully tore open the envelope and pulled out a handwritten note. “To my Sunshine,” I read Ry’s note aloud. “I’ve made a playlist for you on Spotify. Each

song is a reminder of us, of how much you mean to me. Just scan the QR code below to access it.” I glanced at him, my heart overflowing with emotion.

His expression was soft, a smile playing on his lips. “I wanted you to have something to listen to when you miss me. Each song expresses how much you mean to me.”

“This... this is amazing.”

Ry gestured to the note. “I included a little explanation for each song too. Like why I chose it and what it means to me.”

My eyes scanned the list of songs and the notes he’d written. “‘Fight Song’ by Rachel Platten, because it’s our anthem of resilience and perfectly captures our strength and unity through every obstacle.”

“Exactly. And there’s ‘Home’ by Michael Bublé – because you always said that’s how you feel when we’re together.”

I nodded. I could feel the burn behind my eyes. “‘Stand by You’ by Orion Skye,” I continued, my voice choked with emotion. “Because we promised to stand by each other through everything.”

Ry reached out, taking my hand in his. “I just wanted to give you something to hold onto. Something to remind you that no matter where I am, I’m always with you.”

I squeezed his hand. “I’ll listen to it every day, and I’ll think of you.”

Ry gently pulled me towards him and wrapped his strong arms around me. I rested my head in the crook of his neck.

Several minutes after, I raised my head and I looked him deep in his eyes. “Make

love to me,” I breathed out, the words barely more than a whisper.

Reaching for the lube on our bedside table, I prepared us both slowly. “Hands on the mirror.”

My boyfriend did as he was told.

”Ready?” I asked Ry softly before pushing into him slowly. He moaned low in response and I couldn’t help but curse at how good he felt around me.

Our movements were slow and deliberate at first but soon gave way to something more frantic – punctuated by sharp intakes of breath and whispered curses. The sight of us in the mirror only fueled my desire further – watching as our bodies moved together in a rhythm that was uniquely ours.

As the heat coiled tighter within me, I reached down to stroke Ry, matching my hand’s movements with my thrusts. His moans grew louder and I knew we were both close.

With a final thrust, we came seconds apart from each other – our cries echoing off the walls as pleasure washed over us. As our breathing slowly returned to normal, I pulled him closer against me.

”I love you,” I murmured into his ear.

He kissed the arm that was still wrapped around his body. I felt him smile against my skin. ”Love you too,” he whispered back, his words wrapping around me like a warm blanket.

When the first rays of morning sunlight started to filter in, I woke up in the peacefulness of our apartment. Ry was still sound asleep next to me.

I thought about all that happened yesterday. Our tangled bodies, whispered promises of future visits, scheduled calls, video chats, and plans for when we would visit each other. We had spent the evening cocooned in each other's arms, swaying gently to Orion Skye songs – I'd totally come to love the band, especially after going to their concert months ago.

Ry's answering smile was slow and sweet, his hands reaching for the hem of my t-shirt. He pulled it over my head in one swift movement, his fingers trailing down my bare chest, causing goosebumps to erupt on my skin. I mirrored his actions, tugging at his shirt until it joined mine on the floor.

We explored each other with our mouths and hands – licking, sucking, nibbling. Every taste of Ry was intoxicating; the saltiness of his skin, the unique scent that was purely him. His lips found my nipples and I gasped at the sensation, arching into him as he teased them with his tongue.

My own mouth found its way all over his body: his strong neck, his broad shoulders, his sexy pecs, his dick, all the way to the back of his knees – a sensitive spot that had him squirming. We were laughing then – breathless chuckles muffled against skin as we discovered new ways to make each other tremble with desire.

The words we whispered were soft and intimate – declarations of love interspersed with ridiculous jokes that only made sense to us. It was an odd mix – this combination of intense passion and light-hearted banter –but it felt so right.

As we held each other close, time slipped away too quickly. Only a couple of hours ago we'd surrendered to sleep – as if by staying awake we could somehow slow down my inevitable departure.

I slipped out of bed silently and headed for a shower before going to the kitchen to prepare smoothies for both of us. It was way too early for anything heavier in our

stomachs.

When Ry joined me downstairs, freshly showered but with a dullness in his eyes that wasn't there before – his skin lacking its usual vibrance – my heart clenched. We rushed towards each other instinctively, burying ourselves into one another's embrace as if trying to memorize the feel of it.

We stayed like that for what felt like an eternity until reality nudged us apart. Sipping our smoothies in silence, thoughts whirled around like a silent storm within us.

The buzz from my phone broke through our silence – a message from his mom to me; words of encouragement and reminders of my strength.

"Ready?" I asked, trying to steady my trembling voice.

"Yeah. Let's get you to the airport."

Drawing strength from his love and support from his family was all I needed at this moment. They were so kind, much more supportive than my parents ever were. I only got a tag from one of Judy's social media posts that gushed about how happy she was that "her Alexander" got traded to the majors. Sure, I could block her, but that wouldn't erase the sting of their indifference. It wouldn't change the fact that they never truly understood or supported me.

Instead, I focused on the warmth and acceptance radiating from Ry's family. They welcomed me not just as Ry's partner, but as part of their family.

When Ry and I reached the airport, the reality of our imminent separation hit us like a tidal wave. We stood in front of the departure gate, trying to prolong our last moments together.

Ry's eyes were a storm of emotions. He reached out, pulling me into a tight embrace. I buried my face in the crook of his neck, inhaling his familiar scent, wanting to imprint it in my memory.

"You're going to be amazing."

"I hope so."

I know so. And I'm here rooting for you."

I choked on a laugh. "That, I do know."

We shared a lingering kiss. When we pulled apart, I looked into his eyes, trying to memorize every detail – the way they crinkled at the corners, the warmth in their depths.

"Promise me you'll take care of yourself." Ry's hand gently cupped my cheek.

"I promise," I said, placing my hand over his. "And you promise me the same. Keep pushing forward. Your time in the NAPH will come, I know it."

"Love you, Sunshine."

"Berry, I love you, too."

With one final hug, we reluctantly let go. I took a few steps toward the security checkpoint, then turned back one last time. Ry stood there, watching me, his face a canvas of pride, sadness, and hope, his hands shoved in his pockets. He gave me a small, encouraging smile, and I tried to return it, though my heart was breaking.

With that image imprinted in my mind, I turned and walked into the airport. As soon

as I was out of sight, I made a beeline for the washroom. Locking myself in one of the cubicles, I let the tears come. The sobs wracked my body, the emotional floodgates opening now that I was alone.

Leaving Ry behind was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

Bennett

The reality of our parting hit me hard as I watched the love of my life disappear into the airport. I forced myself to turn around, walking back to my car on autopilot. Each step was heavier than the last. The drive home was a blur, my mind replaying our final moments together – the embrace, the kiss, the whispered promises.

Inside the vehicle was stifling, and the lump in my throat grew tighter with each passing second. I managed to make it a few miles before the emotions that overwhelmed me became too much to bear. Finding a safe spot on the side of the road, I pulled over and turned off the engine.

As soon as the car was in park, I broke down. The tears I'd been holding back came rushing out, hot and unstoppable. I gripped the steering wheel, my knuckles white, and let out a guttural sob. The sound of my own crying filled the car, a raw and unfiltered release of all the emotions I'd been trying to keep in check.

I leaned my forehead against the cool steering wheel, the leather a stark contrast to the heat of my tears. He hadn't even left my side an hour ago, yet the weight of my sunshine's absence was crushing, an ache that radiated from my chest to every part of my being. I felt the loss acutely, the empty seat beside me a glaring reminder of the void his departure left.

Through the tears, I replayed my parting words to him. "I'm here rooting for you." His response, "That, I do know," echoed in my mind, a bittersweet comfort that only made the ache sharper. I clung to his promise that we'd get through this together, but in this moment, the distance was insurmountable.

I reached for my phone, my hands trembling. I opened the playlist I had made for Xander, the one I'd given him just before he left. I pressed play, and our songs filled the car, the familiar melody wrapping around me like a hug. The music brought a fresh wave of tears, but also a strange sense of solace. The first song, "Fix You" by Coldplay, played softly, followed by "Unchained Melody" by The Righteous Brothers, and then "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing" by Aerosmith. Each song was a reminder of us, of our love, and our moments together.

I stayed there for what felt like hours, letting the music and my emotions wash over me. Slowly, the intensity of my sobs subsided, leaving a hollow, exhausted feeling in their wake. I took a few deep breaths, trying to steady myself.

"I can do this," I whispered to the empty car. "We can do this."

With a final, shaky breath, I wiped my eyes and started the engine. The road ahead was daunting, but I knew I had to keep going. For Xander, for us. As I merged back into traffic, I held onto the hope that our love would bridge the miles between us.

Xander

The cold sting of the ice arena greeted me as I stepped into the Eagles' training facility. It stood tall and firm, built from steel and glass. The sun bounced off its metal frame, giving it a glow that was hard to ignore. Its windows were like mirrors, capturing the surrounding scenery in their reflection.

Expectations pressed against my chest like a lead vest. New faces, unfamiliar voices, all swarmed around me in a flurry of introductions. The booming voice of Coach Phil sliced through the noise. He was an imposing figure, standing at six foot five with broad shoulders that held up a well-worn Eagles jacket. His face was weathered with experience, and a thick salt-and-pepper beard framed his mouth.

"Welcome back, Xander," Coach Phil said, his tone both authoritative and warm. "We're glad to have you here. You already know how we operate, so let's get you settled and ready to hit the ice."

Brandt Ward, our team captain, clapped me on the shoulder with a grin that was equal parts welcoming and challenging. "Hey man," he said, his voice resonant with camaraderie. "Great to have you back. Let's pick up where we left off and light it up out there."

His words sparked a sense of pride in me, but it was quickly tempered by an undercurrent of pressure – this was it; time to prove myself.

But at least I wasn't the only rookie on the team. I breathed a sigh of relief when the day before, upon arriving at the temporary accommodation provided by the team, I

found Kieran Tom standing in the doorway. Kieran and I had been teammates back in college and with the Giants, where our professional careers had started. A grin had stretched across Kieran's face, matching my own joy at the unexpected reunion.

"X-Man, it's been too long," KT had said, pulling me into a hug. "I can't believe we're teammates again."

While we settled in, we'd reminisced about old games, and marveled at how far we'd come since our college days. Despite the whirlwind of emotions surrounding my transition to the NAPH, I was comforted having a familiar face by my side.

I mentally brought myself back to the present.

My first practice as a NAPH player.

And it was brutal.

Jake Madden, a defenseman, wasn't making things easy for me. He moved with an aggressive grace on ice that seemed designed just to make my life difficult – body checks that rattled my bones and comments sharp enough to draw blood if they could.

"Better keep your head up, rookie," Jake sneered as he skated past after one particularly brutal check that had left me gasping for breath on the ice. "This isn't the minors."

He didn't give me this shit when I came for the 3-game stint months ago; it looked like it was a different puck game.

"I can handle it," I gritted out, picking myself up off the ice. The chill seeped through my gear, reminding me of the harsh reality of this new league.

The drills left me gasping for breath and struggling to keep up. I mishandled the puck and missed several passes, feeling the frustration building. Every mistake was a spotlight on my inadequacy, a glaring reminder that I was one of the new guys trying to fit into a well-oiled machine.

Coach Phil blew his whistle, calling for a brief pause in the practice. As the players skated over for a quick huddle, I noticed his eyes scanning the group before landing on me. “Xander, stay back for a minute after practice,” he called out.

After the huddle, we resumed the intense practice. The team broke into smaller groups for various drills. My group focused on puck control and passing drills. I concentrated on tightening my stick handling, trying to weave through the cones with precision. My teammates moved the puck fluidly, their passes sharp and accurate. I fumbled a couple of passes, but forced myself to shake off the frustration and stay focused.

Next, we transitioned to a scrimmage. The pace was faster, the hits harder. I found myself matched up against Jake. He was relentless, but I dug in, determined to hold my ground. I managed to make a few good plays, intercepting a pass and setting up a teammate for a shot on goal.

The scrimmage continued with rapid back-and-forth play. My legs burned from the constant motion, and my breath came in ragged gasps. Despite the exhaustion, I could feel myself starting to sync with the rhythm of the team. I made fewer mistakes, and my confidence began to build.

Coach Phil blew the whistle again, signaling the end of practice. I skated off the ice, feeling both relieved and determined. The intensity of the practice had been a wake-up call, but I was ready to meet the challenge head-on.

As the rest of the team skated off the ice, Coach Phil motioned for me to come over.

His expression was stern but not unkind.

“You’ve got potential,” he said, looking me straight in the eye. “But potential alone won’t cut it here. We need you to be sharp, precise, and consistent. Work on your execution.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I will, Coach. I won’t let you down.”

He clapped me on the shoulder, a sign of encouragement. “I believe you can. Just stay focused.”

Dragging my weary body through the door of the apartment after practice, I was relieved to have it to myself. Kieran had mentioned a trip to the mall earlier, leaving me alone with the silence and my thoughts. It was an ideal time to call Ry.

Walking to my bedroom, my fingers tapped Ry’s number on my phone. The rapid thump of my heart echoed in my ears as I waited for Ry’s face to pop up. When it did, a grin stretched across my mouth, involuntary and full of warmth.

Ry’s eyes, lit up by the subtle glow of his own phone, met mine through the screen. A soft smile turned up the corners of his mouth – which had kissed me countless times. In the background, our bed was visible. Ungh. We’d made love on that bed more times than I could count. A surge of love and lust washed over me, coupled with an ache for his physical presence.

“Hey, Sunshine.”

“Hi, Berry,” I greeted him, leaning back against the couch cushions.

“Busy day?” His laughter filled my ears – a sound I’d come to adore. “I’m sure you killed it out there, as always.”

”Thanks, but it wasn’t my best. Coach Phil had some words for me afterward.”

A soft sigh escaped him as he adjusted his position on our bed. The sight stirred a familiar longing within me – how many nights had we spent whispering into each other’s skin? ”You know he just wants you to be better, right?” Ry said after a moment.

I let out a breathy laugh, running a hand through my hair in frustration. ”Doesn’t make it any easier.”

”But you’ve got this.” His voice was steady and sure – as if he’d never doubted me for even a second.

A warm rush bloomed in my chest at his words and I found myself smiling. ”Thanks,” I murmured into the quiet space between us. ”Means everything coming from you.”

Ry reached over to the bedside table and opened the top drawer. He held up a folded note to the camera.

Chuckling, I said, ”You read it already?”

”Of course.” He unfolded the note and read it aloud in his low drawl, ”’Ry, even though I’m not there, remember how much I believe in you. You’re stronger than you know.’” His eyes met mine through the screen. ”Xander, you always know how to lift my spirits. I needed this today. Thank you.”

”Your smile makes my day, Ry. I’ll send you more as long as they keep bringing that light to you.”

Ry wanted a blow-by-blow on my day and then we drifted into conversation about his

impending road trip with the Grizzlies.

"Feel like watching an episode of The King of Queens?" I asked.

Ry's brow arched teasingly on screen as he shot back, "What about watching me shower?"

Ungh. A sudden tightness coiled low in my gut. I shifted uncomfortably, adjusting the unexpected pressure building at the front of my jeans. Eyes glued to the screen, I watched as he sauntered into his bathroom, positioning his phone just right so that every inch of him was on display for me.

Ry's shirt hit the floor before he vanished momentarily from view. When he returned, it was under a steady stream of water that cascaded down from the showerhead.

Every movement was amplified through the screen – each droplet cascading down his chiseled body became an intimate secret shared between us. Watching him slide his hands along his slick, wet skin, shaking his ass provocatively for my benefit, sparked a heat within me.

It unfurled as I watched him lather up his hair, bubbles clinging to strands like dewdrops. I could almost smell the intoxicating citrus-mint scent of his shampoo that would linger long after he stepped out from under the water. His laughter rebounded off the bathroom walls when he caught me ogling him, and heat crept up my neck and spread across my cheeks.

Without taking my eyes off Ry's mesmerizing performance, I reached into my sweats and freed myself. The sight of him moving so sensually in the shower had me hard as rock. As I watched him gyrate seductively under the water, I began to pump myself slowly, feeling the pre-cum leak from the slit of my dick.

"Like what you see?" Ry's voice rang out sultrily.

"Hell yeah," I grunted back at him through gritted teeth, pumping myself harder now.

"Wish it was my hands on you instead."

With that, he spun around to face the tile wall, bent over, and spread his ass cheeks for me.

Goddamn.

I craved... no... I hungered to touch this man. To taste him. To bury myself inside him. To lose all sense of self in every inch of his body right there and then.

But since physical contact with Ry wasn't possible, watching him perform these tantalizing moves for me was the next best thing. His every gesture, his every word, his every glance – they were all directed at me. And as I watched him on that screen, matching my strokes to the rhythm of his movements, I felt like the most fortunate man alive.

Who needs TV shows when you have this? This unscripted reality show starring Ry – raw and undeniably enticing – was far more captivating than any sitcom rerun could ever hope to be.

Xander

This was the moment, my debut. To put icing on the cake, we had home ice advantage against the Tallahassee Tridents, a team that boasted a formidable defensive lineup. Though I wasn't leading the charge onto the ice, adrenaline coursed through my veins like an electric current. The arena pulsed with the heartbeats of twenty thousand ardent fans, their faces painted in our colors, black, orange and gold, their cheers a thunderstorm. Tally fans were there in large numbers as well, their navy blue and aqua jerseys standing out in the crowd, waving flags and banners to support their team.

The puck dropped, and I watched intently as our first line hit the ice with purpose. They glided effortlessly, their movements fluid and calculated. The sound of skates carving into the ice filled the air.

As I sat on the bench with my linemates, I tried to keep my nerves at bay. Johnson's deep voice rumbled beside me, his words a mix of encouragement and strategy. Thompson chimed in with a quick observation. I responded with a silent bob of my head, my fingers tightening around the rough tape on my stick. Johnson's words kept playing back in my mind. "It's about positioning and timing." His advice was as clear as the ice beneath our teammates' skates.

Anticipation coursed through me, sharpening every sense. My breath frosted in the cold air, the sharp sting filling my lungs. The glare off the pristine ice was blinding, but I couldn't look away from the thrilling chaos unfolding before me. Every sound and movement was magnified in the electric atmosphere of the arena.

Our forwards darted around like lightning bolts on skates, trading blows with Tally's defensemen while our goaltender stood tall and unflinching in front of our net.

Penalties were called; players got banished to that purgatory, the sin bin, their faces twisted in frustration or defiance as they served their time. Fisticuffs broke out frequently – a dance as old as hockey itself – adding fuel to an already roaring fire.

In between shifts, I found myself scanning the sea of spectators for one face in particular – Ry's. He was 2700 miles away with the Grizzlies, but I couldn't help wishing he could share this experience with me.

And then finally, fucking finally, Coach Phil called my line onto the ice. This was it. I was about to hit the ice for my first game as a full-time NAPH player. My heart hammered a frantic tempo against my ribs as I glided onto the ice, its chill nipping at my cheeks. Stay focused, Xander. Play your game.

The speed and intensity were overwhelming at first, but then something within me snapped into place and I found my rhythm. I made a few good plays, demonstrating my skill and earning nods of approval from teammates. I was in the zone, feeling the thrill of playing the game I loved.

Seizing an ill-placed pass from one of Trident's defensemen like a hawk snatching prey mid-flight, I whipped the puck towards our advancing forward with a swift flick of my wrist. The puck sliced through the air before nestling flawlessly against his stick blade.

Positioning myself near the Tridents' net, I anticipated the next move, ready to intercept or create scoring opportunities. Though the scoreboard said 0-0, the energy on the ice was a hundred times that.

The first period was a blur of ice and adrenaline. I dug my skates in, pushing myself

to the brink as I tried to anticipate the Tridents' every move. The puck was an elusive creature beneath my stick, darting in and out of sight. My body absorbed each brutal hit from the opposing team's defensemen like a sponge, but I refused to let it rattle me.

The rink echoed with Tom's shout of triumph as he fired home our first goal, all thanks to a play I'd set up. His words of praise ricocheted around in my head, stoking the flames of my confidence.

As we huddled close during the break between periods, Coach Phil's voice cut through the cacophony of cheering Eagles fans and disgruntled Tridents supporters. He laid out his strategy with precision and authority – we were going to exploit the Tridents' defensive weaknesses and ramp up our offensive game.

Coach's words resonated within me: "We're playing well... Keep up the pressure."

We managed to cling onto our slender lead until disaster struck at the start of the final period – a quick counterattack from the Tridents resulted in an equalizer. The roar from their fans was deafening; it felt like a physical blow that left us reeling.

With tensions running high, my line was thrust back into action for those last agonizing minutes. Every second on that ice was an eternity – every pass made, every shot taken was a potential game-changer.

Then came that critical moment when everything slowed down. The puck slid towards me across a sea of white; I could hear nothing but my own heartbeat pounding in my ears as I lined up for what could be our winning shot.

I felt more than saw my linemates moving into position around me, creating openings amidst the wall of Tridents players blocking our path to victory. A penalty was called on one of the Tridents, and he skated off to the sin bin, leaving a gap in their defense.

With a rush of adrenaline, I took my chance. The slap of my stick against the puck echoed around the arena as it rocketed towards the goal. The goaltender lunged desperately but it was too late – the puck found its mark and the buzzer sounded our victory.

The roar from our fans was deafening, drowning out everything else. But amidst that sea of noise and celebration, I could only hear one thing: the sweet sound of victory.

The locker room was filled with jubilation, the air thick with the scent of sweat and victory. High-fives flew around like confetti, and laughter bounced off the tiled walls. I was in the eye of this storm, my debut game ending with the winning goal. My heart pounded like a drum, matching the rhythm of our celebration. It was surreal – a dream start to my career in the majors.

"A toast to our rookie!" AJ's voice cut through the cacophony. His eyes twinkled mischievously as he raised his water bottle high. "First game and you score us the winner? Drinks are on you tonight, X-Man!" Laughter roared around me.

I grinned at AJ's good-natured ribbing. But beneath it all, there was an ache for Ry – wishing he could have been here to share this moment.

We decided to head to a local pub, The Rusty Puck, owned by a retired Eagles' player to celebrate our victory. Apparently it was the pub where our fans headed when we won on home ice. The place was alive with chatter and cheer, bathed in warm hues from hanging lanterns that gave it an intimate glow against the winter chill outside.

The Rusty Puck smelled of worn leather seats, spiced fries sizzling in the kitchen, and draft beer fresh from the tap. Fans swarmed around us, their excitement palpable as they clinked glasses with us.

We huddled together at a corner spot, ordering pints of amber ale that foamed over

frosted mugs and plates piled high with sticky chicken wings and golden onion rings – food that tasted even better after a hard-fought win on home ice.

As I bit into a wing smothered in tangy barbecue sauce and laughed at one of AJ's outrageous stories, I was sure in time, I would be truly a part of the team – no longer just the new guy, but an integral piece of this family.

But even as I reveled in the celebration, my mind kept drifting back to Ry. His absence was like a missing note in a symphony – not noticeable to my teammates, but glaringly obvious to me. The joy of the night was tinged with nostalgia, and I found myself reaching for my phone, eager to share this moment with him. But then I hesitated, reminding myself that tonight was about bonding with my teammates – about being present. Yet, despite the laughter and camaraderie around me, I couldn't shake off the feeling that something – someone – important was missing.

Suddenly, there he was. Ry. His tall, sexy frame silhouetted by the entrance to the pub, his eyes locked onto mine. My heart stuttered in my chest before revving up again, disbelief and overwhelming joy crashing over me. For a moment, I was frozen, the world around me fading into a blur. It was as if my deepest wish had been plucked from my thoughts and made real in an instant.

His smile widened, and he waved something at me – a slip of paper? Squinting against the distance, it took me a moment to make out what it was: half of a game ticket. The realization hit me like a punch to the gut, sending a rush of adrenaline through my veins. Without a second thought, I was moving towards him, propelled by a force that felt as inevitable as gravity. Each step quickened as the gap between us closed, my teammates' cheers and the pub's noise fading into the background.

By the time I reached him, the euphoria of seeing Ry here, in this place, was almost too much to contain. My arms wrapped around him in a tight embrace, grounding me in this perfect, unexpected reality. The world around us faded into white noise; all

that existed was Ry and me – my Berry, here against all odds. It felt like the universe had conspired to grant this one wish I hadn't even dared articulate.

But then reality intruded again as we were jostled by patrons clad in Eagles colors heading into the pub. Ry's hand slipped into mine and he steered us around the corner where the noise receded into a dull murmur in the crisp night air.

His green eyes sparkled with mischief under his tousled brown hair.

"You were here for the game?"

"Yes, Sunshine, I saw you on the ice and you were incredible. You killed it out there. I'm super proud of you."

A wave of shock hit me. Ry had come for my debut despite having his own game that night!

My heart was overwhelmed. "I can't believe you were there," I murmured incredulously while he brushed stray strands of hair off my face with his finger. Ry was right there watching me play.

His chuckle was low and warm against my ear as he replied, "Took me forever and a day to get out of the arena."

"But how?" I still couldn't believe he was here when he should have been at his game with the Grizzlies. "You didn't give me a clue, even though we FaceTimed last night."

Ry cupped my cheek and used the pad of his thumb to caress it. "Then it wouldn't have been much of a surprise."

Ry wasn't exactly flush with money and so concern gnawed at my happiness.

“I can hear you thinking, baby. We would talk about it, but first... kiss me.”

And we kissed passionately.

Ry’s lips met in a heated kiss that tasted like homecoming. Through half-lidded eyes I watched Ry’s face – flushed with desire and mirroring the same raw need that twisted like a knot in the pit of my stomach. His breath hitched slightly against my lips as I pulled him closer still – an unspoken promise that there was more to come.

Every inch of me burned for him – from the tips of my fingers that traced patterns on his back to the pounding heartbeat echoing loudly in my ears. But this wasn’t something we could take any further; we were in public, after all.

When we pulled apart for air, Ry explained how the team had chipped in for his plane ticket, and Coach Mack had pulled some strings to get him a game ticket. I could only stare at him, overwhelmed by the lengths he’d gone to to be here.

His lips claimed mine again, effectively silencing my protests before they could form. When we broke apart, I tugged him closer again, whispering, “I can’t believe you’re here. This is perfect.”

“Yes, perfect,” Ry said, but he was looking at me as if I was the one he thought was perfect. Then that made two of us because he was perfect too.

“Let’s go.” I held out my hand for him to take. “I’m gonna tell the guys I’m leaving.”

“You’re going to come out to the team?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I guess I am. Do you want to?”

“I’m always happy to let the world know you’re mine.”

We walked hand-in-hand towards my teammates, and the guys around the table fell silent. Clearing my throat, I said, “Hey everyone, I’d like you to meet my boyfriend, Ry.”

There was a brief, tense silence before the team burst into laughter. A spark of anger ignited in my chest, burning hotter with each second. I could feel my face flush as I clenched my fists, ready to defend us. But then I noticed the laughter wasn’t malicious. It was warm and filled with camaraderie.

Brandt, still smiling, said, “Dude, we know you’re queer and we don’t care.” He raised his hand to stop me from interjecting. “It was your call to share it with the team or not. And if anyone says shit to you, let me handle it. There’s zero tolerance for homophobia here.”

His words hung in the air like a shield, protecting me from the taunts and judgment that plagued other teams. My anger dissipated, replaced by a profound sense of gratitude towards Brandt and this team. The realization that they had my back, that they truly accepted me and Ry, was overwhelming.

I let out a forgotten breath, feeling the tension drain from my body. “Thanks, guys. Really.”

Brandt clapped me on the back, and the rest of the team nodded in agreement, their smiles genuine.

Ry squeezed my hand, and I knew in that moment that we were exactly where we were meant to be

AJ said, “Go, spend some couple time with your man because we know he has a game coming up soon.”

Before I got a chance to respond, Brandt cut in and said, “We know because we looked him up too.”

And Kieran piped in, “Your boyfriend can stay over at the apartment.”

Everything fell into place effortlessly. It was too good to be true but I wasn’t about to question my luck.

The moment Ry and I crossed the threshold of the apartment, there was no hesitation. Clothes were shed, discarded in a trail leading to the bedroom. The hunger gnawed at my gut as I took him in – all sinewy muscle and taut skin.

”Missed you,” I breathed into his ear, my voice rough with desire. A low moan escaped him, vibrating through me.

His cock stood proud and hard, begging for attention. My mouth watered at the sight, an insatiable craving rising within me. Without preamble, I dropped to my knees and took him into my mouth, relishing the strangled gasp that slipped past his lips.

”Fuck... Xander!” His fingers tangled in my hair as he thrust into my mouth. His taste filled me – salty and sweet with an undercurrent of something uniquely Ry.

I sucked him hard, letting him fuck my mouth until he was coming undone above me. Ribbons of cum burst forth from him, spilling down my throat while he cursed above me.

”I fucking missed you,” Ry growled out between gritted teeth as his orgasm subsided.

But I wasn’t done yet. Not even close.

Flipping him onto his stomach on the bed, I positioned myself behind him. My own

cock throbbed with need against his ass – tight and inviting.

I lubed him up thoroughly because I wasn't going to take it easy on him.

"You ready?" My question was more breathless anticipation than actual inquiry.

"Fuck me, baby."

Enough said.

Without another word spoken between us, I plunged into his tight hole – hard and fast just how we both liked it; brutal in its intensity but laced with love beneath it all.

His moans were music to my ears as I fucked him relentlessly; each thrust meeting a curse or plea from his lips until we were both teetering on the edge of oblivion.

"Love you, Berry," I grunted out, my words punctuated by the rhythm of our bodies colliding.

With that, I came, filling him as my body shuddered with release. His own orgasm, the second in such a short time, followed suit, a strangled cry of my name echoing around us as he spilled onto the sheets below.

Panting and spent, we collapsed into each other's arms – a tangle of sweat-slicked skin and sated desires. As our breathing slowly returned to normal, I pressed a kiss to his shoulder.

"I fucking love you too, Xander," he murmured against my skin. And with that, we drifted off into a post-coital slumber – content in the knowledge that no matter how brutal or dirty it got between us, it was always rooted in love.

Bennett

Exhausted from a full day of playing, I collapsed in my hotel room. But there I was, stubbornly clutching my phone for a late-night FaceTime call to Xander. We were both on the road, crammed into separate hotel rooms with our respective teammates, and time was a luxury we couldn't afford.

It had been five days since I surprised Xander. I still couldn't believe how my team had come together to ensure I could be in Newark for his debut. It was a huge sacrifice, considering our paychecks barely cover the bills. But as Maestro said, they did it because we were family, and that was what a family did.

"Hey." Xander's face flickered onto my screen, his usual grin replaced by lines of worry etched into his forehead. It felt like an echo of my own tiredness and longing mirrored back at me. "How was your game?"

"We did good today," I said, trying to keep the weariness from seeping into my voice. "Missed you out there."

His chuckle came through tinny over the speaker, but it warmed me nonetheless. "I miss you too. We're struggling. Wish I could lean on you."

I reached for that day's note tucked under my pillow – part of our ritual now. A small act to bridge the miles between us. It read: "Ry, remember why we do this – for the love of the game and each other. Hold onto that when times get tough."

Reading those words aloud over the call felt like letting him in on a secret part of

myself – vulnerable yet comforting in its honesty. I traced over Xander's handwriting with my thumb as if it could somehow bring him closer.

"I know it's hard," I found myself saying, looking straight into his eyes on my screen, "but we'll get through this."

And in that moment, despite our shared exhaustion and distance apart, I believed it too.

Five days on the road and finally, I was back home. But at practice, my mind was miles away from the frosty surface beneath me. Xander's face kept surfacing in my thoughts. Weeks had passed since we last saw each other and our exchanges were limited to hurried texts and phone calls that left me yearning for more.

My parents too were a constant presence in my thoughts. Mom was anxious about Dad; he'd been overworking himself lately and age wasn't exactly on his side. I could almost see her worry lines deepening every time I FaceTimed her.

Then there were Chloe and Connor, their futures hanging in the balance of college acceptances and scholarships. Chloe had it easy – her acceptance letter came with a full ride, setting her path clear as daylight. But Connor... he was still stuck halfway, his partial funding not enough to cover all of his tuition costs.

"I'll help you find a way," I remembered telling him, this promise settling heavy on my shoulders. The responsibility seemed colossal.

Coach Mack must have noticed my distraction because he pulled me aside after practice one day. His stern gaze softened slightly as he spoke. "Ry," he said, his voice firm but kind, "we need you here, both physically and mentally. You're a key player, but if your mind is elsewhere, it's going to affect the whole team."

His words hit home. I started to wonder if it was time to hang up my skates and put my business degree to use. Chasing the dream of making it to the majors was thrilling, but the reality was stark: I couldn't afford to meet my family's needs with the money I was making. Maybe it was time to face facts and find a stable 9-to-5 job that would allow me to support them properly.

But then, a small voice inside me whispered about the importance of dreams and how giving up now could mean losing a piece of myself. The tension between my responsibilities and my ambitions was palpable, pulling me in two different directions. I had some tough decisions to make, and soon.

I nodded silently, knowing Coach was right, but I was also aware that it would take more than just words to pull me out of this whirlwind of worries swirling inside my head. My family needed me just as much as my team did – if not more – and striking a balance between these two worlds was like walking on thin ice.

The locker room echoed with the absence of bodies, most of the team already gone, leaving only Tank, Maestro, Jester and myself.

"Ry." Tank's voice rumbled like distant thunder, "you holding up okay?" His question hung in the air like a challenge. I glanced at him.

"Honestly? It's been rough." The admission slipped from my lips before I could stop it. A strange sensation washed over me – vulnerability. I'd never let them see this side of me before.

Maestro leaned against his locker, arms folded across his chest. "We've noticed," he said simply. His dark eyes held an understanding that surprised me. He wasn't just acknowledging my struggle; he was empathizing with it.

Jester chimed in next, his usual mischievous grin replaced by a softer expression.

"You're not alone in this Ry," he offered quietly.

I stared at them for a moment – these men who were more than teammates to me now. Their support wrapped around me like armor against all the professional and personal pressures bearing down on me.

In their presence, my mask slipped further away. My mind churned with thoughts I'd kept hidden for too long: worries about performance stats, anxiety over personal issues eating away at my focus...

"I know," was all I managed to say back to them as gratitude welled up inside me. For once, I allowed myself to lean on their strength and felt a sense of camaraderie that transcended mere words or gestures.

This was us – Tank's resilience, Maestro's wisdom, Jester's spirit and my own struggles – woven together into an unbreakable bond.

And for the first time, I told them my worries and fears.

Twenty-four hours later was another night of home ice battle and my skates were on fire, slicing through the rink like a hot knife through butter. Every pass, every shot was a symphony of precision, each move an echo of my promises to Connor and the love I harbored for Xander. The roar of the crowd filled my ears as the Grizzlies claimed victory and our ticket to the semi-finals.

I fumbled with my phone in the locker room after, fingers still numb from the cold. I dialed Xander's number, knowing he'd be knee-deep in his own game. Or he could be either showering or recovering afterward, given the time difference. The call went to voicemail and I hesitated before speaking.

"Hey, Sunshine," I began, trying to keep my voice steady despite the adrenaline

coursing through me. "We won tonight... wish you could"ve seen it. Just wanted you to know... I love you."

Hanging up felt like pulling off a bandage – quick and painful. The strain of balancing everything – hockey, Connor's expectations, missing Xander – was wearing me down. Every day was like skating uphill.

To help ease that longing for Xander, I pulled out another note from him; one for each day we were apart. His words were my lifeline; they kept me grounded when everything else was too much.

"Ry," today's note read. "Remember why you're doing this: For us, for your dreams. You're stronger than you think. And remember... I'm always with you."

A smile tugged at my lips as memories flooded back of us exchanging gifts on our last night together before he left for Newark. The note of surprise in his voice as he unwrapped the gifts I'd given him.

My heart throbbed with longing but also warmth at those precious memories; they were reminders of who I was beneath the weight of my responsibilities, who I was when I was with Xander. Despite the distance, despite everything else, he was my anchor.

I folded the note and slipped it back into my pocket, a renewed sense of determination flooding me. This game wasn't just about winning; it was about proving to myself and to Xander that I could handle anything life threw at me. That I was more than just Ry the hockey player – I was Ry the fighter, the lover, the dreamer.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

Bennett

The air in the Phoenix Firebirds' visitors' locker room was thick with anticipation. I could feel it, a palpable tension that hung over us Grizzlies like an oppressive summer heat. We were far from our home ice, surrounded by the enemy's territory. My heart pounded as I looked around at my teammates, each face etched with the same grim determination mirrored on my own.

Weeks had passed since we'd made it to the PHL playoffs and now, here we were, backs against the wall. It was Game 3 and we were down two. The stakes couldn't have been higher; win or pack up for the season. The Firebirds had us cornered, their talons digging into our throats after a stellar regular season run.

As our Coach took center stage amongst us, his voice rang out clear and strong – not pleading or begging but commanding, instilling in us a sense of hope and purpose. His words resonated within me, amplifying my resolve to win this game for all of us.

I caught the eyes of my linemates across the room, exchanging nods of understanding and determination. It wasn't just about winning anymore; it was about proving ourselves worthy of being here.

A strange calmness washed over me then, a momentary respite amidst the storm brewing inside me – an inner conflict between fear of failure and desire for victory.

My gaze fell upon that day's note from Xander sitting neatly folded inside my locker "Ry," it read, "remember why you're here."

And just like that, everything came into focus again. What lay ahead didn't seem so daunting anymore; instead it felt like an opportunity to rise above adversity and make our mark in PHL history.

Ice beneath me, I barreled into the game, my teammates and I a whirlwind of aggression. The puck was our singular focus: a black disc of opportunity that we all hungered for. I found myself in the thick of it, stick clashing against stick, fighting for control with a tenacity that left my muscles screaming.

Jester and Tank, our formidable defensemen duo, were walls of steel. They thwarted Phoenix's advances with brutal precision while Les, our new left winger who'd stepped in to fill Xander's shoes, darted around the ice like a hawk on the hunt. And Maestro? Our goaltender was an unmovable force at the net – calm and collected even as the Phoenix forwards descended upon him like wolves.

Phoenix struck first blood. A puck slipped past Maestro's guard and into our net. My heart plummeted but it was no time to dwell on defeat. We retaliated swiftly, adrenaline fuelling every stride I took across the ice as we launched ourselves back into battle.

I saw my shot and took it – an equalizer that sent our fans into an uproar while silencing those cheering for Phoenix. It felt like flying, heart pounding in my chest like a drumbeat of victory as I skated past jeering Phoenix fans whose faces were painted with disappointment.

Phoenix had home ice advantage, but our presence was still strong, our fans vocal despite being outnumbered by theirs. Their forwards were relentless – fast and skilled, always trying to slip past Jester and Tank's defense while their goaltender remained steadfast under our onslaught.

My body screamed exhaustion but my mind was clear: this was war on ice and

surrender wasn't an option. My heart parroted that sentiment fiercely, thrumming with determination as we fought tooth and nail against Phoenix for dominance over that small black disc that meant everything in this moment.

As the second period roared to life, the Firebirds surged ahead with a power play goal that sliced through our defense like a hot knife through butter. My skates bit into the ice as I pushed off, desperate to turn the tide. We were floundering, and it was on me to rally us back.

Each stride sent an icy spray flying behind me as I weaved between our opponents. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Jester and Tank, our usually unflappable defensemen, scrambling to regain control. They were like cornered wolves, all snarling aggression and frantic energy. On my right flank was Les, his movements just a beat behind where they needed to be. He was trying hard but he wasn't Xander; not yet.

I could feel every eye in the arena on me as I took possession of the puck. The weight of expectation pressed down on me but this wasn't new territory – this pressure, this moment, it was what every playoff run came down to.

"Get it together, Ry," I muttered under my breath even as doubt gnawed at me from inside. I could almost hear the fans' collective breath being held as I bore down on Phoenix's goal. This was it, our chance to claw our way back into the game.

With a burst of energy, I shot forward, the puck dancing on the edge of my stick. The world narrowed down to just me and the net – everything else faded away.

The crowd's roar became a distant hum, my heartbeat pounding louder than the cheers. I weaved past a Firebirds defenseman, my skates cutting sharply into the ice. My mind raced with possibilities, but my body moved on pure instinct. I had practiced this move a thousand times, but this moment was different – more electric,

more intense.

As I approached the crease, I spotted a small gap between the goalie's pads and the post. It was now or never. I shifted my weight, ready to release the puck. Time slowed, each second stretching into an eternity. I could feel the collective breath of the arena held in suspense, every eye fixed on me.

With a flick of my wrist, I sent the puck flying towards the net, aiming for that elusive sweet spot. The goalie lunged, his glove hand a blur. My eyes tracked the puck's trajectory, heart pounding with the hope of a game-tying goal.

The puck glided through the air, slicing towards its target. For a moment, it felt as if time had stopped entirely. But instead of the satisfying sound of the puck hitting the back of the net, there was a sharp clink as the puck struck the post and ricocheted away.

A collective groan of disbelief and disappointment erupted from our fans, filling the arena.

I skated hard to regain the puck, but the Firebirds' defense was quicker, clearing it out of the danger zone. The buzzer signaling the end of the second period cut through the tension, marking a temporary pause in our battle.

Back on the bench, I gulped down water, my breaths still heavy from the effort.

Coach huddled us together, his voice barking out encouragement and strategy. "Stay sharp, boys. We've still got one more period to turn this around. Keep pressuring their defense, and the opportunities will come."

We nodded, absorbing his words, determination etched on every face. I glanced up at the scoreboard; it confirmed what I already knew: Firebirds 1, Grizzlies 1. We were

still in it, but we had to dig deep.

In the locker room during intermission, the atmosphere was a mix of focus and tension. We reviewed plays, analyzed the Firebirds' strategies, and made adjustments. My missed goal replayed in my mind, but I shook it off. There was still time to make a difference.

Coach clapped his hands, bringing our attention back. "This is our game. Play smart, play hard, and leave everything on the ice."

As we skated out for the third period, the crowd's energy surged, fueling our determination. I exchanged a look with my linemates, a silent promise that we'd give it our all.

The puck dropped, and the final period began. Every second counted. Every play, every pass, was crucial. The Firebirds were relentless, their defense strong, but we matched them skate for skate. The crowd's energy surged through the arena.

Midway through the period, with time slipping away, Coach made the call. He pulled Maestro, our goalie, adding an extra attacker to give us the edge we desperately needed. The pressure was on, and I felt every heartbeat, every breath, amplified by the stakes.

Skating hard, I maneuvered past a Firebirds defenseman, the puck glued to my stick. My limbs screamed in protest, my lungs were on fire, but surrender wasn't an option. I could hear the crowd's roars and gasps.

I lined up my shot, aimed for the corner of the net, and fired. The crowd collectively gasped. Time slowed as the puck soared through the air. It struck the post with a sharp clang that echoed through the arena, and a groan of disappointment rippled through the stands.

But there was no time to dwell on the miss. I circled back, fighting for every inch of ice, the clock ticking down mercilessly. My legs burned, my lungs screamed, but I kept pushing.

Just as the countdown began its final descent into zero, fortune favored me once again – the puck found its way back to me. Fueled by desperation and determination, I launched the puck from our zone straight toward the Firebirds’ net. It was a long shot, a Hail Mary, but we needed a miracle. The puck sailed through the air, and for a split second, it felt like time stood still.

Then, a Firebirds defenseman got a stick on it, deflecting it away from the goal. My heart sank, but before I could react, they took advantage of our empty net. The puck slid smoothly across the ice and into our goal, sealing their victory. The Firebirds’ supporters exploded into jubilant cheers while a deafening silence fell over us.

My heart sank as the final buzzer reverberated through the arena, marking not just the end of the game, but the end of our season.

The locker room was almost silent, each of us lost in our own world, nursing the sting of defeat. I sat there, my gaze fixed on the worn-out laces of my sneakers, replaying every pass, every shot, every missed opportunity. Coach Mack’s words were a balm for our bruised pride. He praised our grit throughout the season and urged us to keep our heads high – we had fought well, doing better than last season.

I turned his words over in my mind, sifting through memories of victories and losses alike. Our journey had been marked by peaks and valleys but we’d emerged stronger with each challenge.

My hand slipped into my pocket, pulling out my phone, even while my teammates filed out of the locker room. The screen lit up to reveal a new message from Xander – my daily dose of encouragement.

"Ry," it read, "no game defines you or your worth. Remember how far you've come and how much you've grown this season. This loss is not an end but another stepping stone towards greatness."

A lump formed in my throat as I read his words again – they were simple yet profound. I swallowed hard against the emotion that welled up within me.

With one last glance at the deserted locker room, I took a deep breath. Pushing off from the bench, I walked out of the arena and headed toward the waiting bus.

Bennett

I'd barely settled into my worn-out couch late the next afternoon, the sting of our defeat against Phoenix still fresh, when the familiar buzz of my phone interrupted the silence. It was my agent, Paul Holmes.

"Ry, I've got some incredible news," his voice broke through the speaker, a hint of excitement lacing his words. "Tallahassee wants to sign you for a two-year contract."

My heart pounded like a drum in my ears as I rose to my feet. This was it; this was what I'd been working towards. My mind raced with questions. "Are you serious? What are the terms?"

Paul filled me in on the details, and then continued, "They're offering a competitive salary," he explained, "and they see you as a key player for their lineup."

A rush of adrenaline coursed through me at his words – key player? Me? The idea was almost too good to be true. Yet there it was, within reach. The excitement bubbled up inside me; I couldn't keep it in any longer.

"This is amazing!" I burst out, grinning so wide it felt like my face might split in two.

"Is that a yes?"

"Are you kidding me? It's a hell yes! Whoo-hoo!" I yelled, pumping my fist in the air. "What's the next step?"

“We’ll go through the formalities,” he assured me calmly amidst my euphoria, “but I wanted to let you know first. You’ll need to sign the contract and then we’ll handle the announcement and transfer details.”

As I ended the call and sank back into my couch, clutching at my pounding heart, I could hardly believe it – a NAPH contract! A sense of accomplishment washed over me as reality began to sink in; all those years of hard work were finally paying off.

My thumb hovered over Xander’s name on my contact list, my heart pounding in anticipation. The moment I hit the call button, his face filled up the screen. His eyes widened as he took in my expression.

“You’re not going to believe this, Sunshine,” I spoke into the phone, a grin spreading across my face. “Tallahassee wants me on their team for a two-year NAPH contract!”

His mouth dropped open before splitting into an infectious smile that I’m sure mirrored mine. “That’s amazing, Ry! We’ll be playing in the same league!” His words were like music to my ears.

A pang of longing hit me as I thought of how we wouldn’t be sharing the same locker room. “I wish it was with you on the same team,” I confessed, but quickly shook off the disappointment. “But hey, we’ll make it work.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed with a determined nod. Then his eyes lit up with mischief. “Go check the note labeled ‘You Did It’ that I left you in the container.”

My heart fluttered at his words and I reached for the container holding our shared notes – little tokens of love and encouragement.

I pulled out Xander’s note and unfolded it, reading aloud to him over FaceTime:

Congratulations, Berry! You've always been
destined for greatness and now everyone else
will see it too. I never doubted that your dream
would come true when the time was right.

I looked up at Xander, feeling a rush of emotions. "You believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself." The fact that he'd written that note months ago before he left for Newark was mind-boggling. It was as if he knew this day would come. My voice thick with gratitude, I whispered, "That means so much to me, Sunshine. I couldn't have done this without you."

The love of my life watched me with a warm smile, his eyes reflecting the love I felt through the screen. "I'm so proud of you, Ry. You've worked hard for this."

"I can't believe this is happening." This time, my voice cracked. "I've been dreaming of this moment for decades. And now that it's real, it feels almost surreal."

"You're going to crush it." My sunshine sounded so confident in my abilities, I straightened my shoulders. "I'll be cheering you on every step of the way."

"Your support means everything to me."

"Who knows? Maybe one day we'll end up on the same team."

"I'd love that." A smile spread across my face. "But for now, I'm just excited to take this next step."

"Me too. And hey, maybe we'll get to play against each other. That could be fun."

I laughed. "Yeah, I'll try not to go too hard on you."

"You think you could beat me, old man?"

"Old man? I'll show you that age doesn't matter when I get my hands on you." I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

We both burst out in laughter. It took us a while to get our wits about us.

"But seriously, Ry. You're going to do great things."

After that boost of confidence, I thought I could conquer the world... and help Tally bring home The Cup next season.

Ry and I spent the next few minutes talking about the future, our plans, and how we would navigate the challenges ahead. Despite the physical distance, the bond between us was stronger than ever.

The morning sun was just peeking over the horizon when I found myself inside the press conference room at the Grizzlies' arena. A few reporters and flashing cameras awaited.

Karen Mitchell, her red hair bobbing as she leaned forward for my response, asked how I felt about moving to the NAPH and joining the Tridents. "Thrilled," I said, feeling my heart race in my chest. "Playing in the NAPH is a childhood dream come true. And joining the Tridents? It's like finding your name written on a winning lottery ticket."

Brian Tate was next, his glasses perched precariously on his nose. "Ryan, transitioning from the PHL to the NAPH is a significant step in your career. What aspects of your game do you think will translate well, and where do you anticipate

facing the greatest challenges?”

”It feels as if I’m stepping onto a rollercoaster after years of carousel rides,” I replied, trying to lighten up the atmosphere with humor while also being honest about what lay ahead. ”My speed, agility and playmaking abilities should serve me well in this faster-paced game.

”But let’s not kid ourselves,” I continued, ”It’s going to be a challenge adjusting to that level of physicality.” I could feel my palms get sweaty as I thought about facing those challenges head-on. “It’s a learning curve I’m eager to tackle head-on, and I’ll be working hard to adapt and elevate my game to meet the demands of NAPH competition.”

Eva Garcia then chimed in with her question. “You and Xander had to deal with being in different leagues for a while. How do you plan to balance your relationship now that you’ll be in different divisions and potentially playing against each other?”

”Being in different divisions and potentially facing each other on ice adds an interesting twist,” I admitted with a small chuckle. ”We’ve built our relationship on trust and communication, though,” I continued earnestly. ”We’ll use FaceTime and make frequent visits whenever we can.” As laughter rippled through the room at my casual mention of technology aiding my love life, I couldn’t help but smile too.

Xander

Two years later...

In the quiet of my Newark apartment, the gnawing worry about Ry's future clung to me like a shadow. Two years had slipped through our fingers like sand.

Our teams belonged to different divisions, limiting our face-offs to rare, electrifying occasions. Those games were etched into my memory; the ice beneath us crackling with tension as we clashed head-on. The Tridents had come out victorious more times than I cared to admit, but it wasn't about winning or losing.

"Playing nice because we're dating? Not a chance," I'd told him once, the echo of my words still ringing true. We'd never held back when competing against each other; if anything, we pushed harder. The thrill of competition was a fire that fueled us both, even if neither team had ever hoisted The Cup in victory.

I traced my fingers over an old Grizzlies team photo on the mantel, lingering over Ry's image. His eyes sparkled with determination – a reflection of his unyielding spirit that made him the formidable opponent he was.

"What does your future hold, Berry?" I murmured to his frozen image. My heart tightened at the thought of Ry facing any challenges alone – hockey-related or otherwise.

Taking a sip of coffee, I reflected on the past two years since Ry started playing in the NAPH. He'd adjusted well. His stats were super impressive and he was still

remarkably fit. Why the Tridents hadn't renewed his contract yet was a mystery to me.

With a sense of anticipation, I grasped my phone, thumb hovering over the screen. My heart yearned for a message from him about his contract predicament. The screen remained stubbornly empty, devoid of any updates. A sigh escaped me – an involuntary release of pent-up worry.

I tapped out a message to him, words of encouragement dancing across the digital screen. It was important to keep his spirits up; he needed that more than anything right now.

Me: Hey Berry, I want you to know that whatever comes with this contract, I'm here for you.

I smiled softly as I sent off the text. Tomorrow was going to be different – better. Ry had been forced into a short recovery break due to a minor muscle strain and it was our chance for some much-needed time together away from the demands and prying eyes of our teams.

The thought warmed me from the inside out. It was rare for us to get quality moments like these and I found myself eagerly looking forward to it. The idea of being there while Ry healed not only physically but also from the stress of his contract situation felt right.

My fingers tapped the screen again, adding one last note into the ether.

Me: This break isn't just about healing your body but also about rejuvenating your spirit. Can't wait to spend this time with you... just us without any pressure.

Fishing into my pocket, I found one of my trusty Ring Pops. The crinkly wrapper

gave way under my fingers, revealing the candy treasure inside. With a quick pop, it was in my mouth and I savored the sweet rush that followed. Coffee and Ring Pops – an unlikely duo that only a guy like Brandt could have introduced me to.

”Xander,” he’d said one day, an impish grin on his face as he held out the colorful candy. ”Trust me on this.”

I remember rolling my eyes at him then, but here I was now, hooked on the strange combination. Now there’s always a stash of them within reach – most often nestled in the depths of my pockets.

Brandt, I thought with an amused shake of my head. You’ve created a monster.

Looking back on my time with the Eagles, not everyone had welcomed me with open arms. Jake, in particular, seemed to have a bone to pick from the get-go. It wasn’t until later that I learned the real reason behind his hostility. Turns out, I was seen as a threat, swooping in as the new talent just as his position on the team was starting to wobble. Poor guy got shipped back to the Miami Stingrays, our affiliate team, and two years down the line, he’s still there, battling it out in the minors. It’s a tough break, but that’s the nature of the game sometimes.

I found myself wearing a path into the carpet of my living room, phone clutched tightly in my hand. Each tick of the clock amplified the waiting game that Ry and I were forced to play. The shrill ring of the phone startled me out of my thoughts.

”Hey, Sunshine,” Ry’s voice crackled through the line, his nickname for me always managing to bring a smile to my face.

”Hey, Berry,” I responded, trying to keep my tone light despite the worry gnawing at me. ”Any news?”

”Still nothing.” His voice was heavy with uncertainty.

I could almost see him there on the other end of the line – those expressive eyes clouded with worry.

”You’ve been phenomenal these past two years,” I reassured him earnestly. ”It’d be a crime if they don’t renew your contract.”

A sigh echoed from his end. ”I wish I knew what was happening.”

My heart clenched at his words; it wasn’t easy seeing Ry so anxious about his hockey career. He loved the game more than anything else – well, except maybe me.

”Can’t wait to see you tomorrow,” I told him softly, hoping to offer some comfort.

When we ended the call I promised myself I’d keep him distracted during his visit here – but not by burying our worries under mindless activities or empty reassurances. Instead, I planned on sexing him up real good. He would be too full of cock to spend his time here fretting over what came next in his career. After all, no matter what happened, he’d always be a star player in my eyes.

An hour had passed and I was about to sink my teeth into a steaming pepperoni and mushroom pizza, its tantalizing aroma filling the room, when there was a knock on the door. Who could it be? I wasn’t expecting any visitors.

As I swung open the door, my breath hitched in my throat. There he was – Ry, standing tall with a mischievous glint in his eyes. Before I could utter a word, his hand found its way behind my neck, pulling me closer while his foot kicked the door shut.

In that instant, my mind was stripped bare as Ry’s lips crashed onto mine in a primal

exchange – raw, unfiltered, even while he backed me against the wall. His flavor invaded my senses; a potent blend of mint and an essence that was distinctly his. The rough stubble on his cheek grazed against mine as we fit together in our own private tango.

”God, you taste like sex and sin,” I growled into his mouth, my hands making their way down to the bulge straining against his jeans. His answering moan vibrated through me as he pushed harder into my touch.

The wall behind me was cold and unforgiving, but it didn’t matter. Not when Ry’s hand found its way into my pants, gripping me firmly and matching the rhythm I had set on him. Our bodies moved in sync, hard and fast against the wall.

”Fuck, Xander,” he panted out between kisses, ”you feel so good.”

His words sent a jolt of pleasure through me. My heart pounded in time with our movements; every nerve ending screamed for release. I could feel the heat radiating off him, could smell the intoxicating aroma of his arousal. It was all-consuming.

”Love you so fucking much,” I managed to grit out before losing myself completely to sensation.

Our ragged breaths echoed off the walls around us as we chased our climax together – raw, passionate... and utterly perfect.

As we finally broke apart, I managed to gasp out between pants, “Come shower with me?”

Without saying a word, Ry carded his fingers in mine and led me to the bathroom.

Now that we had come down from the high of seeing each other and showered and

dressed in shorts and t-shirts, I asked Ry, “Weren’t you supposed to be here tomorrow?” My mind raced trying to recall if I’d muddled up his flight schedule.

He simply grinned at me before responding with two words: “April Fools’?”

Laughter bubbled up between us. We were in the kitchen reheating the pizza. I hadn’t remembered it was April Fools’ Day but Ry had certainly made it memorable. He always knew how to keep me on my toes.

We began devouring slices of cheesy goodness. I took a swig of my ale. “I’m glad you’re here a day early; it means I have you with me for an extra day.” I bit into my slice.

He grinned at me, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “I pulled a few strings,” he said nonchalantly. “Thought it would be fun to surprise you.”

”And your flight? How was it?”

”You won’t believe what happened.”

I leaned in, eager to hear what he was going to say. “Try me.”

”So, I board the plane, and everything seems normal. I’m sitting next to this guy who’s super friendly and chatty. He starts telling me all about his pet ferret. I’m nodding along, trying to be polite, when suddenly, I feel something crawling up my leg.”

”No way!” I said, laughing.

”Yeah, turns out the guy had actually brought the ferret with him, hidden in his carry-on. The little critter escaped and was running loose under our seats.”

I shook my head in disbelief. "That's crazy. What happened next?"

"Well, the flight attendants are trying to stay calm, but you could tell they're freaking out. The guy is frantically trying to catch his ferret, which is now scurrying around, causing a mini-panic. People are lifting their feet and yelling."

I laughed. "Seriously? What did you do?"

Ry rolled his eyes, but there was a good-natured glint in them. "Well, you know how much I love ferrets," he said sarcastically. "I ended up helping the flight attendants catch it. Took us a good fifteen minutes. The guy was apologizing like crazy, and they had to find a small crate from storage to keep the ferret in for the rest of the flight."

"Bet you were thrilled," I said, smiling.

Ry laughed, shaking his head. "Yeah, just what I needed. But, hey, it made the flight interesting. And it was worth it to get here early to surprise you."

Listening to him recount his journey filled me with an inexplicable warmth. His spontaneous arrival wasn't just some April Fools' Day joke; it was a sweet reminder of the playful yet affectionate bond we shared and I was incredibly fortunate to have him in my life – unexpected arrival or not.

I slipped away from the table, casting a casual glance over my shoulder at Ry. "Just heading to the bathroom real quick." My destination wasn't there at all. My feet carried me to the bedroom, and my hand found its way inside the bedside drawer searching for something.

And there it was – just where I'd left it.

Returning to the kitchen, my heart pounded in sync with each step. With a swift movement, I retrieved the Ring Pop from my pocket and dropped to one knee before Ry. The playful glint in his eyes made me smile as I held it out.

"Berry," my voice echoed through the room, "will you marry me?"

His eyes widened like saucers. "Wait, what?!"

I couldn't contain myself any longer; laughter bubbled up within me, spilling out into the room. "Gotcha! April Fools'!"

Ry shook his head in disbelief but joined me in laughter soon after. However, when our chuckles began to fade away, I found myself locked in his gaze – a tender warmth spreading between us.

"But... what if it wasn't a prank?" The words hung heavy in the air.

His face fell slack with shock as realization dawned on him. "Wait... are you serious?"

I swallowed hard against the knot of nerves forming in my throat but managed to keep my voice steady. I took out a box bearing the real engagement ring from my pocket. "Completely serious. Ryan, I love you more than anything. Will you marry me for real?"

His eyes softened, and a slow smile spread across his face. "You're not kidding?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

I shook my head, my own emotions threatening to overwhelm me. "No jokes this time. Just you and me. Forever."

Without a moment of hesitation, Ry reached for me, his arms wrapping around me tightly. "Yes," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "Yes, a thousand times yes!"

We embraced tightly then – letting go of everything else and simply holding onto each other while sharing a heartfelt kiss. The Ring Pop lay forgotten on the floor as I slipped the real engagement ring onto his finger, the diamond catching the light and casting tiny rainbows around the room. I'd picked it out weeks ago. A simple yet elegant platinum band, adorned with a single, brilliant-cut diamond that sparkled even in dim light.

Ry looked at me with shining eyes and said: "Looks like the joke's on me this time." A grin spread across his face, even as tears of joy welled up in his eyes. "Best April Fools" prank ever."

The rest of the evening was a blur of laughing, crying and making love. We basked in the joy of our engagement, and planning our future together.

HOCKEY HERALD

Breaking News

Eagles Secure Star Forward Ryan Bennett with 3-Year No-Trade Contract

In a stunning turn of events, the Newark Eagles have signed forward Ryan Bennett to a three-year, no-trade contract. Bennett, previously with the Tallahassee Tridents, joins the Eagles just as the team is gearing up for another intense season. This move not only strengthens the Eagles' lineup but also reunites Bennett with his long-time partner and teammate, Alexander Harrison.

Bennett's move to Newark has been the talk of the hockey world. After an

impressive stint with the Tridents, where he demonstrated his prowess on the ice with a combination of speed, skill, and strategic play, Bennett is now set to bring his talents to a team eager for a championship. The Eagles have never clinched The Cup, but with Bennett and Harrison on the same roster, hopes are higher than ever.

Bennett, who is currently in Newark recovering from a minor injury, received the call from his agent with the life-changing news. The excitement is palpable not just among the fans but also within the team, as the chemistry between Bennett and Harrison is expected to elevate the Eagles' performance.

"It's a dream come true," Bennett said in a recent press conference. "To be able to play on the same team as Xander is something we've always hoped for. We've faced challenges being in different leagues and on different teams, but now we have the opportunity to push for a championship together."

Harrison echoed his partner's sentiments, expressing his excitement about the upcoming season. "Ryan is an incredible player, and having him here with the Eagles will be a huge boost for us. We've always pushed each other to be better, and now we get to do that every day on and off the ice."

The Eagles' management is equally thrilled about the acquisition. "Ryan Bennett brings a dynamic presence to our team," said Head Coach Phil Roberts. "His experience, combined with his chemistry with Xander, will be invaluable as we aim to bring The Cup to Newark."

Fans have also shown overwhelming support for Bennett's move, flooding social media with messages of encouragement and excitement. The hashtag #BennettToNewark has been trending, with many fans expressing their belief that this is the year the Eagles will finally secure the championship.

However, the road to The Cup won't be easy. The competition is fierce, and the team

will need to maintain peak performance throughout the season. But with Bennett and Harrison leading the charge, the Eagles are poised to make a significant impact.

In addition to his on-ice contributions, Bennett's presence in Newark is expected to have a positive impact on the community. Known for his charitable efforts and community involvement, Bennett has started to engage with local initiatives, further endearing himself to the fans.

As the new season approaches, all eyes will be on the Newark Eagles. The addition of Ryan Bennett has not only strengthened their lineup but also brought a renewed sense of hope and excitement. With a powerful roster and the dream team of Bennett and Harrison, the Eagles are ready to soar to new heights.

The puck drops soon, and the journey to The Cup begins. For now, the city of Newark celebrates the arrival of their new star and looks forward to what promises to be an unforgettable season.

Bennett

One year later...

Sixteen years of professional hockey, and here I was, on home ice in Newark for the final game of The Cup playoffs. It had been a year of change; I'd said "yes" to a life with Xander. We'd moved in together, our lives intertwining as easily as our fingers did when we held hands. The move from Tridents to Eagles had been smoother than expected too.

The sea of Eagles fans in the arena was overwhelming. My eyes searched for familiar faces in vain – my parents, Connor and Chloe. They'd finished their exams and were enjoying a break before summer classes so their regular semester course load would be lighter. Yes, two years ago Connor was able to start college along with his sister, since my contract with the Tridents had come just in time for me to foot the bill. Life had fallen in place for the twins, and I was happy to help to make that happen.

And you know what was a huge surprise? Many of my old teammates from the PHL team where I'd spent most of my career, including Jester, Maestro, and Tank, were there too, watching the game to support Xander and me. My entire hockey family was united in this moment.

The tension hung heavy in the air as we faced off against the Tucson Cardinals. Every cheer from the crowd electrified me, reminding me of what was at stake. Xander caught my eye across the ice; no words were needed.

It was a grind out there – every puck fought over like it was the last one on earth. We

ended regulation tied at 2-2, staring down sudden death overtime.

The first 20-minute OT came and went without a winner. Another 20 minutes were added, the tension rising with each second.

Then, with seconds left in the second OT, Xander pulled off a beauty of a pass. Time slowed just enough for me to snag the puck. I took the shot and buried it in the net – goal! The buzzer sounded, and we walked away with the win over Tucson.

The arena erupted into euphoria; fans roared our names while teammates mobbed us on the ice. Amidst this chaos, Xander found me – his eyes mirroring my own joy and relief. With reporters converging on us like iron filings on a magnet, he pulled me close for a kiss that tasted like victory.

The crowd's reaction was instantaneous. A wave of cheers and applause swept through the arena, louder than ever. Some fans held up signs celebrating not just our win, but our love. Our teammates, already ecstatic from the victory, clapped and cheered us on, some even whistling in approval. It was a moment of pure acceptance and joy

"We did it," I whispered against his lips.

Winning The Cup? Incredible! But having Xander by my side? That was perfection. The arena transformed into a carnival of celebration – the Eagles had won The Cup!

As the team passed around our hard-earned trophy, I stole another moment with Xander. My heart was full; this was everything I'd ever dreamed of and more.

Forty-eight hours after our exhilarating Cup victory, Xander and I were seated on a plane, seatbelts fastened securely. The cabin was a hive of activity, each passenger's excitement crackling in the air like static electricity. The low rumble of the engines filled the air.

A flight attendant was making her way down the aisle when she caught sight of us and stopped abruptly at our row. Her eyes widened with recognition and she let out an excited gasp before rushing to grab the intercom.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she announced with unmistakable excitement, "we have the honor of flying with Ryan Bennett and Xander Harrison from the Eagles, our newly crowned Cup champions!"

The cabin erupted in cheers and applause. A grin spread across my face. Xander shot me a look, his eyes shining.

As the plane ascended and leveled off, I turned to Ry. My heart felt like it could burst at any moment. Taking home The Cup was a dream come true... but this? This was everything.

Xander's eyes sparkled as he reached for my hand, his touch grounding me in the moment. "We're going to start our next adventure. Are you ready for it?"

"Sunshine," I countered while giving his hand a gentle squeeze, "I've been ready since the first day you were mine."

He glanced at his phone then flashed that smile that always made my heart skip a beat. "In less than five hours, we'll be soaking up the sun in Antigua."

I leaned in closer so only he could hear my words over the hum of engines and chatter around us: "And in less than nine... you'll be my husband."