



Rivals on Lockdown

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Category: LGBT+

Description: For Louis Zenith, losing the game on Christmas Eve was bad enough—but getting accidentally locked in the locker room with his biggest rival, Kaden Faulter, takes things to a whole new level. Seven years of rivalry on the ice, sharp words, and tense stares explode into something neither saw coming, all while a snowstorm rages outside.

Louis has always believed Kaden is nothing more than the hockey league's arrogant golden boy, but being stuck together forces him to confront the truth: the heat between them has always been about more than competition. And as the hours drag on, their carefully guarded secrets begin to unravel, revealing feelings neither of them can ignore.

Rivals on Lockdown is a hockey-fueled enemies-to-lovers holiday romance packed with fiery chemistry, heartfelt revelations, and all the heat to melt a winter storm.

Total Pages (Source): 5

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:47 am

The arena lights buzzed overhead, casting harsh shadows across the ice. Louis Zenith's lungs burned as he tracked the puck. Thirty seconds left on the clock, and the score deadlocked at 3-3. He could feel Kaden Faulter's presence somewhere behind him, waiting for him to make a mistake. Seven years since juniors, and nothing had changed—Faulter was still there, always watching, always ready to strike.

The media loved this—the two of them, always circling each other. Zenith and Faulter, hockey's favorite rivalry, names linked together in every sports column like some cosmic joke. It didn't matter that they were nothing alike. Kaden Faulter, the golden boy of the league, heir to the Faulter media empire, who probably had designer labels sewn into his practice gear. The blond Adonis, with his lightning speed and a pretty-boy smile that made fangirls swoon. Then there was Louis: dark-haired, broad-shouldered, a defenseman who'd worked his way up from local rinks and borrowed equipment. The fans ate it up, spinning stories about their “charged encounters” on ice, debating every glare and shoulder check like it held some hidden meaning. If they only knew how much they truly couldn't stand each other.

Coach Martinez's voice cut through the crowd's roar. “Zenith! Watch your left!”

The warning came a split second too late. With Louis caught between watching the puck and checking his passing options, a blur of white and blue—Faulter's jersey—flashed in his peripheral vision. Before he could shift his weight to brace for impact, Kaden slammed into him hard, their shoulders crashing. The puck disappeared from Louis's stick as he fought to keep his balance. Classic Faulter—making the hit look like a clean defensive play for the refs while throwing his full weight at the perfect angle to knock Louis off-rhythm. Louis pivoted hard, ice

spraying as he pushed himself to catch up, but Kaden had always been just a half-step faster.

Faulter crossed the blue line as Louis raced to close the gap. Their goalie, Mike, dropped into position, shoulders squared, but Louis already knew what was coming. Seven years of watching the same shot—quick stick-handle, a slight shoulder dip, then top corner. The puck left Faulter's stick just as Louis lunged to block it. Too late. The final buzzer pierced the air as it hit the back of the net.

Visitors 4, Home 3.

Louis slammed his stick against the ice, the crack lost in the eruption of cheers from the visiting crowd. Two goals tonight, and for what? Just to watch Kaden fucking Faulter light up the scoreboard in the final seconds.

Kaden let out a victory whoop that cut through the noise. "That's how it's done!"

Louis forced himself to look up, watching his rival embark on his trademark celebration lap. Hands raised to the crowd, that million-dollar smile flashing as he soaked in the attention. Some of the home fans were even cheering for him now—traitors. Louis's grip tightened on his stick until his knuckles ached. It was only mid-playoffs, not the end of the world, but losing on Christmas Eve made the defeat sting that much worse.

"Shake it off, Zenith," Coach Martinez called out behind him, but Louis barely heard him over the blood rushing in his ears.

The teams lined up for the traditional handshake, a parade of sweaty jerseys and forced sportsmanship. Louis tried to regulate his breathing as the line inched forward. He could do this. He could be professional. He could—

“Merry Christmas, Zenith,” Kaden drawled as they came face to face, his voice dripping with false sweetness. “Consider this my gift to you—a reminder that some things never change.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Louis growled, meeting his gaze. “Your circus act’s getting old.”

“Maybe,” Kaden said, lips curving into a venomous smile. He leaned in closer, breath visible in the cold air. “But you still can’t help falling for it, can you?”

“Fuck you,” Louis breathed, plastering on a smile for the reporters even as his jaw remained clenched. Camera flashes exploded around them like lightning—the photographers never missed their precious rivalry moments.

Kaden chuckled. “Aw, don’t be like that. You know you’re my favorite plaything.” He leaned even closer, his lips ghosting the shell of Louis’s ear. “Nobody else gets that pretty flush of anger quite like you do.”

“Get bent,” Louis spat, shoving past him.

Kaden’s low chuckle followed him down the line. “Sweet dreams, Lou. I’ll be sure to think of you when I’m polishing my trophy tonight.”

Louis forced himself through the remaining handshakes, each one a blur of motion he performed on autopilot. The locker room beckoned—a refuge from the celebrating crowd, from Faulter’s smirking face, from everything.

He was the first one through the door, dropping onto the bench in front of his stall. The familiar scents of athletic tape and sweat couldn’t mask the staleness of defeat. One by one, his teammates filtered in, their usual post-game chatter subdued to murmurs. Nobody looked his way. They knew better.

Through the small window near the ceiling, Louis could see snow starting to fall harder, the flakes thick and heavy. The weather alert on his phone had warned of a storm rolling in tonight. His hands moved mechanically through the motions—unlacing skates, peeling off gear, dropping each piece into his bag with practiced precision. The routine should have been calming. It wasn't.

Tinsel and miniature wreaths decorated the room—Taylor, their equipment manager, had spent hours on the holiday display. Now, it just felt like salt in the wound. Louis reached up and yanked a piece of tinsel from his stall, letting it fall to the floor.

“Don't let him get to you,” Mike, their goalie, said from the next stall over. His voice was rough with frustration, but he tried for an encouraging tone. “It's Christmas Eve, cap. Let it go.”

“I'm fine, just give me some space,” Louis said, the words coming out sharper than intended. He knew he was coming off as a jerk, but he couldn't help it. Something about Faulter always stripped away his composure, left him feeling like he was still that drunk kid at the juniors afterparty, heart racing and shame burning in his chest.

Mike gave him a knowing look but didn't push it. Smart man. In seven years of pro hockey, three different teams, Mike Patterson was the most perceptive goalie Louis had played with.

“Hey, party at my place is still on,” Santiago Lopez, their power forward, called out to the locker room. “Wife's got enough food for an army, and Santa's definitely leaving some top-shelf whiskey under our tree. No one should be alone tonight.”

A few halfhearted cheers went up around the room. Louis kept his head down, focused on packing his bag. He'd already decided he wasn't going. The thought of making small talk, of having to maintain a brave face while everyone tiptoed around the loss—around him—made his skin crawl.

“That includes you, cap,” Santiago added pointedly.

“I’ll think about it,” Louis muttered, which they both knew meant no.

He reached for his phone in the bag, remembering Aunt Mara’s text from before the game. She always checked in on holidays—but when he pulled out the phone, there was no service in the locker room. Her message sat there unanswered: Good luck tonight, sweetheart. Call me after?

She worried about him being alone during the holidays, even though he’d assured her repeatedly that he was fine. That’s what aunts did, he supposed. He’d call her later, on the way home.

The snow was falling harder now, coating the windows in a thick white blanket. Louis watched it for a moment, remembering winters back home in Minnesota, practicing shots in the backyard until his fingers went numb and Aunt Mara dragged him inside for hot chocolate. Things had been simpler then. Before fame, before the pressure, before hockey became more about fans and media narrative than the pure joy of the game.

Louis lingered in his stall, methodically reorganizing his already neat gear while his teammates filtered out one by one. It was his post-loss ritual—waiting until the room emptied before letting himself really process the defeat. Some guys needed to talk it out, needed the communal commiseration, but Louis had always preferred solitude. Today, mercifully, everyone seemed eager to get home to their families, their Christmas Eve dinners, their lives beyond these walls.

The usual locker room sounds faded gradually: equipment bags zipping shut, boots squeaking against the tile, voices growing distant. Louis counted each departure like heartbeats until, finally, blessed silence descended. He exhaled slowly, shoulders slumping as he let his carefully maintained composure crack just a little.

“Louis?” Coach Martinez’s voice startled him. The older man was standing in the doorway, coat on and a bag slung over his shoulder, peering into the dim locker room with concern etched on his weathered face. “You doing alright, son?”

Louis straightened automatically. “Yeah, Coach. I’m good.”

Martinez shifted his bag, hesitating. “You got somewhere to be tonight? Someone to spend Christmas with?”

“Of course,” Louis lied smoothly, the words tasting bitter on his tongue. “My aunt’s expecting me.” He didn’t mention that Aunt Mara lived halfway across the country in Minnesota or that their only Christmas connection would be their annual phone call, where they both pretended they weren’t alone.

“Good, good.” Martinez nodded, seeming relieved. “Well, Merry Christmas then. Don’t stay too late—even the janitors deserve to get home early tonight.”

“Merry Christmas, Coach,” Louis replied, waiting until Martinez’s footsteps faded down the hallway before letting out a long breath.

Finally, truly alone.

He took his towel and headed for the showers, cranking the hot water to maximum. The spray hit his shoulders with bruising force, but he welcomed the almost painful heat. Steam billowed around him as he stood motionless under the stream, losing track of time as the game played on an endless loop in his head. But it wasn’t just the game anymore—Faulter’s face kept swimming into focus, not the polished smirk from today’s victory, but a different expression entirely. One he’d spent years trying to forget.

The steam thickened around him, and suddenly, he was back there seven years ago.

The music from the house had been muffled by the night air, the pool lights casting everything in an ethereal blue glow. Faulter had followed him outside—or had Louis followed him? The details were blurry now, lost to time and alcohol, but he remembered with perfect clarity how Kaden’s face had looked in the moonlight. How pale he’d been, chest rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths as he stared at Louis. There had been a moment then, stretched tight like a wire between them, the chlorine sharp in the air and crickets chirping in the darkness.

Then something had shifted in those blue eyes, something raw and terrified, before he’d looked away and brushed past Louis, practically running back into the house. Louis had stood there for a long time afterward, watching the ripples in the pool catch the moonlight.

Even now, Louis’s heart hammered at the memory. God, he’d been so naive back then.

The bundle of emotions in his chest ached, too tangled to properly unravel. The loss tonight wasn’t crucial in the grand scheme of things, but Faulter’s familiar taunts had hit harder today. Seven years of the same dance, and he still hadn’t learned how to let them slide off his back. He couldn’t cry, though—he never cried. Wouldn’t give Faulter the satisfaction of knowing he still had that power over him.

After what could have been hours, Louis finally turned off the water. He wrapped a towel around his hips and left the shower stalls, droplets of water still trailing down his chest. The building had gone quiet except for the distant sounds of the cleaning crew doing their rounds and the familiar hum of the Zamboni resurfacing the ice.

But when he stepped back into the locker room, he stopped dead in his tracks. He wasn’t alone.

“Was that your everything shower?” Kaden smirked, giving Louis a deliberate once-

over from where he sat slumped on one of the benches. “Because it took you like thirty minutes.”

Louis felt suddenly cold, acutely aware of his near-nakedness. He stood frozen, water dripping onto the floor. “What are you doing here?”

“Enjoying the view,” Kaden said, that infuriating smirk still playing on his lips.

He looked immaculate, freshly showered, and perfectly groomed in a tailored shirt beneath what was probably a ridiculously expensive wool coat. No doubt headed to some fancy charity Christmas dinner where he’d charm everyone with that practiced smile. The contrast between them—Louis dripping wet in just a towel, Kaden looking like he’d stepped out of a magazine—made Louis’s jaw clench.

“How did you know I’d be here?”

“You always stay for a misery shower after you lose,” Kaden taunted, his smirk widening. “Everyone knows that.”

“If you came to gloat, I’m not in the mood,” Louis said, heading for his stall. He tracked Kaden’s movements from the corner of his eye—the way prey watches a circling predator, muscles tensed for the inevitable strike.

“I didn’t,” Kaden said as he stood, leaving his bag behind on the bench. His footsteps echoed in the near-empty locker room. “Just wanted to check in on my favorite enemy. You looked so wrecked out there after the buzzer. Almost made me regret that last goal.”

Louis’s shoulders tensed as Kaden drew closer. He busied himself with his gear, but that familiar cologne—probably worth more than his car—filled his lungs with each breath. The trust fund prince, playing at being one of them. Even now, with Louis’s

own contract solid enough to secure that downtown apartment and his aunt's new place, something about Kaden's casual wealth made his teeth ache.

"Yeah, right. Stay the hell away from me," Louis muttered, finally turning to meet Kaden's gaze. The familiar blue of those eyes caught him off guard, and he watched something raw and unguarded flicker across Kaden's face—gone so fast he might have imagined it, replaced by that same calculated smile that made Louis's jaw clench.

"Stop pretending you hate me, Lou." Kaden's voice dropped lower, almost gentle, and that softness was worse than any taunt. "We both know better, don't we?"

The words sliced through him with surgical precision, finding the old wound Louis had spent years trying desperately to bury. Ice seemed to crystallize in his veins, but he kept his face carefully blank—a skill learned through too many cameras, too many moments like this. With deliberate movements, he grabbed his thermal shirt and turned away, using the motion of pulling it over his head to hide whatever truth might be showing on his face.

"I don't hate you, Faulter," Louis said, voice low and caustic, even as his heart hammered against his ribs. "You're nothing to me." The lie tasted like copper on his tongue, familiar and sharp, perfected over years of practice.

Kaden stepped closer again, the expensive wool of his coat brushing against Louis's bare arm. "That's cute," he purred. "Is that why your heart's pounding?"

Heat flooded Louis's face, spreading down his neck. There was no way Kaden could know about his racing pulse, but that realization only made his face burn hotter. He hated how Kaden could read him so easily, how every defense he'd built meant nothing under that knowing gaze.

The locker room suddenly felt too small, too warm despite the winter air seeping through the high windows; he could hear the distant rumble of the cleaning crew's vacuum, the last echoes of life in the building. Louis grabbed his underwear and pants from the stall, anger twisting in his gut. "Can you leave? I want to put some clothes on and get the hell out of here."

"Nothing I haven't seen before," Kaden said, voice dripping with false sweetness. He took a few measured steps back and turned away, adding with honeyed venom, "Don't worry about the size, Lou—I know it's cold in here, no judgment."

Louis yanked on his clothes with sharp, angry movements, then sat to pull on his socks and boots. Through it all, he could feel Kaden's presence—still there, perched on the bench with his back turned like some brooding statue in that ridiculous designer coat.

Shoving the last of his things into his bag, Louis zipped up his parka and made for the door. His fingers closed around the handle, turned—and met solid resistance. He tried again, harder this time, but the door didn't budge.

Something cold settled in his stomach as his eyes tracked between the handle and the lock mechanism. "What the fuck?" He turned to glare at Kaden. "Did you do this?"

"Do what?" Kaden's voice held that same aristocratic boredom that made Louis want to punch him.

"We're locked in."

That got Kaden's attention. He stood, all fluid grace even now. "What do you mean, locked in ? I came in like thirty minutes ago."

"Were there cleaners in the hallway?" Louis demanded.

“How should I know? I was too busy watching you take your pity shower.” But there was an edge to Kaden’s voice now, something less controlled.

“Did anyone come in here?”

“No.” Kaden’s perfect facade cracked just slightly as he crossed to test the handle himself. “I don’t know.”

Louis yanked his phone out of his pocket, but he already knew there was no service in the locker room—there never was, the thick concrete walls blocking any hope of a signal. He ran his fingers through his hair and let out a sharp breath. “Well, this is just fucking perfect.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:47 am

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting harsh shadows across the room. A strand of Christmas lights Taylor had strung around the equipment cage flickered intermittently, their cheerful blinking at odds with the growing tension in the room. A forgotten Santa hat hung limply from one of the coat hooks, mocking their predicament.

“Check your phone,” Louis demanded, his voice echoing off the lockers.

Kaden pulled out his smartphone with exaggerated slowness. “No service,” he muttered, then dropped it back into his coat pocket. “Guess you’re stuck with me, darling.”

Louis slammed his fist against the door, pain shooting through his knuckles. The hollow sound echoed through the empty room. “Hey! Anyone out there?” Another hit, then another, each impact a desperate plea into the silence. He kept going, hoping some late-night security guard or cleaning staff would hear him, but the only response was the dull thud of his own fist against metal. After a full minute, his hand aching and useless, he let it drop to his side. Of course, no one would hear them—it was Christmas Eve, and the cleaning crew was long gone.

Louis huffed in annoyance, dropping his bag by the door with a thud before shrugging off his coat and letting it fall carelessly on top.

Kaden had already made himself comfortable on the bench again, pulling a leather-bound book from his bag as if this were some planned vacation. The casual way he turned each page made Louis’s blood boil.

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re just going to read?”

“What would you prefer?” Kaden’s eyes flickered up, a hint of mockery in their blue depths. “We could cuddle for warmth. Play truth or dare or strip poker.”

“Go to hell.” Louis stalked to the high windows, studying the narrow rectangles near the ceiling. Outside, snow was still falling heavily, coating the glass. He dragged one of the wooden benches across the floor, the scraping sound satisfyingly harsh.

“What exactly are you doing?” Kaden asked, finally looking up from his book as Louis started wrestling a second bench on top of the first.

“What does it look like?” Louis grunted, steadying the makeshift tower. “I’m getting out of here. Some of us have places to be.”

He didn’t have anywhere to be, but Kaden didn’t need to know that.

“You’re not getting out through that window, Spiderman.” Kaden’s voice was sharp with amusement. “First of all, that broad chest of yours won’t fit through there, and secondly, there’s no handle—the window doesn’t open. And you’re definitely not making it if broken glass gets involved.”

Louis ignored him, climbing onto the stacked benches. The wooden structure swayed precariously under his weight.

Behind him, a book snapped shut, and Kaden’s voice cut through the air. “Do you want to break your fucking neck?”

Louis ignored him and reached for the window, fingers searching for any grip. No handle. He pushed against the glass experimentally, then banged on it.

“Taking all those hits must have really scrambled your brain, sweetheart,” Kaden said, but there was an edge to his voice. “Though watching you fail is always entertaining—”

The benches shifted beneath him. Louis felt his balance waver, tried to catch himself, but it was already too late. The world tilted sideways as he fell, and the crash of his body hitting the bench echoed through the locker room. A sharp burst of pain shot through his leg.

“Fuck, you absolute moron!” Kaden’s expensive shoes appeared in his field of vision, and then suddenly, he was there, dropping to his knees beside Louis, his face shadowed with worry. “Hey, can you hear me?”

Louis blinked, head pulsing. As he tried to sit up, spots danced in his vision, and then he felt the warm wetness trickling down his leg. Blood was seeping through his pants where he’d caught his ankle on the bench.

“Oh shit—” The room tilted as Louis stared at the growing dark stain.

But Kaden was already moving. He yanked up Louis’s pant leg, then pulled a crisp white handkerchief from his pocket, folded it into a pad, and pressed it against the wound.

“Hold this,” he ordered, voice tight. Then he unwound his silk scarf—the gold “Hermès” lettering glinting in the fluorescent light—and, with surprisingly skilled hands, began wrapping it around Louis’s ankle as a makeshift bandage.

“There’s a medkit somewhere in here,” Louis said as Kaden pulled the ends of the silk scarf tight around his ankle.

“This is just to keep you from bleeding all over the floor,” Kaden said, “Now that we

have time, we can find the medkit, clean the wound, and wrap it properly before it gets infected.” His arm slid around Louis’s waist, warm and steady, as he helped him up. “Come on, tough guy.” When Louis tried to take a step, pain shot up his leg. He grabbed Kaden’s shoulder instinctively, fingers digging into the wool coat.

They made their way to the intact bench, each step a careful negotiation. Louis could feel Kaden’s breath against his neck.

“I’ll look for the medkit,” Kaden said.

“It’s fine,” Louis muttered, dropping onto the bench. “Don’t need anything else.”

Kaden’s eyes found his, holding that familiar mix of mockery and something unreadable. “If you want to get an infection and have your leg amputated mid-season, then sure, it’s fine.” His gaze swept the room before landing on a white cabinet mounted on the far wall. “Ah. There it is.”

Louis didn’t protest this time. He watched Kaden retrieve the kit, then carefully lay his wool coat and suit jacket across the bench beside them. He folded back his shirt sleeves in neat, precise rolls up to his elbows before kneeling in front of Louis.

Something in the room shifted. The snap of latex gloves punctuated the silence as Kaden pulled them on. One by one, he laid out bandages, antiseptic, and gauze on the bench in front of him with the same methodical focus he brought to the ice.

“Hold still,” Kaden murmured, carefully lifting Louis’s injured leg to rest on his thigh. His fingers ghosted over the makeshift bandage where blood had begun to stain the silk, darkening its pattern. Louis found himself studying the familiar intensity in Kaden’s expression—a look he usually only saw during games.

“I could’ve done this myself,” Louis said, his voice rougher than he intended.

Kaden's laugh was soft and bitter. "You'd probably bleed to death just to spite me." His touch was careful as he cleaned the wound, the sting of antiseptic making Louis hiss. Kaden pressed the pad against the wound, his hands steady as he wrapped the fresh bandage with slow, deliberate movements.

"There," he said finally, fingers lingering at Louis's ankle. "That should hold."

Louis swallowed hard. "Thanks."

Kaden peeled off the latex gloves, those blue eyes finally meeting Louis's. "Well, you're welcome. Can't have you dying on me—no one would believe I didn't murder you." He stood up, brushing invisible dust from his knees. "Though I have to admit, the headlines would be delicious. 'Hockey's Golden Boy Snaps, Murders Rival on Christmas Eve.'"

Louis snorted before he could stop himself, hating how easily the sound had escaped. He pulled out his phone again, powering it off and on in desperate hope of finding a signal. Nothing. Then, the reality of their situation hit him like a punch to the gut. "Oh god," he breathed, panic creeping into his voice as the pieces clicked into place. "Tomorrow's Christmas. Everyone's gone home. Nobody's going to check this place for days."

Something flickered across Kaden's face—a crack in his usual smug composure. His perfect facade slipped for just a moment as the reality of their situation sank in. "Wait, what?" He tried to mask his growing unease with a dismissive wave of his hand, but his voice betrayed him, the practiced confidence wavering. "Someone's bound to come looking for you. We'll be found. Today or tomorrow morning, latest."

Louis shook his head. "Nobody's going to look for me."

"You have a family, don't you?" Kaden's tone was oddly serious now, studying

Louis with unexpected intensity.

“Just my aunt. We can go days without talking. She won’t realize anything’s wrong for a couple of days at least.”

“What about a girlfriend?” Kaden asked, then added with a deliberate smirk, “Or boyfriend?”

“Shut up,” Louis snapped.

“I’m actually serious,” Kaden said, the usual venom absent from his voice.

“I don’t have anyone,” Louis ground out. “What about you? Your parents? Your butler or something?”

“Butler?” Kaden scoffed. “I don’t have a butler.”

“Whatever! Weren’t you supposed to be at some fancy event tonight?”

“You’re just assuming that?” Kaden’s voice turned sharp, defensive.

“Well, weren’t you?” Louis frowned. “Why else would you be dressed like a fucking prince charming?”

“Sort of,” Kaden admitted reluctantly, shoulders slumping slightly as the polished facade dimmed. “But they won’t look for me either. They’ll just assume I didn’t show because of the storm or something.”

“Oh God,” Louis sighed again, slumping forward with his head in his hands.

The silence settled between them for a long moment before Kaden pushed himself to

his feet. He wandered to the nearest stall, rifling through the gear bags left behind. A protein bar emerged from Miller's bag, then another.

"Hey, stop that," Louis protested. "You can't steal from people's bags."

"They're your teammates, aren't they?" Kaden didn't even pause, moving to the next stall with calm determination. His voice carried easily across the quiet room. "I'm sure they wouldn't want us to die from starvation."

"Me, maybe," Louis muttered. "You? Not so much."

Kaden's soft chuckle echoed off the walls as he continued his systematic raid of the room. Stall by stall, his collection grew. When he finally made his way back to the center of the room, he laid his bounty carefully on the bench between them.

"Well," he announced, arranging the protein bars into a precise stack, "at least we won't die of starvation. Twelve protein bars should keep us alive long enough to be found." He picked one up, turning it over in his hands with exaggerated disdain. "Though I have to say, your team's taste in flavors is questionable at best. Apple cider protein bar?" Kaden wrinkled his nose. "That sounds absolutely vile."

"I'm not spending Christmas locked in here with you," Louis growled, more to himself than Kaden.

"What, afraid they'll come up with another story about us?" Kaden's voice dripped sweet venom. "Something saucy, maybe? Did you know there are girls who think we fuck?"

Louis clenched his jaws. "Maybe because you lead them on on Twitter?"

"No," Kaden's lips curved into a dangerous smile. "I think they're just feeling this

natural tension between us.”

Louis slid off the bench and leaned back against it, the cool tile grounding him as his heart pounded, each beat echoing in his ears. His palms felt clammy, but he ignored the discomfort. Something about tonight—the quiet, the isolation, or maybe just Kaden’s constant needling—made the weight in his chest impossible to ignore. He wasn’t sure if it was courage or exhaustion fueling him, but the urge to finally address the unspoken tension between them surged to the surface. If he didn’t do it now, he never would.

“Okay,” he said, his voice tight but determined. “I see you’re going to keep bringing this up, so let’s talk about the elephant in the fucking room while we’re at it.”

His pulse quickened as the words left his mouth, but there was no taking them back now. He clenched his jaw, bracing himself for whatever came next.

Kaden shifted where he sat, stretching his legs out in front of him with an air of casual ease. His expression remained calm, but there was something in his eyes—something guarded like he was waiting to see where this was going.

He tilted his head just slightly, his voice smooth and maddeningly unaffected. “What elephant?”

Louis’s heart thundered in his chest, but he kept his eyes locked on Kaden, his jaw tightening as he forced the words out. “The fucking kiss.” Each syllable felt like a challenge, but he refused to back down now. It had been buried long enough, and if Kaden wanted to keep pushing, then fine—they’d push.

He could see the flicker in Kaden’s eyes, a split second of something unguarded before it shifted into practiced confusion. Louis knew better. That look wasn’t real—it was Kaden buying time, scrambling for a response.

“Juniors,” Louis pressed on, his voice steady despite the rapid thrum of his pulse. “The last game we played together. I kissed you by the pool at the afterparty.”

The words hit the air like a slap, sharp and unavoidable. Louis stayed rooted, his gaze steady and unrelenting. If Kaden wanted to play dumb, he’d have to do it while staring down the full force of Louis’s resolve. There was no escaping this, not now.

A faint flush crept up Kaden’s neck, but his tone turned sharp, almost biting. “Why the hell are you bringing this up now?”

“Because every time we see each other, it feels like you’re throwing it back in my face,” Louis said, his voice steady despite the tightness in his chest.

Kaden stayed still, his expression unreadable in the uneven glow of the flickering Christmas lights. The soft hum of the overhead fluorescents filled the silence, pressing down on them both.

“I was drunk,” Louis said finally, the words coming out low, almost reluctant. “That’s why I kissed you. If it made you uncomfortable—if it upset you—then I’m sorry.”

“It didn’t,” Kaden said, the response quick, almost too quick. His face shifted as if he’d bitten into something sour, and he added with forced nonchalance, “Stop being weird, Zenith.”

Louis studied him, waiting for the usual smirk or sharp remark, but none came. Kaden looked flustered, almost unsettled, his focus fixed on the protein bar he was slowly turning over in his hands. The silence between them stretched, heavy and awkward, broken only by the faint hum of the lights and the occasional flicker of the Christmas decorations.

The confession lingered in the air, unresolved. Louis felt an odd twist in his chest—relief that Kaden wasn't mocking him for once, but also a strange, bitter disappointment at the lack of a reaction. Kaden's refusal to meet his gaze, the absence of any real response left the moment feeling incomplete, like a question hanging in the air with no intention of being answered.

His leg throbbed as Louis pushed himself up from the floor. He had to try the door again, had to do something besides sit here with Kaden's silence. Each step turned into an awkward hop as pain shot through his ankle.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kaden asked. "You can't put pressure on that leg unless you want to bleed all over this place."

"I said I'm not spending Christmas here with you," Louis muttered.

He tried to brute force the door, but it didn't budge. Ten more minutes of studying hinges and looking for weak points proved useless—without tools, they were stuck.

Kaden came up to him, annoyance written on his face. "Can you please sit back down? We don't have enough bandages to redo your leg every five minutes."

Louis shot Kaden a scowl but didn't bother with a reply. Instead, he grabbed his parka and made his way to the nearest bench. The cold was becoming noticeable now, seeping into his skin and making his muscles stiff. He settled onto the bench and draped the parka over his shoulders, the familiar weight offering a small measure of comfort.

Reaching into his pocket, Louis pulled out his phone. His thumb hovered over the screen for a moment as he considered checking again, but he stopped himself. The battery was at 47%, and if they ended up stuck here longer than expected, it would be better to save it, just in case. He turned the screen off and slid the phone back into his

pocket, glancing toward Kaden. The sight of him sitting there so calm, so collected, only made the irritation bubbling under Louis's skin worse.

"Check your service again?" Louis asked, his tone sharper than he'd intended.

"I already told you I don't have any," Kaden said, catching the edge in Louis's voice.

"Just...check again."

"Why would it be any different from yours?"

"Because your phone probably costs more than my car," Louis muttered. "Maybe it's got better reception or something."

Kaden rolled his eyes, but there was something almost fond in his exasperation. "Yeah, I get it—you don't want to be stuck here with me. But would it kill you to ask nicely?"

Louis hadn't expected those words to sting quite so much. He paused, really looking at Kaden for the first time since they'd been locked in. It was true—for all his taunting on the ice, Kaden had been surprisingly decent since they'd been trapped. He'd helped with Louis's injury without hesitation, hadn't even complained about ruining his probably ridiculously expensive scarf. Louis opened his mouth, not quite sure what he was going to say—

The fluorescent lights flickered once, twice, then plunged the room into darkness.

"Fuck," Louis breathed.

"Storm must have knocked out the power," Kaden suggested, his voice oddly close in the dim room.

“No, the Christmas lights are still—” Louis started, gesturing toward the equipment cage. But even as he spoke, the cheerful string of lights winked out, leaving them in total blackness. “Fuck.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:47 am

The locker room had fallen into silence. In the darkness, the only light came from Kaden's phone screen, its cold glow illuminating his face in a harsh square of blue-white light. His fingers moved across the screen, but with no service, Louis couldn't figure out what he was doing.

Time crawled. An hour passed, the temperature steadily dropping as the winter air seeped through the concrete walls, with the heating off and nothing to hold it back.

Louis had retreated to one of the corners, his gear bag beneath him and his parka wrapped tightly around his shoulders. The cold was making him drowsy, or maybe it was just the exhaustion of the game finally catching up with him. His eyes grew heavy as he watched the faint outline of Kaden's silhouette against the dim light.

He was nearly asleep when movement caught his attention. Kaden had stood up, his phone's flashlight beam cutting through the darkness as he began another methodical exploration of the room. Louis tracked his progress through half-lidded eyes, watching him move between the stalls, the light sweeping across equipment and forgotten gear.

When Kaden returned, he was holding something—a bottle of whiskey that must have been stashed away in someone's stall. Without ceremony, he raised it to his lips and took a long drink. Then his footsteps drew closer to Louis's corner.

“Want some?” Kaden's voice was quiet, the bottle hanging between them like a peace offering.

Louis wanted to say no. It felt like accepting defeat somehow. But the cold had sunk

deep into him, making his teeth want to chatter, and suddenly, warmth felt more important than pride. He reached up, his fingers finding the bottle and brushing against Kaden's hand in the process.

The whiskey burned, but it was a good burn—the kind that promised heat and forgetfulness. He was still processing the sensation when Kaden lowered himself to the floor, settling a careful two feet away. Close enough that Louis could sense his presence, could catch the faint scent of that expensive cologne, but far enough that they weren't quite sharing space.

They passed the bottle back and forth in silence. Minutes stretched into half an hour, marked only by the soft sound of the bottle changing hands and the occasional swallow. The whiskey was working its way through Louis's system, making everything softer around the edges. The cold didn't feel quite so sharp anymore, and the darkness had taken on a comfortable weight.

When Louis reached for another sip, Kaden's fingers stayed wrapped around the bottle, not letting go.

"I shouldn't have let you drink," Kaden said. There was something careful in his voice. "Could be bad for the wound. Let me check it."

"It's fine," Louis said, but Kaden was already moving. The beam of his phone light cut through the darkness as he knelt in front of Louis. He pressed around the edges of the bandage, his fingers steady and careful despite the whiskey they'd shared.

"Looks okay," Kaden said finally, turning off the flashlight. But instead of going back to his previous spot, he settled down right next to Louis. Closer this time, their shoulders almost touching.

Louis turned his head toward him, the alcohol making his thoughts loose and warm.

“Aren’t you cold?” The question came out more concerned than he’d meant it to be as he eyed Kaden’s thin dress shirt, sleeves still rolled carefully to his elbows.

“Why?” Kaden’s voice carried that familiar venomous sweetness. “Are you going to suggest we share body heat?”

Louis snorted, rolling his eyes. It struck him suddenly that they were having what could almost be called a nice moment. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened—it had to be back in juniors.

“You’re acting weird,” Louis said, the whiskey’s warmth loosening his tongue more than he liked. “What’s with the sudden nice-guy act? You’re a complete dick to me on the ice.”

Kaden shifted beside him. “A dick? Me?” He pressed a hand to his chest, mock indignation dripping from every word. “Harsh, Zenith. Name one time I’ve been anything but delightful.”

“Every fucking match,” Louis shot back.

Kaden let out a quiet laugh, the sound tinged with disbelief, almost amused. “Oh, come on.”

“Your whole mission on the ice is to get under my skin.”

“You can be so daft, Zenith.” The way Kaden said his name felt like a caress and a slap all at once, a sting he knew too well.

“And you always make sure to rub your wins in my face,” Louis muttered, the words pointed but not as sharp as before.

“That sounds like a you problem, not a me problem,” Kaden said with a bitter smirk, taking another sip of whiskey. “Every time I score, you look at me like I’ve taken something from you. Like I don’t deserve it.” He shifted closer, their shoulders brushing, his voice low but steady. “Take tonight, for example. That goal wasn’t luck—I spent weeks perfecting that shot. Hours studying your defensive patterns. But you’d rather believe I’m just lucky than admit I earned it, wouldn’t you?”

Louis blinked, something stirring in his chest that had nothing to do with the whiskey. “You...studied my technique?”

“Of course I did.” Kaden ran a hand through his hair in frustration, the movement barely visible in the phone’s dim light. “You’re the best defender in the league.”

The compliment hung in the air.

Louis felt his face grow warm, grateful for the darkness that hid his reaction. He wasn’t used to genuine compliments from Kaden—wasn’t sure how to handle one. The whiskey bottle lay forgotten between them.

“You’re drunk,” Louis finally managed, but there was no bite to it.

“Not drunk enough to lie.” Kaden’s voice was soft but serious. Then, after a pause, he said, “There’s more where this came from, you know.”

He was up before Louis could respond, phone light sweeping across the room again as he made his methodical way through the stalls. When he returned, he was holding a bottle of rum—probably Lopez’s secret stash, though Louis decided not to think too hard about that.

Kaden came back and sat down on the bag beside him, setting the bottle of rum between them. After a moment, his voice came quiet, slightly slurred. “Why don’t

you have a girlfriend? Girls are crazy about you.”

Louis’s head felt heavy, thoughts moving slowly like honey. He turned the question over in his mind, tasting the familiar bitterness of it. “Are you seriously asking?” The words came out thick on his tongue. “Because I think you already know the answer.”

Kaden shifted slightly beside him, his thigh brushing against Louis’s. “What? Not into relationships?”

Louis let out a low hum, considering, his eyelids drooping under the weight of the whiskey and the pressing darkness around them. Everything felt both uncomfortably close and strangely distant. “Not into girls, dumbass,” he muttered, his voice barely above a murmur.

“Oh.” The word hung in the air between them, quiet but weighted. Louis could hear the slight hitch in Kaden’s breathing, the pause as he processed what had just been said.

“It’s kind of obvious, isn’t it?” Louis muttered, the alcohol loosening his tongue more than he intended. “I kissed you.”

Kaden’s voice came after a beat, slower now but still holding that edge of curiosity. “You could be bi.”

“I’m not.”

“So, it’s just guys, then?”

“Mm-hmm.” The word lingered, simple but heavy.

Kaden paused, then asked, “Do your teammates know?”

“No.” Louis leaned his head back against the cold concrete wall. “And I’d rather they didn’t. For now.”

“Fair enough,” Kaden said, his tone even, offering nothing more.

The silence dragged, comfortable and heavy with alcohol. Louis could feel each point where their bodies touched—shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, the heat of Kaden’s body against his own through the thin barrier of their clothes.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” The question tumbled from Louis’s lips before his alcohol-addled brain could catch up with his mouth. He hadn’t meant to sound quite so interested, but if Kaden noticed, he didn’t let it show.

“Don’t have one.” His voice was closer now, quieter. The heat of his breath ghosted against Louis’s neck, making something flutter in his chest.

“What about that supermodel?” Louis pressed, desperate to maintain some semblance of their usual antagonism. “What’s her name—the one from all those fashion week photos?”

“Kara?” Kaden said, a hint of amusement in his voice. “That was just for publicity. My agent thought it would look good in the press.”

Louis turned his head toward Kaden’s voice, grateful for the darkness that hid whatever his face might be revealing. “Do you usually date people for publicity?”

“Actually, yeah.” Kaden’s laugh was low and hollow, startlingly honest. “My father thinks it’s great for engagement metrics. The fans eat it up. Every appearance gets tracked, every photo analyzed. It’s all very scientific.”

“What about serious relationships?” Louis knew he sounded more curious than he

intended, the question dangerously raw.

“What about them?” There was something carefully neutral in Kaden’s voice now.

“Ever had one?”

For half a minute, only their breathing and the distant howl of wind broke the silence. Finally, Kaden spoke, his voice stripped of its usual polish. “Not really. No time for that.”

“Right,” Louis snorted, a hint of amusement warming his voice. “Too busy with all your charity galas and press conferences?”

“Am I just some spoiled rich brat in your head?” Kaden’s voice had an edge to it now, but not the familiar venom—something vulnerable, barely masked.

“Aren’t you?” Louis shot back without missing a beat.

“That’s hilarious,” Kaden muttered, but Louis could hear the ghost of a smile in his voice.

Neither of them moved, their shoulders still pressed together. They sat like that for a while. Then Kaden turned slightly, his voice cutting through the silence. “But anyway, who needs serious relationships when you can just have sex, right?” The words sounded strained, almost forced, as though he was trying to make them land casually and failing.

Louis noticed the shift in Kaden’s tone, the way the question hung awkwardly in the air before Kaden spoke again. “When was the last time you had sex, Zenith?”

“Yeah, that’s none of your business,” Louis said, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“Been a while, has it?” Kaden teased, though this time it felt different—less sharp, more playful.

“Are you coming onto me?” Louis meant it as a joke, but the words caught in his throat as Kaden’s hand found his thigh. The touch was deliberate, unmistakable. In the darkness of the locker room, Louis could barely make out Kaden’s face, but he watched him shift closer until only inches separated them, Kaden’s breath warm across his face.

“Kaden,” Louis whispered, but any other words died on his lips as Kaden closed the final distance between them.

The kiss started tentative—just a gentle press of lips against lips. Louis held perfectly still, afraid any movement might shatter whatever was happening between them, his heart hammering against his ribs. Seven years of tension, of wanting, of pretending not to want, collapsed into this single moment.

When Kaden pulled back, the absence of his warmth lasted only a heartbeat, but it felt endless. Then he was leaning in again, and this time, when their lips met, Kaden’s tongue traced slowly, deliberately along Louis’s bottom lip. Louis’s breath caught in his throat—it was just like their first kiss by the pool, both of them tasting of alcohol, but this time, Louis was drunk enough not to care about tomorrow.

Kaden’s tongue slipped into Louis’s mouth, and their tongues met in a heated rush. A quiet moan escaped Kaden’s throat, the sound shooting straight through Louis, making his blood run hot. Kaden’s hand began a slow, deliberate journey up Louis’s thigh, and Louis’s body went rigid, pulse thundering in his ears. When Kaden’s hand found Louis’s hardness, Louis cursed, and Kaden let out an audible gasp. But before Kaden could do anything else, Louis caught his wrist, gripping it to stop him.

Kaden exhaled sharply against his lips. “Buzzkill,” he whispered.

“You’re drunk,” Louis said, disappointment welling in his chest.

“Not that drunk,” Kaden insisted for the second time that evening.

“Yeah, you are.”

“But you want me,” Kaden purred, squeezing meaningfully. His voice dropped lower, dripping honey and venom. “I can feel how badly you want me, Lou. You’ve wanted me for seven years, haven’t you? Every time I score against you, every time I get under your skin—this is what you’ve been thinking about.”

“Shut up,” Louis growled, but his grip on Kaden’s wrist wavered.

“Make me,” Kaden breathed against his mouth, the words a challenge and a plea. His free hand slid up Louis’s neck, fingers tangling in his hair. “Is that what keeps you up at night, Lou? Knowing you had me right there, and I slipped through your fingers?” His lips grazed Louis’s jaw.

Louis’s breath hitched. “Why did you run?”

“Does it matter?” Kaden whispered, teeth grazing Louis’s earlobe. “Why didn’t you come after me?” Louis’s grip tightened on his wrist, and Kaden let out a soft, dangerous laugh. “All these years of watching me, hating me, wanting me—and you still can’t take what you want.” His hand twisted in Louis’s grip. “So take it now.” His voice dropped lower, darker. “Because after tonight, Lou? I might not make it this easy again.”

Louis was still for a long moment, his grip on Kaden’s wrist like iron where it held Kaden’s hand against his hardness. The Kaden from earlier tonight had been measured, real—but now the whiskey had stripped something loose in him, something Louis had never seen before.

“You don’t get to play games with me anymore.”

“Don’t I?” Kaden’s voice was breathless but still taunting. His palm rubbed Louis’s cock deliberately through his clothes. “Isn’t that what you like about me, Lou? That I never make anything easy for you?”

“No,” Louis said roughly, ignoring the way his cock twitched in response to the touch. “I liked you better an hour ago when you weren’t hiding behind this act.” Something flickered across Kaden’s face then—raw and unguarded—before the mask slipped back into place.

“Maybe that was the act,” Kaden said with a smirk, his fingers still working Louis’s cock with precision. “Besides, we both know you love hearing me taunt you.”

Louis fought back a shudder as Kaden’s fingers moved against him, his hand finding Kaden’s throat, thumb pressing against his pulse point. “I could make you stop talking.”

“You could try,” Kaden whispered, leaning into Louis’s touch instead of away. “I was hoping to get a mouthful—” His words cut off in a gasp as Louis’s mouth found his neck, teeth scraping against sensitive skin—not enough to hurt, just a warning.

“I don’t want you like this,” Louis murmured against his skin.

Kaden went still. In the dim light, Louis could feel the subtle shift in his body language—the way tension crept into his shoulders, how his breath caught and held for just a moment too long. When he pulled away, the cold air rushed between them, making Louis’s skin prickle.

The screen lit up as Kaden picked up his phone, the beam catching the side of his face—just enough to show how his facade had crumbled. The cockiness was gone,

replaced by something raw that made Louis's chest ache. His blue eyes, usually sharp with challenge or mockery, now held a vulnerability Louis hadn't seen since that night by the pool seven years ago.

Without meeting Louis's gaze, Kaden reached for the bottle of rum. His hands weren't quite steady as he brought it to his lips, taking one long pull, then another. The quiet sounds of swallowing seemed too loud in the stillness of the darkened locker room. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slumped against the wall, the expensive fabric of his dress shirt catching and dragging against the concrete.

The minutes stretched between them, marked only by the soft sound of their breathing and the distant howl of the storm. Gradually, Kaden's breaths grew deeper, more even. The tension began to leave his body in slow waves until his head drooped slightly to one side. Soon, his breathing had settled into the steady rhythm of alcohol-induced sleep.

In the dim light, Kaden's face had softened, the sharp edges of his usual mask smoothed away by unconsciousness. He looked younger somehow, more like the boy from seven years ago—before the rivalry, before their public personas, before everything between them had become so complicated.

Louis leaned his head back against the wall, willing his heartbeat to slow and his body to cool down. His erection faded slowly, replaced by a hollow ache in his chest that felt worse than any hit he'd taken on the ice. Seven years of wondering what could have happened if Kaden hadn't run that night, and now here they were—drunk and locked in a locker room, still running in their own ways. He closed his eyes, letting out a long breath that clouded in the cold air.

Maybe it was better this way. In the morning, Kaden would put his mask back on, and they'd go back to being what everyone expected them to be: rivals, nothing more.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:47 am

Louis jerked awake at half past eight. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, memories of whiskey making his temples throb. The power must have come back on sometime during the night—fluorescent lights hummed overhead, harsh and unforgiving.

For a moment, he couldn't remember where he was. Then he registered the warm weight pressed against him, each slow breath from Kaden fanning gently against his collarbone. Kaden was still asleep, head nestled against Louis's chest, one hand curled loosely in the front of Louis's thermal, their bodies huddled together under Louis's parka for warmth. How they'd managed to get into this position during the night, Louis didn't know—probably seeking heat in their sleep as the temperature dropped. But the sight made his breath catch, a familiar ache blooming in his chest. Kaden looked different like this, all his careful control softened by sleep, golden hair mussed and falling across his forehead, lips slightly parted. Almost peaceful, without the mask he wore.

Suddenly, the sound of keys jingling in the lock pierced the quiet of the room.

Louis looked up and held his breath, heart pounding. For a moment, nothing happened—then the door handle turned with a metallic click. The hinges creaked as the door slowly opened, and an older woman in a gray cleaning uniform stepped inside. She took one step, then stopped abruptly as she took in the scene. Her eyes drifted slowly across the room—the empty whiskey bottle lying on its side, the rum bottle nearby, protein bars scattered about, overturned benches still where they had fallen, first aid supplies strewn across the floor, and Kaden's once-pristine silk scarf crumpled nearby, marred by dark patches of dried blood.

“Oh!” The woman exclaimed softly, her weathered face startled as her eyes landed on Louis—and then on Kaden, still asleep in his arms. Her eyebrows shot up, her surprise unmistakable.

Louis stiffened, suddenly acutely aware of how they must look—Kaden pressed close against his chest like two lovebirds sneaking away for a night of stolen intimacy in the lockers. His cheeks burned, the situation feeling almost impossible to explain.

“We got locked in here last night,” Louis offered weakly, his voice higher than it should have been, betraying his nerves. “We’ll go now,” he added quickly as if that would erase the scene entirely.

The woman gave a slow nod, her expression carefully neutral, though the flicker of polite disbelief in her eyes was hard to miss.

Louis’s chest tightened as he glanced down at Kaden. Freedom was within reach, but with it came the end of whatever fragile connection had sparked between them in the darkness. He knew it hadn’t been the real Kaden who had come onto him last night—not entirely. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that the real Kaden, the one buried beneath layers of bravado and self-defense, was too afraid to show his true emotions.

Louis didn’t want to wake him up and break that shadow of a possibility. It felt like holding onto a dream—delicate and fleeting, already slipping through his fingers as the morning light crept in. Once Kaden opened his eyes, Louis knew the moment would be gone, replaced by the sharp edges of reality.

Finally, he exhaled and reached out, his hand trembling slightly as his fingers brushed against the wrinkled fabric of Kaden’s dress shirt. His touch was gentle, almost hesitant, as if he could postpone the inevitable just a little longer.

“Hey,” he said quietly, his voice low and steady despite the ache in his chest. “Wake up, Kaden. We can go now.”

Kaden stirred with a soft sound, his eyelashes fluttering as his eyes slowly opened. The sight of him like this made Louis forget how to breathe. He was beautiful—not just in the way people always called him, like some untouchable Adonis—but something more. Something raw, human, and painfully real.

For a few precious seconds, Kaden simply looked up at Louis, his face soft with sleep, completely unguarded. A small, dazed smile tugged at his lips as though he were still caught between the haze of dreams and reality. He blinked slowly, his gaze lingering on Louis with an openness that made Louis’s chest tighten.

But then, it was as if reality hit him all at once. Panic flickered briefly in his eyes, and color rushed to his cheeks as he jerked upright, suddenly hyper-aware of where he was and who he was with.

Louis felt a sharp jolt of regret, the weight of disappointment settling heavily in his chest as Kaden scrambled to put distance between them. He stood quickly, his movements stiff and awkward, freezing for a moment as he blinked down at the room, taking in the disarray.

“The door’s unlocked,” Louis said softly, his voice steady despite the ache in his chest. He kept his eyes on Kaden, trying to ignore the bitter sting of the moment already slipping away.

Kaden nodded but still wouldn’t meet Louis’s eyes as he reached for his phone, his usual grace replaced by stiff, jerky movements. He gave the cleaning lady a quick glance before stepping over to grab his bag from the bench. His hands fumbled slightly as he picked up his coat, the flush on his ears deepening and creeping down his neck in a telltale pink.

He focused intently on putting the coat on, shaking out the fabric, and sliding it over his shoulders with more care than necessary. His fingers lingered on the lapels, adjusting them needlessly, desperate for something to do with his hands.

Louis forced himself to look away, busying himself with checking his injured leg. He rolled up his pant leg, examining the bandage—no fresh blood, just a dull ache. Satisfied, he tugged the fabric back down and pushed himself to his feet, wincing slightly as he grabbed his bag.

When he glanced back at Kaden, he caught a glimpse of panic flitting across his face. It was obvious—Kaden was already planning his escape. Seven years ago, Kaden had run, and Louis had let him. But Louis wasn't that same person anymore. He was older, steadier, and completely sick of playing games.

“Ready?” Louis asked, his tone deliberately casual as he met Kaden's startled gaze.

Kaden blinked as if thrown by the simplicity of the question, then gave a quick nod and headed for the door.

“Merry Christmas,” Louis muttered to the cleaning lady as they passed her on what felt like the most literal walk of shame.

“Merry Christmas, boys,” she replied, her smile just a little too knowing.

Louis followed Kaden out of the locker room. Kaden moved a few feet ahead, maintaining a gap between them—not far enough to look like he was trying to ditch Louis, but enough to ensure they wouldn't have to talk. Louis recognized the distance for what it was, a barrier, and let it hang there unchallenged for now.

The corridor stretched out long and silent between them. Kaden's shoulders were rigid, and he stared intently at his phone, the glow of the screen faint in the dim

hallway. But Louis knew there was no service here—not in the corridors, not anywhere on this floor. The rapid movement of Kaden’s fingers across the screen was nothing more than a nervous distraction.

They passed into the stairwell, their footsteps echoing against the concrete as they climbed. Neither of them spoke, the tension between them growing heavier with each step. At the top of the stairs, another corridor awaited them, just as long and just as quiet. Kaden didn’t falter, his pace steady as he led the way toward the vestibule.

The lobby’s fluorescent lights felt harsh after the dim, muted tones of the lower floors. A security guard sat by the metal detectors, sipping coffee. His gaze flicked up as they approached, and his expression shifted into a double-take, clearly taking in their rumpled clothes and disheveled appearances.

“Merry Christmas,” Louis said with a polite nod, breaking the tension.

The guard’s face brightened with recognition. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Zenith,” he replied warmly.

Louis glanced at Kaden, noticing how his head dipped further toward his phone. His fingers moved rapidly, typing or scrolling with purpose now, though it was impossible to tell what he was so intent on. The flush on his cheeks deepened, and his shoulders tensed as though bracing for recognition. But the guard’s attention remained on Louis, sparing Kaden the embarrassment he seemed so desperate to avoid.

Louis didn’t say anything as they passed through the vestibule, but his chest felt tight. Kaden could try to hide from the guard’s gaze and bury himself in his phone, but it wouldn’t change what had happened—or the weight of everything still unsaid between them.

Louis pulled out his phone as the service bars finally appeared. Three missed calls from Aunt Mara. He quickly typed out a message: Hey, I'm okay. Sorry, had some phone problems! Everything's great. Will call tonight.

They pushed through the stadium doors into a world of white. Snow piled knee-deep and still falling so thick it blurred the horizon, reducing everything to a cold, swirling haze. Without a word, they trudged toward the gate, both fumbling with their Uber apps, their frozen fingers clumsy against the screens.

The unspoken words burned in Louis's chest. Whatever had sparked and flickered to life in that dark locker room was already fading, dissolving into the cold like breath on winter air, leaving behind nothing but the ache of its absence.

They didn't say a word as they waited for their Ubers. Louis scrolled through his phone, glancing at the team group chat. Someone had shared links to articles praising his shots from last night's game—apparently, they were being called the best of the season so far. The game itself felt oddly distant now, even though it had only been last night. Another message popped up: photos from the party at Lopez's house. A few of the guys had mentioned missing him. Louis stared at the pictures for a moment, then locked his phone, the ache in his chest growing heavier.

The first set of headlights appeared, cutting through the falling snow and announcing Kaden's ride. Kaden turned toward him, and Louis braced for the usual smirk, the parting jab he'd come to expect. Instead, Kaden stepped closer and held out his hand.

Louis hesitated, then took it. The handshake was firm but brief. When their eyes met, Louis caught something unexpected—a glimmer of tears in Kaden's blue eyes. It lasted only a moment before Kaden quickly looked away.

“Merry Christmas, Zenith,” Kaden said, his voice low and rough.

“Merry Christmas, Faulter,” Louis replied just as quietly.

Louis stayed where he was after Kaden’s cab pulled away, the taillights disappearing into the snowy haze. Even as the cold crept in, he waited for his own ride, unmoving. Whatever had happened between them—whatever it was—it was over now.

He had to let it go.

Louis moved around his kitchen, the rich smell of duck and cranberries filling the air. He’d decided that a proper Christmas dinner might help shake off the lingering melancholy—even if it was just for one. A feta salad sat waiting in a glass bowl on the counter while he gave the mashed potatoes a final stir, steam curling into the air.

He poured himself a glass of red wine, letting the soft strains of Christmas music drift through the apartment. The ache in his chest hadn’t disappeared entirely, but it felt different now. Lighter, somehow, like he’d finally let go of something he’d been holding onto for far too long.

Kaden’s face flashed in his mind—the way he’d looked when he turned back for that handshake, the hint of something raw in his eyes that Louis hadn’t dared believe was real. Louis sighed, running a hand over the back of his neck as he leaned against the counter. He told himself it was better this way, that whatever had sparked between them had burned itself out in that locker room. But his body remembered—his skin prickled with the ghost of Kaden’s touch, and the weight of his presence still lingered, impossible to ignore.

Maybe that’s what last night had been—a chance to lay old ghosts to rest. A way to finally move on from whatever unspoken thing had haunted them for years.

The doorbell cut through Nat King Cole's smooth voice, startling him.

Louis crossed to the door, the wine glass still cradled in his hand. He wasn't expecting anyone tonight. Maybe it was a neighbor who'd run out of salt or needed to borrow something last-minute. His steps slowed as he neared the door, a faint, inexplicable nervousness creeping into his chest.

He hesitated, then leaned forward to peer through the peephole. His breath caught.

It couldn't be—

His heart hammered as he turned the lock and pulled the door open.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:47 am

Kaden stood in the hallway, his usual polish intact but slightly unraveled by the snowstorm. Damp flakes clung to his hair, his cheeks were flushed from the cold, and his coat had the faint sheen of melted snow. He looked almost nervous—still beautiful, but different somehow, softer, less guarded. Louis could only stare.

“Hey,” Kaden said, his voice quiet, almost sheepish.

“Kaden?” The name slipped out, soft with surprise. It felt like the only thing Louis could manage, and maybe it sounded a little stupid, but he didn’t care. To say he was surprised would have been an understatement.

“Is this a bad time?” Kaden asked, his gaze flickering with the slightest trace of panic like he’d just realized he might be intruding.

“No—no,” Louis said quickly, stepping aside to let him in. “I was just making dinner. Come in, please.”

Kaden stepped into the apartment, holding out a bottle of wine. He shifted his weight awkwardly like he wasn’t sure what to do with himself. “I brought wine,” he said, his voice quiet, before his gaze darted to the glass already in Louis’s hand. “But I see you’ve got some.”

“Thanks—there’s never enough wine,” Louis said, a little too quickly, taking the bottle from Kaden. His fingers brushed against Kaden’s for a second, and he felt absurdly self-conscious. God, why did he feel like a nervous schoolboy? “How did you know where I live?” he asked, trying to steer his thoughts back to solid ground as he closed the door behind him.

“Uh...” Kaden hesitated, looking sheepish before admitting, “I paid someone.”

Louis snorted, a crooked smile spreading across his face. “I hope it wasn’t anyone from my team.”

Kaden let out a laugh, quick and soft. “Nah, it was my private detective,” he said, flashing Louis a teasing grin.

Louis blinked at him, incredulous. “You’re joking.”

Kaden shrugged, but his grin lingered as he pulled off his coat. Underneath, he wore a thick beige dress shirt that looked like it had been made for him, crisp and elegant. He looked like he’d come straight from some high-society gala, not ambushed his rival on Christmas Eve.

Louis took the coat from him to hang it by the door, but the moment he lifted it, the scent of Kaden’s cologne filled the entryway. It was clean and expensive, familiar from years of proximity on the ice, but here it was intimate—dizzying in a way that made Louis’s pulse quicken.

As Kaden bent to remove his shoes, Louis cleared his throat, desperate to ground himself. “Want some wine?” he asked, his voice a little too casual.

Kaden nodded, and Louis led him into the kitchen. The smell of duck sizzling in the oven filled the air, mixing with the steam rising from a saucepan of hot cranberry sauce on the stovetop. Kaden’s eyes swept over the counter—the salad and mashed potatoes neatly arranged. His expression flickered with hesitation, his gaze lingering for a moment before he blinked.

“Wait,” he said, his voice careful. “Are you expecting someone?”

A faint blush crept up Kaden’s neck as his eyes darted back to Louis, almost

panicked, like he'd just realized he might be interrupting.

"No," Louis said quickly, shaking his head. "I was just planning an evening for myself."

"Oh," Kaden said, relaxing slightly, though a frown quickly followed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"No, it's fine," Louis interrupted. "I'm glad you stopped by."

He felt his face heat up at the admission, and when Kaden actually smiled back, Louis's chest tightened. God, he was so normal now—so unguarded. Whatever had happened last night had done something to him. The mask was gone, and this version of Kaden, raw and real, made Louis's insides buzz with a strange mix of nerves and excitement.

The silence grew thick again, awkward and heavy. Louis cleared his throat. "Do you eat duck?" he asked, just to break it.

"I eat everything," Kaden said quickly, grabbing onto the small talk like a lifeline. "But I feel bad—I'm kind of crashing your dinner."

"You're not," Louis said with a shrug. "I made way too much."

He grabbed another glass, filled it with wine, and handed it to Kaden. Kaden took it but didn't drink right away, staring at the glass for a moment, his fingers idly tracing the rim.

"I probably shouldn't drink," he said finally, his voice quieter. A faint flush crept back up his neck as he glanced at Louis. "After last night..."

Louis froze, the words hitting harder than he expected. He'd figured they'd talk about

it eventually, but not so soon.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” Kaden said, his voice steady even as the blush lingered. His gaze met Louis’s directly, unflinching. “I feel like a douchebag.”

The sincerity in his voice left Louis momentarily speechless, the tension between them almost fragile.

“It’s fine,” Louis said, taking a sip of his wine. He shifted from one foot to the other, hesitating before asking, “How much do you remember, exactly?”

Kaden shrugged, his ears tinged red. “Uh...all of it.”

Louis let out a small laugh, more nervous than amused. “Well, there’s that, then.”

“Yeah,” Kaden muttered, his face turning scarlet. “Lou...”

“It’s fine,” Louis cut in, forcing a light tone even as his pulse quickened. “It happens.”

“No,” Kaden said firmly, finally taking a sip of his wine like he needed the courage. “I was just nervous.”

“Nervous?” Louis asked, his throat suddenly dry. “Why were you nervous?”

Kaden let out a short, dark chuckle, his eyes dropping to the floor before lifting to meet Louis’s. “Because it’s you,” he said simply.

Louis’s chest tightened at the words.

Kaden’s gaze stayed steady now, unwavering. “Because I don’t know how to act around you if I’m not being an ass.”

“You don’t,” Louis said, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Need to act, that is.”

Kaden swallowed hard at that, the flush on his cheeks a sharp contrast to his usual porcelain-pale complexion. “So,” he said, clearing his throat in an attempt to shake off the intensity of the moment, “where did you learn to cook like that?”

“My aunt taught me,” Louis said, taking a long sip of his wine.

“Is she a Michelin chef?” Kaden asked, one brow quirking up.

Louis chuckled. “She’s a bus driver. But cooking’s her hobby.” God, were they really trying to make small talk like normal human beings?

Kaden frowned, tilting his head slightly. “I think I actually knew that.”

Louis blinked, his brow furrowing. “What?”

“You told me that,” Kaden said, nodding. “Like ten years ago. When we played together in juniors.”

“Oh,” Louis said, biting his lip. “Right. We actually used to know each other.”

“We do know each other,” Kaden replied, a little exasperated. “You haven’t changed that much. Except for, uh...the muscles. You’ve got more of them now.”

Louis couldn’t help it—he laughed, the sound breaking the tension and easing the tightness in his chest. It felt good, so good, to laugh like that. “You’re...different tonight,” he said, unable to hold back a smile.

“Shut up,” Kaden muttered, his own lips twitching into what could almost be called a smile as he took another sip of wine. “I’m really trying if you can’t tell.”

“Not to be an ass?” Louis teased, grinning.

Kaden snorted, shaking his head. “Yeah, that.”

“I was planning to watch *Love is Blind*, ” Louis said, not feeling even a hint of embarrassment at the admission. He was too ridiculously happy and lightheaded to care. It wasn’t the wine—it was the surreal feeling of this moment like he’d stumbled into some wild romantic Hallmark movie.

“I’ll watch it with you, then,” Kaden said innocently. “It’s on Netflix, right? I came here for that.”

“Yeah,” Louis said, the response automatic. It took him a beat to realize Kaden was actually flirting. He laughed, his heart thudding loudly in his ears, but he didn’t have time to respond—the timer on his phone went off, signaling the duck was ready.

“The duck,” Louis said sheepishly, his cheeks still flushed as he turned to the oven. He pulled out the perfectly golden bird, the rich aroma filling the kitchen, and busied himself with carving it. He could feel Kaden’s eyes on him, watching intently as he worked.

“Any allergies?” Louis asked over his shoulder, grabbing two plates from the cupboard.

“No,” Kaden replied, his voice sounding almost dazed.

Louis spooned cranberry sauce over the glazed duck, adding mashed potatoes and salad to each plate. The warm satisfaction of cooking something right mingled with the giddy awareness of Kaden standing just a few feet away. Louis nodded toward his wine glass, left on the counter. “Can you grab my glass? And the wine bottle?”

“Got it,” Kaden said.

With plates, glasses, and wine in hand, they headed into the living room.

The space glowed softly with Christmas lights, casting a cozy warmth as they settled the food on the coffee table. They sank onto the sofa, and Louis picked up the remote, pulling up Netflix while hyperaware of the small, unspoken distance between them.

“Netflix and chill, indeed,” Kaden said with a casual stretch, leaning back against the sofa.

Louis rolled his eyes but couldn’t help smiling. “You’re really smooth tonight, too.”

Kaden blushed—again, for what had to be the tenth time that evening. “Sorry,” he said with a laugh, his ears tinged pink again. “That’s the wine talking.”

Louis couldn’t help noticing how different Kaden was like this—relaxed, genuine, without any sharp edges or carefully crafted persona. They put on *Love is Blind* and started eating their food.

“This is amazing,” Kaden murmured through a mouthful of duck, a bit of cranberry sauce glistening on his lips. “It’s so good.”

“Thanks,” Louis said, his gaze catching on that drop of sauce on Kaden’s lips, mesmerized. He swallowed hard, trying to focus on his own plate, but he couldn’t bring himself to eat much. His nerves buzzed with Kaden sitting so close, so instead, he sipped his wine and tried to keep his hands steady.

Their laughter came easily as they watched the show, Kaden tossing out snarky comments about every couple on the screen.

“Listen, she’s 100% disappointed he looks like that,” Kaden snorted near the end of the first episode.

“Yeah,” Louis laughed, warmth flooding him that had little to do with the alcohol.

“This show pretends to be so inclusive with its whole premise,” Kaden went on, waving his fork for emphasis, “but in reality, it’s not. They don’t put truly ugly people on here, so of course their ‘experiment,’” he added air quotes with his fingers, “works. And even then, not all the time. I’m sure once the mundanity of their lives comes crashing down, they’ll break up in a month or so.”

Louis laughed again, turning to glance at him. Kaden looked so at ease, his face soft in the glow of the Christmas lights, and for a moment, Louis just watched him, feeling something shift in his chest.

Louis set his wine glass down and leaned forward slightly, the movement drawing Kaden’s attention. Kaden looked up, his brows lifting in surprise as their eyes met. Louis stilled, holding his breath, waiting to see what Kaden would do.

And then Kaden leaned in, closing the distance.

When their lips met, it was nothing like before. There was no alcohol-fueled desperation, no fear, no sharp-edged taunts. Just softness. Honesty.

The kiss held everything they hadn’t been able to say—the careful defenses stripped away. Kaden parted his lips, inviting Louis deeper, and when their tongues met, an electric jolt shot through Louis, leaving him breathless. Kaden moaned softly, his breath hitching, and the sound sent a wave of heat pooling in Louis’s stomach.

Louis shifted onto his knees, guiding Kaden to slide back along the sofa until his head was near the armrest. Kaden stretched his legs out beneath him, his hands gripping Louis’s waist.

Their kiss deepened, growing hotter and more insistent. Louis’s hand trailed down Kaden’s chest, his fingers brushing over the firm lines of muscle beneath the fabric.

When his hand moved lower, finding the waistband of Kaden's pants, his fingers fumbled with the button. But just as he started to undo it, Kaden stilled beneath him.

Louis broke the kiss, pulling back just enough to look down at him. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice rough and unsteady.

"Yes," Kaden said quickly, his cheeks flushed, his breath coming in shallow gasps. His hands stayed on Louis's waist, holding him close like he was afraid he'd move away. "I just...I need to tell you something."

"What?" Louis asked, his head still spinning, his chest heaving from the kiss. "If it's about last night—"

"It's not," Kaden cut in, shaking his head. His eyes met Louis's, uncertain but intent.

"I'm fucking in love with you, Zenith," Kaden said, his voice trembling. "I've been in love with you for years. Way before you kissed me. But I was just afraid..."

Louis froze, his heart thundering in his chest. The confession hit him like a blow, leaving him momentarily stunned. "Fuck, Kaden," he murmured, the words slipping out before he could even think.

"I'm sorry," Kaden began, his voice faltering, but Louis cut him off with another kiss, deeper this time, giving no room for hesitation.

"What do you want?" Louis murmured against his lips, his voice low and rough.

"You," Kaden whispered, his breath catching.

Louis's lips found Kaden's jawline, trailing slow, deliberate kisses along it and down to his neck. Kaden shuddered beneath him, a soft gasp escaping when Louis nipped lightly at the sensitive skin, leaving him trembling.

“I want everything,” Kaden whispered, his hands sliding to Louis’s hips and pulling him close, pressing their bodies together. Louis could feel Kaden’s arousal through his pants, and as he shifted his hips, he ground his matching erection against Kaden’s. They both groaned at the contact, the sound raw and needy.

“Fuck me,” Kaden breathed, his voice low and desperate as he thrust his hips up. His movements were urgent, his pupils blown wide with desire.

Louis felt the rush of heat to his core, his pulse hammering as their lips met again in a heated, frantic kiss. His hands moved down, undoing the button of Kaden’s pants, his fingers trembling slightly.

Before he could pull them off, Kaden reached into one of his pockets, fumbling for something. Louis pulled back just enough to see what he was doing and nearly laughed out loud when Kaden held up a small bottle of lube and a pack of condoms.

Of course. Kaden Faulter always came prepared. For all his vulnerability tonight, he was still a cocky bastard who knew exactly what he wanted—and had no intention of leaving without it.

Louis finally pulled Kaden’s pants down, followed by his underwear, leaving him bare—and visibly aroused. Kaden’s cock bobbed between them, flushed and hard. Louis froze for a second, unable to look away, his breath catching at the sight.

Kaden, however, didn’t pause. His hands were already on Louis’s shirt, tugging it over his head before reaching for his jeans. Louis helped him, quickly kicking off his jeans then shoving his boxers down. His fingers moved to the buttons of Kaden’s shirt, undoing them one by one.

But before he could get far, Kaden suddenly stilled, his gaze dropping to Louis’s cock. His lips parted as he let out a soft curse, his eyes fixed on the sight of Louis: big, fully hard, and visibly aching for contact.

A few seconds later, they were both completely naked, their breaths heavy as they took each other in. Louis paused, his eyes locking on Kaden's, searching for confirmation. He needed to be sure.

Kaden didn't say a word—he didn't need to. He reached for Louis's hand, holding it steady as he squeezed a generous amount of lube onto Louis's fingers. The message was clear.

Louis didn't hesitate. As Kaden opened his legs and braced him on both sides, Louis leaned forward and began to prepare him. He started slowly, sliding one finger in and watching Kaden's reaction. Kaden bit his lip, his head tipping back, eyes fluttering shut as he adjusted to the touch.

Louis worked him for a moment, moving carefully, before adding a second finger. This time, Kaden's reaction was immediate—a loud, desperate moan that filled the room. His hips jerked slightly, seeking more.

“Fuck me, Lou,” Kaden breathed, his voice pleading. “Please. I need you.”

Louis didn't need to be told twice. He grabbed the condom from the pack, rolling it on quickly before slicking his cock with lube. The sight of Kaden beneath him, panting and ready, made his chest tighten with both desire and something deeper.

Louis pulled his fingers out and lined his cock with Kaden's entrance, their eyes dropping to where their bodies were about to connect. He pushed in slowly, feeling the tight stretch around him as Kaden gasped, his head falling back again with a moan of pleasure.

“Tell me if it's too much,” Louis said, his voice thick with need, his hands trembling slightly against Kaden's hips. “Tell me if you need me to stop.”

Kaden met his gaze, his pupils blown wide, his voice a breathless rasp. “Don't stop,”

he said, his urgency almost panicked.

Louis pushed a little further, inch by inch, trying to keep his control as he watched Kaden's reaction. Kaden's cock throbbed between them, flushed and leaking, as his body adjusted. Louis gripped Kaden's hips tighter, guiding himself deeper as they both let out a moan at the overwhelming stretch.

"Fuck," Louis cursed, his breath catching as he finally thrust all the way in and paused. They stayed like that for a moment, just breathing, their bodies slick and fully connected. Kaden's chest rose and fell rapidly, and when his eyes met Louis's, there was an almost pleading look there—a silent signal.

It was all Louis needed. He pulled back slowly, almost entirely, before thrusting back in, drawing a loud moan from both of them. The sensation was dizzying, a perfect mix of heat and pressure that sent jolts of pleasure through his entire body.

Louis found a rhythm, his cock sliding in and out more easily now as Kaden's body slickened with lube. His thrusts became faster, each one more desperate than the last, as they moved together in perfect sync.

"Harder," Kaden moaned, his hands reaching up to wrap around Louis's neck, pulling him closer. "Fuck me...harder."

Louis couldn't help but laugh softly at the request, his own arousal surging at the sheer desperation in Kaden's voice. God, he wanted nothing more.

"On your knees," Louis growled, his voice rough with command.

Kaden's cock twitched visibly at the words, his body reacting instinctively to the order. Without hesitation, he shifted, his movements quick and eager, ready for whatever Louis had planned next.

As soon as Kaden turned, settling on all fours in front of Louis, naked and waiting, Louis felt a dizzying rush of arousal. The sight of him—arched, exposed, and so ready—made Louis’s breath hitch.

“Hold onto the armrest,” Louis growled, his voice rough and commanding. Kaden obeyed immediately, gripping it with both hands, his body braced.

Louis guided himself back into him, a hand pressed firmly against the small of Kaden’s back while the other gripped his shoulder for leverage. Without hesitation, Louis began to fuck him, hard and fast, each thrust deep and precise. Kaden’s moans filled the room, desperate and shameless, mingling with Louis’s groans as they both surrendered to the primal rhythm.

The sounds they made were loud, obscene, echoing in the air—Louis was certain the neighbors could hear every second of it. The thought of their noisy, unapologetic fucking drifting through the walls while others sat at Christmas dinner only spurred him on.

Kaden’s moans grew higher-pitched, edged with need, his body trembling under Louis’s relentless pace. Recognizing how close he was, Louis leaned down, reaching beneath him to grab his cock. He wrapped his calloused hand around it, stroking firmly, his thumb flicking over the sensitive tip to spread the slick precome pooling there.

Kaden let out a broken cry, his body tightening, and Louis knew he was seconds away. Louis was close too, pleasure coiling in his core, but he wanted to take them over the edge together.

In a swift motion, he pushed Kaden onto his side, dragging one of his legs up for better access. They lay on their sides, Louis thrusting into him hard and rough, his hand never faltering on Kaden’s cock.

Kaden came first, shuddering with a loud moan as hot release spilled over Louis's hand. The sight and feel of it sent Louis spiraling; he managed a couple of quick, desperate thrusts before his body tensed, and he came inside Kaden with a guttural groan, his thrusts becoming shallow as waves of pleasure ripped through him.

Stars danced in Louis's vision as he rode out the last pulses of his orgasm, his body trembling with aftershocks. He collapsed against Kaden, their sweaty bodies tangled, both of them spent and unmoving. They lay there, breathing hard and ragged, the heat between them slowly fading into an exhausted calm.

For a long while, they lay tangled together in the heated, slick embrace, their breaths evening out as the intensity faded. Louis only pulled away briefly to dispose of the condom before returning to Kaden, wrapping him in his arms once more.

Neither of them spoke, too drained to form words. Kaden shifted slightly, turning in Louis's embrace to face him. He was flushed, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, but there was a soft contentment there too.

He nestled into the crook of Louis's neck, his breath warm against Louis's skin. Just as he was about to drift off, Kaden murmured sleepily, "I hope your leg is okay."

Louis chuckled quietly, the sound vibrating in his chest. He'd completely forgotten about his injury. Pressing a gentle kiss to Kaden's forehead, he whispered, "It's fine."

And with that, he closed his eyes, letting the warmth of Kaden's body lull him to sleep.

They slept most of the night on the sofa, tangled together in the living room until the creeping cold forced them to move to the bedroom. There, they spent the rest of the night wrapped in each other, their bodies unconsciously gravitating together, as if

yesterday they hadn't been the two biggest rivals in the Hockey League.

The morning greeted Louis with sunlight streaming through the snow-covered window. He stirred, stretching lazily, but when he turned over, the bed beside him was empty. For a moment, he froze. Could last night have been a dream? His heart began to race as he sat up, scanning the room for any sign that Kaden had been there. Panic prickled at the edges of his thoughts—until Kaden walked in.

Fully dressed, his hair brushed, and frowning slightly, Kaden stepped into the room.

“Morning,” he said, his voice casual, and Louis felt an overwhelming surge of relief. But the feeling shifted quickly into concern as he noticed the hint of tension in Kaden's eyes.

“Morning,” Louis replied, standing and dragging the duvet around himself for modesty. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Kaden said quickly, his frown disappearing as he smiled. His expression softened further, possibly amused by Louis's disheveled state. He stepped closer, cupped Louis's face, and kissed him deeply. The touch was grounding, sending another wave of reassurance through Louis.

“Are you okay, Zenith?” Kaden asked, his lips quirking into a smirk. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

Louis chuckled, still a little shaken. “I might have. For a minute, I thought I dreamt up last night.”

“You didn't,” Kaden said with a small laugh. “When I woke up, I could definitely feel that I didn't dream it.” His lips twisted into a teasing smirk, one eyebrow cocked meaningfully.

Louis felt heat rush to his face as the implication sank in. “Uh...sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Kaden replied, his voice full of warmth.

He looked effortlessly polished—wearing one of Louis’s white T-shirts, likely borrowed from the closet, and his own pants. He smelled expensive and clean, as usual, his hair brushed into its usual perfection.

“When did you get up?” Louis asked.

“Around nine,” Kaden said nonchalantly. “But it’s eleven now.”

“Eleven?” Louis frowned. “I slept that late?”

“Yup,” Kaden confirmed with a chuckle. “I made you breakfast.”

Louis blinked, dumbfounded. “You did?”

“I did,” Kaden said, smiling. “The coffee’s ready, too. I’ll go check on it. But please,” he added with a teasing glance, “put some clothes on before you leave the room.”

Louis smirked at the words but didn’t dwell on them, watching Kaden leave with an amused shake of his head.

Five minutes later, now dressed, Louis stepped into the living room—and froze at the unexpected voices coming from the kitchen. Not just one voice—several.

Crossing the room, he moved toward the kitchen with mounting curiosity. When he reached the doorway, he stopped in his tracks, his jaw dropping.

Standing in the room were six of his teammates: Mike, Santiago, Fareed, Jimmy, Sawyer, and Eric.

As they mingled casually around the kitchen island, cups of coffee in hand, Kaden stood by the counter, pouring two more cups—nonchalant as ever, the very picture of calm. But as soon as Louis stepped into the room, all six pairs of eyes turned toward him in unison.

“Uh...morning?” Louis muttered, his heart pounding. For a second, he wondered if this was all some bizarre fever dream brought on by the infection in his leg.

“Merry Christmas, captain,” Mike said, smiling as he set his mug down. “The boys and I decided to check on you. Hope you don’t mind.”

“You didn’t answer your phone,” Santiago added, biting back a smirk. “So we just...came over. And knocked.”

A pause hung in the air, thick with meaning, as all six teammates exchanged knowing looks before their eyes flicked toward Kaden.

Kaden, unbothered, crossed the room with the two mugs in hand. He handed one to Louis, their eyes meeting briefly as Kaden shrugged and bit his lip, a trace of amusement playing at the corners of his mouth. “Sorry, Lou,” he said casually. “I just opened the door.”

Strangely, Louis didn’t feel horrified or anxious, though, for years, he’d dreaded the idea of his team finding out about his sexual orientation. He’d expected this conversation to happen eventually, but not like this—and definitely not with Kaden Faulter in the mix. Still, instead of panic, his chest felt tight with barely contained laughter. Could these last 24 hours get any more absurdly Hallmark-esque?

“I can explain,” Louis said sheepishly, the mug warm in his hands. He glanced at Kaden, whose expression was unmistakably smug. He was clearly enjoying the team’s collective bewilderment.

“Before you start,” Mike interrupted, raising a hand, “we don’t care who you sleep with, cap.”

“Uh...thanks?” Louis replied, relief washing over him—though it came with hesitation, knowing there was more coming.

“But—” Mike continued before Sawyer cut in with a disappointed, “But really, cap? You went for the Adonis ?”

“Didn’t you hate the guy?” Fareed added, his disbelief palpable.

“Yeah, you couldn’t stand him,” Jimmy chimed in, shaking his head in incredulity.

“Oh God,” Louis muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Kaden leaned closer, lowering his voice just enough for Louis to hear as he whispered, “I’ll leave you to it.” He pressed a quick, deliberate kiss to Louis’s lips before strolling out of the kitchen and into the corridor, clearly relishing the drama.

Louis sighed, his face flushed as he turned back to his teammates. They were all staring at him—some grinning like idiots, others attempting mock-offended expressions, clearly struggling to keep straight faces. He ran a hand through his hair and muttered, “Oh God.”

THE END