

LOVE AT FIRST  
ONE  
PUCK

# WOLF ON ICE

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# **Alpha Wolf on Ice**

*Love at First Puck*

*Book 1*

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## Chapter One

### Zane

I pulled the crumbled paper out of my pocket and checked the address against the dorm building in front of me. This was it: Hollowridge State College senior apartments.

Honestly, I hadn't expected to get housing, considering it was supposed to be competitive and I was transferring to the school for my final year. I didn't ask, but I assumed my father had pulled some strings. I don't know why he bothered, he was deadest against me going to some no-name school that had never done anything notable in the hockey world to speak of.

Exactly where I wanted to be. My father would *never* have agreed to let me outright stop playing. It was just slump, he said. I'd get it together. I wasn't going to argue, but I wasn't going to humiliate myself on a top ten team that consistently sent players to the National Shifter Hockey League either.

So much for the promising hockey career of the son of Zachary 'Slapshot' Sandulff, son of Zachary 'Eleven Legend' Sandulff, son of Zephyr 'Great Wolf' Sandulff *and* Henry 'Hockey Dad' Talbot.

I bit back a sigh and headed inside. Four floors up I found my room and found a decent-sized common area, with a dining table and a couch. A large guy who smelled like an alpha was putting away dishes in a small kitchen area by the dining table.

"Hey," he said as I walked in. He pointed in opposite directions. "There are two rooms on either side, you can take your pick."

I headed down one of the narrow hallways and found two tiny bedrooms on either side of it. One was full of stuff, the other was empty. I dropped my bags in and went back out.

"Are there four of us, then?" I asked, looking curiously down the other hallway.

"I was told three. I just got here, myself." He rounded the small counter and extended a hand. "Corwyn Blackw—er Corwyn Brun."

I smiled, ignoring the stumble, and shook his hand. "Zane Sandulff. I just transferred here."

"Me too!"

"Can I help you unpack?"

"That would be great, thanks."

Together, we unpacked some dishes and figured out where to tuck everything. We were almost done when the door opened and another guy came in.

"Hey there, which one of you is my new roomie?" he asked.

"Both of us," Corwyn and I chorused.

All three of us laughed and the newcomer slung down some bags near the couch, then joined us at the edge of the small kitchen.

"I didn't think I'd be able to get an apartment here," he said as he walked over. "It's my first semester at Hollowridge. I'm Tate Clawson."

"Corwyn... Brun," replied my other roommate. "We're both new here too." He leaned around Tate a little. "Do I spy a netminder mask?"

"Yeah," Tate said eagerly. "Already have a spot on the team. You play?"

"I'm on the team too!" said Corwyn.

"Me too," I admitted.

“Ha! That’s great,” said Tate. “I didn’t catch your name...”

“Zane Sandulff.”

“Like Slapshot Sandulff,” he said as we shook hands.

“Yeah, *just* like Slapshot Sandulff,” I muttered.

“What position?”

“Left wing,” I said.

“Just like Slapshot, indeed,” Tate laughed. “What about you?”

“I’m defense,” said Corwyn. He looked at the two of us and grinned. “Well, this is great. What are the odds we all play hockey?”

“Probably pretty good, I bet the administration stuck us together,” replied Tate. He had been smiling, but it turned into a frown. “Hollowridge isn’t exactly known for hockey...”

Corwyn’s expression turned sour too. “No,” he agreed. “I was actually playing at a much better school before this...”

“So was I,” said Tate.

“Me too.” I couldn’t help but wonder why they were here. Surely it wasn’t for the same reason I was. “If hockey is your thing, why transfer here?”

“I uh...” Corwyn sighed and leaned against the counter. “Well, I guess you’ll probably find out sooner or later. My pack just disowned me. I couldn’t afford to stay at my other school.”

“Oh shit,” said Tate.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. That explained why he had tripped up over his name; if he was related to the lead alpha family, he wouldn’t have been permitted to carry the surname after being disowned.

“I’m having some pack trouble too,” Tate confessed. “There was a big split over some petty crap and I, well I guess I ended up on the losing side. A bunch of us formed our own pack and started over... couldn’t afford to stay at a bigger school either.”

My problems – or more accurately, my drama – paled in comparison.

“What about you, Zane?” Tate asked, obviously eager to take the topic off of himself.

“I, well... um...” I stammered. “I don’t want to play hockey at all,” I confessed.

They both looked at me in confusion.

“But, you’re on the team?” Corwyn said.

“I mean, I do want to play, sort of. I love hockey. My dad would *kill* me if I stopped playing. But I don’t want to go pro, like him. I figured if I’m at a smaller school, none of the NSHL people will come try to recruit me.”

“Holy shit.” Tate was staring hard at me and I knew, if he was any sort of hockey buff, that he could see the resemblance. “Your name isn’t a coincidence, is it? You’re Slapshot Sandulff’s son!”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“Whoa,” Corwyn breathed.

“I played you last year!” Tate cried. “You nearly took my head off with the puck a couple of times.” He laughed and shook one of his hands. “You have a hell of a shot, I think my hand stung for days. I remember thinking it was so cool to play against you, now here I am, your teammate and roommate!”

I smiled weakly at the praise.

“You don’t want to go pro?” Corwyn asked.

“I did,” I confessed. “I just...” They both looked at me curiously as I shrugged. “I kind of got into a slump last year.” At least my father’s excuse was good for something. “The pressure kind of got to me and I wanted to get away, without having to actually stop playing.”

“I can see that,” said Corwyn. “Your grandfather was a big hockey player too, wasn’t he?”

“The Eleven Legend,” Tate said as I nodded. “They retired his number, didn’t they?”

“They did,” I said, hoping the coach at this school wouldn’t try to give me number eleven like at my last school. The more distance from my family the better.

“And I think his dad played too?” Tate went on.

“*Both* of his dads,” I said. “They met on the ice.”

“No wonder you want to get away,” said Tate. “Must be tough.”

“Yeah.”

To my relief, he headed to his room to unpack.

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The three of us settled in nicely as roommates. It turned out we had a lot more than just hockey in common. We kept similar hours, liked the same shows and the same games, enjoyed the same foods... We didn’t order out much since the others were short on cash, but none of us were half-bad at cooking, so there was always something in the fridge. I started secretly buying extra stuff when it was my turn to shop and kept some of our staples stocked up. Nothing major, but I always smiled when Tate or Corwyn discovered a “forgotten” bag of coffee or one last can of something in the pantry.

Before I knew it, the first couple of weeks of classes flew by and the time for the first hockey practice had arrived.

Chapter Two  
Wesley

“Come in!”

I eased open the door of my academic advisor’s office. “You wanted to see me?”

“Ah, Wesley, right? Yes, come in and have a seat.

“Thanks.” I settled in while he typed rapidly on his keyboard.

“Okay,” he said. “Here we go. I see you just filed for graduation this semester?”

I nodded. “That’s right.” I hoped there wasn’t some sort of issue with the fact I had needed an extra semester. I had gone into heat smack in the middle of finals last fall and, despite my best efforts, had to retake a class that, of course with my luck, was only offered in the fall.

“I was going over all of our upcoming graduates and noticed you haven’t played a sport yet.”

Wait, what? I blinked at him for a moment. “I’m majoring in Sports *Journalism*,” I said.

“Yes. I’m sorry, this should have been caught last year.”

“What should have been caught?” I asked carefully.

“You need to play a sport for at least one semester.”

“I *what*?!”

My advisor smiled at me in sympathy and repeated his statement.

“I’m majoring in Journalism. I’m a... a skinny, nerdy omega. There’s a reason I don’t play sports.”

“I am sorry,” he said. “But part of our school philosophy is that you can’t be a good sports journalist if you don’t have any playing experience. You’ll need to pick a fall sport and sign up right away if you want to graduate this semester.”

And that was how, a week later, I found myself standing outside of a hockey arena. The *only* fall sport that still had space. At least I enjoyed hockey. Out of all the sports I was hoping to cover in my career, it was at the top of the list. I doubted I’d ever get off the bench and actually play, but it seemed that as long as I was on the roster, it counted. The conversation with my advisor echoed in my head as I awkwardly adjusted the heavy equipment on my shoulder and walked inside.

*“What if I don’t make the team? I can hardly even skate.”*

*“They don’t bother with try-outs anymore. Half the team can’t skate. We haven’t won a game in seven years and have never won any sort of championship in our history.”*

The first thing I noticed was that I couldn’t smell a single omega in the locker room. It was nothing but imposing alphas, all talking loudly as they bustled half-naked around the room. Several stopped and turned somewhat predatory gazes toward me as they caught my scent. I swallowed nervously as I walked through to the locker I had been assigned to.

One big guy slammed his shoulder into the locker next to mine with a bang. “Hey there, you in the wrong locker room, honey?” he purred.

I immediately spotted the C patch on his chest and swallowed hard. Great, just what I needed, the captain starting in on me the moment I arrived.

“I just need to play to graduate,” I said softly.

“Yeah?” he sneered, leaning down toward me.

“I don’t know what the hell kind of hockey you play, but we don’t bully our teammates,” said a loud voice. Another alpha stepped between us.

A hushed silence suddenly fell as everyone watched the confrontation. I wanted to vanish. Maybe I should just wait another semester and find a different sport...

The captain straightened his shoulders. “Another newbie. What the hell kind of hockey do *you* play? If you ever played.”

“I was captain for the Mount Quarry University Blasters the last two years,” the new alpha said. “You might have heard of them.”

Whoa. Anyone who played college hockey had heard of them; the Blasters had almost won the National Championship last year, and I was pretty sure they won several years in a row before that.

“He’s lying,” sneered someone from across the room. “The Blasters captain is Slapshot Sandulff’s kid.”

“That’s right.” The alpha in front of me cleared his throat, almost awkwardly. “*I’m Zane Sandulff.*”

The silence turned into a chorus of gasps. Even I sucked in a surprise breath. No way, this guy was the son of a hockey legend. Hell, they called his freaking grandfather Eleven *Legend*. The captain’s eyes grew wide, before darting to me, then back to the guy in-between us. “I was just fucking around. Welcome to the team... both of you. I’m Clint.”

He shuffled off without giving either of us a chance to reply. As if on cue, everyone quickly began to finish changing.

“Thanks,” I said softly.

Zane Sandulff, if that’s who he really was, turned back to me with a surprisingly charming, gentle smile. “No problem.” He extended a hand. “Zane. Er, like I said.”

“I’m Wesley.”

He took my hand in a warm, firm grip, then headed off to change too.

I couldn’t resist looking for him as we filed toward the ice. I sat nervously on the bench with a few other guys. We exchanged some introductions and, based on the way other players stepped out onto the ice, I had found some kindred spirits.

“Whoa!” one of them cried suddenly.

I looked up to see another player go shooting by on the ice – skating *backward*.

“Christ, I can’t go that fast forward!” one guy exclaimed.

He went by so fast I couldn’t even see his face. But as he circled around again, I spotted *Sandulff* across the back of his sweater. Damn.

The coach blew his whistle and Zane stopped on a dime, giving me a clear view of his exhilarated grin; must have been nice to love skating so much.

Practice started and I was relieved to see I wasn’t the only wobbly one. Four of us teetered along, one hand by the rail, while everyone else warmed up. Another big alphas joined Zane and I watched, feeling just a bit envious, as the two skated together, easily changing direction and swerving around each other. I had watched enough hockey to know they were *good*. Possibly the best skaters here.

Two goalies were stretching in front of the net. It wasn’t long before someone emptied a bag of pucks onto the ice and people started shooting goals. It was immediately clear that one of the goaltenders was okay and the other was *phenomenal*. The guy who had been skating with Zane seemed to be the only one who could get a shot past him.

A small crowd stopped skating and just gathered – other netminder included – to watch him block pucks.

Suddenly a puck whizzed out of nowhere, cracked *through* the stick of the guy shooting, and slammed into the net.

“Sorry about the stick.”

Everyone turned to see Zane behind us, standing casually on the far side of the blue line, away from the net.

“Damn,” somebody said with a soft whistle.

By the end of practice I was able to skate without clinging to the wall and even managed to circle the rink once with a stick in my hands. I actually made *more* progress than another player, so I was feeling fairly decent about myself as we returned to the locker room.

Maybe I could handle this for a semester after all.

## Chapter Three

### Zane

As we warmed up for the game a familiar knot started to form in my stomach. It grew worse when I overheard people on the other team whispering my name and caught them staring at me. I almost envied Corwyn's name change. If I didn't have Sandulff emblazoned across my back maybe I'd feel less pressure.

Among the whispers were people wondering what I was doing playing for such a terrible team. I couldn't argue. Tate, Corwyn, and I were easily the best players by far. Although the other team didn't look terribly skilled either, I thought as I sized them up during warm-ups.

The game started.

It probably would have been an even match, except Tate stopped *every* shot that was sent his way. That is, the shots that didn't get by Corwyn, who played some of the best D I had seen on a college team. He was always there, right in the line of fire, blocking pucks or poke checking them away.

I felt sick whenever I got a clear shot at the net, so I never took one. Instead I opted to just pass the puck and ended up with seven assists. Corwyn became the first defenseman in school history to get a hat trick and Tate drew a round of cheers and laughter firing at an empty net. He almost had it too.

The game ended 9-1. Our first win in nearly a decade. It would have been a shutout, but one of our players had ended up between Tate and the crease, when Tate went out to hit a puck. The player he passed it to lost it immediately and Tate had no chance to get back.

He looked pissed at the time, but got over it. "I'll get a shutout next time," he told me confidently as the team headed off to celebrate.

I spent most of the night being thumped on the back, congratulated, and asked for tips.

The next few practices were spent with Corwyn and I drilling players while the coach stepped back. He jokingly told me I should coach, but I had a feeling he wasn't entirely kidding.

The second team we played was better than the first, but after some tough love from Corwyn and I, we were all better too.

Once again, I passed the pucks whenever I could. I had a feeling some of the scores came because the netminder assumed Slapshot's son would be the one trying to shoot and didn't expect me to pass. Either way, the game went as smoothly as I could have hoped.

Until the end of the third was coming up and I got an open shot. I was feeling better than ever, so I took it. Just as I swung my stick forward, I felt a twist of nerves in my gut and my throat closed up. The goalie in front of me seemed hazy, his colors changed from red and white to black and green and bile rose in my throat.

I pinged it off the post and wanted to vomit.

Thank god, the spotlight was quickly taken away. The puck ricocheted so hard it shot past the inexperienced players and back across the ice to Corwyn. He scooped it up and fired straight into the net. Our team erupted in cheers and my gaff was forgotten.

I thought.

We won again and Tate got his shutout. He had made it clear that people needed to stay the hell out of his way and they did.

Things were winding down as we celebrated another win – apparently the first consecutive win in some time – when I noticed one of our rookie players watching me. Wesley. I smiled at him and the

omega turned away shyly.

His skating had been improving and his aim was getting better as well, but I could tell he much preferred to sit on the bench. He had logged a few minutes of ice time this game, but not on the same line as me.

I hated to admit it, but I had been watching him a lot. Probably something to do with him being the only omega I was spending time around. Half of the team seemed to have their eye on him, but nobody had acted on it since I stopped Clint's advance.

"We won," I said, sitting down by Wesley.

"Yeah, thanks to all of your assists."

"A lot of guys are scoring without my help," I said, embarrassed.

"Yeah... Why aren't *you*?"

I was taken aback. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Wesley said quickly. "I didn't mean it like that. I just... I've been watch—I mean, you're the best player, you know? I've been studying you and I noticed you didn't try to shoot at all during the last game. And you only did it once today."

"I'm letting everyone else get confident," I lied.

His eyes narrowed, almost suspiciously, and I excused myself. No way was I having this conversation.

I thought I had escaped for good, but back at the apartment Corwyn suddenly realized I didn't have any goals yet and mentioned it.

"Hey, Gretzky had twice as many assists as goals," I pointed out. "Besides, if I took as many shots as I can get against these teams, it would hardly be fair."

Tate and Corwyn both laughed and, thankfully, the subject was dropped.

I had a sinking feeling it would only be a matter of time...



The arena was open to anyone with a student ID, so one night I found myself heading there. I put on my skates, found some pucks, and hit the ice to practice shooting.

I wasn't nearly as rusty as I would have thought. I zinged one puck after into the net, trying to alternate where I aimed.

"Wow," said a voice just as I was about to shoot.

The puck missed the goal entirely and hit the glass hard enough that I winced and waited for it to break, even though I knew it wasn't supposed to.

I turned in time to see Wesley smile weakly. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. You can keep practicing."

"It's okay, I'm done," I said shortly.

"Oh." He sounded almost disappointed and I wondered if he had been hoping for some pointers.

"You can come shoot some, if you like. I'd be happy to watch." Yes, one more decent player on our team and maybe I could step even farther back.

## Chapter Four

### Wesley

I was trotting along the edge of campus when I caught a familiar smell. I paused and sniffed the air: Zane. I don't know why, but I followed it and found myself heading straight up to the arena doors. Was he inside?

I closed my eyes and focused on my human form, easily changing back. Once human again, I swiped my ID by the door and quietly went inside. The unmistakable sound of a stick slapping into a puck echoed down the hall. I followed it to the ice.

The arena was quite a bit darker than it was during practices or games, but not an issue for shifter eyes, even in human form. I quietly walked closer to the ice and, sure enough, Zane was in the middle of the rink.

There were easily a dozen pucks scattered around the net and a large pile of them next to him. I watched as he scooped one in front of him with his stick, then lined up and fired a hell of a zinger straight into the net with a loud *thwack*. Quick as lightning, he hooked another and fired. Another goal.

I watched several in a row. Even though I could tell he was deliberately aiming for different parts of the net, he never broke his rhythm or his concentration as one puck after another sailed home.

Suddenly, one of his pucks was shooting straight for the wall. I thought he must have messed up, but to my surprise it banked off and flew right into the net, as if he had shot it there directly.

“Wow,” I said, unable to help myself. “That was amazing.”

Zane jumped a mile and looked at me in alarm. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Wesley, hi.”

“Hi,” I said, embarrassed. “Sorry to startle you. I just was out walking and I...” I trailed off, not wanting to admit that I had smelled him and followed him here. “I was thinking about maybe getting a little practice in,” I lied with a sheepish smile. “I'm not very good.” That part was certainly true.

“You've been getting better,” Zane said, sounding genuinely honest. “I'm done. You can go ahead.”

His scent outside hadn't been *that* old; he couldn't have been here for long. “No need to leave on my account.”

“Nah...” He cast an almost uncomfortable look at the net then turned back at me. “I'm done.”

I thought of my observation that he never tried to score during games. Before tonight, I entertained the idea that he wasn't as good at scoring goals as he was at skating, but obviously I was wrong. Maybe I was curious about that. Or maybe, for some reason, I wanted to spend time with the handsome alpha. Or maybe there was some truth to wanting to practice more.

Whatever the reason, I found myself saying, “Any chance you could stick around a little and teach me some tricks? It would help to have someone let me know if I'm doing it right.”

Zane considered it and then shrugged. “Yeah, sure. Why not?”

“Thanks,” I said. “Let me get my skates, I'll be right back.”

Zane nodded and I hurried down to the locker room. He was just wearing street clothes, so I didn't bother with any protective gear; just grabbed my skates and headed back down the tunnel.

As I walked, I heard the distinctive sound of him shooting pucks again. I picked up my pace and stood by the gate to the ice, watching him send three more pucks into the net. He turned and saw me and smiled awkwardly. Curiously, but not unsurprisingly, he immediately gave up on shooting the puck he had been lining up.

I returned the smile and quickly laced up my skates. Zane watched me as I stepped onto the ice,

gathered my bearings, and carefully skated toward him.

“How uh... how long have you been skating?” he asked.

“Since our first practice?”

His jaw dropped. “You never skated before last month?!”

“I mean, a couple of times... like with friends at a local place in the winter after we saw a movie?” I winced as I realized just how bad I was compared to the son of a legend. Not to mention Zane had started to make a decent name for himself at his last school. “I guess you’ve bene skating since you could walk, huh?”

He chuckled, but didn’t deny it. “So, why hockey?” he asked.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

Zane arched an eyebrow at me. “You’re the next generation in a hockey dynasty and your family would kill you if you considered not playing?”

“Forgot who I was talking to,” I chuckled. “I found out last minute that I can’t graduate if I don’t play a sport. Apparently.” I knew I still sounded a little bitter about it. “If I didn’t do hockey, I wouldn’t be able to graduate this semester.”

“That sucks.”

I couldn’t disagree. “Luckily as long as I’m on the roster it counts, even if I don’t actually play.”

“Then why bother practicing if all you have to do is warm the bench?”

I shrugged. “I mean, I love hockey. Watching, not playing, that is. It’s probably my first choice for what to cover when I get a job as a sports journalist. Besides, how many people can say they skated with a Sandulff?”

He flushed a little and grinned. “Let’s do it then.” Before I could reply, he started skating away from the center and toward the boards. “Come on, do a couple of laps with me to get your legs warmed up.”

I followed as best as I could, trying not to feel woefully inadequate as he skated backward to watch me.

“Don’t look at your feet,” he suggested. “Look where you’re going.”

It was sound advice, but still a struggle to force my eyes away from my feet. By the third lap though, I had the hang of it, and followed Zane back to center ice.

He slid a puck over to me and stood back. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

My first shot missed the puck completely.

The second time I aimed lower, overcompensated, and scraped my stick awkwardly across the ice and bumped the puck a few feet away.

Zane effortlessly skated after it and brought it back for me. “Let’s try again,” he said patiently, following it up with a couple of pointers about my grip.

This time, not only did I hit the puck, I actually got some distance.

“There you go,” he said approvingly.

After a dozen or so pucks, I was starting to feel a little more confident. I even almost reached the net a few times.

“You’ve got a knack for this,” Zane said. “Here, hold it more like this next time and hit like this.”

He demonstrated, but I couldn’t quite figure out what I was doing wrong. Rather than get frustrated, he instead skated closer and, to my surprise, gently closed his hands over mine, guiding them.

“Like this.”

He led me in swinging back and forth a few times and it finally clicked.

“I think I’ve got it.”

“Okay, give it a try.”

I suddenly felt cold as he released me and glided backward. I shook off the feeling; there had been something nice about the proximity. Focused again on the puck, I tried to swing the stick just like he showed me.

To my utter shock, it slid straight for the net! I didn’t have the distance, but if I had hit it harder, I might have actually gotten it in.

“Well done,” Zane said.

“Thank you.” My words turned into a yawn; I had gotten up early for a class.

“Why don’t we turn in, we can work on your backhand tomorrow.”

“Really?” You don’t mind?”

Zane shrugged. “Well, I am helping out a teammate. Besides, maybe you’ll get good enough to take some ice time away from me.”

My eyes narrowed at the odd comment and he winced as if realizing he shouldn’t have said it.

“You don’t want more ice time?” Instead of answering, he looked away. I knew I shouldn’t push it, but I couldn’t stop myself. “How come you don’t try to score goals during games? From what I saw tonight you easily could.”

Zane sighed and cleared his throat. “It’s a long story.”

“I have time,” I said. “It’ll take me a while to get to the bench,” I joked.

“Race you there,” he said, easily shooting down my proposal.

It was obvious he wasn’t going nearly as fast as he could, but it still was impossible to keep up with him. For a while, I thought I was actually doing quite well, then I got near the boards and started overthinking how to stop and climb over.

That was it; down I went.

“Oh no, you okay?” Zane quickly spun and skated to my side.

“Yeah.”

He extended a hand and started pulling me to my feet. My skates slipped and I fell again. To my horror, I pulled him down with me.

“I’m so sorry,” I groaned, mortified.

“No big deal, it happens,” he chuckled.

I tried to adjust myself so I could get out from under him and found myself nose to nose with him. His dark eyes stared into mine and I involuntarily sucked in a deep breath, getting a big noseful of alpha.

“Sorry,” I managed to whisper.

“It’s okay, really,” he breathed.

My heart started pounding. Was he going to kiss me?

Should I kiss him?

Before I could decide, he cleared his throat and pushed himself off of me.

“Let’s try that again,” he said, reaching a hand back down to me. Was it my imagination or was there a slight hitch in his voice?

This time I managed to get to my feet. “Sorry,” I said again.

“Everybody falls. Don’t worry.”

With a little more caution, I skated the rest of the way to the wall and awkwardly climbed over. When I was safely on the other side Zane swung up a leg and easily vaulted over after me.

“So... what’s the story with the goal scoring?” I asked as I sat down to unlace my skates.

Zane chuckled awkwardly. "What makes you think there's a story at all?"

"Like you said, your family is practically a hockey dynasty. And you were captain of the Blasters for two years. Easily one of their top players. Then you transfer to this no-name school in the middle of nowhere with a hockey team that will let *anyone* play..." I paused and gestured to myself. You haven't scored a single goal in our games, I don't think I've seen you shoot during practice, and now you're implying you don't want ice time. There must be something to it."

"Is Wesley the Teammate asking or Wesley the Journalist?" He softened the question with a gentle, teasing chuckle.

I flushed. I certainly wouldn't be writing any of this down, but he probably wasn't wrong that some of my studies had come out in the question.

"How about Wesley the..." I paused. For some reason the word boyfriend had been on the tip of my tongue. "Friend?"

I wasn't sure what he'd do, but he flashed me a weak smile, then sat next to me. "It's funny... I've never told the whole story to anyone... but I feel like actually answering you."

"Not even Tate and Corwyn?"

The trio were roommates and thick as thieves. I couldn't imagine them not knowing.

Zane shrugged. "They know half of it, I guess."

At first I had just been curious, but now I really wanted to know. Something about it was just nagging at me, like it went deeper than he wanted to let people in on.

"So yeah. Hockey dynasty. Captain. Star player..." he said softly.

I nodded.

"You know last year was the first time the Blasters haven't won the National Championship game in almost a decade. We lost to Lake Luna U."

I nodded. The rivalry between the Lake Monsters and the Blasters was a popular one in college sports.

"Did you follow that last game?" Zane asked.

"No," I admitted. "I was interning and covering local high school sports last year."

"We were tied. Three-Three," he said softly. "Only seconds left on the clock."

"Right," I prompted when he hesitated.

Zane swallowed hard. "I had a chance to score. And I..." He paused and looked out at the ice; I had a feeling he wasn't really seeing the arena in front of us. "At the last second I thought, what if I miss?" A harsh, bitter bark of a laugh exploded from him, startling me. "It's like you said, I've been skating since I could walk. I never thought about what would happen if I couldn't do it. That time... I did. I could see my dad, my grandparents... Everyone watching me, rooting for me. The whole damn building was echoing with my name and..." Zane trailed off and bowed his head. "I hit the post," he murmured. "It rebounded and a Lake Luna player got it." He sucked in a long, deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, then exhaled with a shudder.

For a moment, he didn't speak. I shifted my weight nervously, afraid to break the silence.

"Everyone thought I had scored," he went on suddenly. "They were so shocked I missed that by the time we realized the other team had the puck it was too late. He scored and that was it. We lost the championship game because of me."

I put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and forced a smile. "You did your best." I thought of the reason our conversation started and narrowed my eyes in concern. "That's not why you transferred, is it? You blame yourself for losing the game?"

"Sort of," he muttered. "It's more complicated than that."

He eyed me and I just waited patiently, hoping he'd explain. At last, he heaved a sigh.

"Dad says I'm in a slump; I don't have the heart to argue. I told him I transferred here because I wanted to take some of the pressure off while I work through it. That's true, but... well, the fact is..." Zane cleared his throat and sighed again.

"The thing is, ever since, when I try to shoot it's like... it's almost like I start to have a panic attack or something. My stomach gets all twisted and I feel sick and my hands shake and... and all I can see is the faces of everyone who was at that game, cheering for me." Zane paused and swallowed hard. "Then I freeze up and miss the shot." The words came out in a rush and when he was done he hung his head in shame. "Just when I feel like I'm over it and I can try again, it happens and I miss, and I feel even worse."

Zane laughed bitterly. "I can skate fine. I can pass. I can drop my gloves and drop anyone across from me... but every time I get a shot on net I freak. Isn't that stupid?" He spat the last word with a laugh that sounded more like a sob.

"I don't think it's stupid at all," I said softly. He snorted in response. "No, really. You've been under tremendous pressure to live up to your family legacy for so long... People crack under pressure and it can be traumatic. You said it's "almost like" a panic attack; I think it really is one," I added, hoping I wouldn't make it worse.

"Yeah, I guess maybe it is..."

"And that's okay."

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes.

"Can I ask," I said slowly, "why you're still playing? I mean, if you're going through that..."

"Cause my family doesn't get it; they think it's just a slump. I mean, my dad pretty much had the same pressure I do, but it didn't affect him. And my granddad did too, with both of his dads being hockey legends. I don't know, I feel like the weak link sometimes." Zane laughed darkly. "Which probably isn't helping me take the pressure off myself."

I nodded in silent agreement.

"I thought maybe if I transferred here and played with a smaller team... Hollowridge has never even been to a playoffs game. I was hoping that playing for a team that usually loses would help. Nothing high stakes, you know? Maybe if I just can play casually for a while, without a million eyes on me, I could get over whatever is bothering me. I *do* love hockey; I *want* to play. God, if I could make it as a pro... play for the NSHL.... I thought maybe a semester here, taking it easy, then transfer back to a big school in the spring, in time to get noticed and hopefully signed to a team." Zane sighed sadly. "I know it's only been a couple of games, but if anything I just feel worse."

I wondered if there was a way I could help him. For now, I settled with just gently patting his thigh. "Thanks for telling me, that couldn't have been easy. Maybe getting it off your chest is the first step."

"Maybe," he agreed softly. "Thanks for listening. You uh... promise you won't tell anyone?"

"I swear," I said.

"Thanks, Wesley."

I returned his smile and suddenly felt reluctant to remove my hand from his leg. Almost as if reading my mind, he rested his hand on mine.

"Thank you," he repeated.

"You still want to practice tomorrow?" I asked.

"Of course. Hey, maybe if I can't ever play again, I can become a coach."

"Maybe!"

We headed back to the locker room in a comfortable silence, exchanged our skates for shoes, put away our gear, and went outside.

“Going this way?” he asked me.

“Yeah.”

“Want to run?”

I would never turn down a good chance to run. “Race you,” I said, echoing his earlier challenge with a grin.

Zane laughed and started shifting.

We hit the ground on paws at nearly the same time and started to run. I let my tongue loll out happily as we ran, feeling the wind stinging my nose and whipping through my fur. Unlike on the ice, I easily kept up with the larger wolf.

“Is this what it feels like when you skate fast?” I called as we ran, thinking of how blissful he sometimes looked when he was skating at top speed.

“Yes and no,” he said, throwing a look over his shoulder at me. “It’s different. Just as fun, but different.”

I veered off the sidewalk and sped up, letting my claws sink into the grass to propel me. I drew even with Zane and, before I could stop myself, nipped at the air near him. He playfully snapped back, then sidestepped and crashed into me.

We tumbled head over tails over the lawn, gently biting and shoving each other, then landed in a tangle of legs. Zane’s face was right next to mine and he stretched forward a little and bumped out snouts together. Giving me no time to react, he rolled quickly to his feet with a snort.

“I’m afraid this is my building,” he said, starting to change back into a human.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said, letting him gloss over the little moment.

“Goodnight.”

I shifted back too and started walking as a human the rest of the way. Partway there I realized I had a partial erection. Annoying. I adjusted myself a little and kept going. By the time I reached my apartment, the erection was even more insistent.

I decided to take a shower to clean off the sweat and relieve myself. An intoxicating scent hit me as I pulled off my sweater. In a blink I had it pressed against my nose, inhaling for all I was worth. It smelled so good. It smelled like sweat and fresh air and something like nutmeg and... Zane.

No, not Zane. *Alpha*.

Oh fuck.

I yanked out my phone and opened up my tracking app, then groaned.

My heat was coming.

Chapter Five  
Zane

I couldn't say what possessed me to offer to coach Wesley. I guess maybe part of me really was hoping that if I could get another forward game-ready, I could have less ice time. But it was also just nice spending time with him. I had to admit the omega had caught my eye now and again over the last few weeks and it was nice to get to know him a little bit – even if he did have some annoyingly perceptive insight into my life. I believed him though, when he promised not to tell anybody about my so-called slump.

As the day wore on, I found myself looking forward to another one-on-one practice session. When the evening finally rolled around, Wesley was right on time. He started off a little shaky but quickly found his confidence.

We started working on a few different techniques and he picked most of them up quickly. But, there were a couple times I had a feeling he was playing dumb in an attempt to get me to actually demonstrate shooting for him. And while I kind of appreciated it, I didn't take the bait.

Partway through our workout, I found myself standing next to him with my hands over his, adjusting his grip on the stick, and noticed that he smelled really, *really* good. It didn't occur to me that I had said it out loud until Wesley awkwardly cleared his throat and muttered, “Thanks.”

“I'm sorry,” I said quickly. “That was awkward.”

“It's okay.” He flashed me a shy smile. “You don't smell so bad, yourself.”

“Oh please,” I chuckled. “I'm sweaty and gross.”

He laughed and I quickly steered the conversation back to practice, but took care not to get quite that close to him again, just in case I did something else embarrassing.

The next night was a regular practice and while it was nice to see everybody, I couldn't deny that I missed the private time with Wesley. On more than one occasion, the coach complimented him and asked if he had been practicing; the omega would catch my eye and shoot me a big grin that made my heart flutter.

Every time I had to stop and tell myself I was *not* developing a crush on Wesley.

But when he broke the news to me that he wouldn't be able to practice the next night, I felt like I was probably a little more disappointed than I really should have been.

Worse, when the game rolled around, Wesley was conspicuously missing. Not only was I disappointed, I was worried. Where was he? Coach said that Wesley couldn't attend, but didn't elaborate. I found myself preoccupied with his well-being for the entire game; it was a good thing I wasn't trying to actively score goals.

Even so, we won easily. Once again mostly due to the combined efforts of Tate being a phenomenal goaltender, Corwyn knowing a thing or two about defense, and me creating as many openings as I could, while passing the puck.

As soon as the game was over, rather than head out and celebrate the school's first three-game winning streak in decades, I headed to Wesley's apartment. I don't know what I was expecting, but nonetheless I knocked on the door.

“Yeah?” he called from behind it after a moment.

An unexpected relief coursed through me; he sounded okay.

I started to answer, but realized I could smell... *something*. Something delicious. Someone cooking dinner maybe?

“Hey, it's me, Zane.”

Wesley let out a squeak from behind the door.

“You weren’t at the game and I wanted to make sure you were okay...” It sounded like a weak excuse, so I quickly added, “And let you know we won.”

“Great.”

“Are you okay?” I pressed.

“Fine, yeah, fine.” I was wrong, Wesley didn’t actually sound fine. In fact, he sounded sort of stressed out.

“Can I come in?”

“Um... sure...” Even through the closed door I could hear a hitch, a hesitation, in his answer.

The lock clicked and the door slowly opened.

Wesley *looked* like he was alright. He was wearing a loose t-shirt and pajama pants. Instead of the usual neat comb, his hair was adorably tousled, like he had just been napping.

“So, how come you weren’t—” I started to ask as I entered.

Then the smell hit me full in the face.

He was in heat.

“Oh!” I said, covering my nose before I could stop myself. “Sorry, um... I didn’t realize you are, er...”

“Yeah...” Wesley said with an awkward shrug. “I’m sorry, I should have warned...” He trailed off and stared at me. His nostrils flared a little and his eyes widened.

Not wanting to be rude – or at least ruder than I already had been – I forced my hand down and got ready to excuse myself. An alpha alone with an omega in heat was probably a bad idea. No wonder I had started wondering if I was attracted to him or not, I had probably subconsciously smelled his changing pheromones.

Before I could say anything, the smell washed over me again and I stopped. He was far from the first omega in heat I had smelled, but there was something about it. Something intoxicating. It was different – *better* – than any heat I had smelled before.

I couldn’t resist inhaling again. As the scent filled my nose, my blood seemed to rush to my groin. My mouth watered, my knees grew weak, and I felt just a little light-headed. That scent...

I gasped, inadvertently sucking in the smell; so potent I could practically taste it.

“Oh shit,” I said, staring at him.

His eyes grew even wider and he paled. As our eyes locked I knew Wesley could smell it as the chemistry of my body changed in response to his.

“We’re...” I stammered. “You’re...”

“Fated mates,” Wesley breathed in awe.

So, it wasn’t just my imagination or maybe even wishful thinking.

“Yeah,” I managed to agree.

Sure, I had liked Wesley before, even if I tried to deny it. But now, bathed in his scent, the pull was impossible to ignore. At least I knew him. Sort of, anyway. He liked hockey, he was majoring in sports journalism, we got along, he was sweet... I couldn’t imagine passing him, a stranger, on the street and being instantly smitten like some shifters were.

“Now what?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

Now we were mates for life, whether we liked it or not. Of course, we could walk away if we wanted to. But now that I had caught his scent in heat, now that I knew, my heart would always long for him, no matter where I went in life.

For a moment I wished I hadn't stopped by, wished that I had given him space. His heat would be over in a week or two and I'd never have scented him and I'd never know... No, I didn't wish that. Every shifter dreamed of finding their fated mate.

Besides, I didn't have a choice in the matter; we called them *fated* mates for a reason. Sooner or later Wesley and I would cross paths during his heat and I'd catch the unique scent that marked him as my fated mate; it was our destiny.

I stared him, feeling almost overwhelmed by the sudden future I could envision with him. How could I even entertain walking away from this?

All at once I realized we had drawn closer. I couldn't say if I moved or not. But instead of standing in his doorway, gaping like an idiot, I was inches from him. Wesley's tongue shot out, flicking over his lower lip nervously. I tried to take a breath and was surrounded by his scent again.

I blinked, I think, and we were kissing. Wesley was in my arms, body molded against mine, mouth to mouth, chest to chest. My hands roved up his back, snaking under his shirt to caress his hot, bare skin. He did the same and I shuddered as his fingers trailed goosebumps across my back.

My tongue brushed against his lips, then pushed between them. Wesley opened his mouth with a small whimper and his taste was even more intoxicating than his scent. I pulled him closer, certain that I'd never get enough.

"Whoa," someone laughed as they walked down the hall, breaking the spell.

We pulled apart, both flushing brightly, and Wesley slammed the door, before turning back to me with a sheepish smile.

"Um..." I said.

"Suddenly I understand all that stuff about fated mates driving you wild," he said softly.

"Yeah," I chuckled.

"I kind of don't want to stop kissing you," he admitted.

"Then don't."

Yesterday – hell, five *minutes* ago – the only thing that mattered to me was figuring out my future in hockey. Now I felt like I could never lace up my skates again and I'd be okay, as long as Wesley was by my side. Sure, the feeling was exactly how I had heard people describe what happened when you finally scented your fated mate, but I always assumed they were exaggerating.

The world narrowed around me to nothing but the feel of Wesley's hands on my skin, his lips against mine, and heavenly scent enveloping me.

## Chapter Six

### Wesley

I wasn't sure how we ended up on the couch, but suddenly I was on my back with Zane straddling me. It was amazing the way his scent had changed – and so quickly – in response to the fated mate pheromones I was giving off. Who would have guessed?

His weight pressed me down into the cushions and I groaned as I felt one of his legs slip between mine. Zane's thigh rubbed against my now-raging erection. He tensed and I swallowed in embarrassment.

"Heat, can't help it," I whispered against his lips.

He took a deep breath, followed by a sound that was half-sigh, half-moan. "It's okay... it's... sexy."

Something about the way he said the word made me want to moan.

"What have you done to me?" I asked. Before I caught his scent I just wanted to hide in my apartment, eat junk food, and binge-watch TV until my heat was over. And jerk off twenty times a day, trying to relieve myself.

Now, the alpha I sorta, kinda thought I like-liked was *everything*. I wanted Zane by my side, in my life... in *me*.

"You're the one who went into heat, technically *you* did this to *us*," Zane teased. "I can't help that my body responded."

I didn't have any control over it, but I couldn't argue either. Instead, I kissed him. He eagerly swiped his tongue across my lips and thrust it into my mouth. I sucked on it, eliciting a moan. His hips rocked unexpectedly against me and I melted under him.

"Yes," I murmured as he kept his hips rolling, grinding against my aching dick. Had I felt any hesitation about this a few minutes ago? It was so right, so perfect.

One of Zane's hands trailed gently down my side, slid under my shirt, then came to a stop – fingers curled just beneath the waistband of my pants.

I arched up against him, adjusting myself to bring my dick closer to his fingers, answering the unspoken question. He immediately cupped his hand against me, gently at first, then harder. I whimpered in pleasure as he kneaded my dick with his palm. I thrust against him with a moan, which turned quickly into a growl as he removed his hand.

Before I could complain, Zane slipped his hand into my pants. I felt his mouth spread into a grin against my lips and he chuckled softly. "No underwear," he murmured.

"I wasn't expecting a visitor," I answered. "Much less my fated mate."

His smile widened and he wrapped his fingers around my dick. A cry of ecstasy burst from me and I thrust up into his hand.

Zane stroked my dick as he kissed me. My hands fumbled with his fly and I was rewarded when his large, rock-hard penis slid out. He gasped and shuddered as I started jerking him off. He adjusted his position, holding himself above me with one hand, never breaking the rhythm of his tongue swirling in my mouth or the quick strokes of his hand. A moment later his tongue withdrew. I started to protest, but he began to trail kisses down my throat.

His hand sped up and just as I started to moan I felt his teeth clamp into my neck. He wasn't the first guy to bite me; it was an alpha wolf thing, but it was the first time I felt pleasure spread from the site like fire. I pressed my neck to him with a cry and he bit harder. I hoped it would leave a bruise, a mark so everyone could see I was his.

And he was mine.

The urge to bite him overtook me and I twisted my head, ignoring the burn as his teeth tugged against my flesh, and I sank my own teeth into the side of his throat.

Zane growled against my skin and bit down even harder.

“Fuck me,” I managed to say, thrusting desperately into his hand. As good as this felt, I knew the relief would be temporary. I needed him inside me, needed a good, hard fuck to ease the constant arousal of heat.

“Are you sure?” he whispered, voice trembling. His hand slowed.

“Yes.”

“Do you have condoms?”

Shit. “No,” I grumbled.

He pulled back a little, eyes searching mine for answers. For a moment I marveled that this hockey-god was anything but a teammate and pseudo-coach to me. There had never been a question that Zane was attractive, but seeing him hovering above, face flushed and sweaty because of *me* instead of the game... The indescribable scent of my fated mate rolled off him in sensual waves with each heavy breath. Fuck, I wanted him. His eyes narrowed.

“Me neither.”

Oh right. Condoms. I almost forgot what we were talking about. “Are you clean?” I asked. Normally I wouldn’t have trusted the answer, but he was my fated mate. There would never be a need to doubt him again, that’s how it worked.

“Yes.”

“Me too.” I thrust up into his hand pointedly.

“Aren’t you also super fertile right now?”

I groaned, *not* from pleasure. A fated mate could impregnate an omega when the omega *wasn’t* in heat. In fact, that was the only time it was possible. But add in heat and a fated mate and I’d be pregnant by morning.

I started to push him off of me, knowing I’d never stop if I didn’t now. But I hesitated as a voice in my head asked, “*Would that be so bad?*”

Well, of course it would. I couldn’t get pregnant now! I...

“Uh... Zane...” I began.

“Yeah?” he breathed.

Fated mates were for life. Fate brought us together and that was that. I’d be totally, completely in love with Zane in a matter of days, if I wasn’t falling for him already. Children were a given. I’d graduate before I gave birth. I wasn’t super hard up for cash – in fact I wrote for a dozen different sports websites and wasn’t even stressing about finding a job immediately after graduation. My current gigs could easily support me and then some for quite some time.

“Would it be... so bad?” I asked softly, echoing my own internal question.

“What?”

“If... if I got pregnant. Would that be a dealbreaker?”

He pursed his lips in thought and studied me. I considered retracting the question and insisting he go get condoms. Why on earth had I said something so ridiculous? It must have been my hormones talking. I was in heat, I was horny, and the only way to get relief was sex right now.

“This might sound absurd,” Zane said slowly. “But I’ve never heard of a fated mate pair being unhappy... I don’t think anything is a deal breaker where you’re concerned. And I can’t lie, I’d love to be a dad someday... but we’re both in school...”

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