

**CHAPTER 1: COLLEGE HOCKEY  
(ENEMIES TO LOVERS) ROMANCE  
SAMPLE**

WREN

The paintbrush snaps in my hand, and I swear as blue paint splatters across my oversized *University of Boston Arts Department* shirt. That's the third brush I've broken this week. My hands are shaking as I reach for another, desperation making my movements jerky and uncontrolled.

No matter what I do, the vision won't come to me.

I've made tea—twice—in the last two hours. I've meditated. Prayed. I've even consulted with Cheddar Bob, hoping for some inspiration, some spark.

Some sign that this piece I'm working on will go somewhere.

I stare at the canvas, at the mixes of cool blues and greens, and burnt oranges, hoping that I can make my vision come alive. But I can't.

Sighing, I lean over, picking up another brush with my left hand and turning the music from the speakers up with my right.

The sounds of Eminem's "Lose Yourself" come blaring out of the little black Bluetooth speaker to my left, and I set back

down on the stool in my tiny studio apartment, getting back to work.

I close my eyes again, hoping it will come to me. It has to.

The deadline for the winter showcase is in eight weeks, and I need this piece to be perfect. My scholarship renewal depends on it, and with Dad's medical bills piling up...

I crank the music louder, feeling the bass beat through my chest.

The lyrics of the song thread through me, and my fingers start to "itch." My heartbeat quickens, my chest rising and falling as hard as I finally put the tip of my brush to the canvas, swiping a coat of paint across the surface just as I—

*BANG, BANG, BANG!*

A beat of silence, then: *BANG, BANG, BANG.*

The pounding on my door is so sudden and violent that my brush jerks across the canvas, leaving an angry orange streak through the composition I've been killing myself on just to make it this far. Cheddar Bob lets out an indignant meow from his perch on the windowsill, his orange tail puffing up like a bottle brush.

"No, no, no..." I whisper, staring at the ruined painting, mouth open. This is the closest I've gotten to capturing what's in my head all day, and now...

The pounding continues, more insistent this time.

"Hey!" a deep voice bellows through the door. "I know you're in there! Come on. Don't pretend you don't hear me."

My stomach clenches. I know that voice.

Everyone knows that voice on this campus.

Kellan Hayes, star right defenseman of our university's hockey team and my next-door neighbor from Hell. Of course it would be him. It's always him.

"Argh. Fucking..." I mutter under my breath before calling out. "Just a minute!" I wrack my brain for ways to figure out how to salvage my painting. But it's no use. The streak has

destroyed the delicate balance I was trying to achieve, turning my ethereal winterscape into something that looks like a four-year-old's finger painting.

*BANG, BANG, BANG!*

"I said just a minute!" I snap, throwing down my brush. Paint splatters across my oversized t-shirt, adding to the constellation of stains already there. Not that I care. This is my painting shirt, chosen specifically because it's big enough to cover my shorts and old enough that more paint has probably touched it than fabric softener.

I march to the door, my bare feet slapping against the hardwood floors. Cheddar Bob follows, his bell jingling as he winds between my legs, nearly tripping me.

"Not now, Bob." I scoop him up, dropping a soft kiss on his furry head before tossing him back to the floor.

Yanking open the door, I'm ready to give Kellan Hayes a piece of my mind. But the words die in my throat.

He's standing there in nothing but a pair of low-slung gray sweatpants, his black hair still wet from what I assume was a post-practice shower. Water droplets cling to his naked shoulders, tracing paths down the planes of his chest that I try not to follow with my eyes.

I clear my throat, also trying not to notice how his ice-blue gaze trails from my head to my painted toes.

I suddenly remember what I must look like—pink-streaked hair thrown up in a messy bun, paint-stained shirt, bare legs, and probably smears of color on my face because I always forget and touch it when I'm working.

He sneers as if now noticing that same paint, his voice rough and deep as he hangs his hands over the top of the doorway.

"Do you have any idea how loud that music is?" he asks, the frown deepening on his chiseled face.

I lift my chin, fighting the urge to be intimidated by my

neighbor from Hell's height or his...everything else. "It's two in the afternoon." I blink. "On a Saturday."

"I'm aware."

"So?"

"So...I'm guessing that idea that some of your neighbors like peace and quiet never occurred to you." I stare at him blankly, and he keeps going. "I was napping."

"Ah. I see. Well, might I suggest investing in some earplugs? I mean, if you're going to keep grandpa hours, you might as well go all out."

His jaw tightens—ticks. "Maybe invest in some headphones if you're going to blast music like you're at a concert."

"Maybe invest in a personality that isn't just being mean to your neighbors." I cross my paint-stained arms over my oversized t-shirt. "And consider that if you were just a tad bit nicer, maybe your neighbors would be more likely to listen to you."

His arms lower to his sides, some of the icy fire going out of his stare. The man in front of me exhales, and I can feel the exhaustion in the sound. "Look, some of us had practice at five a.m. and need to rest before the game tomorrow." His jaw ticks again, hardening. "But...I wouldn't expect you to understand that, since clearly your idea of work is just throwing paint at a canvas and calling it art."

My pulse pounds, matching the rhythm of the beat still in my apartment. I place my hands over my heart.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that hitting people while sliding around on ice was such demanding intellectual work."

"You have no idea what it takes to—"

"And you have no idea what it takes to create something. I've got a scholarship to keep and a senior showcase to prepare for." I gesture behind me at my apartment, at the canvases and supplies scattered everywhere. "But sure, go back to your precious nap. Heaven forbid anything interrupt the great

Kellan Hayes's beauty rest. Though clearly, you need it," I add, even though it's a blatant lie.

*The man looks like he was carved from marble by someone with a very detailed understanding of the male form.*

Something ignites in his eyes—surprise, maybe, that I know who he is. But of course I do. Everyone knows who he is. With his face plastered all over campus and NHL scouts watching his every move, Kellan Hayes is hard to miss.

He's the golden boy, the one who's going to make it big, the pride of the University of Boston's hockey program.

He takes a step closer, and despite my anger, I take a step back. He smells like his signature cedar-wood body wash—not that I've noticed it before, but the scent seems to permeate the whole floor of our building. There's something else too, something crisp and clean, like fresh ice.

"Listen, Princess," he says, his voice low and controlled. "I don't care if you're the next Picasso. Keep the music down, or I'll file a complaint with the building manager."

Cheddar Bob chooses this moment to dart between my legs and into the hallway, rubbing against Kellan's bare ankles with a happy purr.

"Bob, come here," I hiss at my cat, who refuses to budge...of course.

To my surprise, Kellan's expression softens slightly as he looks down at the orange furball now making figure eights around his feet.

He doesn't move, stiffening as if frozen to the spot.

But then he looks back at me, and the softness vanishes. "Your cat has better manners than you do."

"My cat is a shameless attention seeker who doesn't understand the concept of enemies." I lean down to scoop up the purring menace. As I straighten, I realize how close Kellan and

I are now standing. From this distance, I can see the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw, the tiny scar above his right eyebrow, the shades of darker blue in his eyes.

“Is that what we are?” he asks, his voice dropping even lower. “*Enemies?*”

My breath catches in my throat. There’s something in the way he’s looking at me now, something that makes heat pool in my stomach and my skin feel too tight. “What else would we be?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Cheddar Bob squirms in my arms, but I hold him tighter, needing something to ground me.

Finally, Kellan steps back, running a hand through his damp hair. “Just keep it down,” he says, but his voice sounds rougher than before. “Some of us have actual careers to worry about.”

And just like that, the moment shatters.

“Right.” I scoff. “Because art isn’t a real career. Go back to your nap, Hockey Boy. Try not to strain yourself thinking too hard about it.”

His nostrils flare, but instead of responding, he turns and stalks back to his apartment. I definitely don’t watch the way his back muscles move as he walks, or how his sweats hang just low enough to—

I slam my door shut, letting Cheddar Bob jump from my arms.

My hands are shaking as I march toward the kitchen, trying to slow my racing heart.

In the living room, I can still hear the Eminem track playing, though at a much lower volume now—my speakers must have automatically adjusted after detecting the noise complaint.

Stupid smart speakers. Stupid hockey player. Stupid hot hockey player who probably thinks I’m just some flaky art student who—

No. I refuse to let him get to me.

Moving back to my easel, I stare at the ruined canvas. The orange streak cuts through my winter-scape like a wound.

I groan out loud.

Even if I could salvage it, the piece feels wrong now, tainted by frustration and...something else I don't want to examine too closely.

Grabbing my phone, I text Mia.

**ME: Just had another run-in with Hockey Boy. He made me ruin my painting!!!**

Her response comes seconds later.

**MIA: The hot grumpy one? Girl, you two really have a love-hate relationship, don't you? It's kinda hot 🍷**

**ME: It's not HOT. It's cold. Ice cold. And there will be no loving. Only hating. He's the worst.**

**MIA: Sure, Jan. That's why you're always talking about him...**

**ME: He literally just called my art worthless.**

**MIA: Did he actually say that???**

**ME: Well, no. But he implied it!**

**MIA: And you were totally calm and reasonable, right?**

**ME: I may have insulted the institution of hockey**

**MIA: WREN You know better than to diss the hockey gods in Boston**

**ME: Whatever. I have bigger problems. The showcase piece is ruined and I have to start over**

**MIA: Want me to come over? I'll bring wine, and we can trash talk him properly**

I glance at the clock. This is one of the times I'm glad that I'm legal. It's barely three PM, but...

**ME: Yes please. Bring the good stuff**

**MIA: On my way 🍷**

I toss my phone aside, ignoring the way my cheeks are still

flushed. I'm not always talking about him. Just when he's being particularly annoying. Which is...often.

Looking at my ruined canvas again, I make a decision. If I'm going to have to start over, I might as well make it count. Reaching for a fresh canvas, I begin sketching with bold, angry strokes. The winter scape transforms into something darker, more turbulent. Like a storm about to break.

*Or like certain blue eyes filled with fury.*

Not that I'm thinking about Kellan Hayes' eyes. Or Kellan Hayes at all. I have more important things to focus on—like this painting, and the showcase, and keeping my scholarship.

I can't let myself get distracted by irritating neighbors.

No matter how good they look without a shirt.

Cheddar Bob jumps up onto his perch by the window again, settling in to watch me work.

I stick my tongue out at him, and he stares.

"Don't give me that look," I tell the orange, fluffy miniature Benedict Arnold. "You're the one who betrayed me for belly rubs from the enemy."

He blinks, his face the picture of feline innocence.

The music plays on, softer now, but the rhythm still pulses through me as I work. And if some of that intensity, that friction, that heat finds its way onto my canvas...then I'm chalking it up to artistic inspiration.

Nothing more.