

Opposing Teams (Rivals)

Book 9 Scotia Storms Series.

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Chapter One

Kai

I stand outside the rink chatting with Bree—a girl I met at Scotia Academy in my freshman year—when Theo Wagner’s grating voice cuts into my thoughts and rakes down my spine like an ice scraper. Everything inside me tightens as I listen to him boast about his own accomplishments—and how he’s been scouted by Boston Bucks. Sure, it’s okay to be proud of all his goals, but does he need to call down other players—on my team—just to make himself look better? What a fucking asshole.

I momentarily tear my gaze away from Bree and glance to my left. That’s when my gaze locks with Theo’s, and everything inside me wants to wipe the smirk off his face—with my fist.

“Hey, are you okay?” Bree asks, and touches my arm to bring my attention back to her.

I turn, but not before Theo aims his smirk my way. “Yeah.”

“Do you know that guy?” she asks, hugging herself against the chill in this late September night as she glances around me to see Theo standing there like the smug asshole he is, as his groupies—men and women alike—surround him and look up at him like he’s going to be NHL’s next greatest.

I snort. “Yeah, I know him.” Shit, Theo and I go way back, and as much as I’d like to introduce my fist to his face as he talks shit about one of our players, I don’t. My fist to his pretty-boy face is what got me a three-game suspension back in high school.

Theo grew up in Greenwood. I grew up a couple miles away in Middleton. We came from rival schools. Not much has changed since we moved to Halifax. He now attends Kingston College, which is just down the street from Scotia Academy. We’ve been opponents for as long as I can remember, but I’m not going to get into an altercation with him now and risk a suspension. Making the NHL is too damn important to me. It’s my sole focus, and I can’t let anyone or anything get in the way. I owe it to Coop. His death can’t be for nothing.

Theo laughs and I can’t help but look as he pulls a cigarette from his pocket and lights it. What kind of an NHL wannabe smokes, for Christ’s sake? I just shake my head at him, and the smile fades from his face.

That's when I realize my mistake. The fucker was looking for a reaction, a reason to start something between us. Damned if I didn't just give it to him. I straighten to my full height. All righty then. Here we go.

"Hey Kai, you got a problem with me?"

Bree's eyes go big. "Let's go inside," she says and takes my arm. She gives me a tug and I'm about to follow—do I really want to waste my energy on a douche bag like Theo? No, I don't. Years ago, however, I had no choice but to get involved. His girlfriend was mad at him and thought it would be fun to hit on a member of Theo's rival team—me—while he watched. I didn't want anything to do with the game she was playing, but that didn't stop her from throwing her arms around me in the parking lot after a game.

That's when shit hit the fan and Theo brought up my driving skills and blatantly laughed about the accident that killed my best friend Cooper. *Buddy murderer*. That's what he fucking called me. I'm usually good at burying things and keeping my temper in check, but that day, well, he'd pushed all the right buttons. I ended up with a suspension. He ended up with two broken ribs that sidelined him for four games, and a missing tooth. That was just a bonus.

"Hey, don't let him drive you home after the game," Theo blurts out to Bree seconds before I enter the sports complex. I stop dead in my tracks. Oh no, he fucking didn't. I take a deep breath, but it does little to cool the anger surging through me.

"Kai?" Bree says, as a bunch of her friends come running up to join us, completely oblivious to the tension sparking in the night air. Christ, any second now I expect to see a lightning storm overhead.

"Good luck tonight, Kai," Summer says and throws her arms around me for a hug. I hug her back, even though every muscle in my body is tense. "Whoa, are you okay?" She inches back, her eyes full of worry as she follows my gaze to Theo. "What's going on?" she asks, turning her attention to Bree. Theo and I square off, and Bree whispers back that she doesn't know. Honestly, why would she know?

Bree and I have known each other for three years, having met our freshman year, but I don't go around telling people I was driving my car one stormy night, and went off the road and killed my best friend. Who goes around talking about that? I don't know, but what I do know is it should have been me who died that night. Cooper was the best guy I know—knew—and didn't deserve to die. He had so many friends, was liked by everyone and he had dreams, big dreams,

like the two of us going off to the NHL together. Even though I don't think I deserve the NHL now, I'm doing it to keep his dream alive.

"Yeah, I actually think you do have a problem, Ward," Theo blurts out after taking a long pull from his cigarette and filling the air with smoke. How does he care so little about his body, or his game?

"No problem," I force myself to say.

Keep the fight for the rink, Kai.

My gaze strays to the petite, pretty girl shifting nervously beside Theo. I've seen her around before, here and back home. She went to school with Theo and now she's on the douche bag's arm before and after every game. Half the time I don't even think he knows she's even there, or cares. It's not my business, but I have no idea why she's with a guy like that. Maybe she has low self-esteem or something. Not that I've cared about anyone or anything other than hockey for a long time now, and hey, who am I to judge anyone? I'm a total fuck-up.

"Kai," Bree whispers, and it pulls me from my reverie. I'm two seconds from walking away, but go still when skittish blue eyes lift and lock on mine. I stare back, my heart beating just a bit faster as Theo's girlfriend holds my gaze.

Why the fuck is she looking at me with such vulnerability? Oh wait, I get it. Theo isn't paying her attention and maybe she's...shit, I'm not going down this road again. No way am I going to let her close so she can make her man jealous.

"Go on, run inside," Theo laughs.

Don't engage, Kai. Don't fucking engage.

"I think I'll have another smoke," he taunts. "I don't even need to stretch out to beat you in goals tonight," he adds and something inside me snaps.

I stop, and the girls around me suck in a breath. Hands tug at me but I ignore them. "Yeah, want to bet?" I ask through clenched teeth.

What the hell are you doing dude?

"Bet?" he asks, his mouth twisted in a self-assured grin, but there's a hint of uncertainty in his eyes and I'm going to dig into that—because yeah, I'm that much of a prick. "Why would I bet on anything with you?"

I shrug, and press, "If you're so sure, let's put down a bet."

He snorts and glances at his friends, looking for their show of support and they give it. “Why would I bet when I know it’s a sure thing?”

“Yeah, Ward. Why would he bet anything?” Kingston’s right winger asks as he gives Theo a fist bump. Idiots.

Since this is getting tiring and I have a game to win, I point out, “Sounds to me like you’re not so sure.”

He drops his cigarette and stomps it out, dragging his arm away from his girlfriend so hard, she practically falls, which, for some odd reason that I don’t understand, really pisses me off.

“What do you have to bet with, Ward? What could you possibly have that I want?” he asks and glances around at the cars in the lot. “You gonna put up the car you killed your buddy in?”

My heart stalls in my chest, and my throat squeezes so tight, I’m not sure I can get in air. A burst of sadness and shame invades my soul, and nearly weakens my knees, but anger that Theo could be so cold and crass overrules all other emotions and my hands fist as Bree’s small palm lands on my back. Her small gasp doesn’t go unnoticed.

“You know that car was totaled,” I say through gritted teeth and don’t miss the hushed chatter between Bree and her friends. “I’ll put up my jeep.”

“Kai,” Bree whispers. “What are you doing?”

I really don’t know.

Theo takes a small step toward me. “I suppose you want my car?”

I’ve seen his stupid sports car with the loud muffler. What was it I once overheard in the sorority? The bigger and louder the muffler, the smaller and thinner the cock. That thought makes me laugh.

“Nope.”

He cocks his head, puzzled. “What do you want then?”

My gaze leaves his and lands on his girlfriend. Her eyes go wide, like I’d just slapped her in the face. “Her,” is all I say.

Theo’s gaze goes from me, to his girl, back to me. “What the fuck?”

His girlfriend tugs on Theo’s coat, but he ignores her. With my blood pumping fast, I cross my arms, widen my legs, and wait as he works those details out in his tiny brain.

“You want my girl?” he finally asks.

“Do you need me to talk slower, and use smaller sentences?”

Theo glares at me for a split second and then snorts out a laugh. “That’s fucking crazy.” His groupies start laughing with him, because of course they do. Do any of them have a thought of their own?

I hold my stance and using smaller sentences, add, “Mine. For one month.”

Theo stops laughing and his goons follow suit. Silence fills the night. “You’re out of your fucking mind, Ward.”

Of that I have no doubt.

“Wait, unless there’s really something here,” I say and wave my hand back and forth between the two of them. “I wouldn’t want to come between you two if you’re exclusive.”

“We’re not,” he blurts out, and my gaze cuts to his girl in time to see her shoulders curl into herself. Jesus Christ. How deep am I going to shove the knife, and what the fuck is driving me? “But that doesn’t mean this isn’t crazy.”

I bend and pick up my hockey bag. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Theo takes another step closer. “I’m not fucking scared of you, BM.”

BM: Buddy murderer.

I turn away before I do something I might not be able to come back from. “Never said you were,” I toss my bag over my shoulder and pull open the door, ready to walk away but his voice stops me.

“Fine, if you win, and you won’t, you can have Jami.”

Jami...

I angle my body and glance at Jami. It’s hard to tell in the dark, but I’m pretty sure she’s gone ghostly pale. She stumbles back a bit, and I resist the urge to bolt forward, throw my arms around her and hold her upright. Theo sure as shit isn’t doing anything to help her. Regret instantly grips me. Why did I fucking drag her into this? The better question is, why do I care? Like I said, it’s been a long-ass time since I felt anything other than pain and regret. The only thing driving me these days is making it into the NHL.

“For one month,” I clarify.

“One month,” he agrees.

“You and her...broken up. Over completely for one month.”

“Yeah, broken up. For one month,” he agrees, but then snorts. “Like you’re ever going to score more than me, anyway.”

“No contact with her.”

“Fine.”

“If you don’t stick to the rules, I won’t either.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, if you break the rules, I’ll have no choice but to get your girl to fall for me.”

“Like I’m fucking worried.”

Actually, he does look worried, which is strange, considering the way he treats her. Jami, having had no say in this, backs up a bit, and before I can tell her I don’t want anything from her—and maybe apologize for being an asshole—the crowd swallows her whole. My gut squeezes tight. What the fuck am I doing? Honestly, I’m not exactly sure what drove me to involve her—it’s not like taking her away from Theo will hurt him. He doesn’t value her at all. But Jami doesn’t have to worry about me. When I win tonight, I’ll let her know she’s off the hook, that I don’t want anything from her.

I nod at Theo and step through the door, and the word asshole follows me in as he shouts to me. I ignore him and Bree and her friends go silent. I head straight for the locker room to gear up. What I’m doing isn’t smart, and I’m sure I’ll have some explaining to do to Bree. Right now, however, I have some goals to score.

Thirty minutes later, I’m standing at center ice, face to face with Theo as the ref holds the puck between us.

“Eyes on the puck, not the player,” he warns, and the second he lets go of the puck, I get it on the end of my stick and pass. Theo shoulders me as he skates off, but I don’t let it rattle me. I have a game to win.

Jared carries the puck down the ice and I reposition, he shoots it to Brennan, who takes a fast and early shot, but misses. Theo smirks at me, and that’s when I feel eyes on me. I usually ignore those in the stands, but my gaze strays to Jami. Theo turns to see who I’m smiling at, and let’s face it, I’m only smiling to piss him off. I don’t want Jami. Even if she’s watching me with an intensity that’s sort of messing with me.

“Fuck you,” Theo grunts.

“Think she will?” I ask, purposely being a crude bastard just to piss him off, and it works. Although it’s a little surprising. I’ve seen the way he treats her. He’s about to throw a punch when Brennan skates over to me to guide me away.

“You good?” he asks.

“Yup, let’s beat these fuckers.”

He pushes on my helmet. “That’s the plan.”

We get back into the game, and it goes fast. First period ends in a goal for Kingston—scored by a very smug Theo. Second period ends in a tie—scored by me. Now here we are, the clock ticking down, with minutes left, and the puck is on the end of Brennan’s blade. He’s skating fast, and the defense are coming at him. I get myself open, and he makes a clean pass. I receive the puck, transfer my weight, twist my torso and take a slapshot. The red-light flashes and the buzzer sounds. I throw my arms up and cheers erupt as my teammates pile on me.

But right now, it’s Theo’s face I want to see, and maybe even Jami’s. But for different reasons. I don’t want her mad at me. In fact, I might want the opposite, and yeah maybe Theo’s right and I am fucking crazy. She’s on the opposing team and nothing about us makes sense.

Twenty minutes later, we’re all finishing up our showers, and the energy is high in the locker room. I’m putting on a happy show for my teammates, hiding the knot in my stomach. I’m sure soon enough, though, the bet I made will be all over campus, but someone else will do something stupid and this incident will all be forgotten, especially after I tell Jami I’m not going to go through with it.

Foregoing a coat, I shut my locker and start toward the doors. Brennan throws his arm around me. “What’s going on with you and douche bag?”

I laugh at that. “Trust me. You don’t want to know.”

He eyes me and I love that he and the team always have my back. “You sure?”

“Yeah, it’s all under control,” I assure him and hope I’m right.

His gaze moves over my face, and he finally gives in and says, “Okay, let’s go get a drink.”

“Make it two.” It’s Friday. I don’t have classes tomorrow and I could use a cold one.

Outside, the cool night air falls over us and I spot Bree and her friends waiting. She comes up to me, a nervousness about her and I get it. I have some explaining to do.

“Hey Bree, want a ride?” Brennan asks and turns so she can jump on his back.

“Sure,” she says tearing her gaze from me, and I instantly search the parking lot for Jami, not at all expecting to see her. When I find her leaning against the brick building, all alone, watching me, my heart jumps a bit with excitement and that’s just fucked up.

“I’ll meet you guys there,” I say and Bree frowns at me before I take off. I jog to where Jami is standing, and she folds her arms across her body, in a defensive move and it once again reminds me I pulled a prick move.

“Hey,” I say, and put my hand on the wall next to her head. I lean in a bit and try not to notice the sweet, smell of her hair. “You don’t have to do this. I shouldn’t have—”

“Kai.” As she cuts me off, she lifts her chin an inch. Her boldness shocks me. “I know you have an agenda of your own. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have asked for me in this ridiculous bet.” She pushes off the wall, her eyes uncertain but the determination that lives just behind that tentativeness intrigues me. “Maybe I have an agenda too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She reaches for my hand and the second my palm connects with her soft skin, the world goes a little wobbly around me. Her eyes hold mine and with a lift of her chin, she says, “We’re doing this.”