



PLAYING THE FIELD
FACEOFF



J. M. SNYDER

PLAYING THE FIELD: FACEOFF

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Christian grinned. Maybe Ronnie had meant something entirely different when he said they played on the same team...

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PLAYING THE FIELD: FACEOFF

BY

J. M. SNYDER

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PLAYING THE FIELD: FACEOFF
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FACEOFF

The hockey puck slides easily into the goal, setting off both the strobe light behind the goalie and the meager crowd that goes wild as Christian Magdziuk skids to a stop on the ice. The game isn't thirty seconds old and already he's put the Bedford Blizzard on the board. As the sirens wail around him, the announcer plays a rousing chorus of "Who Let the Dogs Out" to get the crowd rocking. "What a play!" a faceless voice calls out over the ice. "Looks like the Magic is back in R-R-R-R-Richmond!"

Christian raises his hockey stick in triumph, but the fanfare dies down quickly. He *is* on the visiting team, after all. The momentum of his shot has carried him around the back of the

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goal—on the other side, his teammate, Gordon Burle, barrels into him. Beneath his face mask, Burle is beaming. “Great shot!” he yells.

With a quick grin, Christian skates for the players’ bench. His team is lined up, hands out, to congratulate him. As he skates down the line, slapping hands with each in turn, he risks a glance behind him at the opposing team’s players. The Richmond Rebels, Christian’s former teammates, glare at him from across the ice. Only one man doesn’t watch him, and no matter how hard Christian stares at his old friend, Rebel Ronnie Niedermeyer never bothers to look his way.

Burle bumps into Christian, propelling him away from the box and back out onto the ice. “Positions,” he hollers to corral the rest of the team. “We still have another minute or so on the ice.”

As Christian glides to a stop in the center of the rink, he glances over at Ronnie, whose dark, shaggy hair has been brusquely pushed back out of his ice-blue eyes. Twin spots of color dot his cheeks, either from the cold coming in off the rink or from some heated emotion, Christian doesn’t know. His old friend’s chin rests in one large hand, and his forefinger is caught between ruddy lips as he gnaws on his nail. He’s studiously watching the goalie anchor the net back into place, and ignores Christian.

Look at me, Christian wants to say. It’s only been a few scant months since he left the Rebels. Do his former teammates still hold against him the trade that sent him to the Blizzard? Does Ronnie *hate* him now, after all they had been

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to each other?

Behind him, the referee blows a whistle to call the players together. Christian hunches over his stick, waiting for the puck to drop. Facing off against him is Eric Latimer, a man who used to invite Christian and the rest of the Rebels over for beers after practice. One look into Eric's hard gaze and Christian can tell those fun memories are eating Eric up inside. Cautiously, Christian ventures, "Hey, Eric."

Eric's eyes narrow in anger. "You got lucky with that shot, Magic. Live it up, eh? It's the last puck you'll sink tonight."

Christian laughs. "Who's gonna stop me? You?"

"Wait until Ronnie gets on the ice." Eric knocks Christian's stick with his, as if challenging him to say something. "He's always been faster than you."

Ronnie won't even look at me. Christian glances over at the player's box.

Sure enough, Ronnie's gaze is elsewhere.

Christian frowns in consternation. *Look at me!* How can the guy face off against him if he won't even acknowledge his presence?

Beside him, Eric mutters, "The Magic *I* knew never needed an assist to score."

Christian elbows Eric to silence him. "Shut up."

Eric shoves back, hard, knocking Christian off-balance. To keep from falling, Christian drops his stick and grabs twin fistfuls of Eric's shirt. With both hands full, he leaves himself open for attack. Eric presses his advantage—he pummels Christian's stomach, each punch a glancing blow through the

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layers of padding he wears, but the uncompromising look in Eric's eyes hurts more than he cares to admit. They were friends once, or teammates at least. Christian hasn't forgotten this.

Apparently, it means little to Eric.

Christian closes in, giving Eric no room to maneuver. They skate around each other wildly, helmets butting together like antlers locked in battle. The ref holding the puck scoots back, out of their way, but doesn't interrupt their tussle. Around them, the crowd starts up a familiar chant, "*Fight. Fight. Fight.*" This is what they came to see—for some fans, this is what hockey's all about.

Christian gets Eric's shirt up around his neck and manages to get in two good jabs right under his ribs before he's pulled away.

Eric swings as they separate—Christian takes the hit in the gut, and leverages himself on the arms that hold him to kick out with one leg. The dull blade of his skate slices through Eric's pants at the thigh, causing the crowd to gasp as one. He'll get extra time in the penalty box for that, but he's headed there anyway. No one heard the shit Eric said, so the refs will think Christian started the fight. He kicks out again. Might as well get in trouble for something good.

This time, his leg comes nowhere near Eric, who is being led away by two of his teammates. As Christian strains to loosen himself from whoever it is holding him back, he calls out, "Fuck you, Latimer. Where do you get off—"

"You already have five for fighting," Burle mutters in his

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ear. “Want to get kicked out of the game entirely? Keep talking. They’ll pull you and you know it.”

Christian stops struggling, and Burle lets him go. With his most menacing stare, Christian pins his former teammate with a look so fierce, he’s surprised Eric has the courage to skate away from it. Burle hooks one arm around Christian’s and leads him to the penalty box as Eric returns to his bench.

For the briefest moment, Ronnie Niedermeyer looks up from his fastidious study of his fingernails to meet Christian’s gaze.

“Ronnie,” Christian sighs. He tries to skate closer, to read what might be written behind those cold eyes, but Burle keeps a tight hold on his arm and, before Christian can free himself, Ronnie turns away.

* * *

This time last year, Christian was a rookie with the Richmond Rebels. He’d blown away the competition in try-outs, and landed a coveted spot on the Virginia Professional Hockey League’s best team. Sure, it wasn’t the majors, not *yet*, but the Rebels were a step in that direction. With Christian’s skills, he knew he’d be hitting the American Hockey League in no time, and after that? The NHL, maybe even the Olympics. He could skate rings around his competition, and no goalie could block his shots.

The first day of practice, he arrived at the Richmond Coliseum with his ego inflated from try-outs. Once on the ice, however, he wised up quick—the Rebels were a cohesive

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team who played together like a fine-tuned machine, many parts working toward one common goal.

Christian could only hope to integrate himself into their camaraderie. He started out as he had at practice, fast and furious, taking no prisoners in his fight to attain the goal. It was *his* puck, *his* game. He would show them just who they were playing with now. He'd show them he was the best.

Afterward, in the locker room, Christian stood by himself as he undressed. His jersey, his pads, his helmet and gloves, each was tossed unceremoniously into his locker. He'd heard the muttering from his teammates as they skated off the ice; he knew he wasn't welcome among them. The others hadn't hung around the lockers after practice, but rather ignored him and left quickly. There wasn't even a *word* of encouragement to him. He'd played good out there, *damn* good, and not one of them bothered to mention it. So fuck them. Fuck them all.

Behind him came the sound of a sneaker scraping over the concrete floor. Christian didn't bother to turn around. A man cleared his throat, and Christian ignored him.

"So," came the soft Southern drawl, "you're the one they call Magic out on the ice."

Christian felt his cheeks heat up. "It's *mad-jook*. You're pronouncing it wrong."

The man behind him snickered. "You looked like Magic to me."

Now Christian turned and saw Ronnie, one of the Rebel's best players, leaning against the lockers with his arms crossed in front of his chest. His dark hair was a disheveled mess, as if

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he hadn't bothered to brush it after climbing out of bed that morning. A faint shadow clung to his chin and jaw, making his lips look impossibly pink. His eyes were the clear blue of a summer sky—Christian thought if he stared into them for too long, he'd see through to the other side.

With a grunt, he turned back to his locker. "What's it to you, anyway?"

Ronnie closed the distance between them to lean against the locker next to Christian's. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, sounding anything but. "For a minute there, I thought we were on the same team."

Christian glanced at him, confused. "We are—"

"Then fucking act like it."

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* * *

In the penalty box, Christian watches the time count down his five minutes off the ice. He should’ve expected the fight—since he first heard they’d be playing their opener against the Rebels, Christian dreaded this game. Part of him hoped maybe there were no hard feelings about his trade. No one but Ronnie knows he requested it. No one but Ronnie really should have *cared*. But the hard glint he’d seen in Eric’s eyes said otherwise. He’s the traitor now, the sell-out.

Whatever, he tries to tell himself, but it still bothers him to think men he once played with, men he’d considered friends, have nothing civil left to say to him.

And then there’s Ronnie.

A minute into his penalty, there’s a shift change on the ice. Both teams switch players, and from the corner of his eye, Christian sees Ronnie skate into position. He’s a winger, stationed close to the penalty box, but he doesn’t bother looking over at Christian. His dismissal hurts more than Eric’s harsh words or tough blows ever could.

As play resumes, he turns back to his study of the clock, counting down the seconds until he’s free to leave his small glass prison. His team probably won’t score again until he gets back on the ice. He’s that good, with or without an assist from his teammates. The Blizzard is just a stepping stone for him,

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as were the Rebels. This time next year, he plans to be in the AHL and leave these petty fights behind.

Out of nowhere, the puck flies straight for him. Christian flinches out of reflex, but it just hits the glass in front of him with a loud *thock!*, then falls to the ice. He's distracted from the time clock now—two men fly toward him, hockey sticks slashing at each others' legs as they angle after the puck. One of them breaks away, giving chase, but the other slams into the boards right in front of Christian.

He flinches again as the glass shudders. And finds himself face to face with Ronnie Niedermeyer.

It seems like forever the two men stare at each other. The crowd fades away, the game dissolves—the chill that seeps into Christian's tired legs and butt comes from Ronnie's ice-chip eyes, and the look there freezes Christian's heart in mid-beat. He still can't read what goes on behind those cold eyes, but he knows from experience just how warm and loving they can be. Images rise unbidden in his mind—the two of them practicing on rollerblades, bodies pressed together as they checked each other's swings; those eyes hooded with lust late in the evening, or drowsy with sleep in the early morning light; Ronnie's too-pink lips kissing the firm muscles of Christian's abdomen, those eyes glancing up as he moved lower, and *lower*...

Another player skates up behind Ronnie, coming in fast. *Too* fast. Christian's gaze flickers over Ronnie's shoulder and his former teammate notices. With a wink as if to thank him for the tip, Ronnie ducks low and hugs the boards as he skates

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out of the way. A second later, a member of the Blizzard hits the glass where Ronnie stood not a moment before.

“Almost had him,” the guy grouses. He flashes Christian a teeth-baring grin and returns to the game.

But Christian can’t focus on him. He can’t return to the timer, either, counting down the seconds until he’s out of the penalty box. His gaze follows Ronnie as he skates after the puck, and that wink sticks in his mind. He closes his eyes and sees it again. So quick, so surreptitious, so unexpected...

And so much like the Ronnie Christian used to know that maybe, just *maybe*, not everyone on the Rebels feels the same about his leaving.

* * *

Christian’s first game with the Rebels had been against the Portsmouth Patriots, a low-ranking team they beat without trying. It was Christian’s first real hockey game, not counting those he’d played while in college or in amateur leagues. His first *professional* game. Hearing his name called out across the ice as he sank puck after puck stirred in him thoughts of greatness. This was where he needed to be, here. This was the game he was meant to play.

One clear thought rang through him as he had skated off the ice after scoring the final goal of the game. *Gretzky, move over. It’s time for some Magic in the majors.*

After practice games, the team usually went out to an early dinner at Mulligan’s, the nearby sports bar. During NHL season, one of the guys might invite the others over to watch

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the game—usually Eric, whose giant, flat-screen TV and decked-out home bar always made Christian think the guy was trying to compensate for inadequacies in other areas of his life.

There weren't any plans to do anything after the first real game of the season, though. They ended late, and by the time everyone showered and changed into street clothes, it was almost eleven o'clock at night. Most of the guys said their good-byes and headed home, their victory cheers turning to sleepy hurrahs as they left the locker room.

Christian's playing earned him a few claps on the back, that was it. The feeling among the teammates was that *they* had won, as a whole, and Christian's individual goals were forgotten. Sure, he'd scored for his team, but would a little appreciation hurt?

As he stuffed the last of his uniform into his sports bag, he felt someone approach from behind. He didn't turn, but he didn't need to. He knew who it was. "Hey, Ron."

"Hey, yourself." Ronnie leaned against the locker beside his, so close that Christian felt his presence like a blanket draped over his backside. When he bent to retrieve his skates, his ass butted against Ronnie's crotch, and for the briefest moment, an audacious hand curved over his hip before falling away.

They'd been skating around each other for weeks now. Always a tentative touch here, a hanging word there—nothing solid, nothing Christian could pin down and analyze. But he watched Ronnie with other members of the team and knew these small touches and lingering moments in the locker room

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were reserved for him alone.

Turning, Christian dropped to the bench in front of the lockers and pushed his wavy blond bangs out of his eyes. “Good game, eh?”

Ronnie grinned. “You were great out there. We’re lucky to have you.”

Christian ducked his head to hide his grin. Finally, someone who attested his skill. “Yeah, well, thanks. I was starting to think I was invisible or something. No one else bothered to say a word.” He tried to keep his voice light, but it was hard hiding the bitterness he felt toward the rest of his team. “They act like they won on their own without me.”

“We’re a team,” Ronnie reminded him. “The Rebels won tonight, not Mr. Magic.”

Christian frowned down into the bag at his feet and said nothing.

The silence between them stretched out, uncomfortable. Then Ronnie nudged Christian’s foot with his. When Christian looked up, he saw those cool eyes had warmed above a shy smile that looked so incongruous with the tough-guy persona Ronnie usually projected. “Hey,” he said softly. “What are you doing later?”

“Tonight?” Christian asked. At Ronnie’s shrug, he frowned. “I don’t know. Going home, going to sleep. You?”

Instead of answering, Ronnie asked, “Why don’t you come on over to my place? We can hang out a bit, grab a bite to eat. Maybe get to know each other a little better. What do you say?”

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What *could* he say? He tamped down a silly grin that threatened to split his face, but his heart fluttered and, in the confines of his jeans, his dick stretched itself awake at the prospect of scoring *off* the ice, as well. “Sure.”

* * *

The first thing Christian does when he’s released from the penalty box is skate to where his coach stands on the sidelines, watching the game. He skids to a stop by the boards, breathless, his gaze watching the puck zoom across the ice. “Hey,” he says, “put me in. I can sink that shot.”

But when he turns to skate into play, the coach grabs the back of his jersey and holds him in place. “Easy there, Magic. Your shift just switched. Sit down and wait your turn.”

“I *got* this one,” Christian says, trying to shake free from the coach’s grip. Ronnie’s out on the ice, and he wants nothing more than to face off against that man. He tells himself it’s because they’re on opposing teams, but something in those eyes, that wink, has him bothered. Ramming the man into the boards a time or two might be just what Christian needs to get *that* out of his system.

But the coach is a no-go. He hauls Christian back into the player box, off the ice and out of play. “Ass on the bench,” he growls, steering Christian toward the end of the line with the rest of his shift. “This ain’t a personal vendetta, kid. Sit down and wait your turn or I’ll throw you from the game.”

With a scowl, Christian falls onto the bench, arms crossed awkwardly before him. He finds Ronnie on the ice without

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difficulty and glares out at his former teammate. Suddenly it's hot in here, *too* hot, so he yanks off his helmet and throws it to his feet.

"Magic," the coach warns. "Save it for the game."

A mess of sweaty blond waves curl down into Christian's face. Roughly he brushes them back, out of his vision, then fists his hand in their thick depths and pulls hard in frustration. He knew going into this game would be difficult, but he'd had no *clue* just what he'd be up against.

With both hands now, he cradles his forehead, the span between his palms dark and comforting. When he left Richmond, he thought he'd left everything behind, Ronnie included. Three months later, he's surprised the guy can still tear him up inside.

Fuck it. Play the game. Go home. Get over it already, can you do that? Get over him. He's just psyching you out and you know it.

But is he? Is he *really*? Because Christian saw something in that cool gaze when they stared at each other through the glass surrounding the penalty box, something that makes him think Ronnie might not hate him completely, the way the other Rebels seem to. Something that hints at so much left unsaid, and so much more between them.

Christian pushes his hair back and sets his chin on his hand to watch the game. The moment he looks up, Ronnie is passing in front of him, the puck fast against his stick, angling for the goal. Sticking out his lower lip, Christian blows the curls off his forehead. Ronnie glances over, sees him, and

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misses his shot.

The puck goes clear around the back of the goal and comes out the other side. Several of Christian's teammates scramble for it, but the ref's whistle stops them short. Above the hockey rink, the announcer's voice rains down like judgment. "Niedermeyer's called for icing. Would have been a great shot, too, if only he'd have kept his eyes on the puck. There is some *tension* in the air tonight, folks! Are you ready to r-r-r-r-r-r-rumble?"

Tension. Christian smirks as Ronnie skates for the penalty box. The air's so thick around him, he thinks he'll suffocate before the night is through.

* * *

That first visit to Ronnie's townhouse, Christian didn't know what to expect. He followed behind Ronnie's pick-up truck out to one of the newer communities being built in the West End. As Ronnie pulled into the garage, Christian coasted his sporty convertible to a stop in front of a brick townhouse that sat in the middle of a row of identical homes. He locked his car but left the top down, just to show off a bit. Then he trotted up the steps to the front door, which opened when he raised a hand to knock.

Inside, Ronnie gave him an enigmatic grin. The light behind him threw his face into shadow, but his eyes were bright and clear, and fixed on Christian. He wondered how pale they would look upon waking, or how dark Ronnie's unkempt hair would be splashed across his pillow. The

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thoughts surprised him—though he'd been getting signals from Ronnie since he joined the team, Christian had never let himself actually *think* of his teammate in a sexual manner. He hadn't wanted to get his hopes up only to be disappointed. What if Ronnie's flirtatious banter was nothing more than tough talk? How would a relationship off the ice interfere with them working together on it? And what would happen if either of them were ever traded to another team?

But here, on Ronnie's doorstep, Christian's hesitation was short lived. Ronnie stood aside to let him into his home, and the moment the door was shut behind them, Christian found a warm hand easing into his, strong fingers curling around his palm. With a playful squeeze, Ronnie smiled at the faint shock that must've been evident on Christian's face. "Thanks for coming over," he said, as if his hand in Christian's didn't hint at anything more than a social visit. "Let me give you the tour."

Downstairs was the garage and a utility room. Ronnie didn't release Christian from his grip as he led him around. He pointed out the washer and dryer, but Christian saw most of the utility room was given over to Ronnie's love of hockey. Clean uniforms hung on one wall, while others littered the floor, mingled with piles of clothing vaguely separated into whites and colors. A street hockey goal took up one corner—hockey sticks lay across the top, and goalie's pads were tossed into the net itself.

"You play?" Christian asked.

Ronnie clicked off the overhead light and guided Christian

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to the stairs that led to the next floor. “Sometimes me and a few of the guys practice on rollerblades. You know, when the Coliseum is unavailable, or when it’s off-season. It’s a lot of fun.”

Bitter jealousy rose in Christian, the same sourness he’d tasted earlier that evening, when no one on his team had acknowledged his role in winning the game. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from saying anything, but his hand grew uncomfortably warm in Ronnie’s, and he wondered how many other players had been given this same tour in the past. The lower level, then upstairs to the second, and ending where? Ronnie’s bedroom?

It’d been a while since Christian had had sex, and when Ronnie invited him over, he’d been hoping to get lucky. But he wasn’t just another nameless player on the ice, and he sure as hell didn’t plan to be another notch in the bed post, either. At the top of the stairs, they entered a dining room and Christian pulled his hand from Ronnie’s grip. Then he tucked both hands into his back pocket to keep them to himself.

Ronnie glanced back at him, a slight frown on his face that creased his brow. “You thirsty?” he asked. When Christian shrugged, Ronnie pointed to a doorway on the right. “Living room’s that way. Let me get us something to drink.”

They parted ways, Christian heading right, Ronnie disappearing through a similar doorway to the left. The living room looked comfy, with overstuffed chairs and a long sectional sofa that faced a large television. On the floor sat an X-Box game system, connected to the TV but pushed up

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against it, out of the way.

Bookcases eclipsed one wall—Christian drifted over to browse the shelves, his head cocked to one side to read the titles on CD cases and book covers. Mostly dance albums, some techno stuff, music one usually only heard in a club. *Or at a hockey game*, Christian thought. The announcers liked to play fast tunes to get the crowd involved. The books were mostly sports-related, no surprise there.

Something icy touched the back of his neck.

Christian whirled to find Ronnie behind him, two bottles of beer in one hand, the other resting on Christian's shoulder. Even through his shirt, he could feel the damp chill coming off Ronnie's fingers. Without removing that hand, Ronnie angled one of the bottles out toward Christian like an offering. When Christian took it, Ronnie tipped the other bottle to clink against his. "To you," he said, his voice low, intimate. "Great game tonight."

Christian nodded and sipped at the beer. It was cold and tingly in his mouth, but warmed as he swallowed it down. When Ronnie's hand didn't fall from his shoulders, he shrugged.

Ronnie didn't take the hint.

Clearing his throat, Christian asked, "So do you do this after every game?" Ronnie gave him a quizzical look, and Christian explained. "Take the MVP home, show him around, booze him up. Then what?"

That faint smile on Ronnie's face faded. "You think that's what this is?"

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Christian shrugged again. Instead of dropping his hand, Ronnie moved it to Christian's nape and let his fingers play over the ticklish skin just under the short cut of Christian's hair. The touch sent shivers down Christian's spine, but a heaviness in his groin kept him from shaking Ronnie away. Trying to keep his voice light, he said, "Nice place you have here. Why'd you invite me over?"

"Why'd you come?" Ronnie countered.

Christian raised his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug and trapped Ronnie's hand in place. The beer in his hand was already half gone—when had that happened? "I don't know," he murmured, downing the rest of the bottle. "Maybe I should go."

Softly, Ronnie brushed his fingers across Christian's nape. They combed up into his hair, tickling his scalp, then rubbed to one side, behind his ear, before curving around his neck to stroke his jaw. His arm lay heavy on Christian's shoulders, and with a gentle nudge of his knuckles, he turned Christian's face toward his.

This close, Ronnie's eyes looked see-through, transparent. They were the same barely-there shade of blue as the winter sky, pale and crisp, almost white. Christian couldn't stare into them for long; he felt himself disappearing in their gaze, yet try as he might, he couldn't seem to look away. He glanced at Ronnie's thick, sleepy lashes, the dark eyebrows above them, the pinked excitement coloring his narrow cheeks and his too-red lips, but he was drawn to those eyes, again and again.

"Stay," Ronnie murmured, so low Christian would've

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thought he imagined the word if he hadn't watched those lips form it. "I like you."

Christian raised his bottle between them, but it was empty. Ronnie offered him his instead. "Thanks," Christian sighed as he took it, setting his own on a nearby bookshelf. The glass was cold against his lips, the beer frothy in his mouth. In two gulps, he downed half the bottle. Lowering it, he picked at the label and tried again not to meet Ronnie's gaze, but couldn't. "What's that mean, exactly?"

The smile was back. Ronnie plucked the bottle from Christian's nerveless fingers and set it beside the other one on the bookcase. Christian watched it go, vaguely discomfited with nothing to hold onto.

A gentle hand touched his chin, turning his face toward Ronnie's. Christian found his teammate's eyes shut, lips parted. The arm on Christian's shoulder held him in place as Ronnie leaned in, closer. His nose brushed over Christian's, an Eskimo kiss. Then his mouth touched Christian's lips, soft, alcoholic.

Christian's hands rose between them, smoothing over Ronnie's chest before grasping at his T-shirt and tugging him closer. He opened his mouth for their next kiss, and Ronnie's tongue slipped into him. He dipped inside, testing Christian, tasting him, licking away the tiny moans he elicited from his teammate. One knee eased between Christian's legs and bent, rising, to press against the budding erection in the front of Christian's jeans. Another, louder moan escaped him at that touch.

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Ronnie kissed Christian's lower lip, his chin; Christian laid his head back, letting those kisses trickle down over his throat and into the collar of his shirt. His hands rubbed up Ronnie's chest, grabbed at his shirt, then ran up another few inches to do it all over again. "Ronnie," he sighed. He didn't know what else to say that wasn't *please* and *yes* and *God, just fuck me now*.

Against his neck, Ronnie's breath danced over Christian's heated skin. "Let me show you the bedroom."

This time when Ronnie took his hand, Christian didn't shake him off. But when they reached the doorway leading into the dining room, Christian stopped. Ronnie must have felt him tug on his hand because he turned, a question written in his eyes. Christian wasn't one to prolong things—he wanted Ronnie, now, and from his teammate's advances, he knew Ronnie was interested in him, as well. So why trek through the rest of the townhouse wasting time? Why not get busy here?

A slight pull on Ronnie's hand brought him back to Christian's side. Walking backward, Christian led him away from the door to the sofa. When the back of his leg bumped against the cushion, he stopped; Ronnie kept walking, eyes smoldering with lust, as he came right up on Christian. His hands touched Christian's waist as if holding him in place, and his forehead leaned heavily against Christian's own. "What do you have in mind?" Ronnie murmured.

Easing his arms around Ronnie's neck, Christian hugged him near to claim another kiss. This wasn't tentative any longer, nothing unsure between them now. Christian kissed

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Ronnie as if they faced off against the ice—hard, driving, playing to score. To win. With his hands fisted in Ronnie's shaggy hair, he held his teammate to him and pressed his advantage. His tongue bullied its way between Ronnie's lips, demanding. Now Ronnie's moans spurred him on, lost between them, and they clung to each other in a desperate attempt to become one.

The hands at Christian's waist dipped into the back of his jeans. Cool fingers slid into his underwear to cup his ass. He leaned toward Ronnie, his kisses insistent, his hands dropping from Ronnie's hair to bunch the collar of his shirt. Finding the top button at Ronnie's throat, Christian unbuttoned it, then the next, and the next. Ronnie's hands rubbed around him to the front of his jeans, where they plucked at the button there before easing down his zipper.

"Yes," Christian sighed into Ronnie as sure hands cradled his cock and balls through the thin material of his briefs. "Ronnie, please—"

"The bed's more comfortable," Ronnie whispered.

"It's so far away," Christian told him, "and I'm so damn close, you just don't know."

With a gentle squeeze, Ronnie fondled Christian's hard cock through his briefs. "Oh, I think I know."

Christian kissed him silent. Ronnie's hands worked Christian's briefs down, exposing his thick erection, which stood like an exclamation between them. Pushing open Ronnie's shirt, Christian played across the undershirt beneath the button-down—his fingers picked at the hard nipples

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hidden beneath the thin fabric, and in response, Ronnie's hands tightened around his dick and balls.

"You do this with all the rookies?" Christian asked. He tweaked Ronnie's nipples again, interrupting his response. "Or am I just lucky?"

"You're Magic," Ronnie joked. "I've never met another player like you before."

Christian preened at the compliment. Tugging at Ronnie's shirt, he demanded, "Take this off. And this." He indicated the undershirt as well, tugging it free from where it was tucked into Ronnie's jeans. Unbuttoning his fly, Christian teased, "Let me see what I'm working with here."

With a laugh, Ronnie pushed Christian's hands away. "It's my house," he said, shrugging out of his button-down shirt. "You're the guest. Let me please you first."

Christian couldn't argue with that. He let Ronnie take off the sweater he wore, and the thin T-shirt underneath. Then, grabbing Christian's open fly, Ronnie hooked his fingers into Christian's briefs and commanded, "Sit."

As Christian obeyed, his jeans were shucked down his legs, and he plopped bare-assed onto the sofa. His hard cock stood up from his groin, stiff and ruddy, the tip already glistening with pre-cum. He raised his legs to kick off his sneakers as Ronnie shucked off his jeans, one leg at a time. With his hands on Christian's knees, Ronnie held his legs apart as he knelt on the floor before him. Christian's hand drifted to his crotch to play with his balls, the sac soft and warmed from Ronnie's touch. "So now what?"

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Ronnie leaned forward in response and took the tip of Christian's dick into his mouth. Strong lips massaged his cockhead as Ronnie's tongue licked out, down the underside of his length, then back up to the twirl around the tip. "God," Christian sighed, leaning back against the couch. Ronnie's hands were on his thighs now, spreading his legs wide. Christian grasped at his teammate's disheveled hair, tugging at the dark tufts as he pushed himself farther into Ronnie. "Yes, yes."

With lavish attention, Ronnie circled Christian's dick, first nuzzling the tender knob, tracing under the flared head with his tongue, licking the slit as beads of white cum bubbled from the tip and trickled down the trail left by Ronnie's saliva. Then he kissed his way down the thick, veined length—first a bevy of little kisses, from tip to base, then wetter kisses, sucking back up his shaft.

Christian writhed beneath the sensations that shot through him, lust and desire, an aching need for release. Ronnie's hands were between his legs now—he sprawled down on the cushions, one leg thrown over the arm of the sofa, the other propped up on the wooden coffee table beside Ronnie. Strong fingers rubbed into sensitive skin, tracing intricate patterns into his balls, tickling lower to rim over his trembling anus. Christian gripped Ronnie's head in both hands as his hips rose unbidden off the sofa, thrusting at his teammate.

Finally Ronnie took Christian's cock in his mouth again. With hooded eyes, Christian watched Ronnie watch him—one moment, the bulbous tip of his dick separated them; the next,

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Ronnie swallowed it down, his mouth opening wide to take his entire length in. Those ice-chip eyes never blinked, and that wintry gaze never left his own as Ronnie deep-throated him. When his lips kissed the hair curled around Christian's cock, his tongue slipped out to lick over Christian's fuzzy nuts, and his cockhead brushed against the back of Ronnie's throat.

His mouth worked around Christian's shaft once, twice. Every inch of Christian's body felt poised, like a drop of water dangling from a faucet, waiting to fall. His cock felt sheathed in wet heat, and a bead of saliva drooled down over his balls. "Yes," he sighed, and "God," and "Ronnie, please." He felt Ronnie's lips tighten around his shaft, felt that throat working against the tip of his dick, and with a guttural cry he could barely contain, Christian bucked up off the sofa as he came deep within his teammate's mouth.

Expertly, Ronnie drank him down. Christian fucked into him, his mind a blur. *Yes, God, please, yes, yes.* The words escaped him as mere breath, but they rang out through his mind and Ronnie milked his orgasm as if they spurred him on.

Scoring on the ice had *never* felt this good.

* * *

At the end of the first period, Christian heads into the locker room with the rest of his team. The way the Coliseum is laid out, both locker rooms are on the same side of the rink—they lead off in separate directions off a main hallway, like a T. During games, a thick curtain divides the hallway into halves so the teams can't interact. As Christian passes by the

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curtain, it flutters at the bottom, and he can hear laughter from someone on the other side. His hands tighten around the stick in his hands. They're laughing at him, he just knows it.

In the locker room, a table has been set up with snacks and drinks. Before he can grab anything, though, the coach is in his face. "Magic or not, you have to fucking *concentrate* out there," he yells. Christian keeps his gaze down to avoid meeting the man's eyes. "You're not the only member of this team, kid, you hear me? The first shot was great but let up on the puck a bit. You can't hog it the whole game."

"Why not?" Christian mutters. "Every time I get it, it goes in the goal. We're winning, aren't we?"

Three to one, he wants to add, and it's only the first period. That's a great score, and if he'd been on the ice when Ronnie's shift last played, it'd be three to nothing.

"The way you play," the coach hollers, "*you're* winning, and fuck the rest of the team. You have other guys out there, Madge. Let *them* hit the puck once or twice, what do you say?"

Christian shrugs off his words. It's the same old story—he starts scoring big, and all the other players get pissed because he's better than them. The Blizzard is just another stepping stone in Christian's career path, and how will he ever attract a scout's attention if he doesn't take control out on the ice? That's how he fell under the notice of Bedford's owner. That's how he's going to get to the NHL.

He keeps to himself by the snack table, nibbling on a Power Bar and guzzling Gatorade. Even Burle stays away

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from him—the two room together when out of town on away games, and of all the players, he knows Christian best. Or rather, knows his moods, and has learned the hard way not to cross him when he's mad. Like the rest of the team, he doesn't *know* Christian, the *real* Christian, the person Ronnie had known. They'd been roomies, too, on the road, and there wasn't a game last year that hadn't ended with the two of them lying together in bed, Ronnie's own or at a hotel, the sweaty sheets twined around their legs and their bodies hard against each other...

With a shake of his head, Christian pushes those memories away.

Someone thumps him on the shoulder; he looks up to find Burle there, helmet pushed back until it teeters precariously on the top of his head. There's a faint smile on his grizzled visage, almost apologetic, as if he somehow knows what this game is doing to Christian and he's sorry. "Time's up," he says, nodding at the hall. "You ready?"

The rest of the team is already heading back onto the ice. Christian tosses his drink away and follows Burle. He lets his teammate pull ahead, leaving him to trail behind. He should've been first, he thinks, at the head of the team, and the crowd would go wild when he entered the rink, arms raised high in victory. If this were the Bedford stadium, they'd call out his name as he skated into position. And if he had better teammates, he wouldn't be the only one scoring to win—

"Magic."

As he passes the curtain in the hallway, he hears his name

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from the other side. It sounds like a bad word, spat out in such hate, and it stops him in mid-stride. Someone unseen laughs, a braying jackass sound he knows too well. Eric, the fucker. Talking shit about him, and he doesn't even know Christian overhears.

He does something unthinkable—with the crook of his stick, he snags the edge of the curtain and pulls it aside. The Rebels are passing by, heading for the ice. When the curtain opens, they turn as one and stare, dumbfounded, at Christian. It's one against a half dozen—stupid odds, Christian knows—but the fight's been building in him all evening and he's ready to remind these jerks he'd once been the best thing on their team.

Eric stands closest to him. His eyes glisten meanly and his lips curl into a snarl. Taking a step toward him, Christian threatens, "Say that again to my face."

Placing a hand against Christian's chest, Eric shoves him back. "Out of *our* locker room, Magic. You don't belong here anymore."

Christian pushes Eric's hand away, and it begins. The two men scuffle in the hallway, sticks clattering against the stone walls and concrete floor. Beside them, the curtain rattles on its pole, and the men behind Eric start chanting, "Fight, fight." Christian gets in a good punch to the stomach—he hears Eric *oof!* in his ear—then strong hands pull them apart. Christian keeps swinging until someone steps between them. A broad back separates him from Eric, and the sudden whiff of sporty cologne takes him to a place he hasn't realized he missed

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before tonight.

Even with his back to him, Christian recognizes Ronnie's scent and the stiff, sweaty spikes of dark, shaggy hair that stick out above the collar of his jersey.

Christian tries to edge around Ronnie, but his former teammate holds him back. The hand on the front of his jersey makes his stomach flutter, and a familiar ache blossoms at his crotch. Ronnie's other arm is bent against Eric's chest, holding him in check. "Stop it, right now," Ronnie admonishes, his voice low. "Take it out on the ice."

"Ronnie," Eric starts, "he—"

Loud music filters down the hallway, rolling in off the ice like fog and cutting Eric off in mid-sentence. Ronnie raises his voice to shout over the noise. "Your shift is up first, isn't it? So get out there already."

"But—"

Ronnie shakes his head. "Just go."

Christian makes a half-hearted attempt to lunge after Eric, but Ronnie's arm blocks him, and the hand at his waist fists in his jersey to keep him back. The Rebels glare at him over Ronnie's shoulder, but no one says another word. One of the younger teammates, a rookie Christian doesn't know, shoulders by Ronnie and earns himself a punch in the back as he passes.

When the hall is clear, Christian mutters in Ronnie's ear, "Are you fucking him now?"

Ronnie turns, eyes narrowed, face livid. The wounded look in those eyes is all the answer he needs—Ronnie's as tortured

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by tonight's game as Christian is himself. *Good. I'm not the only one.*

"Get out on the ice," Ronnie tells him. He fumbles something into Christian's hand, a piece of paper or a ticket stub, something Christian doesn't get a good look at before Ronnie's pulling the curtain between them.

"Hey!" Christian cries out. He pokes his head around the curtain but the hallway is empty. Taking a step closer, he tries to peer down the short hall that leads into the Rebel's player box and out onto the ice. "Ronnie!"

Someone grabs hold of his jersey and hauls him back on his side of the hall. Christian turns to find his coach breathing down his neck. "Magic!" he shouts angrily. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

Christian crumples the piece of paper in his hand. "Nothing. I—"

"Then get *out* on the ice! They're waiting on you to start."

Quickly, Christian hurries down the hall to the player box. There he stops to remove the blade guards from his skates, and he tucks the piece of paper up under the fitted sleeve of the long underwear he has on beneath his jersey to keep him warm while on the ice. The paper chafes his wrist, and he smashes it down as he skates out into position. He can't imagine what the message might say, but he doesn't have time to look at it now. As he moves to face off against Eric, he pushes the paper—and Ronnie—from his mind.

* * *

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As a senior player on the Rebels, Ronnie had more pull than most of the others on the team. No one complained when he began inviting Christian along after practices, and the coach changed up the rooming arrangements so the two men could bunk together while on the road. The other players began to relax around Christian—it was always hard fitting in with an established group, but Ronnie's friendship made it easier to be accepted, and soon his teammates began to appreciate Christian's skills on the ice. By the time they played their first away game, against the Portsmouth Patriots, Christian began to feel the camaraderie that had always seemed just out of reach.

He sat beside Ronnie on the bus, and every so often, his teammate would touch Christian's knee or arm or hip, a surreptitious gesture no one else could see. It warmed Christian up inside, that hand on his body, and he looked forward to an evening alone after the game. It'd become a ritual now, his staying over at Ronnie's whenever they played, but a hotel room was a blank slate—anything could happen. Perhaps they'd finally move past the touch and go stage of their relationship, beyond mutual masturbation and insatiable kisses to something... Christian didn't know. Something *more*.

The game went into sudden death overtime, and the coach sent Christian out on the ice to sink the final shot. When the puck hit the net, the light above the goal flashed and the crowd roared, and Christian raised his arms in triumph as his team skated out to join him on the ice. Ronnie reached him first—in

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front of everyone, his arms went around Christian's waist and he pulled him into a fierce bear hug. The other Rebels joined in, a mad crush that obscured the playful press of Ronnie's lips against Christian's cool, bare cheek. *Yes*, his mind crowed, triumphant. Other players knocked his helmet aside, tousled his hair, clutched at his jersey. For the first time, the Rebels celebrated his win.

His.

Later, at the hotel, the team caroused in the halls, bottles of beer clinking together as they toasted their victory. Christian had a beer or two, a goofy grin threatening to split his face, and laughed when the guys wanted him to rehash the final play. "Aw, come on," they cajoled. Strong arms tugged him away from where he stood by Ronnie against the wall. "Show us again."

Christian grinned at Ronnie. "Go on," he said, taking the bottle from Christian's hand. "Show us your magic."

How could he say no to that?

Hours later, Ronnie half-carried, half-dragged a pleasantly exhausted Christian into their hotel room. The two men still snickered from their teammates' antics, and the beer buzzed comfortably through Christian's veins with a vibrant hum like electricity through overhead lines. He let Ronnie drop him on the closest bed, where he lay on his back, fully clothed, and stared at the stucco ceiling above. "God," he sighed. "I'm beat."

At the other bed, Ronnie unzipped his overnight bag. "Tired?"

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Christian laughed. "Yeah. I could fall out right here."

Ronnie nudged Christian's leg with his own as he dug into his bag. "Too bad. I had plans for tonight."

Interested, Christian raised his head to glance at his friend. "Oh? Like what?"

Extracting a small, cardboard box from his bag, Ronnie pitched it underhanded to Christian. It hit the bed by Christian's arm, and he rolled over to grab it. As he held it up, he noticed it was a box of condoms. "Heavily lubricated," he read. A nervous little flutter tickled his stomach. "Looks like you came prepared."

With his back to Christian, Ronnie shucked off his jeans and underwear. The twin pale moons of his ass peeked out from beneath the hem of his shirt. He turned toward Christian as he pulled the shirt off over his head, exposing whorls of dark hair that kinked around his nipples then dove down his flat stomach like a trail on a treasure map to fist in the curls at his crotch. Christian had seen Ronnie nude before—they showered together in the locker room, for Christ's sake—but never had so much naked flesh looked so tempting before. His gaze was drawn to the ruddy tip of Ronnie's cock, peering out from its bed of hair, and his own dick stiffened in anticipation.

Positioning his legs on either side of Christian's, he climbed onto the bed to straddle Christian and sat heavily on his thighs. One hand plucked at Christian's zipper, easing it down inch by inch. "I had such big plans, too," Ronnie said with a pout as he ran a finger up over the bulge at Christian's crotch, over the button on his jeans, and under his shirt to

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delve into his navel. "But if you're too tired..."

Pushing Ronnie's hand aside, Christian unbuttoned his jeans. "I'm not. Get up."

As his hips arched off the bed, Ronnie rose up on his knees to give Christian room to remove his jeans. He had wiggled them just below his underwear when Ronnie stood and tugged them off completely. His briefs followed suit, and Ronnie climbed back onto him again, pushing Christian's shirt up out of the way as he lay above him. Their dicks crushed together with a sweet ache, and the press of flesh was wondrous along his skin. Ronnie held his shirt up, over his head, and before pulling it off completely, he kissed Christian's exposed chin, then his mouth, then his nose. "I could eat you up," he murmured against Christian's throat as his lips left damp imprints behind after every kiss.

Christian pulled his arms free from the shirt and found Ronnie's shoulders. Running his hands along his friend's back, he tightened his arms around Ronnie and held him close as he shook his head from side to side. "Get this thing off me already, will you?"

With a laugh, Ronnie kissed Christian quiet. His body rubbed against Christian's own as he tugged the shirt up slowly, his nipples teasing Christian's own, his cock fast against Christian's length. When the shirt cleared Christian's ears, Ronnie nipped at his earlobe, then ran his tongue behind the ear, leaving a warm, wet trail in its wake. "Fuck me," he whispered, his breath hot and close.

Christian gripped Ronnie's ass with both hands and spread

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his cheeks wide. His forefingers delved into the crack of Ronnie's ass, strumming over skin that quivered at his touch. "Now," Ronnie said, grinding his hips into Christian's. "Fuck me now."

The box of condoms lay beside them on the bed. As Ronnie sat up to retrieve it, Christian pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside. He reached out, his fingers toying with the pink nipples that poked through the tufts of hair on Ronnie's chest. "What if I said I wanted to be first?"

"They're my condoms," Ronnie told him, tearing into one of the individual foil packets. "When you buy them, you get fucked."

Christian reached for the box. "So what, you're saying you get to use all of these? That's not fair—*ah* yes, yes."

His words dissolved into breathless gasps as Ronnie fisted his shaft, kneading it erect before rolling the condom into place. Scooting forward to sit on Christian's lower belly, Ronnie lay down on him again. He kissed Christian, hands slick with lube as they clenched in the wavy bangs that fell back from Christian's brow. "Fuck me," he growled, moving his hips in a maddening circle to entice his friend. "What are you waiting for? Sink the shot."

Christian's hands found Ronnie's ass a second time, and he held those fleshy cheeks apart as he slowly guided his cock inside.

* * *

Near the end of the second period, Christian is called for

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high-sticking. He doesn't care—the shot he took hit the edge of the goal, rebounded off the goalie's skate, then landed in the net for the score. The Blizzard are up five to one, and he allows himself a victory lap before heading for the penalty box. The coach will call him on the showboating, he knows, but at this point? He doesn't care.

In the box, he absently scratches at his left wrist as he watches the shifts change on the ice. Ronnie comes out, and though Christian stares right at him—the guy *has* to feel it—Ronnie doesn't look his way. Christian tugs on the sleeve of his jersey and hears a crinkle as he rubs his wrist. With a frown, he pulls back the sleeve to find the piece of paper Ronnie slipped him in the hall.

It's torn from one of those scratchy paper towels the Coliseum stocks in the restrooms. Christian smoothes it out on his knee only to discover there's nothing on it. How odd. Why would Ronnie give him this?

Then he turns it over, and recognizes his former teammate's scribble. *Stop by my truck after the game.*

Christian's first urge is to ball it up in his fist and throw it over the glass confines of the box. He's not hanging around after the game, and Ronnie knows it—as a member of the visiting team, Christian will be bused off to the hotel immediately after skating off the ice. He won't have time to visit old friends, particularly ones who don't want anything to do with him.

He glares out at the game, finding Ronnie easily among the players. *Now* the guy feels his stare—*now* Ronnie looks his

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way. Holding up the piece of paper, Christian shrugs and mouths the words, “What the fuck?”

As if in reply, the hockey puck flies through the air straight at him. It hits the glass with a solid *thunk!* that makes him jump.

The players scramble for the puck, and Ronnie gets caught up in the moment with them. He doesn’t look at Christian again as he skates into play. *Stop by my truck.* As if they have *anything* to say to each other now.

Ronnie skids to a stop in front of the penalty box, the puck between the boards and his stick, his back to Christian. With a burst of anger, Christian launches himself at the glass separating them, fists banging to get Ronnie’s attention. “Hey!” he shouts, his voice lost in the cry of the crowd and the rambunctious music pounding through the stands. “Ronnie! Hey!”

Ignoring him, Ronnie hits the puck back into the center of the ice. The players scatter after it. Christian sinks back to his seat as he watches Ronnie skate away. He thought he knew where things stood between them—Ronnie had made it clear when Christian left the team, and the attitudes of his former teammates tell him exactly what they think of him now. So why does Ronnie want to meet up with him after the game? Is it a trap, and the rest of the team will be there waiting to jump him? Or will it just be the two of them, like old times?

Christian doesn’t know, and part of him doesn’t *want* to know, either. Ronnie is the type who hints at his thoughts without ever making them known. For all the time they spent

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together last year, Christian still doesn't know exactly what Ronnie thinks of him. What he *feels* for him. Even at their best, he caught glimpses but never had anything concrete to back up his own suspicions.

And now, this. What's Ronnie playing at, anyway?

* * *

It was after the third game in the playoffs that Christian told Ronnie about the trade. They had just won against the Fairfax Fury and, as had become their custom, Christian had followed Ronnie home after the game. The box of condoms was his this time—he lay nude on Ronnie's bed, the sheets twined around his legs, his ass comfortably warm from the arm Ronnie had draped over it. He felt loose and pliant, like an old rubber band that had been stretched beyond its means and no longer held any tension in it. The pillow was cool beneath his cheek, the mattress firm against the front of his body, his lover on his back beside him. One of Christian's arms was around Ronnie's waist, keeping him close; the other lay straight beside him, fingers toying with Ronnie's hand where it rested against his hip. The only light came from the overhead out in the hallway, which Christian had flipped on as they came up the stairs and forgot to turn off before they made it to the bedroom.

Despite the idyllic moment, the amber afterglow of sex, the cocoon of safety in which they lay, Christian's mind churned in turmoil. He had to tell Ronnie. He had to.

Clearing his throat, he studied his lover—the thick

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eyelashes, the mussed hair, the scratchy growth that was beginning to fill in on Ronnie's chin and cheeks, which had caused Christian to writhe in delight when Ronnie had knelt between his legs earlier and tickled his balls with that scruff. "Ronnie," he whispered. Suddenly he felt cold, and he shivered against the covers.

The arm across his buttocks tightened. "What?"

For a moment, Christian didn't know how to proceed. He'd told no one on the team yet, not even the coach—the phone call had come in two days prior, and he'd been so wrapped up with the playoffs that he hadn't really had time to consider the offer. But lying here beside Ronnie, he already knew he'd take it. Best to just say it straight.

"I got an offer from the Blizzard."

Ronnie made no response; he didn't move, didn't even blink.

Christian cleared his throat again and explained, "The Bedford Blizzard?"

"I know who you mean."

The words were short, succinct, clipped almost. More like the Ronnie Christian had met at the start of the season and nothing at all like the man who had just made love to him moments ago.

Still, Christian soldiered on. "They want me to sign with them for next season. This is a great opportunity for me, Ronnie, you know that. Playing with them, I can get seen by AHL scouts, I can get picked up for the major leagues... I can go places."

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Now Ronnie turned toward him, but in the semi-darkness of the bedroom, his eyes were unreadable. All Christian saw were shadows obscuring his face, hiding his emotions. *Don't be mad*, he wanted to say, but that would sound stupid, wouldn't it? Why would Ronnie be *mad* that he wanted to play for another team? It wasn't as if they were more to each other than two teammates who got off together after the games. It wasn't as if they were in love.

At least, Ronnie had never said the word, and Christian would be damned if he said it first.

"Sounds like your mind's made up," Ronnie said softly.

Christian shrugged, a move that snuggled him closer to his friend. "It's a good opportunity," he said again. Then, tentatively, he asked, "What do you think?"

Ronnie stared at him, quiet, and Christian bit his lower lip to keep from saying anything else. Let Ronnie think, let him work it through in his mind. This didn't mean they were *over*, not *really*, but it did mean a drastic change in their relationship. If they *had* a relationship. While Christian played for the Rebels, it was convenient for them to be together. Coming over to Ronnie's place after practice or shacking up in a hotel room after an away game was easy—they played on the same team. They kept the same schedule.

But if what they had together were *real*, then they would make a long distance relationship work. Bedford was a few hours' away, granted, but it wasn't *that* far. If they needed each other. If they *wanted* things to work out.

After a lifetime, it seemed, Ronnie rolled over toward

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Christian and pressed his mouth to Christian's forehead in a platonic kiss. "You do what's best for you," he murmured.

Christian closed his eyes, disappointed in Ronnie's answer. What about doing what was best for *them*?

* * *

The third period passes in a blur. Christian is benched for most of it—the coach says he can't afford any more penalties, but Christian thinks it's more than that. From the player's box, he watches his teammates skate around the Rebels, the puck zooming from one end of the rink to the other without landing in either goal. His mind careens in much the same manner, swinging from, *What the fuck does Ronnie want anyway?*, to the melancholic, almost nostalgic notion that it'd be nice to catch up with him again, just like old times. By the time the buzzer sounds, he still hasn't decided what he's going to do. The team bus back to the hotel? Ronnie's truck? He almost hopes for a sudden death overtime to delay his decision.

But the score remains the same as it was at the end of the second period—five to two. A good game, Christian thinks as he skates out with the rest of his team to shake the other players' hands. He can be generous now because his team won. He lines up between two of his teammates, hand out, and waits as the Rebels skate down the line. It's a show of good sportsmanship, shaking hands after the game, but the first guy skips Christian's hand completely; the second hits him so hard, his palm stings. The third is Ronnie, who stops and takes Christian's hand in both his own.

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Christian raises his gaze to meet his old friend's, and for a moment, the world stops. All thought disappears beneath that crystalline stare, and Christian gasps like a fish out of water, unable to draw breath as long as Ronnie's watching. "Hey," Ronnie says softly.

"Hey." Christian mouths the word, and isn't sure it comes out loud enough for Ronnie to hear.

A faint smile tugs at Ronnie's lips. "Good game. You still got it, Magic."

In that instant, Christian knows he'll be skipping the team bus ride this evening.

Later, in the locker room, Christian is in the showers with shampoo running down his face when his roommate Burle takes the shower beside him. "Five to two," he says, turning on the spray. "How many of those were yours? Damn, Chris. You couldn't lose tonight."

With a laugh, Christian turns his face up into the hot water and lets it wash away the suds. "Tell the coach that. He blames me for the two they managed to score."

"He's just busting your balls," Burle tells him.

Christian drops his head and lets the water splatter the back of his neck as he wipes the soap from his eyes. Speaking of balls, from this position, he gets a good look at Burle's thick dick and low, hairy nuts without his roommate knowing. Too bad the guy is straight—a cock like that? Christian would love to make it stand up and salute. He's not into Burle, personally, but it's been too long since he was last with someone. Ronnie has a good size on him, as well.

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“Hey, Gordy. Listen.” Christian cuts off his shower and brushes the hair back from his face as he turns toward Burle. “I’m not going to ride back with the team, all right?”

Confusion clouds Burle’s face. “You mean to the hotel? Why not?”

“I’m meeting up with a friend.” Christian wipes excess water from his face and makes a conscious effort to keep his eyes above Burle’s waist. “This is my hometown, you know? So when I knew I’d be down here again, an old friend of mine called me up and asked if we couldn’t do something after the game. I’ll probably get in pretty late.”

“Your friend’s here now?” Burle asks. “Coach ain’t going to like that.”

“He doesn’t have to,” Christian mutters. “We’ll just get a bite to eat, catch up with each other, you know how it is. I’ll get him to drop me off at the hotel when we’re through.”

Burle frowns as if he thinks that’s a bad idea, but Christian isn’t asking his permission, he’s telling him what he’s going to do. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning,” Burle says. “If you miss the bus...”

Slapping Burle’s bare shoulder, Christian assures him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be back tonight.”

Though honestly? Christian isn’t so sure.

* * *

Christian stayed with the Rebels through the season, and acted as surprised as the rest of the team when his trade to the Blizzard was announced. Only Ronnie knew otherwise, but he

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didn't mention it, not to Christian or to the rest of the team. Up until their last game together, he acted as if it wouldn't happen, and Christian didn't bother to bring it up again. So this was where things ended between them? So be it.

It was one thing to turn away from his friend on the ice when others were watching—it was quite another to struggle not to think of him as he packed the last of his things into the trunk of his car. They had been so good together, Christian thought. What he'd felt between himself and Ronnie had been so... so *real*. Had he been the only one who felt that? Had all those evenings alone, all those touches, those kisses, had they meant *nothing* to Ronnie?

Christian didn't know. But damn it the hell, he needed to find out.

With the last bag secured in his car, he locked up the apartment where he'd been staying and tore out of the parking lot. He'd mail the key to the rental office once he got situated in Bedford. The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky, and he had a good four, five hours worth of driving ahead of him before he reached his new home, but he couldn't leave without saying goodbye.

The route to Ronnie's townhouse was a familiar one. Christian took the corners a little too fast, zooming through yellow lights and swerving around slower vehicles as if begging to get stopped. He'd relish a traffic cop at the moment—he needed something tangible to get angry at, somewhere to direct his emotion, before he reached Ronnie's. Anything to tamp down the feelings swirling inside him...

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Just his luck, no cop. He made it to Ronnie's without incident, and squealed to a stop in front of his friend's townhouse. The car door slammed behind him. With giant strides, he took the steps two at a time to the front door, where he leaned on the doorbell for a full thirty seconds before he attacked the door with a barrage of knocks. "Ronnie!" he shouted into the quiet afternoon. "Open the fuck up!"

No answer.

Christian knocked again, gently this time, as if that might coerce his friend to listen. The doorbell chimed as he prodded it, once, twice. He could hear it echo throughout the home. So this was it then, eh?

Fuck Ronnie.

Storming down the steps to his car, Christian slid behind the wheel, twisted the key in the ignition, and waited. He stared at the front door, willing it to open. He looked at each of the windows in turn—the three high circles in the garage door, the large bay window in the living room, the two smaller windows upstairs in the bedroom where he'd spent so many nights. He hated that he felt this way, this torn up and lost, this... this *alone*, about anyone. He was Magic, wasn't he? He wasn't supposed to be left hanging like this.

If only Ronnie had said *something* to indicate what they'd been to each other was magical, too.

Pissed—at Ronnie, mostly, but at himself as well, if he were honest, because he'd *let* himself get hung up on the guy, he'd *let* Ronnie in—Christian put the car into reverse and peeled out of the parking spot. He narrowly avoided hitting a

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car pulling into the lot behind him, and with a roar of his engine, he raced around the other vehicle to the exit. There he braked, briefly, before pulling out into the flow of traffic. He had to leave for Bedford—practice with his new teammates began first thing the following morning. He didn't have time for Ronnie, if the guy didn't even have time for him.

At the end of the block, he caught a red light. As he waited, he gunned the engine just to hear it tear into the stillness of the day. Fuck Ronnie, he thought, fiddling with the radio buttons. He wanted something hard and fast, a beat he could lose himself in. He had a long drive ahead...

The light changed. Before Christian could shoot through the intersection, he glanced over at the oncoming traffic and recognized Ronnie's truck. His foot slipped off the gas pedal as he watched Ronnie drive past. His former teammate looked straight ahead, as if he didn't see Christian's car. If he did, he ignored it.

The driver behind Christian hit his horn. That tinny sound made Ronnie look over—for one breathless moment, the two stared at each other, and the world seemed to hang in the balance.

Then the horn sounded again. Ronnie looked away, and the moment, if there had been one at all, was lost.

Christian stomped on the clutch to keep his car from sliding back. The light ahead had turned yellow—he didn't care. Shifting into first, he hit the gas and shot through the intersection. In his rearview mirror, he watched Ronnie's taillights flash, and his turn signal clicked on. If he did a U-

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turn in the middle of the road, if he made any move to follow, Christian would have pulled over to wait for him. They would've talked things through, sorted out their feelings, defined their relationship right there on the side of the road if necessary, anything to clear the air between them...

But no. Ronnie turned into his parking lot and disappeared from Christian's mirror. For the remainder of the trip out to Bedford, the cell phone that sat beside Christian on his passenger seat remained silent. Ronnie's number hasn't appeared on it since.

* * *

Christian lines up with the rest of his team outside the locker room, but as they file toward the exit and the bus beyond, he ducks through a service door. He knows the Coliseum inside and out, from his time with the Rebels. A few empty corridors later, he steps out onto the crowded thoroughfare and easily mixes in with the crowd. Only the heavy gym bag he carries over one shoulder makes him stand out, but no one notices and he slips through the turnstiles out into the night without getting stopped.

Outside he pauses to zip up his jacket. It's colder than he thought it'd be. Most of the crowd huddles in oversized parkas, wool caps, and thick gloves. He tugs on a pair of thin leather gloves, flexes his fingers in them to settle them right, then realizes he's dawdling. He should just get this over with already. What's Ronnie want with him, anyway?

Hefting his gym bag again, he cuts across the flow of the

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crowd to the small, private lot across the street where the players park. As he approaches, he notices the lot has emptied out—only a handful of vehicles remain. The coach's Beemer, a battered Toyota he thinks belongs to one of the referees, and Ronnie's pick-up truck. Christian doesn't see his old teammate inside the cab or standing by the driver's side door. Maybe he's not out of the locker room yet.

Coming up behind the truck, Christian deposits his bag in the bed. Then he walks around to the passenger side, hands shoved deep in his pockets to warm them up. And he sees Ronnie.

His former friend leans against the outside of the passenger side door, hands in his pockets, feet crossed. An easy stance that matches the lack of emotion on his gruff face. His hair, dark and damp, falls around his brow, combed down after the shower but already the ends are beginning to stand up on their own, itching to fly off in different directions. His unshaven cheeks look thinner than Christian remembers, and his eyes much more piercing. For a long moment, the two men study each other, neither daring to be the first to speak.

Finally Christian clears his throat. "Hey. I got your note."

Well, yeah, no shit. Ronnie handed it to him, of *course* he got it. But what else is there to say?

Ronnie nods. Clearing his throat, he rubs at his nose, his fingers red and chapped from the weather. So he's been out here awhile then, Christian suspects. "You played real good tonight."

Christian sighs. He skipped the bus to hear that? "Ronnie,

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what are we doing here?"

"You tell me," Ronnie answers. *Damn* him.

Closing his eyes, Christian pinches the bridge of his nose in frustration. "It's been what, three months? You haven't written to me, you haven't called—"

"You haven't called *me* either," Ronnie points out.

"Why does it have to be me? Why can't you pick up the phone for once in your life? You saw me leaving your place, I *know* you did, but you didn't even turn around to stop me. I thought..."

He shakes his head, angry. At Ronnie, yes, but mostly at himself. For letting Ronnie get to him like this. He should've torn that note up into a million little pieces and thrown it away. He should've balled it up and tossed it out onto the ice, where the other guys could've skated it into oblivion.

In a quiet voice, he admits, "I thought I was over you, damn it."

Color rises to Ronnie's cheeks, twin spots of red just under his eyes that make the rest of his skin look drawn and pale. "Is that why *you* never called? Because we're over?"

Christian shrugged. "It's been three months..."

"When did I ever say we were through?" Ronnie snaps.

"You didn't have to say it. Jesus, Ronnie. When I told you I was thinking of going with the Blizzard, you kept quiet. When I told you I was leaving, you never said a word. So how am I supposed to know we even *had* something between us if you don't bother telling me in the first place?"

"I told you." Ronnie steps away from the truck, toward

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Christian. “Every time we were together, I told you how I felt. You just didn’t listen.”

Christian struggles not to give ground. “You never said...”

A look of consternation crosses Ronnie’s face. “I didn’t think I had to say the words out loud.”

Confused, Christian starts, “Then how—”

“Listen.”

Grabbing the front of Christian’s jacket, Ronnie pulls him close. Before Christian can react, he feels the sweet press of lips on his, a mouth he hadn’t thought he’d taste again, and his eyes slip shut as Ronnie kisses him. Christian gives into the moment, the man—for the first time, he hears the unspoken words hidden in the velvet crush, the emotions Ronnie never spoke of, the feelings for him that had always lingered in every touch, every kiss, every time they made love. Ronnie licks into him, possessive; Christian melts beneath the kiss. This is definitely worth missing the bus, he decides.

Against his mouth, Ronnie murmurs, “Stay with me tonight.”

For once, Christian hears the words beneath the request. *Love me, and let me love you.* His response is another kiss, deeper than the one before, and he eases his arms around Ronnie’s waist to hold him tight. The warmth between them keeps the chill of the night at bay.

J. M. SNYDER

An author of gay erotic/romantic fiction, J. M. Snyder began self-publishing gay erotic fiction in 2002. Since then, Snyder has released several books in trade paperback format and has begun exploring the world of e-publishing, working with both Aspen Mountain Press and Amber Quill Press. Snyder's highly erotic short gay fiction has been published online at *Ruthie's Club*, *Tit-Elation*, *Sticky Pen*, and Amazon Shorts, as well as in anthologies by Aspen Mountain Press and Cleis Press. A full bibliography, as well as free fiction, book excerpts, purchasing information, and exclusive contests, can be found at:

<http://jmsnyder.net>

* * *

**Don't miss *On Company Time*, by J. M. Snyder,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Jimmy's job in customer service is just a paycheck, in his eyes. But his boss Debbie wishes he were more of a "people person" and more enthusiastic about coming to work. To improve his skills, she schedules him to attend a two-day, out-of-town workshop Jimmy's already dreading.

Then he discovers Scott Raines will be tagging along.

Jimmy's had a fierce crush on Scott, who works in sales, since his first day at the office. The man is gorgeous and funny and so damn intimidating, Jimmy hasn't yet screwed up the courage to ask him out. Maybe the workshop will provide the perfect opportunity to remedy that. They'll travel together, share a hotel room, and who knows where things may lead? Jimmy might yet get to make his move.

Unless Scott makes one first...

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