

Stephani Hecht
**OFFSIDE
PASS**

At one time Devon Canton and his two brothers were the talk of the NHL. Set to become the next superstars of the sport, they had lucrative contracts and numerous endorsements within their reach. Then the bottom fell out of their world and everything changed. Now struggling to make ends meet, they have been reduced to playing in the minor leagues. To make matters worse they all end up playing for the same dead-end team, the Battle Creek Hawks. Not only hasn't the team won a game in three years, but their arena is falling down around them and in danger of being condemned. Then Devon and his brothers hit a new low when they get thrown out of their first game for getting into a knockdown, drag out brawl...with each other.

Battle Creek Times sports reporter, Saul Davis, knows the instant he sees the three brothers beating the snot out of each other that he has a story. It only takes a little digging to find out how far the once promising hockey players have fallen. Intrigued, Saul tries to pin down Devon for an interview, only to be rudely rebuked. Unfortunately, for Devon, that only makes Saul more determined to get to the bottom of the story.

Then Saul finds out a shocking revelation about the brooding hockey player that could not only destroy the man's reputation, but also ruin any chance of him ever playing on the professional level again. Saul knows he should go ahead and run the story, but as he finds himself growing closer to Devon, he discovers that his feelings for the other man are too strong to ignore. Then when a rival reporter finds out Devon's secret, Saul realizes that he may have to make the most painful decision of all—his own journalism career or Devon.

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Offside Pass
Blue Line Hockey Book One

By

Stephani Hecht

Dedication

To all the brave teens out there who aren't afraid to stand up for the right to be themselves.

Chapter One

There could be no other way to look at it—*Bran Flake* arena was the worst pit he'd even laid eyes on. Since Devon suffered a lot of pits, that didn't bode well for his new hockey career.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Chad exclaimed from the passenger seat.

Devon could pretend not to hear the question. Lord knows the situation would be believable given the engine on the ten-year old Ford truck sounded louder than a jet engine. Devon just knew that would mean he'd have to listen to Chad's yammering later on though, so he decided they may as well rip the band aid off the wound and get it over with.

“Nope, this is it.”

Chad took off his knit hat, his brown hair spiking up in unruly cowlicks. He made a haphazard attempt to tame them as he blinked stupidly at the dump that housed their new team. He swallowed hard before glancing back at Devon. “This is bad. I mean really,

really bad. Honestly, how much lower can we sink?”

Devon nodded, agreeing with his twin. They’d definitely hit rock bottom, then had somehow managed to dig down even deeper. The arena—and even calling that was a stretch—looked as if it’d been constructed in the fifties and never had any maintenance since.

The bleak gray exterior melted into the equally dreary winter Battle Creek skyline. The parking lot appeared to have been plowed with a halfhearted attempt, resulting in big piles of dirty snow littering the cracked asphalt. Several of the parking lot lights were broken.

The sign, naming the arena, was only half-lit, making it look as if the name were really *AKEREN*. One of the *Es* flickered widely, making it a real possibility the sign would soon read, *AK REN*.

Devon sighed. This is so not how he’d imagined his life going. He parked the car, then turned around and hit the lump perched on the narrow backseat of the truck. “Wake up. We’re here.”

Trey sat up, the coat he’d been using as a blanket falling. “Where?”

Devon and Chad exchanged eye rolls. Sometimes their younger brother acted every part of his blond hair,

blue eyes. Devon forced down his irritation and patiently explained the maddeningly obvious. “We’re at our new arena.”

“It doesn’t look so new to me. In fact, I’d say it was a shit hole.” Trey blinked at the decrepit building.

“It’s a good thing he has his looks to his advantage,” Chad quipped.

Yeah, Trey did have his sweet as apple pie smile and dimples to fall back on. While he’d taken after their mother’s side of the family and got all the wholesome features, Devon and Chad inherited their father’s dark hair and more rugged appearance. The only trait they shared with Trey was the blue eyes.

“What did we ever do to deserve this,” Trey grumbled as he picked his coat up and shrugged it on.

Devon could argue what *hadn’t* they done to put themselves in this position, but he wisely kept his trap shut. Besides, despite shooting off a dumb question now and again, Trey really did have a brain in his head. So he didn’t need a replay of all the fuck ups they’d committed in the past few years.

They all got out, the cold wind hitting Devon like a slap to the face. He quickly grabbed his gear from the bed of the truck, his brothers doing likewise. Trey’s

goalie pads still were blue and white from the last team he'd played for. Yet another painful reminder of what they'd lost. Just seeing them made Devon's gut twist with regret.

"Let's get this over with," Devon said.

"Fine, but if any of them fire off one comment, I'm shoving my fist down their throats," Trey threatened darkly as they started to slosh through the muck.

"No, we'll just smile and take it. We don't want to lose this opportunity, too," Devon ordered.

"What opportunity? This team is in last place. Shit, they haven't even won a game in three years. What could they possibly threaten us that would be worse than this?" Chad asked.

"Okay, so maybe the Battle Creek Hawks aren't the best team, but they're still considered professional and they're paying us," Devon reasoned.

Trey tossed him a disbelieving glare. "You may call it a paycheck. I call it an insult."

Devon decided to keep that one uncommented on as well. They reached the player's entrance and Devon tugged on the door, only to find it...locked? He frowned as he tugged on it a few more times.

"Are we sure we have the right day?" Chad reached

around and tried the door himself.

“Well, I don’t know. My day planner is so full of entries there could have been a mess up,” Devon returned with heavy sarcasm.

“Maybe we should knock or just go through the front?” Trey suggested.

Before they could dwell over either option, the door popped open to reveal a half-dressed man.

Usually, Devon would be all up for a partially nude guy, but this time he forced himself to bite his bottom lip to hide back his expression of revulsion. The man looked to be around his late thirties with a scraggly brown beard and messed up shoulder length hair. He had on underwear, a chest protector and nothing else. He scratched at his taut gut as he narrowed his blood-shot, brown eyes.

“Why are you pounding on our fucking door?”

The brothers exchanged looks of disbelief, before Devon answered, “We’re the Cantons. It’s our first day.”

The man appraised them carefully before he shrugged and—oh, God—turned and gave them his back. Trey let out a soft sound of dismay while Chad muttered what sounded like a prayer of some sort. Devon shrugged before he led the way in.

The inside of the building appeared to be in no better condition. The long, dim hallway boasted of a threadbare carpet and stained, white brick walls. Several of the halogen lights flickered and hummed noisily. Off in the distance, muffled voices came from behind a locker room door that had the Hawk's mascot painted on it.

As the man put a hand on the door to open it, Devon made a hasty attempt at being polite. "I'm Devon and these are my brothers, Trey and Chad."

The stranger turned and snorted. "I know who you are." He then presented them with his back again as he pushed open the door.

Devon had often seen in movies or read in books situations where a character would enter a room and all conversation ended. Up until that moment, he'd never experienced it. The entire locker room fell dead quiet as every eye turned in their direction. Had there been a record playing, it would have even scratched to a stop as a spotlight swung in their direction.

The silence continued to stretch as the brothers found themselves under the scrutiny of over twenty players. Many of whom were in various stages of getting dressed into their gear. The only sound punctuating the dear-

God-let-it-end quiet was a constant *drip, drip, drip* from a leak nearby.

“Who do you think they’re staring at? The two gays or the drunk?” Chad asked in a loud stage whisper.

A muffled laugh sounded from the right of the room, but Devon couldn’t discern who it came from since everyone kept on a serious expression.

“Boy, how much lower can we sink?” A blond sitting off to the left asked, nearly echoing Chad’s earlier question.

“Excuse me?” Trey returned, drawling the words out slowly.

The blond stood and gave them a disgusted once over. “We’re already in last place and now we have to put up with the three biggest losers in the league and no, I’m not saying that because two of you are gay either.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Chad challenged.

Devon could tell by the tense way he was holding himself that Chad was about to attack. He put a calming hand on his brother’s chest. If Chad got into a row, then he would have to get involved, which would mean Trey would enter the scuffle and then there would be a huge mess. Judging by the way the battered lockers were already leaning to the front, they wouldn’t be able to

handle a full-team fight without tipping over.

The blond somehow managed to smirk around a fat upper lip, showing that mouthing off was probably a hobby he carried onto the ice. “My name is Kip Cooper.”

Trey let out a short burst of laughter. “Did you just say your name is *Kip*?”

“Yeah, I did...*Trey*,” Kip fired back.

Now Chad laughed, earning a glowering look from Trey.

That still didn't mean if the fists went flying Trey and Chad wouldn't have each other's backs. It just meant Chad loved to make fun of Trey's name. One of his favorite sports was to find new and inventive ways to make fun of it. This had caused Devon more than one headache. Sometimes dealing with his two siblings seemed worse than if he had a pair of toddlers.

“Listen, none of us are happy that the league stuck us with one of you, let alone all three of you losers,” Kip returned.

“Why? Is your goalie beside himself with worry that Trey is going to take his spot?” Devon jerked his head in the direction of the team's goaltender, who was currently sleeping on a corner bench.

“Rich is great between the pipes,” Kip boasted, but his tone had a heavy dose of doubt in it.

“Sure, just so long as he manages to stay awake for three periods,” Devon drawled.

He’d done enough research of their new team to know all about the bad press the goalie received for letting in soft shots. Devon watched a few archived games and quickly surmised that was due to the fact the guy’s mind tended to wander during games—an unforgivable sin that Trey would never commit, despite all his other flaws.

“Maybe you don’t need another forward who can score?” Devon pressed, knowing full damn well the team’s point average was laughable.

“And you think you can do better?” Kip challenged.

“Yes,” Devon replied bluntly, because he had absolutely no doubt of the fact.

When several members of the team grumbled, Devon continued, “Maybe your defense is so tight, they don’t need another enforcer?”

He held back a smile as he recalled a recent sport page article that had likened the Hawk’s defensive line to a group of erratic puppies. While Chad may have a temper, he also knew how to use that aggression on the

ice. His only flaw was knowing the proper time to shut it off. Still, the way Devon saw it, a few penalty minutes would be well worth the current alternative.

“So, what is it that you’re really afraid of?” Devon badgered, with a heavy dose of sarcasm. “That you’ll start losing? Or that you’ll end up in last place?”

Kip pressed his lips together. “Is that supposed to be funny? You already know that we’re in last place.”

“How about I do one better and point out that you haven’t won a game in three years. So, the way I see it, even with our bad reputations, you have nothing to lose by us coming onto your roster. If anything, you should be thanking us for fucking up and ending up in this league.”

Having had his say, Devon brushed by Kip and walked over to an empty bench, Trey and Chad following.

As they set down their gear and started to get undressed, Trey whispered, “Do you think you got through to them?”

Devon took one look at the sea of angry faces and shook his head. “No way in hell.”

Chapter Two

This had to be the worst game of his ever-living-fucking-life and, since it was only the first period, that said a lot.

Devon took in a gasping breath as he glanced up at the scoreboard. Even though the score read 0-0, he knew the game already had been lost. The Hawks played with no discipline, each guy looking out for only himself and wanting to one-up each other. Several times Devon had been wide open and yet none of the other players would pass him the puck.

At first, he'd assumed it was because of the hostility he'd felt in the locker room, but soon he realized they refused to pass to anyone, period. When yet another player got his pocket picked, making the Hawks lose possession, Devon looked over to the bench to see the coach's reaction.

The heavyset man had his hands shoved in the front

pockets of his cheap, gray suit. He ran a hand over his thinning brown hair as he chewed furiously on his gum, almost as if he had a personal vendetta against Dentyne or something. Other than that, he showed no reaction.

Devon skated to the bench for his shift change. As he swung a leg over the boards, he asked, “Aren’t you going to say anything to them?”

The coach shrugged. “About what?”

“Their skating is sloppy, the defense looks as if they’re working for the other team and I’m pretty sure you’re backup goalie is sleeping again.” Devon glanced back and confirmed that the Trey’s fellow goalie was indeed snoring away.

“What’s the biggie? Trey is doing a good job,” the coach dismissed him.

Trey was doing much better than just good. He’d been standing on his head since the puck dropped. If it hadn’t been for him, the score would already be way out of hand. Devon realized there was only so much his brother could do though, and eventually, the other team would get a goal.

Once again, Devon wondered just how much *coaching* their coach actually did. For all his research, all Devon had been able to learn about the man was he

once coached college hockey before he'd moved on to their league. His win record hadn't been impressive in either setting. While his name was David Howe, he wasn't related in any way to the legendary Gordie Howe, which was a good thing for Gordie's relatives, since they would have been ashamed to have to claim any ownership of David or his piss-poor leadership skills.

Even though they'd had a couple practices and a morning skate since joining the team, they hadn't even met the man until the game. Even then, all he'd done was grunt out that Trey would be starting in net. Since then, he'd left it up to his assistant coaches to run the show.

All too soon, it was time for Devon's line to go back on the ice. He hopped over the boards, exchanging grim expressions with Chad. At least they were on the ice at the same time. That way Devon knew he had one teammate looking out for him.

Devon took the faceoff, winning it easily. He passed the puck to Chad who shot it back once Devon was clear. Devon saw an opening and took it. He found himself on a clear breakaway, just the opposition goaltender standing in his way. Devon fired off a hard

slap shot, the puck zinging over the goalie's left shoulder.

Even before the red light went on, Devon had his hands in the air. The crowd sat in stunned silence for a few beats before they broke out into cheers. It may have sounded pitiful, given the arena wasn't even a quarter full, but Devon would still take it. Chad rushed over and gave him a huge hug.

"You showed them," Chad praised.

"Yeah, it's not over yet. We're still going to lose this game."

"Oh, no doubt about it. But at least we scored first."

Sure enough, the next play signaled the beginning of Devon's dire predictions. One of the Hawks lost control of the puck and a player from the other team skated in on a breakaway. Trey made a spectacular butterfly save, but lost control of the puck on the rebound and the other team scored.

Devon skated over to the bench and leaned against the boards as he waited for the opposition to finish congratulating each other. The whoops were so loud he almost missed the insult Chad tossed to Trey.

"Way to control the rebound, asshat."

"Oh, fuck. This is not good," Devon muttered.

Trey flipped up his goalie mask to glare at Chad. “Maybe my defense should have kept the dick out of my zone.”

The dick in question stopped his celebration long enough to demand, “What did you just call me?”

Trey and Chad ignored him, instead choosing to continue glowering at each other.

“Are you questioning my defense skills?” Chad pointed a mock-gloved hand to his chest.

Trey let out a humorless laugh. “I’m not questioning. I’m point blank telling you they suck.”

The coach rushed down the bench until he was standing behind Devon. “What are those two doing?”

“Insulting each other,” Devon replied in his best *duh* voice.

“Well, tell them to stop it.”

Devon turned to give Coach Howe his best are-you-kidding stare. “I’ve been telling those two naughty rascallions to behave for years now. What makes you think they’ll start listening today?”

Howe narrowed his eyes, “Are you being smart with me?”

“Yeah,” Devon replied bluntly. “Seriously though, they’re not going to care what I say to them. Why do

you think we're here? Because we actually listened to our coaches and behaved ourselves?"

Letting the sarcasm linger heavily in the air, he turned his attention back to his brothers. The argument had already escalated to the point where both teams had stopped what they were doing to watch. Some of them wore stupefied expressions while the rest grinned.

"It's just like the *Lennox* incident. You can't man up and admit it when you fuck up," Chad yelled at Trey.

"Ooooooh..." Devon winced. "This is not going to go down pretty. Trey is still very sensitive about that topic."

As soon as those words left Devon's mouth, Trey dropped his stick and gloves and charged Chad. The crowd roared as Chad tossed down his own gloves and took Trey on. Soon the brothers were exchanging blows.

Howe gave Devon a shove. "Do something!"

Devon shrugged. "Why? They'll eventually tire themselves out."

The refs looked at each other, clearly at a loss for what to do. While they'd must have seen hundreds of fights, Devon was willing to bet this was the first time where the combatants came from the same team.

Chad swung hard, clipping Trey in the mouth and drawing blood. As soon as the crimson hit the ice, the

crowd cheered louder.

“Bloodthirsty, little, leeches,” Devon tsked.

Howe grabbed a good handful of Devon’s jersey. “They’re your brothers. Make them stop.”

Devon held up one hand in an exasperated gesture. “They’re your players. *You* make them stop.”

When Howe just glared in return, Devon let out a huge sigh and thrust his stick into another player’s hands. “Fine, I’ll go over and tell them to behave themselves.”

* * * *

Saul watched in stunned disbelief as the two players continued to beat each other. While what he knew about hockey could fill a thimble, even he could tell by the red-colored jerseys that they were on the same team. He elbowed a fellow reporter. “Who are they?”

The reporter stopped cheering long enough to shake his head at Saul. “You’re kidding, right?”

Saul fought back a wince as he realized the question had shown just how green he was when it came to his new job. He gave a helpless shrug and the other man had mercy on him.

“The pair going at it are two of the three Canton brothers.”

“There’s three of them?” Saul cringed as the goalie took a blow to the mouth, blood gushing from the wound.

“Yeah, Trey, the goalie, is the youngest and the defenseman is Chad.” The reporter providing the information looked to be only a few years older than Saul. Going by the expensive black leather coat he wore and how his blond hair was styled perfectly, he was way more successful than Saul though.

Saul self-consciously smoothed down his own unruly, dirty brown hair. With his battered loafers and threadbare green jacket, never had he felt more out of his league. For the millionth time he questioned his decision to move to Battle Creek. Maybe he should have just stayed in his small hometown and got a job at the auto factory like all his other classmates.

“You see the guy arguing with the coach?”

Saul glanced over in the direction his fellow reporter indicated and spotted a tall man, leaning against the boards. He couldn’t make out the man’s features due to the thick, plastic shield covering half the guy’s face.

“That’s the third brother, Devon. He’s one of the

best offensive men I've ever seen," the reported informed, his voice laced with sadness.

Devon finally thrust his stick at another player and skated over to the fighters.

"If he's so good, then why is he playing for the Hawks?" Saul asked.

The other reported smirked. "You really don't know anything about the sport, do you? How did you get this assignment?"

Like Saul could very well admit that he'd gone into the small, upstart newspaper and lied his ass off. As far as his new boss was concerned, Saul knew everything there was to know about all sports. In truth, the closest he'd ever got to any playing field had been one miserable semester in high school when he'd been forced into PE class.

"I can be convincing if I have to," Saul half-admitted.

The man laughed and held out a hand. "My name is Bobby Reid."

As they shook, Saul glanced at Bobby's press pass, noting he was from one of the biggest newspapers in Michigan. "I'm Saul Davis."

"Well, Saul, let me give you a quick course in

Canton Brother history.”

Saul nodded eagerly, glad he'd have something to write about besides a fight.

“At one time, the brothers were primed to be the next best thing in the NHL. They had it all, contracts, endorsement deals, there was even talk of them being on the Olympic team.”

“What happened?” Saul asked as he watched Devon skate closer to Trey and Chad.

Some words were exchanged before Chad paused in his fighting long enough to give Devon a firm shove. Devon tensed, but didn't strike back.

Bobby continued his story, “No one knows for sure. They just seemed to cave under the pressure. They would miss interviews, be late for practices, not perform when it came to game time. Plus, there was the big scandal.”

Devon tried to skate in again, this time Trey was the one who pushed him away.

“What scandal was that?” Saul queried as he watched Devon yelling. Since they were so far away, he couldn't make out what exactly was being said, but given the body posture, it wasn't friendly.

“Two of them, Trey and Devon, are gay.”

Devon got shoved again. This time he didn't take it so well. He threw down his gloves and entered the scuffle. The crowd screamed louder while the other team just stood around, as if at a complete loss for what to do. The refs threw their hands up in defeat and just let the brothers go at it. The Hawks stood around as well, some of them cheering the brothers on.

“So is that how they ended up here?” Saul asked, his gut clenching in sympathy. It was hard enough to come out, but to have to do so in a very public way must have been doubly as difficult.

Bobby wrinkled his nose. “Nah, they were such good players, most were willing to overlook the whole gay issue. Sure, they lost some endorsement deals and had to put up with a lot of ribbing, but that was the extent of it.”

A collective *ooooh* went through the stands when Devon clipped Chad on the jaw, sending the defenseman crashing to the ice.

“So it was the other stuff that made them end up here,” Saul surmised.

“Yeah, no team is going to put up with that.” Bobby tilted his head in the direction of the ice. “Especially when their game began to slip.”

“I wonder what could have happened that would have made all three of them lose it like that,” Saul mused.

A thrill of excitement went through him as he realized there could be a real story behind this. One that would get him the recognition and respect that all reporters craved but rarely achieved.

The refs finally pulled the brothers apart. They’d all lost their helmets in the scuffle and Saul noted two of the brothers had brown hair while the goalie was blond. One of the players from the opposite team sneered something. Saul didn’t have to be that good of lip reader to figure it out either.

“Crap, please tell me he called Devon a nag, bag or something else along those lines,” Bobby groaned.

“Nope, he said exactly what you think he did.” Saul felt a heat rush to his face, angered by the homophobic slur.

All three of the brothers took offense and attacked, surprising Saul since they’d been trying to rip each other apart moments before. Two of the homophobe’s buddies joined in and, before the refs could intervene, they had a six-man brawl on their hands.

It took another five minutes for the fight to be broken

up. In the end, all three of the brothers were escorted off the ice. The exit happened to be near Saul's seat so he got a real good look at Devon as he skated by.

Sweat clung to his dark hair, making several stray strands stick to his tanned face. Intense blue eyes danced in laughter at some private joke he only seemed privy to. A small cut marred his right brow, a thin tickle of blood trailing down his defined jaw line. Instead of distracting from his good looks, it only served to make him more attractive in a rugged way.

Saul ran his tongue over his lips, his body tightening in response to the strangely erotic image in front of him. Never before had he been drawn to the rough, caveman types, yet he started to grow hard as he continued to study the hockey player.

Then it happened, Devon turned his head and their gazes locked. A small sound burst past Saul's lips as he found himself frozen in place. Devon's gaze locked him immobile better than any chains or cuffs could ever have.

Devon shot off a cocky, half-grin and Saul found himself echoing the gesture. A tingling sensation traveled up his spine as he realized that he was going to enjoy pursuing this story—in more ways than one.

Chapter Three

Even though the game continued after the refs ejected the brothers, Saul left the stands and took up position in front of the Hawk's locker room.

As he waited, he surveyed the old, crumbling building, wondering how it had managed to avoid being condemned. Even from his standpoint, he could detect traces of mold growing in several crevices and the ceiling seemed in danger of caving in.

He wondered what Devon thought of his new home rink. Did he mourn the loss of the high-tech state of the art arenas of his past? Or did he not notice little things like fungus and asbestos?

The door finally opened as Trey and Chad walked out. Saul ignored them, even though he could have very well shot his questions their way. Instead, he waited for the bigger target. A few seconds later, he was rewarded when Devon came out.

Devon now wore a pair of gray sweats and a white t-shirt that clung to his hot-as-hell chest. Saul got so caught up in drooling over those pecs, he almost forgot his intentions until Devon had nearly walked by.

“Mr. Canton, I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for me,” Saul blurted, his voice carrying loud down the hallway.

Devon stopped, then turned around. Unfortunately, so did his brothers. Trey let out a snicker. “Did he just call you *Mr. Canton*?”

Saul could feel an embarrassed flush spread over his cheeks. At the same time, he had to resist the urge to throw a rude gesture at the goalie. What did the jerk expect? For Saul to pop off a *hey you*? Devon smiled, although his gaze remained guarded, as if he were only stopping to humor Saul.

“Why don’t you guys go to the truck? I’ll be there in a second,” Devon called to his siblings.

“Are you sure?” Chad asked, his eyes narrowing into slits as he looked at Saul as if he was a demented cobra or something.

“Yeah, he’s just a puny thing.” Devon gave Saul a dismissive once over. “I can handle him on my own.”

Saul opened his mouth to protest only to have an

outraged squeak come out. *Way to show off your un-puny-ness, jackass!* He wanted to kick himself in the rear, then find a hole to crawl into.

Trey and Chad still hesitated for a moment before they gave curt nods and left. The way they so obviously distrusted someone from the press intrigued Saul further. Only somebody with a big secret would act that way. He mulled over what it possibly could be in his mind for several beats before he realized that he and Devon were now alone. The hockey player seemed to be less than pleased with it, too.

Devon had a heavy bag slung over his shoulder, but that didn't prevent him from moving fast. Before Saul knew it, he found his back pressed against the cool, brick wall as Devon advanced on him.

“I want you to get one thing through that pretty head of yours,” Devon said in a low threatening voice.

Did he just say pretty? No! You need to focus on other things, idiot. Like the fact that a very, muscular, angry man looks ready to use you as his own private voodoo doll.

Devon continued his commands, “You’re going to leave me and my brothers alone. We have no interest in making any comments and we sure as hell don’t want to

be in any fucking newspaper.”

Saul swallowed hard as he realized he just might have stepped into a huge pile of trouble.

* * * *

Damn, did he have to be so cute? Devon asked that question to himself for the dozenth time as he glared down at the reporter.

He would be lying to himself if he didn't say he'd felt an instant attraction to the other man. As soon as he'd spotted the thin, yet cute guy with slightly messy, light brown hair and big, brown eyes in the stands, Devon had wanted him. Then he'd spotted the press pass clipped to the man's shirt and that attraction had vanished.

Well...maybe it had almost, nearly vanished.

As Devon glared down at the smaller man, he couldn't help but notice how sweet his slightly pouty lips looked, or the fact the reporter smelled so damn nice. Even above the musty rank that saturated the entire arena, Devon could detect the scent of sandalwood coming from the reporter.

He spotted the press pass, noting the man's name.

“Saul, is it?”

Saul nodded, his tongue making a nervous pass over his way-too-kissable lips. “Really, all I wanted was to ask a few questions. I promise not to take up too much of your time.”

A flare of anger went through Devon. Was it really too much to ask to be left alone? He’d hoped that once they’d landed in this shithole they’d have at least that. Now some hot as hell man had to barge in and ruin even that.

“And I told you...no comment.” Devon turned and started to walk down the corridor.

“I know how it feels. The fear of being found out. To have to hide who you are because you know that they won’t accept you,” Saul called after him.

Devon stopped in his tracks, fury rolling over his body. Just when he thought the punk couldn’t sink any lower. He spun around so he could face off against the jerk. “You just did not pull the I’m-gay-too card on me. What, do you think? That it’ll make me feel closer to you and then I’ll share all my secrets?”

Saul’s doe eyes grew wide as he frantically shook his head. “No, I would never do that. I just...”

When he trailed off and didn’t seemed inclined to

finish, Devon filled in the blanks. “You just saw a way in and decided to take advantage of it.”

“That’s not it at all, I swear. I just thought you would like to know that you’re not so alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Devon seethed.

“No, you have your brothers. I have to wonder though.”

Devon cocked his head to the side, wondering what it was about Saul that made him want to strangle and kiss the man at the same time. “Wonder what?”

“If that’s enough.”

“Even if it wasn’t, the last one I would turn to would be a reporter. Gay or not, I have no fucking use for you.”

He spun around, almost taking Saul out with his hockey bag. As he walked away, he could hear Saul calling out to him again. This time Devon didn’t bother to look back.

* * * *

“When are you three going to grow up? Honestly, the whole Peter Pan gig grew old three years ago.”

Devon winced, both from his sister-in-law’s lecture and from the peroxide she dabbed on the cut above his

eye. He glanced up into her blue-eyes that were full of anger and a bit of sadness, too.

“Chad and Trey started it,” he defended, knowing how lame his argument sounded.

She tossed the rag at his chest, the cloth leaving behind a wet spot on his t-shirt. “And as usual you just had to help them finish it. Did it ever occur to you that maybe you should try to talk them down instead of joining them in their juvenile behavior? You are the oldest after all.”

Devon glanced over at Chad and Trey for help, only to find they’d both suddenly become very interested in the red checked tablecloth. Damn, cowards. Neither one of them could ever stand up to Niki’s fury.

“I’m only ten minutes older than Chad. I don’t see how that should count,” he pointed out.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Maybe I should have specified that you’re older than them *emotionally*.”

“Ouch, is that any way to talk about your husband?”

“I love Chad more than anything, but I also know what he’s like.” She pulled out a chair and sat heavily in it, suddenly looking so much older than her twenty-five years.

As he stared at her, Devon couldn’t fight back the

guilt that threatened to crush him. Just a few years ago, Niki had been so young and vivacious. Now she looked tired and stressed all the time. Her long, brown hair pulled back into a sloppy ponytail, bags under her once bright eyes and her nails gnawed down from her chewing on them all the time.

He'd done that. Well, he and his brothers. Once Niki had married Chad, she'd never looked back. Not even when the three of them had lost it all. She'd always been their biggest supporter.

His gaze swept over the tiny home. It had cracked windows, the seals so old the winter air leaked easily in. Yellowed, ass-ugly flowered wallpaper covered the walls and stains speckled the linoleum floor.

All the money they'd earned from their all-too-brief NHL career had gone to pay for their mother's care. After their father's death, there had been no insurance, so when she'd become sick with ovarian cancer, it had fallen on her sons to pay for her huge pile of medical bills. By the time she'd finally succumbed to the disease, their careers had bottomed out and they'd just had enough left to bury her.

That meant when they made the move to Battle Creek, they had to scramble to find a place to live,

which resulted in the married couple living in a rundown house while Devon and Trey resided in separate, but equally crappy apartments.

The only reason Chad had been able to afford the dump was due of the added income Niki made as an RN.

“I’m sorry,” Devon said as he reached out and grabbed her hand.

“I am, too, babe” Chad added.

“You promised no more stupid incidents,” she rasped, tears building in her eyes.

Devon wanted to kick his own ass at that point. He didn’t care for many people, but she was one them. He could see his guilt echoed in Chad and Trey’s expressions. Trey even went so far as to nibble on his bottom lip—a nervous habit he’d given up years ago.

“Don’t blame them, Niki. I lost my temper first,” Trey admitted.

Niki looked over at him before she let out a defeated groan. “Damn it, you asshole. I can never stay mad at you. Especially when you give me that kind of look.”

Trey lowered his gaze. “You should be mad at me. All of you should. If I hadn’t lost my temper, then the fight never would have happened. Now we’ll probably get kicked off this team, too.”

“I seriously doubt that. Even at our worst, they need us more than we need them,” Chad grunted.

Devon nodded, even though inside he was battling his own doubts—there were only so many more times they could fuck up. If they lost this, the only thing left would be having to go out and find jobs in the real world. Since all they were qualified for was hockey, that would mean something in construction or a factory. They’d been drafted fresh out of high school, so they didn’t even have a college degree to fall back on.

“I keep fucking things up for us,” Trey continued. “I’m just like *him*.”

Trey didn’t need to specify who he spoke of since that bastard was never far from any of their minds. He lurked in the back of each of their subconscious, kind of like a monster in the form of a human.

Niki let out soft sob before she jumped up and rushed over to Trey. Wrapping him in a hug, she placed a kiss to the top of his head. “You’re nothing like your father. He was heartless, evil and terrible, none of which you are.”

“Then why can’t I keep my temper in check? No matter how hard I try, I always fly off the handle when things don’t go my way,” Trey demanded as he

snuggled into her embrace.

Chad and Devon exchanged worried glances. The only thing worse than an angry Trey was a depressed one, and that looked like the direction he was headed. Not that Devon could blame the guy for getting down from time to time. As a kid, Trey had it worse than all of them. Then there had been that one night where everything had gone to hell. Devon didn't think he'd ever be able to forgive himself for not getting there in time to save Trey from what had gone down then.

"We all lost our heads tonight at the game. Not just you," Devon said.

"Especially after what that asshole called you," Chad added, his face tight with anger.

Devon stood and put a hand on Trey's shoulder. "Come on, let me drive you back to your place and you can get some sleep. We have an early practice tomorrow and a bus ride after that. We'll make it up to the team at the next game."

"Who are we playing?" Trey asked as he pulled free of Niki's embrace.

"The Ice Caps and their loss record is nearly as bad as ours. Although, I heard their ice is nicer." Devon grabbed his coat from the back of the chair and pulled it

on, wincing when the movement pulled at an old rib injury.

“A bum’s cardboard box would be nicer than *Bran Flake* arena,” Trey snorted as he got up and shrugged on his own coat.

“Please tell me that is not the name of your team’s rink,” Niki exclaimed before she laughed.

“Well, we all know that Battle Creek is the cereal capital of the world,” Devon quipped. The two large factories in the city could attest to that fact.

“I guess it’s a good thing that we’re called the Hawks instead of the *Tony the Tiger*,” Trey shot back, a small grin playing at the corner of his bruised lips.

That resulted in them all calling out their own suggestions, all of them related to cereal characters.

“How about the *Dig ’ems*?”

“The *Toucans*.”

“The *Cuckoo Birds*.”

“The *Boo-Berries*.”

“The *Sugar Bears*.”

“The *Cap ’n Crunches*.”

They all burst out laughing, all the gloom from earlier dissipating. Devon pulled Trey into a half-hug. “Let’s get out of here, so Niki can kiss all of Chad’s

boo-boos and make them feel better.”

Once Devon dropped Trey off, it only took him a few minutes to drive to his own apartment. A complex in the center of the not-so-nice area of the city, his place probably predated the rink, if that were possible.

He shut off the truck and got out, not bothering to lock the door because nobody in their right mind would steal his hunk of rust. He quickly ran inside, shivering as a blast of wind hit him. Once he got to his apartment, he was dismayed to find it no warmer.

Cursing under his breath, he quickly discovered the heat was on the fritz...again. This time he decided not to even bother phoning the *super*. Not only did the calls never result in any action, but it was so late all he wanted to do was crash. At least he'd taken a shower back at the arena. He didn't even want to contemplate how miserable it would have been to do so in his cold-as-snot bathroom.

He took off his shoes and coat, but left the other clothes on. Even though he had a bedroom, it didn't hold anything other than some old mementos and hockey equipment. He settled down on his lumpy couch instead, covering himself with as many blankets as possible.

The lights were off, but the streetlamps shone through his one window enough for him to still make out the stains on his white walls and the dated cupboards in his tiny kitchen.

He sighed. Not exactly the Hilton, but it could be worse...really, it could. He closed his eyes and fell into a troubled, miserable sleep.

Chapter Four

Saul rubbed his aching eyes before he took a sip of his lukewarm coffee. All night. That's how long he'd been at the computer, doing research on the Canton brothers. More specifically, Devon.

While he'd found plenty of articles on the brothers and their fall from grace, Saul still felt as if he were missing something, that the whole story behind the family had never really been told, that there was a secret they'd been fighting to protect.

In all the interviews he'd been able to dig up, they had one glaring consistency. Whenever one of the men had been asked about their childhood or parents, they'd all either answered with a firm *no comment* or quickly ended the interview.

Had Devon and the others continued with their NHL careers and became more popular, Saul felt sure he wouldn't have been the only one to notice this pattern.

But as the Cantons had faded from the spotlight, so had public interest. Saul couldn't help but wonder if they'd been relieved with that aspect to their downed careers.

"What are you doing here so early?" Amy asked as she came through the door.

One of Saul's fellow reporters, Amy was just as young and eager as him. She had dark hair that she styled in a short, severe style and a penchant for pantsuits that would make Hilary Clinton proud. He dully noted she wore a dark blue one today.

"I never went home," he grunted as he rubbed a kink in his neck. "Something kind of big went down at the match."

Her eyes grew wide as she nodded eagerly. "I heard about the big fight at the game last night."

"You follow hockey?"

"Sure. I always listen to the games on the radio."

He slid a jaded glance her way. "So how come you're not writing the sports column?"

She smirked before going over to the ancient coffeemaker. "Because then I would be relegated to section C of the paper instead of writing the headlines."

"Ouch," Saul muttered. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

“What are you trying to say about me, fluffy?” she demanded as she cast a dismissive glance over the fleece pullover he’d put on sometime during his marathon research session.

Saul paused, thinking of the best way to answer her diplomatically. Somehow he didn’t think she’d appreciate him saying she’d sell off her own cat, mother and grandmother for a chance to move up in her job. In the end, he went with, “You just seem dedicated, that’s all.”

“Riiiiight.” Her narrowed eyes showed she didn’t buy his reply.

“So what do you know about the team?” he asked quickly, eager to change the topic.

“Besides the fact they couldn’t win a game even if the fate of world hinged on it?”

“Wow, you don’t hold anything back.”

She started to pour cream and sugar into a mug. “I just tell the truth. The Hawks suck.”

“So why do you still follow their games?”

“Because I’m one of the very few remaining die-hard fans. My dad still buys season tickets.”

Saul raised a brow. “That is die-hard.”

“All the fans were hoping the Canton brothers would

help break the losing streak.”

“Really?”

“Sure, while they may have a bad reputation, when on their game, they’re unstoppable.”

“So, do you have any ideas as to why they fell apart so badly?” he asked. A part of him refused to believe that they simply *caved* as Bobby theorized the night before.

“I really don’t know. Some said it was because they had a spoiled childhood. Others thought that maybe it was because they all got their contracts too soon. That they were too young to handle the pressure.” She got a cup of coffee and sat down in the chair by his desk. “What did you find out in your research?”

He scratched his head. “Not much. They were all rink rats. Their father at one time was slated to go pro, but he got injured his first season. He used the money he made playing to open his own arena. His sons started skating from the moment they could walk. All four of his sons showed promise at first, but the oldest, Brock became addicted to drugs when he was a teenager and pretty much dropped out of the picture.”

“That had to be disappointing to dear old dad,” Amy speculated.

“Maybe that’s what led to Mr. Canton’s reported depression. He committed suicide five years ago by shooting himself in the head. After that his rink folded and his wife was left with next to nothing.” Saul tapped his pen against the edge of his desk as he wondered how that must have affected Devon.

“Wow, how did their mother take all that?”

“She died from cancer a year ago. Since she didn’t have any insurance, the brothers had to pay nearly everything out of pocket. Not only did they lose what little they’d made playing for the NHL, but they all lost their houses, cars and almost everything else they owned.”

“Hmmm...” Amy wrapped her hands around her mug, her gaze pensive. “I would have said maybe it was their mother’s passing that made them go off the deep end, but they’d already been kicked out of the pros by then.”

“It could be their father’s suicide. He died during Trey’s senior year of high school.”

“Have you asked any of the Cantons if they would give you an interview?”

Saul pulled a face. “Yeah and I was given a very firm thanks, but no thanks.”

“That’s not surprising. I heard they’ve never been open when it comes to the press.” She tapped a finger along the rim of her mug. “Have you ever considered asking the other brother?”

“You mean Brock?” Crap, Saul wouldn’t even know where to look for the guy.

“Something tells me he’d be a lot more willing to share.”

“The only problem is he’s been out of contact with his family for years. I don’t know where he lives now,” Saul admitted, feeling a bit of a failure.

“I have some contacts with the police department. Why don’t you let me see if they can pull up some records on him? They may give us a clue to where he is now,” she offered.

Saul grinned. “You’d really be willing to do that for me?”

“Sure, you can pay me back sometime.” She patted his arm. “Now go home and get some sleep. Don’t the Hawks have an away game tonight?”

“Yeah, and since it’s not too far away, I was going to drive down and watch it live.”

Hopefully, he could pin Devon down after the game and finally get a statement from the man. Most likely not

though. Even if he did manage to get Devon's attention, the guy would probably just try to take him out with his big, smelly, hockey bag again. Saul grunted in frustration. While Devon may be the hottest hunk ever created, he was also as annoying as hell.

Damn if that trait didn't turn on Saul more than ever, though.

* * * *

As soon as Devon, Trey and Chad walked into the arena, they were informed that the coach wanted to see them immediately. Not the best way to start the morning, but yet not totally unexpected. After what had gone down the night before, there was sure to be hell to pay. If they made it out with just a massive ass chewing, then they'd be lucky.

They stumbled up the rickety steps that led to the office. In all actuality, it was nothing more than a huge, glass box set up next to the side of the main stands. Ugly, mold-green curtains hung on all sides in order to offer some form of privacy.

They set the bags down and Devon knocked. Off in the distance, he could hear the sounds of the rest of the

team arriving. He wondered if they would be angry with him and his brothers. While they hadn't technically lost the game for the team, he knew they'd let them down. Not the first impression he'd been hoping to set. Kip probably felt vindicated for the icy, reception he gave.

To make matters worse, Devon hadn't been able to sleep the night before. Not only from the cold, but also because he couldn't stop thinking about a certain, brown-eyed reporter. Every time he tried to drift off, he'd think about how sweet Saul smelled, how kissable his full lips looked or the way it'd felt so right when their bodies pressed together.

Devon wanted to bang his head against the wall. The last thing he needed was a boyfriend. Especially one from the press. They'd spent the last five years avoiding the press and the worst way to undo that would be to fuck one of the leeches. Even if said leech was a walking sex dream come true.

"Come in," Howe called, his voice harsh with anger.

Devon took in a deep breath before he turned the handle and walked in, Trey and Chad following closely behind.

"Close the door," Howe ordered.

He had a remote in his hand and three chairs were set

up before a television set. He gestured for them to take a seat. “I want you guys to see something.”

“Sir?” Trey asked as they sat. Given all that’d happened to him, he’d never been good at taking a surprise.

Devon gave him what he hoped was a comforting smile.

Howe went on as if he hadn’t heard the inquiry. “This morning something happened to me that every coach dreams of. I ended up on *SportsCenter*.”

Oh, boy. This could not be good.

“Really?” Devon asked.

“Do you all want to see why?” Howe gave them a huge, sarcastic smile that just dared them to answer in the negative.

“Sure,” Trey ventured timidly.

Howe turned the set on. Devon’s gut clenched as a highlight of the fight came on. In the background, the commentators made sarcastic statements about the brothers’ outlandish behavior. The worst part though was the caption that read, *The Canton Brothers—When will the embarrassment end?*

Chad pointed at the screen. “See, Trey? I told you that you always leave your left side open while

fighting.”

“I don’t think that’s why he’s showing us this,” Devon hissed from the corner of his mouth.

“Maybe not, but you do have to admit I have a point. Trey might not be so lucky in the next fight and some guy may knock out some of his pretty teeth. After all the money our parents paid for those braces, that would be a shame.”

“Enough!” Howe bellowed as he tossed the remote at them.

They ducked just in time. The remote sailed over their heads and hit one of the windows. It didn’t appear to do any damage although it did make an impressive thumping sound.

For once, not even Chad had a smartass remark. They all sat there in stunned silence. Howe ran his hands through his thinning hair, then began to pace over the threadbare, green carpet.

“Everyone told me I was a fool for taking you three on,” he stated.

At that point, Devon wasn’t inclined to disagree with him. Not with the comments and images from *SportsCenter* still fresh in his cranium. If he’d been Howe, he’d have already shown them the door.

Howe continued with his tirade. “I didn’t listen to them because despite everything you’d done in the past few years, I still saw a spark of potential in you.”

Devon swallowed hard as he lowered his eyes, too ashamed to meet the coach’s gaze. While they’d fucked up plenty in the past, never had he felt so damn bad about it. Maybe it was Niki’s words the previous evening, or perhaps it was because Howe said he’d still seen potential in them. Whatever the reason, Devon felt nearly sick with regret.

“Don’t give up on us, yet,” he croaked.

Trey and Chad jerked in shock. Devon had never been one for pleas or groveling. Howe stopped in his pacing to fix a piecing gaze on Devon.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Howe challenged.

“Because we can turn this team around,” Devon vowed with certainty. Sure they may have a second string goalie who slept, a center with a huge chip on his shoulder and an arena that should be condemned, but Devon knew they could still make it work.

“And just how are you going to do that? By beating the other teams up so badly that their afraid to take the ice?”

“No, we’ll do it by playing the way you want us to.”

Trey and Chad nodded earnestly, showing their support for Devon.

Howe threw his hands up in frustration. “I don’t even think you know how to play a good game anymore.”

“All we’re asking for is a second chance,” Devon pressed.

“I already gave you that when I signed you on.”

“Then give us a third, please?” Devon realized he was coming off desperate, but that’s exactly how he felt at the moment.

A thick, heavy silence filled the room for several heart-clenching moments before Howe gave a reluctant nod. “Fine, one more shot. But if you fuck up again, I’m done with you.”

“Thanks, I promise you won’t regret it.” Devon grinned, a huge wave of relief going through him.

“He’s right, Coach. We’ll make this up to you,” Trey added.

Chad didn’t add his own vow, but he didn’t shoot off a snarky comment, so Devon still considered that a win. They got up and quickly left the room before Howe could change his mind.

Chapter Five

Devon skated to center ice and got ready for the faceoff.

At the start of the third period, the score stood at 4-3 in their favor. While the excitement at finally seeing a win felt nearly palatable, Devon knew they still had plenty of game left.

He nodded to Chad and Trey. They both returned the gesture. Trey squatted down into a deep goalie stance and got ready. The chanting from the crowd grew louder. While the attendance record for the Ice Caps wasn't much better, their fans seemed to be louder.

It'd been an exciting game. Both teams had numerous scoring chances. Trey made some spectacular saves that were pure highlight reel material while Chad managed to score one of the Hawk's goals and assisted on the others. Devon scored two himself, while Kip earned the fourth one.

Devon had been both shocked and amused when Kip

requested that they skate on the same line. While he'd claimed it was so he could keep a better eye on the brothers, it became quickly apparent that he and Devon clicked while on the ice. They each seemed to have the ability to know what the other was going to do. It was almost as if they'd played together for years.

Devon easily won the faceoff. He passed the puck to Chad, who shot it back once Devon was clear. He saw an opening in the Cap's defense and took it. He skated in on a breakaway, Kip at his side. Just as they reached slap shot distance, Devon passed the puck to Kip.

Kip captured it smoothly and, without missing a beat, shot it. The goalie scrambled to make the save, but couldn't get there in time and the puck sailed into the net.

The Hawks cheered. Kip came over and gave Devon a celebratory embrace. Soon Trey and the rest of the line joined into the huddle. Devon glanced over to the bench to see Howe's reaction. Other than a curt nod, he didn't show any expression. Devon could still tell the coach was pleased.

* * * *

For the second time in just as many days, Saul found himself waiting outside a locker room door. From the noise, the team was having a great time celebrating their first win in three years. Saul smiled to himself, happy that he'd be able to write up on their victory in the paper. It would make for another sleepless night for him, but if he worked hard, he'd be able to make the next day's edition. He just counted himself lucky that his paper opted for afternoon delivery instead of morning like most of the bigger operations. Otherwise, the news of the win wouldn't be going out until a day later.

The team began to trickle out. While Saul realized he should be stopping some of them to get a comment, he let them all pass. The only one he was interested in speaking to had yet to leave.

His fingers curled into nervous fists as he thought about the prospect of being able to see Devon again. It was a crazy notion, since the man made it perfectly clear he wanted nothing to do with Saul.

Finally, Devon came out, his brothers flanking either side of him. They were all smiles, but grew sober as soon as they spotted Saul.

Not the best way to start a conversation. Saul cringed under their glares. "Congrats on the win," he

tried with a feeble smile.

Devon nodded to his brothers. “I’ll catch up in a second.”

“Why don’t you just want me to squash the bug and get it over with?” Chad asked, his upper lip curling in aggression.

“We promised Coach no more fighting. That goes for *off* the ice, too.”

Chad shot one more murderous glare before he stormed away. Trey hesitated a second. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stick around?”

Devon shook his head. “Nah, I can handle this one alone.”

“Okay, but hurry up. First drink is on me.”

After Trey left, Saul asked, “Is he even old enough to drink?”

“He’s twenty-three.” Devon hesitated, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Does that disappoint you, because you were hoping to write about Trey’s underage sins in the paper tomorrow?”

Saul gave a soft chuckle. “No, I’m not that kind of reporter.”

“What kind is that?”

“The one who looks for a scandal just to boost their

careers.”

“Every reporter is like that, who are you trying to kid?” Devon scoffed bitterly.

That comment made Saul more convinced than ever that the brothers were continuing to hide something. The fact that he wanted more than ever to pursue that story made Saul wonder if Devon had a point. It left Saul feeling low and more than a little slimy.

He glanced up from under his lashes at the taller man. Damn, if Devon didn't get better looking each time Saul saw him. He'd changed into a dark shirt, dress slacks and red tie. The look fit Devon perfectly, making him appear dark and sexy at the same time.

His body hummed with excitement as he fantasized about taking off every stitch of that clothing so he could get some skin-on-skin action. Something told him that Devon was the type to take charge in bed and that suited Saul just fine. He'd love nothing more than to give in to the hockey player in every way possible.

“Why don't you let me take you to dinner?” Saul blurted, surprising even himself with the offer. Usually he was too shy to take the initiative with that kind of thing.

“So you can spend the entire meal grilling me? No,

thanks,” Devon replied curtly.

“That’s not why I invited you. It would be casual and everything would be off the record, I swear,” Saul rushed out. The last thing he wanted was for Devon to think he’d been trying to buy him off with a meal.

Devon leaned in closer.

Saul swallowed hard as he realized that he was effectively pinned against the wall and they were the only ones in the hallway. Devon dipped his head down until their lips were just inches apart. It took all of Saul’s self-control not to lean up so their mouths were touching. He held back though, not sure if Devon would welcome the kiss.

“Why Saul, did you just ask me on a date?” Devon asked, his voice laced with amusement.

Saul’s heart thumped in response. How was it possible that Devon could make a simple question sound so sexy? His cock, which had been half-hard since Devon first walked out of the locker room, grew stiff. Devon stood so close there could be no way he missed it, yet he didn’t remark on it.

“Yes, I did,” Saul admitted.

Devon ran his thumb along Saul’s bottom lip. “You are so cute. If I didn’t know that you’d turn against me

the first chance you got, I'd be tempted to take you up on that offer."

"I promise, there are no ulterior motives behind my invitation." Saul's breath caught as Devon continued to caress his lip.

"Listen to you using all those big words," Devon teased lightly as he lowered his head just a fraction more.

"I meant them, too," Saul vowed as he strained his face up so they could finally meet.

Just as their lips were about to come together, Devon pulled back. "You may mean that now, but I know how quickly things can change."

Before Saul could even gather his wits enough to come up with a reasonable argument, Devon turned heel and left. For the longest time Saul stood there, his body screaming in frustration.

* * * *

As soon as Devon walked outside, Trey and Chad were on him.

"He's a persistent fucker," Chad snarled.

For some reason it bothered Devon to hear Saul

referred to in that manner. “Leave him alone. He’s just doing his job. Besides, he didn’t press me for any information.”

“Then what did he want?” Trey asked.

“Believe it or not, he wanted to take me out to dinner.”

Chad and Trey both gaped with astonishment.

Trey recovered first. “As in a date?”

“Yeah,” Devon replied, trying not to be annoyed that they were so shocked somebody might actually be romantically interested in him.

So what if it’d been a while since he’d dated anyone. It’s not like he’d had the time for a social life. First, he’d been taking care of Ma and then he’d been fighting to keep their careers semi-afloat. That didn’t leave him much time for anything else. That still didn’t mean he was a troll or something. Plenty of guys had been interested.

“I hope you told him to fuck off,” Chad snapped.

“Don’t worry, I turned him down.”

“Because the last thing we need is a reporter getting too close to any of us.”

“I told you, I turned him down,” Devon shot back, annoyed at how quickly Chad decided that Saul was off

limits.

“If you were to get intimate with Saul, how long do you think it would take for him to find out about what really happened to Dad?” Chad persisted.

Devon closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. “We don’t have to worry about that because I have no plans on hooking up with Saul.”

“But you would like to,” Trey cut in.

Even though he was the youngest, Trey had the ability to see certain things better than anyone else in the family. Devon glanced over, expecting to see anger in Trey’s face, but all he found was a soft gaze that spoke of gentle understanding.

“Yeah, I would,” Devon admitted, knowing he could never hide the truth from Trey, even if he wanted to. “That doesn’t change anything though. Family has always come first and a sexy ass isn’t about to make things different.”

* * * *

Saul sat behind the wheel of his car and watched the Hawks board the team bus. Even across the darkened parking lot, he could easily pick Devon from the crowd.

A moan slipped past Saul's lips as he reached down to palm his cock. Even with the cold of the winter night's air, he could still feel the warmth of Devon's body pressed against him.

There was no way he could deny the truth to himself, he had it bad for Devon. For a moment, Devon showed he'd returned the attraction, too. The incident had been brief, but there'd been no mistaking the flare of desire that'd passed over the man's blue-eyed gaze. Then things were ruined when Devon brought up what Saud did for a living.

Saul beat his fist against the steering wheel, frustration surging through him. For the first time ever, he wished he'd picked a different career. Maybe if he were a fireman or a waiter, then he'd already be in bed with the sexy hockey player. Instead, Saul sat in a cold car while he harbored a major hard-on and dreams of what could have been.

His phone went off, startling him so much he jumped, hitting his elbow on the window. Hissing in pain, he flipped open the cell. "Hello?"

"Hey, I heard the game on the radio," Amy replied.

He blinked in surprise. "How did you get my number?"

“I have my ways,” she sang.

“That sounds ominous.”

“Be nice or I won’t give you the information I found on Brock.”

Saul perked up. “Already? That didn’t take long.”

“My buddy is good. He was able to track Big Brother Canton down by way of arrest and court records.”

“Oh,” Saul groaned, sympathetic for Devon. “So he hasn’t changed his ways, I take it?”

“Nope, in fact, he’d graduated to heroin and meth,” she tsked.

“Where does this future episode of *Intervention* live?” Saul asked, getting out a pen and pad. While he had a perfectly good PDA, he’d never been able to figure the damn thing out so he relied on the old-fashioned method of keeping notes.

“He’s still in Michigan, in a city named Burton. His probation records put him at some low-end efficiency apartment.” She rattled off the address.

“Thanks, this means a lot to me,” he replied before hanging up.

He stared at the paper for several seconds. He could very easily go back to the office, write up his report and

then drive to Burton. Since the Hawks didn't have a game for the next couple days and the other various local sports teams didn't have much going, Saul could take the time away.

A tinge of guilt niggled him though. If he were to go ahead and interview Brock, then Saul would be fulfilling every one of Devon's accusations. On the other hand, Saul did have a job to do. It's not like he owed Devon anything either. Just the opposite given the way Devon had rebuffed him so many times.

Then he recalled the way Devon had all but called him a liar and a backstabber. Saul felt a sting of hurt of anger in his chest. He'd never done anything to deserve that kind of treatment. Devon just assumed he was something that he wasn't. Maybe it would serve the jerk right if he were proved right.

Mind made up. Saul carefully shut the notebook and turned on the car. First thing in the morning, he'd drive to Burton. He wouldn't come home until he had some answers either. This time he wouldn't take *no comment* for an response.

Chapter Six

By the time Saul turned in his article, caught a few hours of sleep and made the drive to Burton, it was already early in the next afternoon. As he navigated the busy streets of the lower class, town that was littered with abandoned factories, he wondered how Brock ended up there of all places.

The Cantons had been raised in Michigan, but it'd been in the upper-class region of Birmingham—about as far away social wise from Burton as one could get. It would appear things hadn't worked out as planned for any of the brothers.

After getting lost a few times, Saul finally found the address. As he parked in front of the short row of squalid apartments, his stomach did a slow roll of sympathy. Crap, nobody should have to live like this.

Each of the units boasted one tiny front window and battered, white door. The parking lot was nothing more

than a mixture of dirt, dead grass, slush and mud. The building on the one side was a storage unit, the other a pawnshop. A couple of scantily dressed women, who Saul suspected were prostitutes, stood by the street. One of them wore a painfully obvious fake, speckled fur coat and leopard print miniskirt. She caught him staring and blew a kiss in his direction. Not wanting to come off rude, he gave a feeble wave in return before averting his gaze.

He got out of the car, glad he'd made it before nightfall. This was one place he didn't want to be caught in while it was dark outside. Even though his car was nearly ten-years old, he still locked it up. He didn't have much to steal, just an old car radio, but he didn't relish the idea of it ending up in the pawnshop next door.

Saul knocked on the battered door, hoping Brock would hurry the hell up and answer. The hookers started to shout out to him and while he could only hear enough to get the gist of what they were saying, he knew it wasn't PG Rated or pleasant. When one of them raised her short skirt to reveal her black thong, his stomach nearly revolted.

He pounded harder on the door, praying that Brock would open it. Hell, he'd take Freddy Kruger greeting

him at that point. Anything to get away from his two new admirers.

When the door finally swung open, Saul had to hold back his *whoo-hoo* of relief. Then he got a good gander at the man standing in front of him and Saul wondered if maybe he weren't better off with the hookers.

He could see the family resemblance to the other brothers, but just barely. While Brock had the same blond hair and blue eyes as Trey, that was where all similarities ended. The best term to describe Brock would be *rode hard then put up wet*. His hair stuck up in several, messy, natty-looking hunks. Several open sores marred his emaciated face and pasty arms that were only partially covered with a filthy, gray t-shirt. His blue eyes were vacant and bloodshot. A foul odor wafted from him, a mixture of sweat, body odor and chemicals.

He scratched his food-crusting belly and blearily blinked a few times. "Who in the hell are you?"

"I'm Saul Davis from the Battle Creek Times." Saul held out his hand, which was ignored. "Are you Brock Canton?"

"A hundred dollars."

Saul dropped his hand. "Excuse me?"

"If you want me to talk about my brothers, it'll cost

you a hundred bucks. I don't give interviews for free."

What a loser! "So, does that mean you are Brock Canton then?"

"Yes, now do you have the damn money or not."

The jaded part of Saul already anticipated the request so he'd come prepared. Reaching into his pocket, he grabbed the requested amount, then handed it over. The excited gleam that came over Brock's gaze made Saul both pity and despise the man. What kind of man sold his own brothers out for a hundred dollars?

Brock stepped to the side. "Come on in."

As he stepped inside, Saul held back a gag. The stench in the tiny, one-room apartment could have felled an elephant. He fought back the urge to vomit as he swept his gaze over room. Garbage littered the floor and the only furniture consisted of one, stained mattress.

"What did you want to know about my brothers?" Brock asked as he lit up a cigarette.

"Why don't we start with your home life? Tell me something that I wouldn't find in old articles and interviews."

Brock smirked before blowing out a stream of smoke. "What should I go into first? How my father expected perfection from all of us? Or what would

happen when we didn't meet his expectations?"

"So he was one of those types of dads who wanted good grades and stuff like that all the time?" Saul asked as he took out his small voice recorder. Unlike the PDA, this was one piece of technology he'd mastered.

Brock flopped down on the mattress and gave a bitter laugh, showing off several half-eroded teeth—a result of the drug abuse. Saul remembered that fact from the few weeks he'd did some ride-alongs with the police department. It'd been in hopes of getting some experience to land him a crime column, but never had he thought it would help him as a sports reporter.

"What's so funny?" he asked as he pulled a *Snickers* from his coat pocket.

He tossed the candy to Brock who caught it, an eager gleam of excitement passing over his once-dopy expression. Opening the wrapper, he took a healthy bite before answering Saul's question. "It's funny that you would think my prick of a father gave a fuck about something as mundane as school. He had much bigger goals in mind for us."

"Such as?" Saul grimaced as he watched Brock devour the candy bar quicker than a great white chewing up chum.

“Hockey. More specifically us getting to the NHL. Starting with the day we were born, that’s all he cared about. From the time we were old enough to understand, we ate, slept and lived hockey.”

“Sounds like he was pretty obsessed.”

Brock gave him a well-duh look. “Do you know that I can’t remember a birthday or Christmas where I didn’t get a gift somehow related to that sport? We never got trucks or bikes like the other kids. Instead, our gifts were helmets, sticks and jerseys. Mom even got into the act and would fill our stockings with pucks.”

Saul could only imagine how disappointing that must have gotten as the years progressed. It broke his heart a bit to think of all the happiness Devon missed out on. One of Saul’s best memories was the year when he was twelve and got a new PlayStation. His own father had been obsessed with hunting. Saul knew he’d have been disappointed to come down every Christmas to find rifles and safety orange vests waiting for him.

“What would have happened if one of you told him that you didn’t want to play hockey?” Saul quizzed, although he already had a nasty suspicion to that answer.

Brock wrinkled his nose as he lit up a fresh cigarette. He smoked at a rate that both fascinated and horrified

Saul.

“You didn’t tell my father *no* about anything, especially if it was related to hockey.”

“Why? How would he react?”

“Let me put it this way. One year Devon wanted to miss a game because it was the same day as the final for the science fair. Devon had worked weeks on this project and it would have easily taken first place. He begged Dad to let him go.” Brock let out another laugh, this one hollow and haunted as he let out a shaking stream of smoke. “It was only one fucking game. Hell, even the coach said Devon should go to the fair.”

“Your father didn’t agree, I take it?”

“No, and when Devon continued to beg, Dad finally had enough and beat the shit out of him. I thought for sure he was really going to hurt Devon bad, but at the last minute, Dad pulled back. Only because he wanted to make sure Devon was still well enough to play in the game.”

Saul’s gut clenched and if he trusted that the bathroom would be even be halfway clean, he may have been tempted to vomit. He clenched the recorder so hard his knuckles popped. All the while, he had to keep a straight expression on his face because reporters were

supposed to be impartial. They sure as hell weren't supposed to get angry, sad and devastated because a guy they were pretty sure they were falling for had it rough as a kid.

Brock wasn't done sharing. "One time Trey had a bad game. He let in some soft goals and his team lost the game because of it. Dad screamed at him in the lobby, in front of all the other parents. Do you know that not one of them stepped forward to help Trey? Not even when Dad started shaking him. Fuck, Trey was only a kid at the time."

"Oh, God," Saul breathed before he could stop himself.

"Dad made Trey get up at five the next morning and watch video of that game. He then had to write an essay, detailing each error he made and how he could do better."

"Your mother never said anything to him?"

"At first Mom was really into the whole hockey thing. It wasn't until we were in our late teens and the beatings began that she started to try defending us in her own passive way. By then it was too late. Dad had control for so long there was no way in hell he was going to give it up. Especially once it looked like I was

going to make it into the pros.”

“What happened that stopped you from making it?”

“I took a bad check and it blew out my knee. After that, no team wanted to touch me. Since I was no use to him injured, Dad kicked me out. No sense in keeping around a failure when he had three other potential golden tickets to train.”

Saul didn't blame Brock for the bitter tone in his voice. After the way things had gone down, the guy had a right to feel a tad resentful.

“Have you talked to your brothers lately?” he asked, wondering how Devon felt about having a drug addict in his family.

Brock shrugged. “They send me some money when they can. I know how hard it is for them after having to pay for Ma's medical bills, so I don't expect too much from them.”

“They all send you cash?”

“Yeah, Trey usually sends the most, but he's not supporting a wife like Chad. Devon helps out, too, but he's still sinking most of his extra cash into the remaining medical debts. I think he's going to be paying those off for the rest of his life.”

“That must be so hard on him,” Saul said, his heart

breaking a bit for the surly hockey player.

“The worst part of it is that all the treatments didn’t help one bit because Ma still died.”

“You must miss her very much,” Saul mused. If he lost his mother, he would be devastated. They’d always been very close.

“I miss her a whole hell of lot more than my father.”

“Why do you think he committed suicide?” Saul asked. That question had plagued him for days. Even more so now that he’d found out a bit about the man’s overbearing personality.

Brock snorted. “I don’t fucking buy it.”

Saul cocked a brow. “Buy what?”

“The fact that he committed suicide. My old man was too much of a mean bastard to do us the favor of dying. There is no way in hell he’d off himself.”

Saul’s heart thumped, excited about the potential for a good story. At the same time, his gut clenched in worry over Devon. “What do you think happened?”

“I think something big went down that night and the asshole finally got what was coming to him.”

“Are you saying you think he was murdered?” Saul demanded, his voice cracking a bit from the flurry of emotions racing through him.

“Or somebody finally fought back and he came out the loser,” Brock replied.

“You do realize that if that is what happened, then the perpetrator would probably be from your own family?” Saul felt compelled to point out before Brock continued to blab any more.

“Yeah, I’m fully aware of that.” Brock gave off a wicked smile. His teeth meshing grotesquely with his sallow face. “I think it’s fucking poetic, too. It would serve him right if one of his prize dogs turned and bit him in the ass.”

It irked Saul to hear Devon equated with a dog. He cursed under his breath as he realized that he’d long ago stopped being impartial when it came to Devon. While he should be thinking of the best way to spin this information to make a great story, all he cared about was how this affected the other man. If Amy only knew how conflicted he felt, she’d probably laugh in his face, then tell him to man up and write the damn story.

This could hurt Devon and I could never do that to him. Even to help my career.

He had the sudden, overwhelming urge to bang his head on the battered, filthy wall. What in the hell was wrong with him? Had he inhaled too many meth fumes

or something? He and Devon had shared exactly two conversations, both of them hostile. Yet all Saul could think of was how he wanted to protect the man.

Chapter Seven

Devon fought to tamp down his anger as he walked up the steps leading to Saul's home. Already in a sour mood, it didn't take much motivation for him to curl a lip at the folksy, I'm-doing-okay vibe the two-story home gave off.

He knew that probably made him hypocritical since his own previous home had been twice as large, it's just that Devon hadn't made his money by screwing others over. He sure as hell hadn't made it by snooping in someone's private life the way Saul had earlier.

Holding back a surprised curse as he slipped briefly on a patch of ice, Devon stabilized himself before knocking. He waited impatiently, even adding another hard round of knocking for good measure. Saul's POS shit car was in the driveway so Devon knew the guy was home.

The fact the reporter's car screamed of limited

income in direct odds to the house, puzzled Devon, but not enough to distract him from his current task. He'd come to tell Saul off and get the man to butt out of his life.

Just as he raised his hand to pound for a third time, the door swung open. Devon opened his mouth, more out of shock than to speak as he found himself rooted in place out of pure arousal. Saul wore only a pair of red shorts and a white t-shirt. It appeared he'd been working out because he had a pair of earbuds dangling from his neck and his tee was damp with sweat. The perspiration made the thin material cling to his muscular chest, so every dip and ridge was perfectly accented.

More droplets of sweat trailed down his jawline before disappearing into his collar. Devon's mouth watered as a visual popped into his head of him dipping his head down to lick away the drops. Saul blinked a few times, his sweet brown eyes showing confusion, but a bit of interest as well. Going by the bulge building in the front of his skimpy shorts, Devon bet it wasn't on the professional level either.

"Wow," Saul finally said, "I never expected to see you here."

The man's voice reminded Devon of warm syrup as

it somehow managed to sound sensual, yet compassionate at the same time. His own dick began to wake up as he wondered how he'd never before noticed how sexy Saul's tone was.

Devon gave a mental shake of his head. He'd come here to set down the rules, not to satisfy his suddenly hungry cock. He brushed past Saul, all the while trying his damndest not to notice how good the reporter smelled, even when he was sweaty.

"Okay, why don't you come in and make yourself at home?" Saul remarked in a sarcastic tone, although he didn't seem too angry.

No, if Devon had to guess, he'd say Saul was just as turned on by the situation as he was. There could be no mistaking the way the man's eyes grew dark with passion anymore than Devon could ignore the erection tenting Saul's shorts.

Devon just prayed that his coat was long enough to cover his own erection. The last thing he needed was for Saul to realize he wasn't the only one horny at the moment. Devon needed every advantage he could get.

"We need to talk," Devon said as he folded his arms over his chest.

Saul pursed his lips together for a second, as if

debating the situation. Devon wanted to snort, as if Saul had any say in whether or not this talk would be going down. Saul finally gave a small sigh before shutting the door. He jerked his head toward the middle of the home.

“Come on into the kitchen. I’ll make some coffee.”

“You don’t need to bother. I won’t be here long,” Devon protested even as he followed Saul into the large kitchen.

Devon let out a low whistle as he stared at the high-end appliances, marble countertops and expensive mosaic tiling. “How can a reporter from a third-rate paper afford all this?”

A blush covered Saul’s cheeks as he ducked his head to the side. “I’m renting it from a friend of the family.”

“It still must cost a fortune,” Devon argued as he ran his fingers over the cool, gray swirled countertop.

“Not really. They’re giving me a pretty good deal.”

Devon didn’t think it possible, but the blush deepened on Saul’s face. Intrigued, Devon moved in closer and put two fingers under Saul’s chin, forcing the younger man to look up into his gaze. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Saul nibbled on his bottom lip a few seconds before admitting, “Okay, it’s my aunt’s house and she isn’t

charging me rent.”

“That’s awfully generous of her.” Devon continued to touch Saul’s face. The man’s skin felt so warm, so inviting, that Devon found it impossible to move away. Then again, Saul didn’t exactly complain about the manhandling. If anything, his gaze grew more stormy with desire.

“She said I may as well get settled in here since she plans for me to inherit it when she dies.”

Devon barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes. He should have known that Saul was nothing more than an overly pampered, rich brat. “So, does all your family have cash to throw around like that or is it just dear Auntie?”

Saul’s brows furrowed as he shook his head. “We’re not rich or anything. My aunt got this house from my grandparents when they died. Since she doesn’t have any kids of her own, she just decided to pass the home on to me.”

“What do your parents do for a living?” Devon pressed as he finally dropped his hand, but didn’t step away. When Saul balked, Devon said, “Since your newest hobby is digging into my personal life, I think it’s only fair you share some of your history with me,

too.”

He could almost see the wheels churning in Saul’s head as he worked that one out.

Finally, Saul shrugged. “There really isn’t anything interesting to share. My parents are both alive. Mom is a homemaker, Dad just retired from GM.”

“Do they know you’re gay?”

A crooked smile twisted Saul’s lips. “Yeah, I came out to them my junior year of high school.”

“How did they take it?”

“Very well. They didn’t even once blink twice at the prospect of having a gay son. I guess you could say my coming out was very anti-climactic and drama free. Some would call it boring.”

Devon couldn’t help but chuckle. “You almost sound disappointed.”

“Oh, I’m not,” Saul rushed out. “I realize how lucky I am. My parents are even board members for the local PFLAG chapter and everything.”

“You’re very fortunate,” Devon said, his chest aching as he recalled how his own coming out had gone. It’d ended with his dad punching him in the face. The next day, he’d been forced to run up and down the bleachers of the ice rink as punishment for his *abnormal*

attractions.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Saul replied in a near whisper.

Devon cleared his throat and moved away until the counter separated them. He needed to get a barrier between the two of them before he did something stupid like make a move for Saul. “I didn’t come here to discuss that though.”

“I pretty much figured as much,” Saul said, his mouth turning down in a frown.

“Brock called me.” Devon didn’t offer up any more information, instead waiting to see what Saul’s reaction would be.

“Oh,” was all that Saul gave.

“He told me all about the interesting conversation you two had,” Devon growled. “I suppose he could have saved the calling minutes though, since I’m sure I’ll be reading all the details in tomorrow afternoon’s paper.”

A long silence descended on the room as Devon waited for what clever response Saul would come up with to vindicate him using such personal information for the sake of a damn news story. Finally, just as Devon was about to walk away in disgust, Saul spoke up.

“I didn’t use it. Nothing Brock told me is going to show up in any article I write.”

Devon's lips parted in shock. "Why would you be willing to do that?"

Saul ducked his head. "Because I don't want to hurt you just for the sake of bettering my career."

"Why should I believe you? Especially after you went to the trouble of driving all the way to Burton and paying Brock for the story?"

A gasp came from Saul as he lifted a surprised gaze in Devon's direction. "He admitted that he took money to talk about you?"

"Do you honestly think you were the first reporter to pay him off?" Devon sneered.

"Then how did you manage to keep the story out of the papers this long?"

"Because before now, Brock never told anyone the truth. He would feed them enough half-lies to come off as convincing."

"What he told me was true though," Saul protested. "After I got done talking with him, I drove to your hometown and interviewed some of your old coaches and teachers. While they didn't confirm every detail Brock gave me, their stories did back up much of what he said. Enough for me to know that he wasn't bullshitting me."

“Brock could never resist a cute ass.” Devon smirked. Inside he was seething as he wondered just how much his brother revealed. Since his brain was basically Swiss cheese nowadays, thanks to all the drugs, there was no way of telling what Brock was capable of doing.

“Brock is gay, too?” Saul scratched his head, the gesture slightly messing up his hair.

“Not exactly,” Devon replied, deciding to leave it at that.

Saul mulled that over for a second before a sly grin spread out over his face. “Did you just say I have a cute ass?”

Yes, you do. Amongst other things. Devon fought to keep his face clear of any interest as he put on a bored tone, “It’s not that bad.”

The smile on Saul’s face grew until Devon added, “It’s not the best I’ve seen though.” *You dirty liar. If that’s the case, then how come you’ve spent the past couple nights jacking off while thinking about getting your dick inside it?*

“Are you always this big of a jerk?” Saul demanded, his eyes bright with anger.

“Pretty much. If you want to be around someone

who's sweet and innocent, then you should be bugging Trey instead of me all the time."

"I don't like Trey. I like..." Saul trailed off, that endearing flush coming over his round cheeks again.

Even though the sane part of him screamed that it would be a mistake, Devon crossed the kitchen and used both his hands to cup Saul's face. Titling the younger man's face up, Devon finally gave into temptation and kissed him. It wasn't the hard, all-consuming, cock-happy kiss he really wanted. Instead, it was a soft, brief passing of lips. It was over before Saul even gave any reaction.

Cursing himself for being all kinds of stupid, Devon pulled back. Saul wore a dumbstruck expression as he reached up to touch his own mouth.

"Why did you do that? I thought you couldn't stand me?" Saul asked, fingers still to his lips.

"I don't know, because you're right, I can't stand you," Devon replied, knowing full well that last part of his comment was lie.

"Oh...okay, well, ouch, I guess," Saul replied in a small voice as he dropped his hand.

"Damn it," Devon cursed, running his hand through his hair. It was either that or pull it out by its roots

because he had to do something to vent his frustrations.

“If you hate me so much, then why don’t you just get the hell out of my house,” Saul ordered, although the hurt still lingering in his tone made the order come off as weak.

Devon paced a few times, trying to think of the best way to handle this. *How about getting the hell out before you make things worse?* He told his inner voice to shut the hell up. If he kept talking to himself this way, he’d be soon sporting a straightjacket and living in a rubber room. Shit, maybe he was losing his mind. How else could he explain his infatuation with the very person he should be pushing away? If Chad and Trey knew that he’d been getting cozy with a reporter, they’d probably have him committed.

“It’s not you I hate. I hate what you represent,” Devon admitted raggedly.

“I get it, all people who work for the press are slimy, bastards. I think you’ve made yourself clear on that point several times,” Saul snapped.

“I never said that.”

“No, but you’re other statements have implicated such.”

Now Devon felt his own rage come forward. “And

you proved it today by paying some junkie off for a few scraps of information.”

“I got more than just scraps and we both know it.”

“And I’m sure all your readers will, too. You’ll probably have all the dirty details in tomorrow’s paper.”

“How many times do I have to tell you?, I didn’t *write* the story. Even though it goes against everything I’ve been taught to do, I chose to keep your secrets.”

“Why would you do that?” Devon demanded suspiciously.

“Because for some crazy, irrational reason, I care about hurting you,” Saul shouted, on a real tirade now. “Even though you haven’t shown me the smallest hint of niceness, I want to still protect you.”

“I don’t need or want your protection,” Devon yelled back.

“Of course not, because the great Devon doesn’t want to need anybody.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is, and the fact that somebody is finally ballsy enough to point it out you, pisses you off more than anything. Hell, you won’t even let Trey or Chad look out for you. It always has to be you who’s in charge, calling the shots, telling everyone what to do.”

Devon let out a low growl. Nobody had ever dared challenge him that way. He knew he should feel angry, insulted, indignant even, but he sure as hell shouldn't be feeling mind-blowing desire.

He moved in quickly, not giving Saul time to react. All the reporter managed was a small yelp of surprise before Devon captured his mouth into a kiss. Unlike the previous time, there was nothing gentle about this one. Devon attacked Saul like a man starving, his hands reaching around to cup the man's sweet ass.

Saul let out another sound of surprise, this one muffled against Devon's lips. At first, Saul stiffened, no doubt shocked at the advance. Then he let out a low moan and sank into Devon's embrace. He even parted his lips to allow Devon access to his mouth.

Devon took advantage, sliding his tongue inside to stroke and taste. He was now the one who let out a moan, his body humming with excitement as he got his fist sample of Saul. He tasted sweet...innocent...in other words, like frigging heaven.

He grunted as he jerked Saul closer so their cocks could rub against each other. Even through the layers of clothing, the friction made Devon nearly come. Saul let out a soft whimper as he threaded his fingers through

Devon's hair.

“What have you done to me?” Devon demanded between kisses.

“Nothing much, just given you a couple licks. I can do much more if you let me,” Saul replied as he rocked against Devon's dick.

“I don't mean that, although, I like it. I was talking about this attraction I have for you. Even though I know I should stay away from you, all I want to do is take you upstairs and pound you into the mattress.”

“What's wrong with that plan? It sounds great to me. I even condoms and lube in my bathroom so we won't have to waste any time rushing out for supplies.”

But it would be wrong. Because even if they did give into their raging hormones and fuck, Devon knew they could never move on to a real relationship. Somehow, he didn't see Saul being okay with just a casual hookup from time to time either.

It was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but Devon forced himself to break off the kiss and step back. Saul let out a small sound of protest, his kiss-swollen lips parting so invitingly. Devon took in several heaving breaths as he took in the debauched image Saul presented, from the razor burn on his cheek to the way

his clothing were slightly skewed.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do this,” Devon said, hating himself when he caught the brief glimmer of hurt that passed over Saul’s eyes.

“I won’t betray you, I swear,” Saul pleaded. “Even as I stood there listening to Brock talk about your childhood, I knew I’d never be able to write that damn story. Especially when he told me about your dad’s death.”

Horror swept through Devon, washing away all traces of passion. He moved in closer, but didn’t reach out to touch Saul again. “What exactly did Brock tell you?”

A shiver went through Saul. Devon realized it came from fear instead of arousal this time. A small twinge of regret went through him at that thought, but it wasn’t enough for him to back off. Not when so much depended on Saul’s answer.

Saul nervously licked his lips before answering, “He doesn’t think your dad killed himself.”

Even though Devon was falling apart on the inside, he made sure to keep his expression natural. “Oh, really? And just what does the meth head think happened?”

“That it was one of you who shot him and that all

three of you covered it up.”

Devon balled his hands into fists and spun away. This is exactly why he should have never gotten involved with Saul. Fuck, they’d only spoken a few times and already the reporter was too damn close to the truth. If what happened that night ever came out, it would be the end of not only what remained of his career, but Trey and Chad’s, too. Devon couldn’t allow them to pay for his mistake.

He turned on Saul. “Just stay away from me and my brothers.”

Saul reached out for him, but Devon ducked away from the touch.

“I could never hurt you. I thought you finally realized that,” Saul said, his voice cracking with emotion. His eyes grew wet, but he didn’t outright cry.

It still didn’t make Devon feel any better though. It took everything he had in him not to reach out and pull the smaller man into a tight embrace. Ignoring that urge, Devon spun around and left the house.

Chapter Eight

Devon finished stuffing the last of his equipment in his bag before looking up at the rest of the team, all of whom were celebrating their latest win. He smiled when he spotted Chad right in the middle of the chaos. Leave it to his twin to finagle things so he was the center of attention.

“You would almost think he was the one who got the hat trick instead of you,” Kip said as he came over and sat next to Devon.

Since the first win, the captain of the team had gone out of his way to be nice to Trey, Devon and Chad. As soon as it became obvious the winning would continue, the entire team eventually warmed up to them.

“Yeah, Chad always did like a celebration,” Devon drawled, shaking his head as he watched Chad take a beer from one of his fellow linesmen.

“A bunch of us are going to Zambonis to celebrate.

You want to join us?” Kip offered.

Devon grimaced. Spending the rest of the evening in the small hole-in-the-wall dive that tried to pass itself off as a sports bar didn't sound too appealing. “Thanks, but I'm pretty beat. I think I'm just going to go home and crash.”

“You sure?” Kip pressed. “Trey and Chad already said they were going with us.”

“Yeah.” All Devon wanted to do was go home, take a hot shower and sleep for the rest of the weekend.

The Hawks had played ten games in just under three weeks. The heavy schedule had left Devon tired and bruised. It'd been worth every contusion though, since they'd won eight of those games. If they kept it up, the team may actually stand a chance at making it to the playoffs.

Despite that prospect, Devon couldn't find it inside himself to be happy. Since that night he'd left Saul, Devon had been an emotional wreck. He couldn't eat, drink or even sleep. All he could think about was the expression of hurt on Saul's face. It took all he had to put on an all-is-good front for his brothers and teammates.

Devon sighed. How could he have been so stupid to

let Saul get under his skin? Or maybe the better question should be, had he been stupid to push the reporter away?

He shook those unpleasant thoughts away. Even if he did want to change his mind and try to make amends, Saul probably wanted nothing to do with him now. Not after the way Devon had truly fucked things up. So instead, Devon would have to focus on keeping up his team's winning streak.

He glanced over at the newest member of their team. A shy, blond who looked to be fresh from high school. He'd only been with them a couple of days and he hadn't spoken more than three words the entire time. Even as the rest of the team partied it up, the kid kept to himself, quietly getting dressed in his street clothes as he wearily eyed the other men up.

"What's his deal?" Devon asked, jerking his chin in the direction of the rookie.

Kip gave a slow shake of his head. "I don't know too much. Just that his name is Sergei and he came from the Cougars."

Devon winced in sympathy. The Cougars were nothing but a team of thugs. They would have eaten someone like Sergei for breakfast.

"I've heard some rumors," Kip hedged, clearly

uncomfortable about revealing what they were.

“Rumors of what?” Devon pressed, not willing to let Kip off easy.

“That he’s like you and Trey...you know, that he’s gay, too.” Kip rushed to add, “Not that I care either way. The only thing that matters to me is whether or not you can help the team win games.”

Devon studied the young player, his heart going out to the kid when he caught the dejected way Sergei carried himself—almost like a puppy who’d been kicked so much that it lived in anticipation for the next attack. He wondered if Sergei had always been that way or if his brief time with the Cougars had made him that wary.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Devon offered. “I’ll have a word with Trey and Chad, too.”

“Thanks.” Kip smiled.

Sergei grabbed his bag and hefted it over his shoulder. As he left the locker room, he didn’t even so much as give a parting wave. Most likely because he didn’t think anyone would care or notice that he left. At that moment, Devon realized how lucky he’d been to have Trey and Chad around for support. While they may not have always been on the same teams, they knew that each other were only a phone call away.

“Thanks for helping to turn the team around, too,” Kip added.

Devon grunted. “I didn’t do much. Just gave a few speeches and made sure that I stayed out of the penalty box.”

“You did way more than that. You earned their respect and because of that, they followed your example and began to play together as a team for the first time ever.”

“Well, they also had a great captain showing them the way,” Devon offered. While he may not have had the best first opinion of Kip, he’d grown to admire and like the guy as time passed.

Kip inclined his head in thanks. “We’ll be at the bar for at least a few hours. If you change your mind, you know where to find us.”

Devon nodded as he shouldered his bag. Waving goodbye to the team, he left. As he walked out into the hallway, his heart skipped in surprised, excitement when he saw Saul waiting for him. The reporter was leaning against the freshly painted brick wall, a battered notebook in his hand. Several of Devon’s teammates yelled out greetings. Saul returned each one, calling each one by their names. Not bad for a guy who hadn’t even

seen a Hawk's game until a few weeks ago.

Even though Devon had been doing his damn best to avoid the man, his heart still sped up as he took in how nice Saul looked in his worn jeans and bright red Hawk's sweatshirt. Then Saul offered him a lazy, sexy grin and Devon found himself walking over to the man, despite every instinct in him warning him it would be wrong.

"I think that was one of the best games I've ever seen," Saul offered, his gaze sweeping up and down Devon's body.

"Be honest with me, how many games have you really seen?" Devon challenged as he felt his cock stirring. Well, there went the theory that some time away from Saul would dampen the attraction between them. All he had to do is hear the man's sexy voice and Devon became instantly aroused. If God ever decided to be good and Devon got to see any nudity, he'd probably lose it and cream his pants.

"Do you mean all sports or just hockey games?" Saul asked.

"Hockey games." Devon stepped in so close that Saul had to tip his head back to maintain eye contact.

"Counting the eleven Hawks games and eight high

school ones, nineteen.”

“Okay, how many sporting events total have you been to?”

“Counting the hockey games, nineteen,” the corners of Saul’s lips twitched.

Devon laughed. “How in the hell did you manage to get your job?”

“By doing what you think comes naturally for all reporters—I lied my ever living ass off.”

For some reason, that confession only served to make Saul more endearing.

“Naughty, naughty.”

“Very,” Saul agreed. “I would have never been able to get away with it at a bigger paper.”

“You’ve been doing a great job of faking it. I’ve been reading your articles and you seem to know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, well if it’s something that interests me, I’m a very fast learner,” Saul shot back, the sly look on his face showing he was well aware how sexual that comment could be taken.

“I noticed something else, too.” Devon shifted his bag on his shoulder, all the while keeping his gaze locked in on Saul.

“What was that?”

“You never ran a story on all the stuff Brock told you.”

A ghost of a smile passed over Saul’s kissable mouth. “A promise is a promise.”

His brothers came out and walked by. Chad wore a speculative, suspicious glare, while Trey had a knowing grin on his face. He even had the audacity to wink at Saul. “Hey, Saul, if Devon keeps turning you down for that private interview, just let me know. I’ll be more than happy to give you an exclusive.”

Chad gave Trey a punch in the arm. “Stay away from the reporter.”

Trey flashed the grin that’d never failed to get him whatever he wanted. “What can I say? Saul’s cute. If Devon’s too dumb to notice that, it’s not my fault.”

Trey let out a small yelp as Chad grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and casually dragged him down the hall as if it were perfectly natural to lead a full-grown man around like he was temperamental puppy.

“See you tomorrow,” Chad called back.

Saul watched them with open-mouthed astonishment. Devon shrugged, “You get used to them after a while.”

“If you say so,” Saul replied, his voice heavy with doubt.

“Sure, it only took me twenty years or so.”

“Are you going out with the rest of the team?” Saul asked.

Devon shook his head. “I’ll leave the partying to them, I’m just going home to crash. Are you going?”

“Just for a drink or two. I’m kind of tired, too, but Kip asked me and I don’t want to rude.”

An irrational stab of jealousy nagged Devon. He realized how foolish it was, especially given that Kip was perfectly straight. Then Devon thought about Trey’s parting comment about how cute Saul was. Devon knew his brother had a very valid point and it would only be a matter of time before someone noticed Saul.

Before he could think too much on that and do something stupid, Devon forced himself to step away. Something he noticed he’d been doing a lot of lately. Funny, considering he never thought of himself as a coward up until then.

“Well, I better get going,” Devon said, ignoring the twinge of disappointment that came with that statement.

“Sure. See you around?”

Devon gave a soft chuckle. “I’m pretty sure you’ll

make certain of that. You reporters can be pretty tenacious when it comes to getting a story.”

Giving Saul one last smile, Devon turned around and walked down the hallway. With each step, he had to force himself not to turn back.

* * * *

Saul downed a shot of whiskey, shivering as it burned a path down his throat. He swore he could immediately feel it affect him. Or maybe it just happened to be that it marked his third shot and he'd never had a high tolerance with alcohol. That still didn't stop him from signaling to the waitress for another.

Trey sat in the chair next to him. Since Chad called it a night a couple hours ago, the pair had become fast drinking buddies. Kip was at the table as well, but he had his tongue so far down some chick's throat, Saul doubted he noticed either one of them.

“Jaknue, Debon rally ikes ewe,” Trey slurred heavily.

“Huh?” Saul frowned, not having a Drunk-to-English translator handy.

“You know, Devon really likes you,” Trey tried

again, his face straining as if he had to concentrate on each syllable.

“Yeah, I can tell,” Saul replied sarcastically, paying the waitress as she brought their next round.

She smiled hopefully at Trey. The poor woman obviously didn't possess an inner gaydar because she'd been flirting with the goaltender all night long. She wasn't the only one either. With his blond hair and sweet smile, Trey had been turning the heads of several bar patrons.

Saul couldn't help but wonder why *he* wasn't attracted to Trey, however.

He sighed as he looked down at his drink. Who was he kidding? He hadn't been attracted to anyone since Devon had come into his life. Despite all the times the hockey player had pushed him away, Saul's attraction had continued to grow, too. The past few days, it'd got so bad that Saul had been forced to jack-off several times a day, just so he could function normally.

A hand brushed across his cheek, jerking him from his morose thoughts. Looking over, he was stunned to see that Trey had scooted closer. The younger man's eyes were glazed from drink and, if Saul weren't mistaken, a bit of passion, too.

“I mean Devon, really, really likes you,” Trey babbled as he continued to caress Saul’s face.

“You could have fooled me. Going by the way he’s been acting, I would have guessed he couldn’t even stand to be in the same room with me,” Saul replied thickly.

His mind scrambled for a way to discreetly pull away from Trey’s touch. He didn’t want to insult the man, but at the same time, Saul didn’t want to encourage him either.

Then he gave himself a mental shake of the head. He was probably just misreading things. There is no way in hell someone as sexy as Trey could ever be interested in plain old him. Trey probably was just....Oh boy! Trey’s hand drifted down and cupped Saul’s cock.

“I can see why Devon is so turned on by you,” Trey murmured before he dipped his head down to rain kisses along Saul’s throat. “You’re so hot. I could fuck you all night long.”

“That’s not saying much since it’s already two in the morning,” Saul teased, hoping some humor would lighten the mood.

Unfortunately it seemed to have the opposite effect. Trey only pressed his hand harder into Saul’s cock as he

continued to nuzzle his skin. Saul waited for the flare of passion to hit him, but he didn't even feel so much as a spark.

Crap! What was wrong with him? He had one of the most gorgeous men he'd ever met, coming on to him and all he could think about was Devon. It's not like he owed Devon a damn thing either. They were barely on speaking terms, let alone in a relationship. Yet, a part of Saul felt guilty for even allowing things with Trey to go this far.

"If Devon likes me so much, then what do you think he would say if he could see where your hand is right now?"

Trey jerked his hand away as if he'd touched a live wire. "Oh, shit! What am I doing?"

"It's okay. You've just had too much to drink," Saul soothed.

"That's no excuse. Not after all Devon's done for me." Trey let out a sob and buried his face in his hands.

Saul cast a glance around the bar, worried that someone might notice Trey's sudden change of moods. When he'd made the offhand remark about Devon, he'd only did it to make Trey back off a bit. He certainly hadn't meant to upset Trey that much.

“I’m sure you’ve done plenty for him, too. That’s what’s family is for,” Saul reasoned as he ran a comforting hand over Trey’s back.

“No, you don’t get it. Devon did more than just help me out, he risked everything for me. When he came in that night and found me all bloody, he helped clean up the mess. Then he made sure that nobody ever found out the truth.”

Horror filled Saul as the implication of Trey’s words hit him like a block of ice. He cast another gaze around the bar, dismayed when he noted that Kip had taken an interest in their conversation. Saul grabbed Trey roughly by the collar of the man’s shirt and gave it a good shake. “Shhh...you don’t know what you’re saying. You’re drunk.”

“But I do know what I’m saying,” Trey sobbed in that special way only too much booze could induce. “He and Chad, they came in, calmed Mom down and made it so nobody ever knew what happened to Dad.”

Shit! Saul needed to get Trey out of there pronto, before he blabbed anymore. The problem was he’d drunk too much himself to get behind a wheel. He thought about calling for a cab or phoning Devon. Saul immediately dismissed both options because it would

take too long for the ride to get there.

“Grab his coat and I’ll get my car,” Kip cut in as he untangled himself from the woman.

“Are you sure?” Saul asked, even as he started to help Trey to his feet.

“Yeah, we need to get him out of here before someone else hears him. I can drive since I haven’t had anything to drink.”

Come to think of it, Saul couldn’t recall Kip dinking anything heavier than a Coke all evening long. Saul nodded his thanks to Kip and the hockey player rushed off, leaving behind a very disappointed groupie. Saul glanced down at her, wondering if they should be worried about what she may have overheard. One look at her vacant expression let Saul know that she’d had too much booze to remember anything that’d gone on that night.

“Come on, big guy, let’s get you home,” he grunted as he struggled to get Trey to the door.

“I’m such a fuck up,” Trey rasped. “Devon gave up everything for me and I paid him back by making a pass at the only guy he’s ever cared for.”

Saul started to argue over the last part of Trey’s statement. Then he recalled the way Devon had looked

at him earlier, when they'd been alone in the hall. Saul knew the tenderness in Devon's expression couldn't be faked. So yeah, he was ready to admit that Devon had grown to care about him. Saul only hoped that him finally knowing the big family secret wouldn't make Devon change his mind and pull away. This time for good.

Chapter Nine

Devon barreled up the steps leading to Saul's house and burst through the door, without bothering to knock. "Trey!"

Saul came down the stairs, his hands held in the let's-all-be-calm gesture. "He's okay. I have him resting in my guest bedroom."

"*Resting?*" Devon echoed. He wondered, for the millionth time since Saul called him, how his baby brother had ended up drunk at Saul's. Now Devon was discovering the brat was also in Saul's bed? What in the hell was up with that?

"Yeah, he passed out as soon as I got him home," Saul explained.

"Oh," Devon replied as a small measure of relief went through him. That still didn't explain how the two men had grown so close over the past few hours that Saul felt compelled to take on the role of Trey's

caregiver though.

Unwanted Trey's comment came back, *Hey Saul, if Devon keeps turning you down for that private interview, just let me know. I'll be more than happy to give you an exclusive.* A sharp stab of jealousy and anger hit Devon. It hadn't taken the little jerk long to make a pass at Saul. Devon let out a snarl before storming to the edge of the stairs, "Trey! Get your ass out of bed and get down here."

"He's not going to hear you. He seemed pretty out of it when I left him," Saul protested.

Devon turned. "What exactly went down between you two tonight?"

Something flickered in Saul's gaze before a soft smile came over his lips. "Why, are you jealous?"

"Don't play games with me," Devon stepped in closer, his fingers practically itching with the need to reach out and touch Saul.

Saul wrinkled his nose and giggled. A sound that normally wouldn't come from the man. Devon sighed as he realized that Trey hadn't been the only one who had a bit too much to drink.

"Why don't we get you into bed, too?" Devon suggested before he grabbed Saul's hand and led him up

the stairs.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to hear you suggest that,” Saul declared hungrily.

“I’ll bet you said the same thing to Trey,” Devon couldn’t resist tossing out.

They reached the top of the steps and Saul tugged on Devon’s hand to make him stop. “That’s not how it is between us.”

Devon realized just how close they were standing together. All it would take was for him to slide his hand around Saul’s back and then he could finally have the man in his embrace. “Then how is it Trey ended up here with you?”

Saul tilted his head back so their gazes met. This time he was the one who moved in those final few inches. Devon stood stock still as Saul’s arms twined around his waist. “I did it to protect you. Trey kind of lost it and started talking.”

Alarmed, Devon sucked in a breath. “What did he say?”

“Nothing that I didn’t already suspect.”

“Did anyone else hear?”

“Just Kip. He was the one who helped me get Trey back to my house.” Saul nuzzled his cheek in to Devon’s

chest.

Somehow Devon's hands found their way to Saul's hair. He ran his fingers through the thick locks. "Do you think Kip will tell anyone what he heard tonight?"

"He said he wouldn't. I guess he doesn't want to risk losing his three best teammates or the Hawk's winning streak." Saul looked back up at Devon. "I won't tell anyone either."

Devon cupped his cheeks. "I already knew that. If you were going to betray me, you've had weeks to do so already. I still don't understand why though."

"Don't you get it, yet? I did it to protect you."

"Why? You had to know that they could have fired you if they found out you held back on a story, but you went ahead and did it anyway. It doesn't make sense."

"You still don't understand, do you? I did it because I care about you. More than some stupid story or my career. I know..." Saul trailed off and pressed his lips together, a flush coming over his cheeks.

"Go ahead, babe. Just tell me," Devon soothed, running the pad of his thumb over Saul's warm flesh.

"I know that we only met a month ago, but you've come to mean a lot to me," Saul blurted so quickly the words threatened to jumble together.

Devon smiled. Joy swept through him, washing away the nasty taste left behind by the whole Trey incident. It gave him the courage to finally admit what he'd been denying, even to himself. "I've fallen for you, too."

Saul's eyes rounded in surprise. "Really?"

"What can I say? Your persistence finally broke me down." Devon ran his hands down Saul's back, not stopping until he was cupping the man's ass. "Although, my desire to finally get inside *this* helped convince me, too."

A gleam came to Saul's eyes as he gave a breathy laugh. "You only want me for my body. I should have known."

Devon gave Saul's ass a hard squeeze. "I'll admit that was the first thing that attracted me to you, but I've also grown attracted to your smart wit, cute smile and the way you're so caring about others."

"I thought you said it was only a matter of time before I betrayed you," Saul said, his voice soft with hurt.

"I was an idiot for saying that. I was scared because in the back of my mind, I already knew that I was head over heels for you."

Saul looked up from under his lashes, his gaze dark filled with passion. “So does that mean you won’t run away this time?”

“Nothing could pull me away,” Devon promised before he let go so he could toe off his shoes and kick them to the side.

Taking Saul back into his arms, Devon swooped down and captured his lips in a hot kiss. Devon didn’t hold anything back, he poured his emotions into every nip, lick and caress. Pleasure shot straight to his cock when Saul let out a happy sigh and began to return the kiss with the same hunger.

“Please tell me you still have those supplies handy,” Devon said between passes.

“Yes, just like any other good, gay man, I have them in my bedside drawer. Right alongside all my porn, butt plugs and penis pumps.”

Devon pulled back to gaze down at Saul. “Are you serious?”

Saul gave him a goofy grin. “Nah, I just wanted to see what your reaction would be.”

“There’s never a boring moment when you’re around,” Devon shot back before he picked Saul up and threw the man over his shoulder.

Carrying him fireman style, Devon gave Saul's ass a firm slap. "Which room is yours?"

"What? Can't the know-it-all hockey player figure it out himself?" Saul quipped as he wiggled to get free.

Devon gave him another smack in a silent order to be still. "I'm sure I could eventually find it, but I don't think Trey would appreciate it if I picked the wrong room and we both tried to crawl into bed with him."

"I don't know, Trey did say I was cute."

That earned Saul another smack. "Don't even think about it. You belong to me now." Saul sucked in a breath, but given his current position, Devon couldn't see the other man's reaction.

"Do you really mean that?"

This time Devon opted for a soft caress as opposed to another smack. He smiled to himself when Saul moaned in response. "Yeah, and if you tell me where the damn bedroom is, I'll spend the rest of the night showing you."

"Down the hall, last door on the left." Saul paused. "Are you going to let me walk there on my own?"

"Nope," Devon replied, bluntly as he started toward the door.

"Oooookay," Saul drew out. "Although when I

dreamed of meeting a guy who swept me off my feet, I didn't think it would be so literal.”

True to his word, Devon carried Saul the entire way. Not letting the man down until they'd reached the foot of a huge, four-poster bed. Devon let out a moan as their bodies slid against each other—the hard outline of Saul's cock impossible to miss.

Even in the semi-dark, Devon could make out each detail of Saul. He took them in carefully, wanting to burn each small detail to memory.

Saul closed his eyes and swayed slightly as Devon ran a hand down his chest.

“It's been a while since I've done this, but I think we have to take off at least some clothes,” Saul teased lightly, his eyes still closed.

Saul's pink, swollen lips called to Devon and he couldn't resist going in for another taste. A muffled groan rumbled from Saul's chest as he thrust his tongue out to join in the action. Otherwise, he didn't move, allowing Devon to set the tone. A thrill of ownership went through Devon as he realized that Saul was so willing to submit control like that. It spoke of a trust that Devon never experienced until that moment.

Devon broke the kiss so he could pull the sweatshirt

off Saul. He took extra care to kiss each inch of newly exposed skin, paying special attention to Saul's nipples.

"Fuck, that's good," Saul moaned as he arched into Devon's mouth.

Devon swirled his tongue around Saul's nipple, smiling when he heard the hiss of pleasure from Saul. It was a good thing Trey was a heavy sleeper because Devon had a sneaky suspicion Saul was a screamer. Devon took off his own shirt, carelessly tossing it to the side, before he returned his attention back to Saul.

"Open your eyes," Devon ordered as he used a finger to trace a circle around one of Saul's nipples.

A small whimper passed through Saul's lips, but he obeyed, his lids fluttering open. The passion burning in those normally soft eyes proved to be Devon's final undoing. He dropped to his knees and started to fumble with the zipper of Saul's pants.

"I have to taste you, now," Devon panted as he continued to fumble with Saul's fly. Why was it clothing never wanted to cooperate while in the heat of passion? Luckily, Saul had pity on Devon and helped. Saul reached down and undid his pants, then let them drop to the ground, his underwear soon following. Saul kicked them out of the way before timidly stretching a hand out

to brush through Devon's hair.

"If you could only see how fucking gorgeous you look right now," Saul breathed.

Devon eyed up Saul's cock and wanted to argue that *it* was the most gorgeous thing in the room. Long and thick, it curled up to Saul's tight stomach. Devon ran his thumb over the soft head, marveling at how Saul only seemed to get better with each passing second.

"Mine," Devon growled, not caring that the declaration probably made him come off like a selfish caveman.

He stuck his tongue out and lapped at the tip, savoring the slight burst of pre-cum that filled his mouth. Devon let out a moan of satisfaction at the salty taste before he parted his lips and slowly took all of Saul in.

"Oh, God," Saul cried, his hips thrusting forward.

Devon forced his throat to relax so he didn't gag at the intrusion. While Saul may be a smaller build, his cock was plenty large enough it took Devon a few minutes to adjust. After that first thrust, Saul seemed to sense that because he stilled and let Devon take control again.

It didn't take long for Devon to find a good rhythm.

He used one hand to massage Saul's balls while he stretched the other one up to Saul's mouth. Saul took the hint, his lips parting to take in one of Devon's fingers. The sensation of Saul's velvet tongue swirling around his digit, made Devon moan as his own cock jerked in anticipation.

Once Saul had the finger good and wet, Devon slid it free and moved it down to the puckered opening of Saul's ass. Still sucking the reporter's dick, Devon slid the finger inside. He only went to the first knuckle, not wanting to push things too fast until they had the lube out. That was all Saul needed though, because he let out a wail as his cock emptied into Devon's mouth.

Devon pulled back slightly so he could savor the taste of Saul's semen. It coated his tongue before slowly sliding down his throat. The entire time he continued to work Saul's sack, wanting to milk every drop from his man.

"Fuck me," Saul pleaded.

Devon gave him one last lick before he stood up. "Grab the stuff and lie down."

While Saul scrambled to do as he asked, Devon pulled off the rest of his clothes. By then his cock was so hard it'd reached the painful stage. He carefully avoided

touching it, not wanting to add anymore stimulation until absolutely necessary. As it was, the sight of Saul sprawled out and naked on the bed was nearly enough to push Devon over the edge.

Devon climbed into the bed, nearly pulling face plant when his knees sank into the mattress. “This has to be the softest bed I’ve ever been in.”

Saul laughed as he opened the condom wrapper. “It came with the house. If you want, we can go out tomorrow and pick up something firmer.”

The mention of them doing something together in the future warmed Devon. He reached out and smoothed his hands up Saul’s thighs, spreading the man’s legs so he could get at him better. “I think a new mattress would be a good idea. I plan on us spending a lot of time in this bed.”

“Promise?” Saul asked as he handed the condom to Devon who quickly slid it over his erection.

“I guarantee it.” Devon bit his lip, his own touch nearly making him blow his load. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d been this worked up.

Then he spotted where’s Saul’s hand had gone and Devon groaned. “Fuck, are you trying to kill me?”

Saul gave a sexy moan as he started to pump two,

heavily lubed fingers into his own ass. “I need you inside me, now. I don’t want to waste any more time.”

Devon grabbed the lube and slicked even more over his erection as he watched Saul stuff a third finger inside. The man’s once flaccid cock started to stir again, showing off his amazing recovery time.

“Are you ready?” Devon asked, his voice thick with passion.

“Yeah,” Saul nodded vigorously as he moved his fingers out and hooked his hand under his knees. He then pulled his legs up, further exposing himself to Devon.

Pausing briefly to press a soft kiss to one of Saul’s calves, Devon then lined the tip of his cock at Saul’s stretched opening. Saul let out a soft whimper as Devon surged in, but a quick glance at the man’s expression revealed only pleasure, not pain.

“No regrets,” Devon vowed as he started to fuck Saul in quick, hard thrusts

“None,” Saul agreed, his hand reaching to grab his own cock so he could stroke himself.

“I am going to kick Trey’s ass though,” Devon said as he shifted his thrusts slightly to he could rub Saul’s sweet spot.

Saul yelled out a loud cry of pleasure before he panted, “Why?”

“If I know anything about my brother, he made a pass at you tonight. Trey always gets frisky when he’s drunk.”

“Yet, it’s still you who ended up fucking me,” Saul replied before he let out another yell.

“And I’ll be the only one from now on, won’t I?”

“No one, but you. I promise.”

No sooner had that declaration left his lips than Saul came, screaming Devon’s name so loud all of Battle Creek probably heard him. He shot off, his hot spunk, splattering on both of them. He thrust up against Devon and at the same time, the walls of his ass clamped down on Devon’s dick. That was all the added stimulation Devon needed. He groaned, his head falling back as he filled the condom.

Saul ran his hands up Devon’s back. “Does this mean you’ll stay the night?”

“Babe, I’m not leaving you ever again.”

The smile Devon received in response to that statement was the best present anyone could ever give him.

Chapter Ten

Saul sat at his desk, completely lost in the article on the Hawk's latest win. He didn't realize that he no longer was alone in the office until Amy stormed up and hit him on the back of the head. "Ouch," Saul said, sarcastically as he rubbed the sting away.

Amy planted her hands on her hips and glared down at him. He had to admit with her severe cut, pinched face squinty eyes and powder-blue pantsuit, she came off a bit scary. What he didn't understand was why all her hate was currently directed at him.

"I just wanted to make sure at least some blood is going to that part of your body as opposed to everything going to your dick. Including your common sense," she snapped.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I'm referring to the fact that you're not doing your job because it may affect your current boyfriend."

Dread filled Saul as he realized she could only be referring to one thing. He still played the dumb card though. “I don’t understand.”

“After I had my police source look up Brock, I got curious and decided to dig a little deeper.” She held up a thick file. “Do you want to know what all this is?”

“Not particularly.”

She went on anyway. “It’s police reports for several domestic disputes at the Canton house. It goes back for years. Seems like Daddy Canton liked to beat his wife.”

“So what? A lot of husbands hit their wives.” *Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck!* This was not good at all. Amy was too damn close to the truth. Saul didn’t worry about his career. While it would suck to lose his job, it wouldn’t be nearly as catastrophic to what could happen to Devon, Trey and Chad.

“I also looked at the coroner’s and police report on the father’s suicide.” She slammed the file on his desk. “Although they could never prove it, there were some in the department who never believed it was a suicide.”

“And what do you think?” Saul asked, his gaze locked in on the damn pile of papers.

“I think that nobody acts as skittish around the press like those boys do unless they have something big to

hide.”

“Maybe they’re still gun-shy because of the scandal that followed after Trey and Devon came out,” Saul offered out of desperation.

She snorted. “Please, that’s old news. Plus, Trey never came out on his own. He was booted out of the closet when one of his ex-boyfriends blabbed to that gossip rag. Devon came out after, but only so Trey didn’t have to bear the heat by himself.”

Saul floundered around for something...anything that could sway her. “Yeah, but it was still really intense there for a while. Devon and his brothers probably were turned off to the press for good.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You should see your face when you say his name?”

All the air seemed to leave Saul’s lungs as he fought to keep his expression innocent. “Who?”

She smacked him upside the head again. “Don’t *who* me. I happen to know he’s spent the last three nights at your house.”

“Have you been stalking me?” Saul demanded, a bit outraged.

“No, I’ve been stalking Devon. I make it a point to always know where my next story is at.”

“He’s not just a story,” Saul shot back angrily.

“Whatever he may be to you, I hope it was worth it because when Frank finds out about this, he’s going to can your ass,” she returned, referring to their boss.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe sometimes a good story isn’t worth destroying someone’s life over? You don’t even know Devon, Trey and Chad, yet you’re willing to ruin them just so you can get a flashy headline.”

She paused, her gaze nearly penetrating his skull as she studied him. “You know the whole truth about what happened that night, don’t you?”

Saul thought about denying it, but realized they’d gone way beyond that point. “Yeah, Devon told me a couple nights ago.”

Amy slowly shook her head. “Why? What is it about that man that would make you just throw everything away?”

“Because they had a damn good reason for doing what they did.” Saul sighed, his chest aching at the thought of all the brothers had been through.

There was a long, heavy pause before Amy ran a hand through her hair. “Fine, call them in here.”

“What for?” Saul asked suspiciously. How quickly

he'd come to distrust the press, too.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to put the screws to Devon's thumbs or anything. Even without a statement from them, I already have enough to run a story. However, I not a totally heartless bitch. If you think there is a good reason for me to hold this story back, then I'm willing to listen to reason. I just want to hear it straight from the source.”

Hope blossomed in Saul chest until he realized it may not be so easy to convince Devon and his brothers to share their story with Amy. For years, they'd bonded together, forming a protective shield of secrets. Until recently, they'd never let a newcomer in. Now, Saul was going to have to ask them to not only reveal everything to someone else, but a person from a newspaper.

Saul knew he had to find a way to convince Devon to talk though. Not only did Devon's future ride on it, but so did Saul's. With shaking hands, he picked up the phone and dialed the number.

It took Devon a half hour to get there and he didn't show up alone. Trey and Chad flanked him and they didn't look any happier to be there than Devon. Chad and Devon both wore hard scowls while Trey nibbled

nervously on his bottom lip.

“Why should we trust her?” Chad demanded as he glared at Amy.

“Because you don’t have a choice,” Saul explained with a calmness he didn’t come close to feeling.

“No offense, but why should we trust *you*?” Chad countered.

“Because I do. If Saul says this is the best solution, then I believe him,” Devon cut in.

A warmth spread over Saul at those words. He ducked his head to hide the pleased blush that was certain to be on his cheeks. Both Chad and Amy let out disgusted groans as they rolled their eyes.

“I’ll tell the story,” Trey offered, shocking everyone in the room. “After all, it was because of me that everything went wrong.”

Devon shook his head. “Nothing and I mean *nothing* that bastard ever did to you was your fault.”

Amy surprised Saul when she pulled out a chair and patted it, her face growing soft with sympathy. “Sit down and tell me everything.”

Trey took one step forward before he hesitated, his fingers nervously fiddling with the zipper of his coat. “Are you going to record the conversation?”

“Not if you don’t want me to,” she assured him.

That seemed to placate him. Trey took the chair so he and Amy were facing each other. “You probably already know I was eighteen when Dad died.”

Amy simply nodded.

Trey continued, “When the night started, he was in a great mood. I’d been drafted by a NHL team, both Chad and Devon had been playing well for their own teams, plus Brock hadn’t bothered us in a few months.” Trey hurried to add, “Not that I didn’t want to hear from him or anything. Drug addict or not, I still love him. It was just my father who didn’t want anything to do with him anymore.”

“I understand,” Amy assured as she reached out and took both of Trey’s hands.

Saul could see her hard outer shell dissolve under all the vulnerability Trey was shooting off. Not that Saul blamed her. There weren’t many who wouldn’t be moved by the shame, terror and sadness in the younger man’s blue-eyed gaze. While he may look strong on the ice, at that moment, Trey resembled a cornered stray that was just waiting for the next kick to come.

“Then the phone call came,” Trey ducked his head, but not before Saul detected a glimmer of tears. “It was

some reporter from the Detroit Times. Steven, my ex-boyfriend, had spilled to some reporter all the details of our relationship and they wanted an official comment from me.”

“I still say they paid the asshole to out you like that,” Chad growled.

Saul didn’t doubt that for a moment. There were some reporters that would do anything to get a good story. No wonder the Cantons didn’t trust anyone from that profession.

“Unfortunately for me, my dad was the one who answered the phone. He—” Trey took in a hitching breath. “He, lost it. Way worse than ever before and he grabbed a hockey stick and started to hit me with it.”

“Oh, God,” Amy breathed, her face growing pale. “Did your mother see him doing this?”

Trey gave a short, jerky nod. “At first she did what she normally did. Just stood in the corner and cry. She would always plead with him to stop, but she never actually went so far as to do anything physical to help us.”

Saul glanced over and saw unshed tears in Devon’s eyes. Getting up, he went over and wrapped his arms around Devon’s waist. It was little comfort, but at the

moment, it was all Saul had to offer.

“The entire time he was hitting me, he was yelling that he wasn’t going to let some faggot ruin things for him. That after all the hard work he put in, he’d be damned if my abnormal ways would make a bad name for the family. Then he said he’d make it so I would never want to take it up the ass again. He jerked down my pants and used the grip of the stick to...”

Trey sobbed, the rest of his words lost. Amy let out a sound of dismay as she reached out and pulled him tight to her chest. “Don’t worry, sweetie. You don’t have to go on. I get what he did to you.”

“I thought for sure he was going to kill me. After a few minutes, I even begged him to. That’s when my mom came back into the kitchen. Until then, I hadn’t even realized she’d left. Dad kept his gun in the bedroom and that’s where she must have went because she had the Colt in her hand. She didn’t even shout out a warning. She just pulled the trigger. While she may have been able to stand by while he beat on us, he took things too far that night. She finally got the nerve to protect one of us.”

“What happened after that?” Amy asked, tears streaming down her face. She had yet to let Trey go.

Devon spoke up. “Mom called me and Chad. When we got there, it was like walking into a horror film. Mom was sobbing, there was blood and gore all over the kitchen. The worst part was Trey though. He was curled up into ball, hiding under the kitchen table. There was blood all over him, too. Some of it Dad’s, some of it his own. I tried to talk to Trey, but he was out of it. His eyes were vacant, like he’d just checked out. Finally, I was able to get through to him enough and I coaxed him to come out. Chad took him the clinic while I helped clean things up and fabricate the suicide story.”

“And the police just bought it?” Amy pressed.

“I think some of them strongly suspected the truth, but they were never able to prove it,” Devon said.

“They never found out about Trey’s injuries?”

“A friend of the family worked for the clinic. They made sure to keep things quiet,” Chad supplied, his voice catching a bit.

Trey gazed up at her. “Please, you can’t run this story. Even though my mom is dead, Chad and Devon could still get into trouble for covering everything up and lying to the police. They’ve already lost so much because of me. I couldn’t stand for them to go to prison, too.”

Amy locked gazes with Saul.

He mouthed *please* to her.

She pressed her lips together before she gathered up her file and handed it over to Trey. “Your secret is safe with me. That bastard already hurt you enough while he was alive, I’ll be damned if he will cause you any pain after his death.”

Trey clutched the file to his chest. “Thank you, Amy. I swear I’ll make it up to you someday.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “We’ll just say you owe me a favor and leave it at that.”

* * * *

Later that night, Devon laid in bed with Saul. The scent of their recent lovemaking hung in the air and sweat still clung to their bodies. That still didn’t stop Devon from reaching out to pull Saul close to his chest.

“That was fantastic,” Saul hummed as he wiggled in deeper.

Devon totally agreed. After yet another win, he’d gone home and proceeded to make love to his man, not once, but twice.

“I can’t think of a moment when I’ve been happier,”

Devon admitted.

“Me either,” Saul agreed. “I have one question though.”

“Just one? You’re starting to lose your touch,” Devon teased.

“When did you start loving it again? Hockey, I mean.”

Devon hesitated. Wow, he’d never even considered that question himself.

When he stayed silent, Saul pressed on, “I pretty much figured that’s what happened to your careers. After what occurred with Trey, it only makes sense that you all would resent anything that represented your dad. But in the past few weeks, as I’ve watched you bond with the team and start playing better again, I can tell you’ve fallen in love with the sport once more.”

“I can’t answer for Chad or Trey, but I think it happened when I fell in love with you,” Devon confessed, his heart pounding in fear.

He and Saul had only known each other for such a short time that Devon hoped he wasn’t rushing things. Devon held in a breath as Saul shifted in his arms so they were facing each other.

“Do you really mean that?” Saul asked, a hint of a

smile on his face.

Too afraid to say anything more, Devon just nodded. Saul's grin grew larger before he leaned up to give Devon a quick kiss.

“Good, because I love you, too.”

Joy filled Devon as he gave Saul a tight squeeze. “I meant what I said our first night together. You're mine now and I'm never going to leave you.”

“And I won't ever leave you,” Saul promised in return.

Devon closed his eyes, safe in the knowledge that this was one story that truly did have a happily ever after.

About the Author

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. Born and raised in Michigan, she loves all things about the state, from the frigid winters to the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.

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