



*Stephani Hecht*  
**CUP**  
**CHECK**



After years of hard work and sacrifice, Kip Cooper's dream of playing for the NHL is finally within reach. Soon he'll be able to leave behind his farm team to taste fame, fortune and the respect that comes with being number one. So he's not about to allow anyone or anything get in the way. But try telling that to his libido, because despite everything, he can't keep his mind off his teammate, Sergei. Too bad Sergei is young and openly gay... and Kip isn't. When a chance encounter leads to a night of passion, Kip realizes he has to make a choice: Sergei or his dreams.



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Cup Check

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Cup Check  
Blue Line Hockey Three

By

Stephani Hecht



## *Dedication*

*To all those who are brave enough to embrace  
who they are.*



## Chapter One

It took two minutes for Sergei to realize the Cougars were out for blood. In particular, they were out for *his* blood and they weren't going to be happy until they got at least two pints.

Had the Cougars been a group of older ladies, Sergei wouldn't have minded...much. Hell, he'd have even taken the real-life wild version. These Cougars eyeing him up were neither. Instead, they were a group of undereducated, bullies who just happened to know how to skate and handle a puck.

Sergei took in gasping breaths as he perched on the edge of the bench and watched the ice. He'd just come off his first shift, but he could already tell how the game was going to go down. His team, the Hawks would win. If there wasn't at least a three goal spread between them in the end, he'd be shocked. That win would come at a huge price, however. The Cougars had a rep for being a mean team and they'd be doing their best to live up to that reputation.



Almost as if answering that unspoken cue, a Cougar checked one of Sergei's teammates. A center named Lance, the man stood well over six-three and that was before he laced up the skates. He still wasn't a match for the Cougar defenseman. He slammed into Lance's left flank with what appeared to be the force of a pissed off bull in a matador ring.

Lance tried to react, but he was already too late. He did a half-flip. It looked both awkward, yet strangely graceful at the same time and Sergei found himself holding his breath in anticipation. The crowd let out a collective groan as Lance landed hard on his side and didn't move.

The Hawk bench jumped to their feet, all of them yelling a blast of obscenities. Sergei joined them, tossing a few Russian ones he'd picked up from his father. The Cougars responded with a bit of jaw action of their own and before long, things progressed to some pretty impressive smack talking.

Usually content to let the players fight it out, this time the refs moved in quickly. With a team like the Cougars, they couldn't allow things to get out of hand. They even tried to make Kip, the Hawk's team captain, skate back to the bench, even though he kept trying to check on Lance, who'd yet to move.

It wasn't until the team trainer and coach came



onto the ice and were by Lance's side that Kip relented. He skated over, but instead of climbing over the boards, he searched out Sergei. Looping his fingers into the cage of Sergei's mask, he pulled him close until their faces were inches apart.

"You be careful out there, kid," Kip ordered.

As always, as soon as Sergei found himself the center of Kip's attention he became an instant idiot. He couldn't help himself, all Sergei had to do was take one look at those deep, blue eyes and he went from an IQ of 138 to duhhhhh in two seconds flat. So instead of answering, Sergei merely blinked a few times as an oh-boy-he-knows-I'm-alive chant danced in his head.

Those distracting eyes narrowed as Kip gave Sergei's cage another shake. "Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, be careful," Sergei murmured, still a bit caught up in his lustful thoughts.

A lock of Kip's blond hair had slipped from the front of his helmet and drooped over his blue eyes. Sergei had the suicidal urge to reach out and tuck it back into place before he used a finger to trace Kip's full, oh-so-kissable lips. Yeah, like that would go over real well. While he was out, Sergei knew better than to call too much attention to his sexuality. Plus, Kip happened to be the straightest guy he knew. So while they may be close buddies,



there was no way in hell he'd welcome that kind of attention from Sergei.

Kip huffed in irritation. "I'm serious, Sergei. These bastards have it out for you. It's been even worse since you and Trey did that interview for that gay magazine. Now they really want a piece of you and not in a good way."

Okay, make that Sergei *usually* knew better than to call attention to his sexuality. He'd be damned if he felt bad about the interview. It'd been his and Trey's way to reach out to young gay athletes. A way to let the teens know that they weren't alone. So if he had to take some slack, then let the bastards bring it on. It's not like they could do anything that hadn't already been done to him. Besides, Sergei was done playing the scared, rabbit role. While he may not be the biggest guy in the league, he'd be damned if he'd continue to be their doormat any longer.

Not that Kip would understand any of that. While he didn't seem to mind being on the same team as three gay men, somehow Sergei didn't see the guy marching in any pride parades or anything.

Kip made a frustrated sound as he gave Sergei another shake. "Are you even paying attention?"

"Not really. I kind of drifted for a moment," Sergei admitted.

"What they just did to Lance is nothing



compared to what they have planned for you.”

“That’s nothing new. Even when I was on their team, they hated me.” Sergei shivered as he remembered some of the more terrifying experiences he’d suffered through during the brief time he wore the Cougars’ jersey. His gaze drifted over to Lance. He knew full well the pain the guy was no doubt feeling. Sergei used to be a walking bruise. One time, he’d been checked so hard, he’d pissed blood for a few days. That hit had come during a practice, too.

Lance stirred a bit before shakily sitting up. The crowd broke out into relieved applause. He wobbled on his butt for a few moments before Coach and the trainer helped him to his feet. They half-led and half-dragged him off the ice. Bypassing the bench, they went straight to the locker room.

“Great, he’s our biggest enforcer. Now he’ll be out the rest of the game,” Kip said.

“At least he’s okay,” Sergei pointed out.

“Yeah, but he’s going to be pissed that he missed out on a chance to get into some good scuffles. He’s the only one I know who likes to fight more than the Cantons.”

Since Kip still held onto his facemask, Sergei had to strain his head to look down at the end of the ice, but sure enough, Trey Canton was full of attitude. Before he’d become a Hawk, Sergei had



never seen a goalie get into so many fights. Trey's brothers, Chad and Devon were egging on the Cougars as well. Devon even went so far as to mimic some rude innuendos with his stick.

God, how Sergei wished he were more like the Devon and Trey. Not only were they tough on the ice, but they also didn't give a damn what others thought of them being gay. While Sergei never hid his sexuality and had taken a huge step by doing that interview, he still lived in fear of retribution, whereas Devon and Trey had this whole fuck-it vibe going. They never cowered, even when facing the Cougar assholes. Since they tended to be a tad overprotective of their teammates, they'd do their best to make sure they didn't mess with Sergei, too.

"The Cantons can't be everywhere on the ice," Kip lectured as if sensing Sergei's thoughts.

"I can handle myself."

Even as Sergei made that claim, the captain of the Cougars skated by and sliced a finger over his throat in a threatening gesture. The entire time, his hateful glare burned into Sergei. A shiver of fear slid down Sergei's spine as he recalled the time the captain had pinned him down to the ice during a scrimmage. While Sergei had managed to get away, it wasn't until after the Cougar had delivered a few rib-bruising punches. Going by the look he currently gave Sergei, that incident



had just been a small taste for what he really wanted to do.

It was a good thing Kip didn't have supernatural hearing, or the sound of Sergei's pounding heart would have given away his fear. When Kip just stared without saying anything, Sergei realized his face must have given him away. Then he saw the flash of pity go through Kip's gaze and Sergei felt a surge of anger.

"What more do you want from me? I agreed to wear this damn facemask, I'm making sure to keep my head up, just like you ordered. The only option left would be for you to cover me up in bubble wrap."

Kip gave Sergei a dismissive once over. "You could try growing a few inches."

Maybe it was the Canton's influence. Or perhaps it was just the fact that Sergei was sick of being picked on for his height. Whatever the reason, he somehow found his own dose of fuck-it attitude.

"Nobody's ever complained about my lack of inches before," he popped off with a cocky grin.

Kip's eyes flared with emotion that Sergei couldn't quite place. If Sergei had to guess, he would go with anger. Not that such was anything new. It seemed he always managed to piss off the captain.

For a brief, pulse-pounding moment, he



wondered if Kip knew about Sergei's crush. From his experience, most straight guys didn't embrace the idea of a gay man being attracted to them. Sure, they'd go all PC and be friends, but to actually have another man lusting all over them was a whole new ball of yarn and the men sometimes got downright viscous. Because of that, Sergei learned long ago to just keep to himself and not get too friendly with his teammates, regardless of what team he played for. It'd only been recently that he'd let down his guard enough to let Kip become his buddy and now he may have blown it with one smartass comment.

"Just a bit of advice, I wouldn't talk that way to any of the Cougars," Kip warned, his eyes narrowing.

Sergei swallowed hard. "From the way you're acting, I guess it wasn't a good idea to toss those comments your way either."

Kip let go of Sergei's cage and gave his helmet an affection tap. "Don't worry, we're good."

They never got to finish the exchange because the ref blew the whistle, marking the beginning of play.

"Change it up," the assistant coach yelled.

He groaned before he swung his leg over the boards. Time for his line to go out for another shift. Kip sent him another warning look, but that was all he could do since it was his turn to ride the



bench.

Sergei skated out to the right side of the blue line and faced off against a Cougar offense man. When the man curled his lip and growled, Sergei resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Seriously, did the jerk have to dish so much drama? Next would be coming the homophobic slur in 3...2...1...

“Hey, princess, where are your figure skates?”

The Cougar was an older guy who’d been one of Sergei’s main tormentors when he’d been on the team. Sergei pressed his lips together and refused to be baited, although he mentally ticked off a few points for the guy’s predictability and lack of originality.

Sergei forced himself to push aside all other thoughts and focus on the game. The dim of the crowd faded away, the chill from the ice left and he even managed to ignore the next handful of slurs that were thrown his way.

The sharp report of the whistle marked the beginning of play. The puck slapped down on the ice and after that, everything moved on fast forward. Sergei glanced over to see who won the faceoff. The Cougar opposite of him moved in. Using the distraction, he slid the blade of his stick in between Sergei’s legs. Panic surged through Sergei as he realized this encounter would not be ending on a good note for him. He tried to back up, but it was already too late. The stick came up



and slammed into his groin.

Even though he wore a damn, good cup, pain still sliced through his body. His stomach rolled with nausea as he went down on one knee, a cold sweat breaking out over his body. His vision swam for a few minutes as he forced himself to take in several deep breaths.

Much to his chagrin, the game continued around him. Silly him to think that anyone would be concerned by the poor right-winger who just swallowed his own nuts. Anger mixed with outrage surged through him, giving him the power to work through the pain still spiraling through his body.

Fine, if the refs wouldn't make that asshole Cougar pay for the penalty, Sergei would, the only way he knew how—by scoring some goals. He staggered to his feet and scrambled to catch up with the play.

The first few strides were rough, but once he reached the Cougar end of the ice, he'd worked out most of the pain. By the time he got back into position, the Hawk's center had the puck. Most importantly, the asshole, cup-checking, Cougar was completely out of position, which allowed Sergei to get behind the opposition's defense. Not even the goalie paid him any mind, probably assuming Sergei was still rolling around, singing soprano.



*Perfect.* Sergei banged his stick a couple times on the ice to indicate he was open. The center smiled before he passed the puck. Sergei neatly caught it and, in one fluid movement, shot it at the net.

The goalie tried to block it, but was too late. It sailed past his outstretched blocker and hit the back of the net. The red light came on as the horn blasted loudly. The crowd erupted into cheers. Sergei threw his arms up in the air, a huge grin splitting his face.

His line came up and smacked the top of his helmet by way of congratulations before they skated over to the rest of the team. Before Sergei climbed over the bench, he exchanged high fives with the rest of the Hawks. Kip was last, he looped his fingers into Sergei's mask and pulled them close until their helmets clacked together.

Sergei forgot how to breathe as he found himself locked into Kip's blue-eyed gaze. Already high with adrenaline, Sergei's body buzzed as a dash of arousal hit him, too. Then he heard them. The two words that he'd come to live for. The ones that made him work so hard and push himself beyond all his limits.

"Good boy."

Warmth flooded Sergei at the praise. Just the way Kip said them, in his low sensual voice never failed to turn Sergei on. Moreover, it made him



feel like he could take on the world. Nothing mattered more to him than knowing he'd earned Kip's approval.

*If only he weren't straight. I could easily fall in love with him.*

Kip smiled before letting Sergei go. He gave Sergei's helmet another pat and repeated, "Good boy."

*Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? Straight or not, I'm already a goner for him.*

Devon Canton skated up. "That'll show that asshole not to piss you off."

Devon's twin, Chad, joined them. "Yeah, Sergei. Not very many guys could shake off a cup check like that."

"Thanks," Sergei said.

He climbed over the boards and took a seat on the bench. While the compliments from the Canton brothers had been nice, they in no way compared to the feeling he got from Kip's praise.

The rest of the game passed without any further injuries. At least on Sergei's part. Chad got into a pretty good fight with the cup-checker. As always, it wasn't Chad who walked away bloody. By the time the refs called an end to the fight, the Cougar had a bloody nose and fat lip. Of course, that resulted in Chad being booted for the rest of the game, but since the score was already 6-0 in the Hawk's favor, that didn't matter much.

When the final buzzer sounded, the cheer from



the stands rang louder than usual. Both because the Cougars were their biggest rival and because the win assured the Hawk's a place in the playoffs. Something the team hadn't managed to do in a decade.

The team whooped in excitement. While Sergei joined in the celebration, he couldn't help but dart glances in Kip's direction. The captain took off his helmet and ran a hand through his sweat-slicked, blond hair. He looked over at Sergei and grinned as he held up two fingers, indicating the number of goals Sergei scored in the game. Sergei grinned and returned the gesture, since Kip had garnered the same amount of points.

Cup check aside, Sergei decided that this had to be one of the best games ever.



## Chapter Two

Kip sat down in front of his locker and began to unlace his skates. His nose twitched as the usual odors of the decades old room assaulted him. The fresher stench of sweat, wet hockey equipment and the insides of skate boots, combated with the older smells of mold, rot and what he felt pretty sure was asbestos.

The starting goalie, Trey Canton, waddled over and took his usual spot next to Kip. His goalie mask was flipped up to reveal his face, the usual youthfulness marred with a black eye that he'd earned at the last game. While many goalies stood back and left the fighting up to the other players, Trey lived to get into scums.

"Only two goals tonight? You're slipping, Captain," Trey teased as he began to take off his equipment.

"It's two more than you got tonight."

Trey paused in taking off his helmet. "Hey, I shut out the other team, so I did my part. I may be



the best goalie in the league, but not even I can score while protecting the net."

Kip snorted. "Please, you were lucky if they got ten good solid shots on goal."

"But they were quality shots. On one of them I even had to exert myself to block it."

"Let's not forget the nice bruise you left on that Cougar when you slashed his calves."

Trey's eyes narrowed. "The fuck deserved it for what he did to Sergei. That was a cheap shot he took."

Kip's stomach clenched at the memory of Sergei crumpling to the ice. Every time they faced off against the Cougars, Kip worried for the safety of younger man. While Sergei may be one of the fastest skaters in any hockey league, he was smaller than most players. That alone would have made him a target. Add in his sexuality, and the kid may as well have a neon kick-me sign plastered to his back.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. Yet, that's how it still worked most of the time in professional sports. While he and his teammates had no problem accepting Devon, Trey and Sergei, it wasn't the same with the rest of the league. One of the reasons why Sergei had been traded to the Hawks had been because of the harsh treatment he received from the Cougars. Even now, they had it out bad for the kid.



Kip allowed his gaze to drift over to Sergei. The forward was deep into conversation with Chad and didn't seem to be aware that he was the center of Kip's attention. That allowed Kip to have one of those rare moments where he could look his fill.

Sergei had stripped off his jersey and chest pads and wore just his lower equipment and a grey tee. Sweat dampened the shirt, making it mold to his body. While Sergei may be thin, hours of training had left his body tight with muscles. Kip's gaze traced the man's pecs and abdomen as he wondered what it would be like to be able to peel away the rest of Sergei's clothes to expose all of his body for appraisal.

One time, Kip had caught a brief glimpse of a tattoo marking Sergei's right hip. The sighting had been brief, not nearly long enough for Kip to make out. Now, he had a burning desire to know every dip and whirl of that ink on Sergei's skin. Would Sergei be ticklish there, or would he moan under the touch?

Kip blinked a few times and forced himself to look away. Thoughts like that would only get him in trouble. While such urges were far from new to him, he'd worked too long and hard at keeping them at bay to let some cute blond throw him off track just as all of Kip's dreams were within his grasp.

He started to take his equipment off in quick



angry motions. Trey watched him in a silence that Kip knew was too good to last. Sure enough, not two minutes passed before Trey opened his pie hole.

"I don't blame you. He's really good looking."

"Who?" Kip grunted, deciding to play dumb.

"Sergei. He has that cute, innocent thing going for him."

"Really? I never noticed," Kip lied.

Trey's cocked brow and smirk said he didn't buy it. "Yeah, he's pretty sexy in his own way. If I went for that kind of guy, I'd be all over him."

"You better not let your cop boyfriend hear that."

"I said *if*," Trey stressed. "Personally, I happen to like my men older."

"Then why are you going on and on about Sergei?" Kip snapped as he shot worried glances around. While the locker room was pretty loud, that didn't guarantee they wouldn't be overheard.

"I'm just saying I can see why you have it so bad for him."

Kip froze, horror coursing through his body as Trey's words hit like a kick to the nuts. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. I'm straight," Kip said, his heart hammering so loud it was a wonder the Cougars didn't hear it two locker rooms over.

"Yeah, you keep saying that, but I'm not buying



it. Any more than I believe that you're sleeping with any of those women you pick up at the bar."

All the oxygen seemed to be sucked from the smelly room as Kip gaped at the goalie. How Trey had managed to see right through the shield Kip had so painstakingly created was both unbelievable and terrifying.

"I'm nothing like you or Devon," Kip said, his voice tight.

"You're right about that. Unlike you, Devon and I aren't afraid to embrace who we are. Shit, even Sergei isn't scared and he's a year younger than me, which means you have six years on him."

Trey did have a point, Sergei never hid who he was. That bravery had earned him a stick between the legs, too. It'd also landed him a spot on a farm team when in all rights Sergei should be playing for the NHL. That was something Kip just couldn't risk happening to himself. No matter how hard it was to deny the growing attraction he felt for Sergei.

He leveled a hard glare at Trey. "Look, I have nothing against you and Devon for being gay. It's just not who I am."

For once, the normal cocky expression faded from Trey's face as his gaze grew soft and almost...sad? Whatever emotion it was, it had Kip squirming more than if he'd faced off against the



entire Cougar lineup.

"Yeah, and you want to know something else you're not?" Trey asked his tone serious.

"What?"

"You're not happy and you're never going to be until you stop running away."

Kip jerked, the words so close to the truth it hurt. He'd never backed away from a fight before, but things were getting way too personal. Kip ripped off the last of his equipment and stood.

"Thank you for your words of wisdom, Mother Teresa, but I'm due in Coach's office," Kip drawled.

If Trey had a smartass reply, Kip didn't hear it.

Twenty minutes later when Kip returned to the now empty locker room, his mood hadn't improved. If anything, it'd taken a nosedive. He'd just received the worst news. The Hawks would be playing against the Cougars in the first round of the playoffs. While Kip knew before that such had been a real possibility, he'd kept hoping his biggest fear wouldn't come true. Now it had and that meant they might have to deal with the goons for up to seven games.

Goons who wanted nothing more than to have another taste of Sergei's pain. Kip's gaze darted over to Sergei's locker. While he had long gone home, Kip still felt the presence of the other man



as if he were standing next to him. Not surprising, given that Sergei was never far from his mind anymore. It'd gotten to the point where Kip was having nightly dreams about the man.

To be so close to something he desired only to have said thing be hands off was its own special kind of torture. If that wasn't the story of Kip's life. He ran a hand through his hair with a deep sigh before he made his way over to his locker. He opened the battered, faded, red door and his gaze landed onto a magazine somebody had left on the top shelf.

His gut clenched. Kip didn't doubt for a moment that Trey was behind this. The jerk never did know when to leave well enough alone. Kip still fell for the bait, his hand reaching up to grab the magazine.

Even before he looked at the cover, Kip knew what it would be. A couple of months ago, Trey and Sergei had done an interview and photo shoot for a popular gay publication. Because he'd heard some of the pictures were a bit on the sexy side, Kip had been avoiding looking at them. Since his errant brain managed to think of plenty of steamy Sergei images on its own, the last thing it needed was some visual aids. His fingers seemed to have a will of their own because damned if they didn't start leafing through the pages.

It only took a few minutes for Kip to find the



picture of Sergei. The photo took up one whole page and was in full color. It was fan-fucking-tastic, too. Kip's breath hitched as arousal slammed into him. Those who'd called it steamy had been vastly understating the situation.

Dressed in uniform, only from the waist down, Sergei leaned against a hockey stick. His bare chest glistened as if lightly oiled and the laces of his pants were undone in a teasing manner. His gaze could only be called smoldering, the gray eyes slightly darker as they seemed to harbor some sort of bedroom secrets.

Kip's finger touched the page, tracing the chiseled abs and tight pecs. The paper was a piss poor substitute in Kip's yearning to touch the real thing. Unwanted desire flooded Kip's gut as he imagined how it would be to once...just once...be able to have the freedom to be himself, to be with someone he was really attracted to instead of who the world *dictated* he belonged with. No, more than that, he wanted to be with Sergei.

A low curse burst from his lips as he sat heavily down on the bench. Who in the hell was he kidding? He already had enough going against him. He was reaching thirty, had a knee injury that never quite healed and played for a low-end farm team. He'd be lucky if the NHL ever glanced twice at him. If he were to add the whole gay tag to everything, it'd all be over.



Sure, the NHL had said they'd booted Devon and Trey for bad behavior on and off ice, but Kip never bought it. The jaded part of him always suspected the League had just used that as an excuse to get rid of two homosexuals marring up their ranks. So Kip just simply couldn't risk coming out. Not unless he wanted to be stuck being the captain of the Hawks for the rest of his career.

Kip knew that made him a coward and he hated himself for that weakness. Sergei may be six years his junior, but the kid had way more courage and maturity than Kip could ever manage.

He glanced down at the magazine, his heart heavy with regret. In the end, it would be better if Sergei never knew about Kip's true feelings. The last thing the kid needed was somebody who was too afraid and insecure to be comfortable in his own skin.

His phone chirped, alerting him he had a text message. Kip pulled it out, frowning as he read the message from one of his teammates, asking if he would be joining the rest of them at the bar.

His finger ran over the phone as he debated his answer. If he did go, he already knew how the evening would turn out. He'd drink a Coke while the rest of the team chugged beer, because the last thing Kip wanted was to get drunk and let



something slip. Then he'd find some poor girl to make out with, so he could keep on denying who he was. Then he'd pull the ultimate asshole act by taking the poor woman's number although he knew he'd never call her.

Or else he could slip away to another kind of bar a couple of towns over. It wasn't his normal stomping ground, but it was the one place where Kip could finally be himself if but for a few hours. Better yet, since he only did play for a farm team, nobody would recognize him. Most important, he may be able to finally work out some of the tension building inside him before he did something stupid.

Like actually blurt out to Sergei what his true feelings were.



## Chapter Three

The first thing Sergei did when he got back to his small one-bedroom apartment was take a shower. Usually on game days, he'd take one in the locker room, but after all the hostility he'd faced on the ice, he'd just wanted away and to the safety of his own place.

Not that any of the Hawks were ever mean to him. If anything, they went out of their way to be extra nice. It just threw Sergei having to see the faces of his former tormentors. It'd brought back so many unpleasant memories, many of which had taken place in a locker room, so Sergei left before a panic attack hit him. He hadn't had one of those since he left the Cougars and damned if he would have a reoccurrence around Kip.

After he'd cleaned up, he got out and quickly dried off since his apartment tended to be drafty, even in the spring. He pulled on a pair of worn jeans and his favorite short sleeved, red plaid shirt, wincing a bit as the movement jarred his still



tender groin.

God, what he'd give to be a few inches taller and several pounds heavier. Then maybe they'd think twice before messing with him. Call him crazy, but he was getting damn sick and tired of being a walking, breathing punching bag.

The phone rang as he did up the last button on his shirt. He froze fingers midair as his heart pounded with dread. There was only one person who ever called and the conversations were never pleasant.

Still, it's not like he could dodge the caller, not when it was his mother. Taking a deep breath, Sergei picked up the cordless and answered it, "Hello, Mom."

"I heard you won the game today," his mother replied in her heavily accented voice.

Both Sergei's parents had been born and raised in Russia. They lived there until they'd defected. Since Sergei's father was a much sought after hockey star, they had no trouble building a new life in the States. Sergei's father had gone on to become one of the NHL's biggest stars. A fact he never failed to point out whenever he mentioned how his son only managed to be drafted for a farm team.

"Yeah, so that means we have a spot in the playoffs for sure now," Sergei replied, trying to hide the wariness in his tone.



Sergei clenched the phone tightly in his sweaty hand, knowing that it would only be a matter of seconds before the call went south. His mother never delivered a compliment without following it up with a backhand of criticism.

"I also saw your pictures in that magazine." She sniffed, the familiar sound of disapproval slicing through Sergei. "Of course I didn't show your father those. He would have been so disappointed if he'd seen those filthy photographs of you."

"They weren't that bad. I've seen worse in some of the magazines you're always buying at the supermarket."

"But I'm not in them talking about my sex life, like you did," she replied, her voice brittle with anger.

He rolled his eyes. Yeah, because he had such a glamorous sex life to talk about. His only encounters were quick hookups at a gay bar a half hour drive away. Since he never bothered to exchange full names, let alone phone numbers, somehow he didn't see himself building up any lasting relationships. To make things even more pathetic, ever since Sergei became attracted to Kip, even that little bit of activity had come to a standstill. It just hadn't seemed like the right thing to do anymore.

How much of a loser could he be? Feeling guilty about messing around on a straight man



who would never see him as nothing more than friend.

"I didn't bring my sex life into it, Ma." Sergei sighed.

"You may as well have since you told everyone that you're..." she trailed off.

Never once had she'd spoken the word *gay*. Almost as if she didn't, that would somehow make it not true. That Sergei would suddenly announce that he'd been kidding all along and was straight and secretly married with ten kids.

"Do you mean *gay*?" Sergei supplied for her, fury surging through him.

"Think of how it makes your father look? He has a huge fan base and they all look up to him."

Sergei wanted to shoot off that his father had retired ten years ago, so he wasn't still the huge star she thought him to be, but held back. It didn't matter what he said. His father was and would forever continue to be a superhero in his mother's eyes.

"I'm sorry me being the way I am is such a hardship on him," Sergei shot back with angry sarcasm.

Of course, it went right over her head. "I just don't understand why you chose to be that way. What have we've ever done to make you so mad that you have to get back at us this way?"

"Chose?" Sergei echoed outraged. "Are you



kidding me? This isn't like choosing what to have for lunch. If you want paper or plastic. Or if you're going to watch *Leno* or *Letterman*. I was born gay and that's who I am. The sooner you learn to accept it, the —"

"I can never accept that," she cut in cruelly. "No more than your father can. Why do you think he never comes to see you play?"

"Here I thought it was because he wouldn't be caught dead cheering for a farm team."

"You wouldn't be playing for a team like that if you didn't insist on flaunting yourself to the world."

God, why had he ever answered the phone? He really needed to learn to let it go to voicemail. It would be a whole hell of a lot better for his blood pressure.

"No, the reason I never made it into the NHL is because, while I may skate fast, I'm too small. Most teams took one look at my height and passed me up."

Her voice rang through the receiver, no doubt arguing with his logic, but Sergei was done listening to her. He realized, not for the first time, that there just was no reasoning with her.

"Look, I have to go. There's an early morning practice and I need to get to bed."

His excuse was only half-true. While he did have an early practice, he had no intention of



going to bed any time soon. With all the stress from the game, he was too jacked up to sleep. After saying a quick goodbye, he hung up and slumped into one of the red, vinyl kitchen chairs.

All things considered, that hadn't been the worst conversation he'd shared with his mother. At least she didn't cry or curse him to hell this time. That was an improvement as far as she was concerned.

He tossed the phone to the side as he tried to decide where to go for the evening. The rest of the team was going to their usual bar to celebrate the win. While Sergei usually enjoyed being there, he just didn't have it in him to sit by and watch as Kip picked up yet another girl.

Sergei knew he had no right to feel hurt by Kip's actions. They weren't a couple, nor would they ever be. That still didn't mean it didn't feel like a kick to the gut every time he saw Kip with some beautiful woman.

So, no, going out with the team was out.

He could go out to the gay bar. It'd been ages since he'd been there. This time he was determined he wouldn't be coming home alone either. Maybe if he fucked somebody else, then he could finally get over his damn crush.

A crack of lightning spliced the sky outside his window, the weather mimicking the varied emotions clashing around inside him. Happiness



at winning the game. Anger at his parents for not loving him unconditionally. Hurt because he knew that he'd never be able to have Kip. Disgust for allowing himself to wallow in his bad thoughts.

Another arch of lightning flashed and he made up his mind. Enough of the pity party. He couldn't control his parents' behavior or the fact that Kip was straight, but Sergei sure as hell could stop his own self-deprecating behavior.

He grabbed his coat and headed for the door. He made a vow that before the night was over, he'd be over Kip for good.

By the time he'd reached the bar, Sergei already began to have doubts. He'd never been one for the bar scene even before Kip, so he seriously doubted anything changed. To make matters worse, it'd began to rain in earnest, making it so he had to drive slower, which gave him more time to think of reasons why he may be making a mistake.

He parked in the back lot and cut off the engine. He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as he stared at the building. It was small, but still looked to be busy. Several cars dotted the parking lot. Even over the sound of the storm, Sergei could hear the thumping of music and he could detect different colored, pulsating lights when a couple opened the door to walk inside.



In the end, he decided it wouldn't hurt to go in for just one drink. With the way the bar watered down their cocktails, it wasn't as if it would make it so he couldn't drive and at least he could tell himself he tried.

He got out and dashed for the bar, his clothes getting wet in the process. Since it was spring, the rain was cold, too. By the time he got inside, he'd started to shiver some.

The numerous bodies in the building heated it up some, so the chill passed before he reached the bar. He ordered a whiskey sour and shook off some water from his hair while he waited for it to be served.

When it came, he started to pay for it only to have a hand reach out and grab his wrist. Turning his head, he found a tall, lanky dark-haired man standing inches from him.

"I insist on paying for you," the man said, flashing a smile.

While the guy wasn't bad looking, he just simply wasn't Kip's type. He preferred his men to be more muscular and to have blond hair. He didn't want to be rude, so he murmured a thanks and put his wallet away.

"No problem. It's not every day I get to meet a real celebrity," the man gushed.

"You must have me confused with somebody else," Sergei replied, frowning in confusion.



"You're Sergei Petrov, aren't you?"

"Yeah, how did you know?" Sergei asked, searching his memory to think of how they may be acquainted. Somehow, the guy didn't strike Sergei as a hockey fan and since Sergei didn't get out much otherwise, he couldn't think of anyplace else they could have met.

"I saw your article in the magazine. Those pictures of you were hot."

The man stepped in closer, invading Sergei's personal space. He tried to back up, only to have his ass bump into the bar. Damn, trapped like a rat. This night just kept getting better and better.

Reaching up, the man traced the back of his knuckles along Sergei's jaw. "I think I've masturbated over your photograph at least a dozen times."

"Uh, thanks," Sergei stammered.

He didn't know for sure what the proper response should be for that kind of compliment. Feeling even more trapped, Sergei tried to slide to the right a bit, only to have the creeper's hand shoot out and block his way.

Sergei hesitated as he debated the best way to get out of the situation while not calling too much attention to himself. He may be smaller than the other guy, but Sergei had no doubts he could muscle his way out if need be. That would be a sure way to make others look their way though,



and Sergei desperately wanted to hold onto what little anonymity he had left.

"I need to go to the bathroom," he said. When it looked like the man was going to tag along, Sergei stressed, "To piss, nothing more."

Thankfully, Creeper moved his hand, although the flash of irritation that went over his face broadcasted his cooperation was reluctant. "Fine, I'll wait here for you to come back."

*Yeah, I wouldn't be counting on that happening, buddy.* Sergei gave a weak smile before he took off while he still had the chance. He navigated through the heavy crowd to the back where the men's room was located. When he pushed open the door, he was relieved to see there were only two other occupants and they seemed to be deep into some conversation.

Sergei dismissed them and went to the mirror to fix his hair. He usually wasn't that vain, but the rain had flattened it out, making him look like a blond Liza Minnelli wannabe. He ran his fingers through the top, trying to make it spike a little. The sound of raised voices rang out, letting him know the other bathroom dwellers were in an argument.

"What? Do you think you're too good for me or something?"

"No, I'm sorry, I just can't. I didn't mean to lead you on or anything."



Sergei gasped as his blood froze in shock. He'd recognize that second voice anywhere. Spinning on his heel, he found himself looking at Kip. The man had his back to the wall, his hand on some fugly guy's waist. Sergei must have gasped or something because Kip glanced up in his direction. They stared at each other, the moment almost surreal in a whole this-can't-be-happening way.

"What the fuck?" Sergei blurted, finally finding the ability to speak.

Kip's mouth parted in shock as the color drained from his face. Time seemed to freeze as they continued to stare at each another. In the meantime, single words seemed to quick-fire in Sergei's head. *Kip? Here? Impossible! How? Why? Liar!*

Then it all became painfully clear to Sergei. All the times Kip had gone AWOL from the hotel during away games. How he never had a steady girlfriend. The way he seemed to be going out of his way to show just how straight he was. It'd all been a cover. One great big hey-I'm-not-gay charade.

Hurt mixed in with the shock as Sergei realized there could only be one reason why Kip was in the bathroom of this particular bar. It wasn't because he had to take a piss either. His gaze drifted once more to Kip's hand and the way he was holding



onto the other man and a wave of jealousy surged through Sergei.

"Kip?" his voice croaked a bit.

"It's not what it looks like," Kip protested.

Mr. Fugly gave Sergei a nasty grin. "Actually, it is."

Pain sliced through Sergei. This was even worse than when he thought Kip was straight. The knowledge that Kip was gay, but just not interested in Sergei hit him harder than a full-on body check into the boards.

He needed to leave, quick, before he said or did something that he'd regret. Holding a hand up, Sergei plastered on a fake smile. "Sorry, I'll just give you some privacy."

"Sergei, wait," Kip pleaded.

Sergei took a step to the side, moving closer to the door. "For what? It isn't enough for you that I have to watch you hoovering the mouth of every female in Michigan? Now you want me to watch you do the same with guys?"

"No, it's—"

Sergei cut him off. Now that he'd started, he couldn't stop. It was almost as if he were vomiting out all the hurt and anxiety that'd been building up inside him. First the game, then the phone call with his mother, followed by the gut-wrenching revelation in the bathroom. It just became too much. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You



always have to be the center of attention. The captain, the mentor, the one who we're all supposed to look up to. Which is the biggest crock I've ever heard considering you don't even have the fucking guts to admit who you really are. You're just some scared, lying, liar-ton."

Okay, there went leaving before he said something he regretted. Not just going off on a tangent, but using dorky, made up words. That still didn't mean he was finished. He opened the door, but paused long enough to toss back, "You asshole!"

He could hear Kip calling after him, but Sergei ignored him. He rushed through the bar, desperate to get the hell out of there. Muttering apologies, he shoved his way through the crowd and raced outside.

The rain fell harder than when he'd come in, but Sergei no longer cared. He let out a sob, the betrayal so strong, he could barely hold his emotions in check. It was more than the fact that Kip had been lying about who he was, this particular deceit cut deeper. They were supposed to be friends and now Sergei realized everything Kip had ever said or done in his presence had been nothing more than a facade.

He fucking should have known better. Even though Kip pretended to be his friend, it was all an act, some big joke. He probably laughed his ass



off at how easy it was to fool the little Russian idiot. In the end, the Cougars were actually the better of the two evils. At least they were honest about their feelings.

Just as he reached the front of his car, a set of strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. Sergei let out a snarl as he blinked the water from his eyes, already knowing who it was. *Kip*. He must have given chase, no doubt worried that Sergei would go back to Battle Creek and begin telling everybody the great big gay secret.

"Let me go," Sergei yelled as his ass slammed into the hood of his car.

The rain continued to fall, making it hard to see. The droplets hurt a bit, maybe because a bit of ice mixed in, but Sergei barely felt it. The only reason he noticed even a little bit was because he hoped that the rain stung *Kip*. It would serve the jerk right to feel a bit of discomfort for once in his I'm-so-perfect life. *Kip* tightened his grip on Sergei's shoulders and gave a good shake.

"Why are you running away?" *Kip* demanded angrily.

"I couldn't stand by and watch you be with somebody else. At least not anymore," Sergei admitted, some of his words gurgled because of the water getting into his mouth.

"There was nothing to see. I couldn't go



through with it."

Sergei snorted in disbelief, instantly regretting the move when he sucked in some rain. "Don't even try and say you couldn't do it because you're not gay after all. It would just insult both of us."

"That's not why at all. I couldn't do it because he wasn't you."

Kip's fierce declaration took Sergei's breath away. He gasped as his cock stirred to life. Which was insane since he was still crazy mad, yet there it was, bone-numbing desire just from two little sentences. Sergei nervously licked his lips as he eyed up Kip's mouth, wondering what it would feel like to finally get a taste of the other man.

"What are you trying to say?" Sergei asked, flushing a bit at the husky undertone of his voice.

Kip shifted his hands up to brush away the rain-soaked hair from Sergei's face. Keeping his palms in place, he tilted Sergei's head up slightly so their gazes locked. "It's you I want. It always has been."

"Do you honestly think I'll fall for that line?"

Kip swooped down and captured Sergei's lips in a hot, demanding, dominating kiss. Sergei only struggled a few moments before he gave in with a long moan. Oh wow, this was way better than he ever dreamed it would be. Kip tasted hot, hard and masculine and he was giving Sergei everything he had.



Sergei tried to take over control of the kiss, his tongue thrusting out to finally get a really good sample of the other man. Kip growled as he took Sergei's bottom lip between his teeth and tugged, a clear warning of who would be in charge.

Too bad Sergei was still too pissed to give over total control. He hissed as he dug his fingers into Kip's shoulders. Instead of ticking Kip off, it only seemed to amuse him. He gave a dark laugh before he spun Sergei around and bent him over the hood of the car.

Sergei's breath came out with a whoosh as his chest slammed onto the metal. At that moment, he became aware of three things. He was about to get the snot fucked out of him. It wouldn't be tender at all, but rather a hard, angry, dominant screw. And he'd never been more turned on in his life.



## Chapter Four

Kip stared down at Sergei, his cock filling at the completely submissive picture the younger man presented. Pinned to the car, his face turned to the side, his mouth parted in a moan, Sergei had to be the sexiest thing Kip had ever seen.

“Perfect,” Kip crooned.

He reached in front of Sergei and began to fumble with the fly of the younger man’s jeans. Opening it, he pulled them down, just enough to have some fun. The thick denim resisted some since it was wet, but Kip was determined so he managed to get the task done.

What they were about to do was ten different ways of foolish. Rainstorm or not, they could be discovered at any moment. Worse yet, they could be arrested for indecent exposure. That kind of story would be sure to hit all the papers in Battle Creek. Then Kip’s secret would be out for everyone to know.



One more glance down at Sergei blew away all of Kip's reservations. He would have to be made of stone to turn away from such a sweet temptation. He ran his palm over Sergei's perfect ass, the flesh warm against his hand.

"By the time I'm done, you're going to be too worn out to run away from me again," he promised.

Sergei whimpered, but otherwise didn't answer, although the flare in his grey eyes told Kip how much he liked the sounds of that plan. While Kip could have taken him right then and there, he didn't want to hurt Sergei. So he forced himself to calm down a bit. Reaching into his front pocket, he grabbed a small package of lube. Kip tore the package open and squirted the contents out, rubbing it over his fingers a few times to warm it up. Reaching down once more to Sergei's ass, Kip swirled one digit around Sergei's hole, but didn't thrust it in just yet.

"Next time I call, you better not run away," he warned.

Only when Sergei nodded did Kip slide his finger inside. As he felt how warm and tight Sergei's ass was, Kip let out a moan. He knew once he got his cock inside he wouldn't be lasting long. He added a second finger, spreading them slightly in order to stretch Sergei out enough to take him.



Sergei let out little mewling sounds as he thrust back, his hands slipping on the slick surface of the hood. Kip rewarded his efforts by adding a third finger at the same time twisting his wrist so they pegged Sergei's sweet spot.

"Ah, fuck me. That feels good," Sergei yelled, his eyes growing wide.

Kip smiled to himself, a thrill going through him at getting such a visceral reaction from the normally shy man. He pulled his fingers out, trying hard to ignore the way they trembled with anticipation. Grabbing a condom from his pocket, he barely managed to get his dick out and the latex covering on. Lining his cock up, he thrust into Sergei in one hard move.

Sergei cried out, his back arching as his fingers scrabbled on the metal. Kip only paused for a second to let him adjust before he began to pound inside him. Sergei didn't protest the harsh treatment. If anything, he thrust back as much as his position would allow.

A tingling at Kip's spine let him know he didn't have long before he came. Not wanting to orgasm before Sergei, he reached underneath and somehow managed to grab the man's cock. Sergei jerked, a wordless cry passing his lips as he thrust into Kip's touch.

"That's it, babe, let go. Come for me," Kip growled as he continued to fuck Sergei hard and



fast.

"Oh, crap. Damn. Shit," Sergei cursed before he stiffened, his cock shooting off hot streams of cum.

Kip stroked Sergei through the orgasm, milking the man dry. It wasn't until Sergei let out a satisfied moan that Kip allowed himself to go over the edge. Crying out Sergei's name, Kip filled the condom.

For a second they paused, both of them panting for breath before Kip forced himself to pull out. Sergei winced, but otherwise didn't say anything, his cheeks flaming as he pulled up his pants and tucked his cock back in.

Awkwardness filled the air. Trying hard not to overthink it, Kip pulled off the condom, tied it and tucked it into his pocket since he didn't have anywhere else to put it. It may have been a little gross, but he didn't want to toss it on the ground either. He zipped his pants back up and cleared his throat.

"Why don't we dry off in your car while we talk?" he suggested.

A mutinous gleam came over Sergei's eyes and for a moment, Kip thought he'd refuse, but in the end, Sergei gave a jerky nod. He unlocked the passenger side for Kip before going over and climbing in behind the wheel.

They sat for a while in the darkened car, the only sounds the pattering of rain against the



windows and Sergei's shivers. Kip glanced from the corner of his eye at Sergei. The younger man's shoulders were slightly hunched, his head down, gaze directed at the dashboard. It was almost as if he'd been rejected and spat on so many times and he was just waiting for it to happen once again.

"Start the car," Kip ordered.

Sergei wordlessly obeyed, his fingers clumsy as he fished the keys from the pocket of his sodden jeans. Once he had the engine purring, Kip reached over and cranked the heat on. He did it, not for his own comfort, but because Sergei's continued shivering troubled him. After everything the guy had been through, the last thing he wanted was for him to suffer even one more discomfort.

Kip reached out to touch Sergei's cheek. His stomach clenched when Sergei flinched from the touch a moment before finally allowing Kip to run the back of his knuckles over his cool cheek.

"You really are beautiful." Kip sighed.

Sergei finally shifted his gaze into his direction. The scathing disbelief lingering there was an iron to Kip's heart. "You don't have to say that just to get to my good side. I won't say anything to anybody, so you're secret's safe."

"I'm not saying that to flatter you. I really mean it."

"Right, because guys like you always go for



scrawny, nobodies like me," Sergei scoffed.

"You have no idea the impact you can have on people."

"I'm pretty sure the majority of them just want to stomp on me the instant they see me."

Those jaded words, coming from someone as young and sweet as Sergei, cut Kip deep.

"That's not true at all. At least not with me. I still remember the first time I saw you. You'd just been traded to the Hawks and one of the assistant coaches brought you into the locker room right before a morning practice."

Sergei shot him a look of disbelief.

Kip continued, "You had this red t-shirt on that was way too big for you and these baggy jeans. You still managed to look sexier than hell. Then I saw the way you looked around the locker room. You had such terror in your eyes, almost like you expected somebody to attack you at any instant. At that moment, I vowed to myself that I would do everything I could to make it so you didn't have to live in fear anymore."

"The Cantons took me under their wing and helped me feel better about myself," Sergei whispered, his face turning into Kip's touch. "You told them to do that, didn't you?"

"I wanted you to know you were safe with us, that our team wouldn't hurt you just because of who you were."



Kip's fingers drifted to Sergei's mouth, the pad of his thumb running along the plump lower lip.

"If it's so safe, then why don't you come out?" Sergei asked.

And just like that, the mood was broken. Kip jerked his hand away as fear took over him. "I'm not gay."

Sergei let out a short, bitter laugh. "Yeah, try telling that to my ass, because it's pretty sore from the drilling your straight cock just gave it."

Kip winced. "Do you have to be so crude about it?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to use my manners. I'm not up to par on my cowering-in-the-closet etiquette. And don't even try to keep denying it. If you like me even half as much as you claim, then you won't demean me that way."

Kip opened his mouth to issue a denial, then realized Sergei was right. Kip owed him at least the truth. "I can't come out."

"Why not?"

"It'll ruin any chance I have of ever making the NHL."

Sergei's lips parted in a gasp as he shook his head. "You really are fucking unbelievable. In case you forgot, both Devon and Trey were out when they were still in the league."

"Yeah, and the league booted them for it."

"No, the league kicked them out for having bad



attitudes and their nasty habit of bitch slapping reporters," Sergei countered.

"True, they did that and a whole lot more. But now they have their shit together and they're playing better than ever, yet they're still stuck playing for the Hawks."

"What's so bad with the Hawks?" Sergei demanded. "Sure, the pay may suck and we may not have all the perks, but our teammates are great and we finally have a shot at the championship."

"It's not the same and you know it."

"Wow, you just sounded like my dad right then."

From the scathing tone in Sergei's voice, Kip knew that hadn't been a compliment. "You know what Coach told me today?"

"That you telegraph your shots too much sometimes?" Sergei blinked innocently.

Kip ignored the criticism and went on to make his point. "The Red Wings may call Chad up. They didn't ask about Devon or Trey though."

"Maybe it's because they don't need a goalie or forward. They might only be looking for a good defenseman," Sergei reasoned.

"Or maybe they don't want any gay players."

Sergei stared at him for a few beats before slowly shaking his head. "Wow, what right do you get being so jaded? I mean if it were me spouting all this, it would make sense. After all



I've been through and all the hate thrown my way, it would be understandable. But you've been leading a sheltered life as far as I'm concerned."

"You have no idea what I've been through."

Sergei jerked back and out of reach. "Do you want to know what they did to me my first day on the Cougar team? A couple of the bigger guys on the team cornered me in the locker room, beat the shit out of me, then for good measure, pissed on me after they were done."

Kip's heart broke at the thought of Sergei going through that. A dose of anger followed it. How could anyone want to harm the shy, sweet man? It was just so unfair.

Sergei continued, "When I went home, I called my dad to ask for help in filing a complaint with the league. Do you want to know what he told me?"

"Probably not, because I have a feeling it wasn't good," Kip whispered.

"He said that if I was going to flaunt my ways, I got what I deserved. That maybe it would teach me a lesson and finally make a real man out of me." A single tear slid down Sergei's cheek. He wiped it away with a short angry move, almost as if ashamed of the fact that he'd allowed it to slip free. "I haven't talked to him since. Not because I don't want to or anything. He's the one who refuses to speak with his embarrassment of a son."



"Oh, babe, I'm so sorry that happened to you," Kip said.

He wanted to lash out at all of those who'd hurt his boy. The Cougars, Sergei's father, all of the people who looked down on him for being gay. Most of all, Kip wanted to kick his own ass because he full well knew he was responsible for some of that pain lurking in Sergei's eyes.

"I wish I could make it all go away. That I could make everything better for you," Kip blurted.

Sergei stared back, his eyes wet with unshed tears. "How can you help me when you can't even help yourself?"

Those words hit hard, knocking all the breath from Kip's lungs. "I'm not as brave as you."

"No, you're not," Sergei replied with uncharacteristic bluntness. "The sad thing was, before tonight, you were my hero."

"And what am I to you now?"

Sergei's lips curled up into a sad smile. "I don't know. I just need time to think about everything. Part of me wants to throw my arms around you and declare that I'll take whatever bits of affection you'll toss my way. Another part of me wants to shove you away and not ever talk to you again."

The thought of not talking to Sergei again, not being able to have that same easy-going friendship they'd always shared, scared the hell out of Kip. "Don't push me away, please. You mean too much



to me.”

“But not enough for you to go public with the truth.”

Anger surged through Kip. “It’s not as easy as you make it sound. I’m not as brave as you. I’m older than you were when you came out. People have certain expectations of who I am and how I should act.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re fifteen or fifty, it’s never easy to come out. But in the end, it’s worth it. Better to face a little bit of scorn than to live a life that’s a big lie,” Sergei shot back, his eyes stormy with anger.

“Remember that the next time a pair of Cougars corners you in the locker room,” Kip yelled.

As soon as he spoke those vile, hateful words, Kip wanted them back. They hung in the air like a thick, oily cloud as Sergei let out a gasp.

“Get the fuck out of my car,” Sergei seethed, finally showing a bit of the Russian temper his father was so infamous for.

“I didn’t mean —”

Sergei let out a low curse that would have made a sailor blush. “I said, Get. The. Fuck. Out. Forget about what happened tonight. Forget about this conversation we just had and, most of all, forget about me. Outside of the games and practices, I don’t ever want to speak to you again.”

Kip started to argue, but realized that Sergei



was too angry to listen at that moment. So instead, Kip just slipped out of the car and back into the rain. He shut the door and Sergei took off so fast that Kip had to jump back to avoid having the wheels run over his feet.

As he stared at the disappearing taillights, Kip's chest grew heavy with regret. Not only had he lost the admiration of someone he cared about deeply, but he'd just lost his best friend.



## Chapter Five

Sergei hunched down in one of the back seats of the team bus and pretended to be asleep in hopes that nobody would bother him. While he usually didn't have a problem socializing with the others, he just wasn't in the mood for any kind of conversation, be it friendly or not.

The rest of the team slowly filed inside, their voices loud with excitement since they were on their way to the first game of the playoffs. Even their backup goalie was in good spirits, which had to be a record since the guy usually operated in half-asleep mode.

Sergei knew he should feel some of their good cheer. After all, not only were they in the playoffs, but most of the experts were predicting the Hawks would win the first round easily. He'd finally be able to give the Cougars a great big *fuck you* by way of eliminating them from the playoffs. That was the best form of revenge he could think of.

Yet, he couldn't find it in him to be happy over



anything. He'd been down ever since his encounter with Kip. Quite frankly, angry or not, he missed having his best friend. The entire week had been filled with awkward tension in the locker room and one-word exchanges during practice. Other than that, they hadn't spoken at all. A few times, Sergei had been certain he'd felt Kip's gaze lingering on him, but every time he turned to look, the captain's attention had been elsewhere.

Sergei pushed those thoughts aside. He'd just have to get used to not having Kip around. There was no way they could go back to what they had before the bar incident. Even if the sex had been mind blowing fantastic. He sighed as he tried to get more comfortable. While the team had upgraded from the ancient converted school bus they used to drive in, the seats still lacked for comfort. He'd just found a position that classified as maybe seventy-five percent comfy when Trey plopped down next to him.

Great, so much for having some privacy and alone time. While not the biggest blabbermouth on the team, Trey took a close second, his brother Chad having the number one slot.

"How's my little Russian teddy bear?" Trey asked.

Sergei flipped him off.

Trey let out a low whistle. "I guess that means



he's a Grumpy Gus."

Sergei sat up so he could shoot off a proper glare. "Why don't you go sit by Devon and leave me alone so I can sleep?"

"Devon is sitting with Kip so they can go over plays and I'm lonely since Chad isn't here," Trey replied with a pout that Sergei didn't buy for an instant.

He still felt himself softening toward the jackass. "I guess you must really be missing Chad since he left to go sit at the big kid's table."

The Cantons were so close that it seemed a bit odd to only see two of them on the bus. It'd gotten to the point where Sergei considered them a package deal.

Trey shrugged. "Sure I miss him, but I'm happy for him, too. Now that he and Niki are going to have a baby, they need all the money they can get. So the pay raise will be worth us being apart."

"I didn't know they were pregnant."

"Yeah, they just found out a couple of weeks ago." Trey flashed a cocky grin. "I'm going to be an uncle."

"Now that's a scary thought. I can only think of the number of ways you're going to be a bad influence," Sergei teased.

They were silent while the bus pulled out onto the road. It wasn't until they were on the highway that Sergei finally gathered up the courage to ask



the question most troubling him. "Why do you think they called up Chad and not you or Devon? You guys have been playing just as well as he has."

"It's probably because the Wings' best defenseman is out with a groin injury. Even with his temper, nobody is better at protecting his end of the ice than Chad."

"So, you don't think it's because you and Devon are gay?"

Trey narrowed his eyes. "Okay, what's going on with you?"

"What? I was just asking a valid question."

"Maybe I'd buy that if you hadn't been acting squirrely all week, but something is up with you. You've been walking around with your head up your ass ever since that game with the Cougars."

"You always did have such a way with words," Sergei drawled.

"And you have a way of always trying to deflect the conversation whenever things get too close for comfort."

"I'm just nervous about the playoffs," Sergei lied.

"I might believe that if it weren't for the tension between you and Kip. What happened? You guys used to be pretty tight."

"The key word there is *used*," Sergei snapped as he shot an angry glare in Kip's direction.



"What happened?" Trey repeated in a firm tone.

"That's really none of your business."

"I'm sorry, but I have to disagree with you on that one."

"Why? Because we should all be one happy, cohesive team that loves each other?" Sergei scoffed. "Don't worry, I won't let my feelings for Kip get in the way of my game."

Trey reached over and popped Sergei in the back of the head. "I'm worried because I don't want to see my friends so upset."

Sergei rubbed away the hurt as he gave Trey a dirty look. "I'm sorry that my love life is making things difficult for you."

As soon as he realized what he'd said all the blood drained from his face. "What I meant is..."

He trailed off as his mind scrambled for a suitable cover story. When nothing popped into his mind, the air rang heavy with damning silence.

"Don't worry, kid. I kind of figured it was something like that," Trey replied gently.

"I'm only a year younger than you, so you can stop calling me, kid," Sergei grouched.

"Especially since that's one of the little pet name *he* uses for you," Trey added knowingly.

Damn, whoever said Trey was just another dumb blond jock obviously never really met the man. Trey managed to strip away all the lies and



get to the truth before the bus had even left the boundary of Battle Creek.

After glancing around to make sure nobody was listening, Sergei leaned in and whispered, "Please, don't say anything to anybody."

Trey cocked a brow. "Why would I do that? I've been keeping this secret tight to my chest from the very first time I noticed Kip checking out your ass."

Despite himself, Sergei grinned. "Was he really?"

"Don't look so pleased with yourself. I've caught Kranks checking out your money maker, too."

"Isn't Kranks the really, creepy janitor who's like eighty years old?"

"Yeah, and he thinks you're hot. He's told me so at least a hundred times. If you want, I can introduce you to him."

Sergei shivered. "Thanks, but I'll pass. I like my guys to be older, not ancient."

"It's just as well. I have a feeling that Kip would get jealous."

"The last thing Kip would ever feel over me is jealousy," Sergei said, a lump forming in his throat.

"What happened?" Trey's tone was softer, more understanding.

Sergei nibbled on his bottom lip as he glanced



over at Kip. While he didn't want to betray Kip's secret, the need to unload on somebody was nearly overwhelming.

"Do you promise not to tell anybody? Not even your brothers?" Sergei asked, still looking at Kip.

"You have my word, I won't tell a soul."

Sergei only hesitated a second before he began to tell Trey about the encounter at the bar. He even included the part about the parking lot and the car. All the while, Sergei made sure to talk in a near whisper, for fear of being overheard. By the time he'd finished, his head rested on Trey's shoulder. The contact was a friendly touch as opposed to anything sexual. Not only did he have too much respect for Trey's relationship, but Sergei was finally ready to admit to himself that he didn't want to be with anyone other than Kip.

"If it's any consolation, I think he really does care a lot about you," Trey said once Sergei finished.

"Not enough to stop living a lie," Sergei replied sadly.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. He's been acting just as miserable as you have been this past week. Besides, you need to remember how hard it is to admit to the world that you're different."

Sergei thought back to that day five years ago when he'd come out to his parents. "My dad smacked me across the face and told me I was a



disgrace.”

“And we both know how my dad reacted,” Trey added.

Sergei reached out and hugged Trey’s arm to his chest. Yeah, Trey’s coming out horror story trumped anything Sergei ever heard before. It’d only been recently that the goalie had confided it to him. The sheer awfulness of it had given Sergei nightmares.

“Do you think Kip’s parents would flip out if they found out he was gay?” Sergei asked.

“I have no idea since I’ve never met them before. All I do know for certain is that Kip has to be scared and feeling a little lost, regardless of how they are.”

A heavy dose of guilt washed over Sergei as his own words came back to haunt him, *it doesn’t matter if you’re fifteen or fifty, it’s never easy to come out*. Yet, he’d ignored his own wisdom and judged Kip for being afraid.

“Damn, I’m such an idiot,” Sergei muttered.

“I’d say you both have equal rights for that title,” Trey replied as he ran the back of his knuckles over Sergei’s cheek.

Sergei jerked in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Just trying to remind Kip what he’s fighting for. He’s been watching us for the past five minutes and he doesn’t look too happy with how



close we're sitting."

Sergei barely resisted the urge to dart a look to see Kip's reaction for himself. "Won't Wade be ticked if he finds out?"

Wade was Trey's very big, very handsome, very policeman boyfriend. While he seemed to be a nice enough guy, Sergei didn't want to end up on his bad side.

"Wade will understand that we don't mean anything by it, plus all we're doing is a little cuddling."

Sergei knew that was all it would ever be, too. Trey was madly in love with Wade and would never stray. Something Sergei could understand. If he were to ever be lucky enough to find someone that special, he would never cheat either.

As always, whenever he thought about finding somebody special, his mind immediately went to Kip. Unable to resist any longer, Sergei glanced over at the other man. The blistering anger in Kip's eyes sent a shiver of desire down Sergei's spine. As stupid as it sounded, it was a turn on to know that he could get such a strong reaction from Kip.

"If this upsets him, then maybe I should take that Vapors' offer for a quick hookup," Sergei teased, knowing there was really no way he could ever want anyone but Kip.

"A guy from the Vapors hit on you? I didn't



even know they had a gay player on their team.”

“He’s deep in the closet, but sent me an email just a couple of weeks ago.”

“So, he wants to get together with you?”

Sergei gave a heavy sigh. “Only if I promise to keep it a secret. While guys may want to fuck me, I’m not good enough for them to risk being seen in public with.”

“Don’t talk about yourself that way. If I’d been into younger, innocent blonds, I would have snapped you up the first day you showed up at our rink.”

“And if I was into smartass goalies, I would have taken you up on the offer,” Sergei returned, his gaze drifting back to Kip.

Kip continued to glare, although all his animosity seemed to be directed at Trey. The goalie didn’t seem to mind, he even had the audacity to give Kip a small wave.

Sergei chuckled. “You really do love to piss people off.”

“Well, it gives me something to do when I get bored. Besides, everyone needs a hobby and since I suck at needlepoint and macramé, I decided irking others would be a great after-school activity.”

They laughed for a moment before Sergei sobered enough to say, “Thanks for always being there for me.”



“What are friends for?”

They settled into a comfortable silence for the rest of the ride. Sergei kept his head in place, even snoozing for a while. When they finally pulled up to the hotel, the sun was just beginning to set.

Sergei rubbed his eyes, surprised that the hotel looked to be fairly decent. Usually they stayed in places so crappy that not even rats would be caught dead there.

“Wow, first the new bus and now this. Maybe we need to make playoffs more often,” he said as they stood up.

Trey stepped out into the aisle and called over his shoulder. “Yeah, management is actually spoiling us a bit for once. Maybe this means they might actually fix the drain in the shower.”

“I doubt it. I think they like watching us slosh around in ankle deep water.”

They got off the bus and went with the rest of the team to gather their bags while the team manager went inside to grab the room keys. Devon came over to stand by Sergei and Trey. Whereas Trey had blond hair and an easy smile, Devon tended to be more serious and had dark hair.

“I don’t know what kind of game you two are playing, but it pissed Kip off something awful,” Devon said.

Sergei almost snorted in derision until he



remembered Trey's words. Maybe he really should give Kip a break and stop pressuring him so much to go public. After all, who was he to judge how others handled their lives when his own family's relationship was the definition of dysfunctional?

"Who are you going to room with?" Devon asked Sergei.

"Oh, shoot! I forgot, now that Chad's gone, I'm going to have to look for a new roommate," Sergei exclaimed.

"No, you don't. You're rooming with me," Kip announced as he came up and waved a key.

He didn't look any less angry than he had during the bus ride. Just a week ago, Sergei would have jumped at the chance to be able to sleep in the same room as Kip. Now he didn't feel so sure. He nervously gnawed on his bottom lip. "I am?"

"You are," Kip replied in a firm tone that warned against argument.

"What will Mike do? Don't you guys usually bunk together?"

"Not anymore. Now come on."

When Sergei just stood there in stunned disbelief, Kip let out an irritated sound and grabbed Sergei by the front of the shirt. He then proceeded to pull Sergei through the doors leading into the hotel.

Sergei let out a surprised yelp as he struggled to



keep up while still managing to hold onto his heavy hockey bag. The entire time, Kip didn't glance back once, not even when Sergei stumbled a couple of times. Sergei had the distinct feeling that if he did fall, Kip would just drag him facedown the rest of the way to their room.

"I can walk on my own," Sergei protested.

He may as well have been talking to the walls for all the reaction he got out of Kip. The captain didn't stop until they reached their room. Kip silently opened the door and all but threw Sergei inside.

Sergei's bag slid to the floor as he turned to face Kip. After slamming the door shut, Kip started to advance, his blue eyes sharp with anger. Sergei's heart hammered with anticipation and arousal. He tried to take a step back, only to trip when his feet hit the bag. At the last second, Kip saved him by reaching out and once more grabbing the front of Sergei's shirt. He pulled hard, causing Sergei to slam into his hard chest.

All the air left Sergei's lungs in a whoosh as he felt himself pressed against Kip's body. While the anger in Kip's gaze still concerned Sergei, he couldn't help but notice something else – a certain detail that had his pulse racing with excitement.

"Why, Kip, is that a hockey stick in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

Kip growled. "If I wasn't already so pissed at



you, I'd be tempted to paddle your ass for using such a cheesy pickup line."

Sergei blinked innocently. "Why are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong?"

Kip's free hand snaked around and cupped Sergei's ass. Giving him a tight, almost punishing squeeze, he somehow managed to pull them closer. "You know damn well what I'm talking about."

A moan ripped from Sergei's throat as his cock rubbed against Kip's thigh. That still didn't mean he was about to give in. "We should get our stuff put away and get back out to the lobby. The rest of the team will be going to dinner soon."

"Fuck the rest of the team," Kip snapped.

"I don't think I'll have the stamina to fuck all of them, but if you're going to be so insistent, I can try." That earned him another butt squeeze, this one hard enough to make him yelp in pain.

Kip narrowed his eyes before declaring, "You won't be fucking, touching, cuddling or flirting with anybody else."

"What gives you the right to make that order?" Sergei demanded.

In truth, he really liked hearing those possessive words coming from Kip's mouth. So much so that Sergei allowed himself to grind against the other man again. Kip gave a wicked grin that made Sergei's heart go wild.



"You love it. Don't try to deny it."

"You can be a really arrogant jerk sometimes."

"You enjoy that, too."

Sergei saw no sense in denying it. "Yeah, I like it a lot."

Kip gave him one more grin before he swooped down and captured Sergei's mouth in a hard kiss.



## *Chapter Six*

Sergei let out a low moan as his hand reached up to clamp onto Kip's shoulder. A dim part of Sergei recalled that he'd been mad at Kip and he didn't want to talk to the man let alone get intimate with him. Yet, with every sweep of the tongue and nipping of teeth, those thoughts were pushed further away until all that was left was desire.

"I'm sure it'll be a few minutes before the rest of the team gets settled in and back to the lobby," Sergei conceded between kisses.

"Yeah, at least a half hour, maybe more," Kip agreed as he began to tug at Sergei's clothes.

Between the two of them, they soon were both nude. Sergei climbed onto the bed, laid back and held his arms out. Kip paused for a moment, his gaze leaving a heated path over Sergei's body.

"A dragon," Kip said.

"Huh?" Sergei tilted his head in confusion.

"I've always wondered what you had tattooed



on your hip."

"Oh, that." Sergei glanced down at it. "I got it on a whim a few years ago."

"Fuck, that has to be the hottest thing I've ever seen," Kip breathed.

Sergei gazed up at Kip. All hard muscles, without an ounce of fat, he had to be near perfection. The fact that his cock was big without being ridiculously massive was a plus, too. Sure, there were some scars here and there, a result of playing professional sports, but they only added to Kip's beauty.

"Funny, I happen to think *you're* the hottest thing," Sergei countered, still holding his arms out, welcoming.

Kip finally took the hint and climbed into bed, his body sliding over Sergei and not stopping until their faces were a breath apart. Sergei let out a moan, the friction of Kip's hot skin rubbing against his cock so electric that he almost lost control and came too soon.

"Easy, babe, I have you," Kip crooned before giving Sergei another kiss.

Once they broke for air, Sergei said, "Please tell me you brought protection."

"Yeah, I have the supplies in my bag."

"Good," Sergei breathed before a thought slammed into his lust-hazed brain. "You must have been pretty sure of yourself then. Am I really



that big of a pushover?"

Kip smiled. "No, I was just damn hopeful that you'd forgive me. I was ready to beg if necessary."

"I was wrong, too. I should have never got so angry at you. I forgot how scary and hard it can be," Sergei admitted.

"I only wish I could be as brave as you."

Sergei reached up and cupped Kip's cheeks. "You are. You just don't realize it yet."

Kip started to kiss him again, his lips eventually trailing down Sergei's jaw and neck. When Kip took a piece of skin between his teeth and sucked, Sergei let out a hiss as he threaded his fingers through Kip's thick hair.

"When are you going to get the supplies?" Sergei asked before letting out a loud moan. He'd never realized having his neck sucked could feel so damn good.

"In a minute. I want to play first."

Kip proceeded to do just that, too, first kissing and sucking his way down Sergei's collarbone before moving on to his nipples. He gave them each equal attention, then kissed his way down Sergei's stomach. By the time he reached Sergei's cock, things had begun to build to the point of critical.

"Please," Sergei panted, thrusting his hips up.

"What does my boy want?" Kip asked.

"I need you to touch me, suck me. It hurts so



bad," Sergei called loudly.

Kip gave in, swooping his head down and sucking in Sergei's entire length. Sergei cried out, his fingers clawing at the bed covers. "Shit, you're good at that."

Kip hummed and began to bob his head up and down, one hand reaching down to cup Sergei's balls. It still wasn't enough for Sergei. Thrusting up, he ordered, "Give me your fingers. Fuck me with them."

When Kip hesitated, not wanting to hurt the other man, Sergei let out a frustrated snarl. "Use your spit."

"Wow, somebody's bossy," Kip said, but he complied, sticking his fingers in his mouth to get them slicked.

Sergei yelled in relief when Kip thrust first one, then two digits inside his ass. At the same time, he continued to suck Sergei's cock, doing a remarkably good job for someone who pretended to be straight.

Just as Sergei felt his orgasm approaching, Kip pulled off his cock. Sergei let out a cry of protest until he saw Kip get off the bed and rush over to his bag. Oh yes, the supplies. Sergei pacified himself by stroking his own cock as he watched Kip rummage around the bag. When Kip finally found them, he let out a happy sound before holding the box up like a prize. He also grabbed a



bottle of what looked to be new lubricant.

Coming back to the bed, he took a condom from the box and opened it. Sergei watched, desire shooting up his spine as Kip slicked it over his erection. Kip added some lubricant before going between Sergei's thighs.

Picking up Sergei's legs, Kip put them on his shoulders. The new position tested Sergei's flexibility, but he didn't care. Especially when he felt the tip of Kip's cock pressing against his hole.

"Fuck me. Fuck me hard," Sergei panted.

Kip pressed inside slowly. Once seated, he waited a few moments for Sergei to get adjusted before he set a slow, gentle rhythm. Whereas their first time had been angry sex, this time the encounter felt so much gentler, tender...almost loving.

As he gazed up at Kip, Sergei's chest grew tight at the pure emotions playing across the other man's face. For once all the shields were stripped away and Sergei felt as if he were seeing Kip as he was meant to be, passionate, loving and without fear.

A jolt went through Sergei as he realized he loved Kip. He had for a while. Somehow, during the past few months, the crush and friendship had developed into something much deeper.

Sergei wanted to tell Kip his true feelings. The urge to just spill everything was nearly



overwhelming. In the end, Sergei kept it to himself for fear of scaring Kip away, this time for good.

If this was all Kip could offer him, then Sergei would take it. Better to have a few stolen moments than to be without anything. Sure, it may suck, but Sergei would learn to deal. Really, he would.

Kip reached down and grabbed Sergei's cock, stroking him in time with his thrusts. At the same time, Kip slightly adjusted his angle so his erection pegged Sergei's sweet spot.

"Oh, yes, just like that." Sergei moaned.

He bit his bottom lip before other words slipped out, ones that would damn him. The look Kip gave him was so tender that a lump built up in Sergei's throat. God, what he would give to see that every night.

Then an orgasm hit him, robbing him of all ability to think. He yelled out Kip's name as his cock pulsated and he shot off. That seemed to be all Kip needed because he hissed and stiffened as he found his own release.

Letting out one more moan, Kip let Sergei's legs slide down before collapsing on top of him. Kip's weight didn't exactly make things comfortable, but Sergei still had that after sex buzz going, so he didn't voice any complaints. He just wrapped his arms around Kip and treasured the moment. He knew there wouldn't be too many of them.



\* \* \* \*

Kip buried his nose in the crook of Sergei's neck and inhaled the warm, masculine scent of the other man. He only allowed himself to linger a moment, knowing his weight was probably crushing Sergei.

Kip rolled off, but didn't go too far, wrapping an arm around Sergei's waist. Pulling him tight to his side, Kip pressed a kiss to his temple. Sergei made a satisfied humming sound as he snuggled into Kip.

"I missed you this past week," Kip confided.

"I missed you, too," Sergei replied as he used his finger to trace an idle pattern on Kip's forearm.

"Let's not fight again."

Sergei tilted his head up and looked him. "I'm sure we'll still get into plenty of fights. I tend to tick you off a lot."

Kip admitted to himself that Sergei had a point. Not a day went by where Sergei didn't push his buttons, be it because he refused to do a drill in practice or because he didn't keep his head up during games.

"Okay, let's not fight like we did that night at the bar," Kip amended.

"Agreed, although the wild sex was pretty hot."

Kip playfully tapped his finger on the tip of Sergei's nose. "This time was better."



Sergei thought for a moment before he nodded. "Yeah, it was."

"We better get cleaned up and down to the lobby before the guys start wondering where we are."

They got out of bed, cleaned up and pulled on some fresh clothes. Before they left, Kip couldn't resist pulling Sergei in for one last kiss. While he could have stayed in the room and nibbled on Sergei all night, Kip knew they had to make an appearance at dinner.

"Let's go eat so we can get back to our private room," Kip said.

A slight flush came over Sergei's cheeks. "That sounds like a good idea to me."

Kip opened the door just as Devon and Trey walked past. The brothers both froze and shot looks in Kip's direction. Devon's face reflected shock while Trey's lips were pressed into a knowing smirk.

"Hey, guys," Sergei greeted, the easy smile on his face showing he was oblivious to their facial expressions.

Kip glanced at the door one down from his room and realized that must be where the brothers had been placed. He felt the color drain from his face.

"The walls are damn thin here," Trey remarked with a snicker.



Sergei froze, his eyes growing as wide as pucks as he shot an apologetic look at Kip.

Devon held up a hand. "Don't worry, we won't blab to anybody."

"Although Sergei may want to cover that hickey on his neck," Trey added, pointing to a livid, mark on Sergei's neck. Trey wore a Hawk's jacket. He took it off and helped Sergei into it, popping the collar up so it hid the damning evidence. "There, that should do it."

"Thanks," Sergei muttered, a blush coming over his cheeks.

Devon blinked at Kip. "Wow, I had no idea that you were gay."

"Haven't I told you that you have sucky gaydar?" Trey sang.

"Yeah, I guess this proves you're right."

Sergei moved forward. "Please, nobody knows about Kip, not even his parents. This can't get out."

"Like I already said, we won't say a word," Devon reiterated.

Sergei's protectiveness warmed Kip and chipped away at some of the panic welling up inside him. He reached out to pull Sergei into an embrace only to remember at the last minute that any open displays of affection were off limits. He shoved his hands into his pockets and gave Sergei a smile instead.



"Although I would like to point out that it sounded like somebody was a very bossy bottom," Trey snarked.

Sergei groaned and buried his face in his hands. "I can't believe I was that loud."

"I know! At first Devon kept insisting that you two were in some huge argument. He didn't want to believe me about what was really going on until you yelled at Kip to use his fingers on you," Trey added.

Kip couldn't decide if he wanted to comfort Sergei or reach over and strangle the goalie. Luckily that decision was made for him when Devon reached over and popped his brother on the back of the head.

"You're lucky we need a good goalie tomorrow or else I'd beat your ass, then nail your mouth shut."

"What did I do?" Trey asked with an innocence that was nowhere near believable.

They all shared a collective eye roll before they went down to the lobby. The rest of the team was already there and they ended up going to a dive of a diner. The food was terrible, the plates chipped and it probably just barely passed its last health inspection, but Kip thought it had to be the best meal he ever had, because Sergei was by his side the entire time.

While they hardly talked to each other, the way



Sergei's thigh would occasional brush against Kip made it a night to never forget. The best part was knowing that they'd be going back to the same room after.

During most of the meal, Kip and Devon went over strategy and plays. While they had a coach in the figurative sense, he wasn't that good, so Kip leaned on Devon for support in deciding what lines would work best and who to use to kill power plays. They'd nailed most of it down during the bus ride, so by the time the meal was over, they had all the small details ironed out.

The members of the team gradually left and went back to the hotel. After saying goodnight, Kip and Sergei did the same. The entire time, the tension built between them. Unlike the previous week, this time it wasn't due to being angry at each other. Now it had an excited, sensual tone to it.

Once they got back to their room, Sergei paused, as he played with the zipper of his borrowed jacket. "I guess we probably should be good for the rest of the night."

"Yeah, we have a huge game and should conserve our energy," Kip reluctantly agreed.

They took turns in the bathroom, taking showers and brushing their teeth. Kip went first, so he was already under the covers when Sergei came out. He'd changed into a pair of red flannel



sleep pants and a plain white t-shirt. His normally spiked hair wet and slicked back.

When Sergei hesitated and didn't move from the door, Kip cocked a brow questioningly. Sergei nibbled on his bottom lip before finally speaking. "Do you think it would still be okay if we slept in the same bed? We don't have to do anything kinky. I just wanted to have you hold me tonight."

Kip grinned, a warm feeling going through him. As if he would say no to that request. He lifted the corner of the blankets and Sergei rushed over, climbing in. It took a couple of moments of wiggling before Sergei found a position he liked.

Sergei wrapped one arm around Kip's waist, his thinner body plastered to Kip's side. Then he snuggled his head onto Kip's chest. Sergei smelled of the hotel soap, his natural scent lingering underneath.

"Comfy?" Kip quipped, a smile spreading over his face.

"Yeah," Sergei said with a happy little sigh.

"I need you to promise something for me."

"If we win the game tomorrow, I won't plant a big one on your lips in front of the whole team," Sergei teased.

"No, I want you to make sure you're careful. I have a feeling the Cougars aren't finished with you." Even as Kip thought about the last game, a wave of fear went through him.



Sergei snorted. "Don't worry about me. I can skate faster than any of those losers."

"They managed to get to you at the last game."

"Only because I let my guard down. It won't happen again."

Kip prayed Sergei was right because the thought of any harm coming to his boy made Kip's chest tight. He held Sergei close to him and wished there was some way he could guarantee that Sergei made it safely through the first round of playoffs. Short of benching the guy, he didn't see how he could avoid the danger. He would just have to make sure that he kept Sergei covered and protected at all times.

He wanted to issue a few more orders, but the soft snores coming from Sergei let Kip know he was out for the night. Kip lay awake for a while longer, savoring the feeling of having Sergei in his arms. He realized how much Sergei had come to mean to him. Instead of scaring Kip, it sent a happy feeling through him. He didn't know how it'd happened, but somehow Sergei managed to wiggle under his skin and now the kid was the most important thing in Kip's life.

*More important than the NHL?* A nasty voice in his head asked.

Surprisingly, that answer came to him easily. Yes, Sergei was more important. It'd taken nearly losing him for Kip to realize that, but now he



knew for certain that his future was Sergei, consequences be damned.

He vowed to himself that as soon as the game was over tomorrow, he'd let Sergei know that, too. Mind made up, Kip gave the top of Sergei's head a kiss. He couldn't wait to begin his new life with the man he loved.



## Chapter Seven

Kip was going to strangle Sergei with his own skate laces. From the instant the team filed out of the locker room and Sergei pulled on his helmet, sans face cage, Kip's worry grew to a near panic. He'd even broken protocol and pulled Sergei out of line, so they could talk.

"Where in the hell is your mask?" he demanded.

Sergei shrugged. "I don't need it."

"I specifically told our new equipment manager to make sure it was in place today."

"And I told him to forget it," Sergei replied with a calmness that infuriated Kip.

"What the fuck for? Did you forget how the Cougars treated you last game?"

Sergei's eyes narrowed with anger and he tilted his chin in that all-too familiar stubborn way of his. "If I wear it, they know I fear them. I'm not going to give those bastards that satisfaction."

"So you're going to show them how tough you



are by bleeding all over the ice when they give you a slash to the face?" Kip demanded, his heart pounding in fear.

"I'll just have to make sure they can't catch me," Sergei replied with a cocky smile.

Kip wanted to shake him. Did the idiot actually think he could stay out of their reach for a whole game? While he applauded Sergei standing up for himself, he'd picked the wrong way to go about it.

"Please, don't do this, babe."

Sergei's eyes rounded at Kip's public use of an endearment, but that stubborn expression remained. He gave a slight shake of his head. "I'm done being afraid of them. I've given them way too much of my life already."

Kip wanted to argue further, but Sergei turned around and walked away, toward the ice. Left with no other choice, Kip followed, his chest tight with fear. He caught Devon's gaze. The forward's dark brows were drawn tight and his lips pressed together in a hard frown.

"What is he thinking?" Devon demanded, echoing Kip's own fears.

"I have no idea. He was fine this morning at practice and breakfast."

They got on the ice and began running through warm up drills. The entire time Kip tried to meet Sergei's eyes, but the brat pointedly ignored him. The whistle sounded, indicating the start of the



game. Since Kip's line was first up, he had no choice but to watch helplessly from the ice as Sergei made his way to the team bench.

Some gangly woman walked on the ice to sing the National Anthem. Clearly a hometown girl, she ran a hand through her overly teased, fried-blonde hair before she began to butcher the song. The stands were filled with Cougar fans and from the sounds of some of the crude chants, they had already racked up some pretty impressive beer sales. Kip grimaced, between the fans' behavior and the Cougars' on-ice thug behavior, this would be one hell of a game.

When the woman finished singing, Kip clapped, not out of appreciation for her talent, but because the torture was over. He went to center ice and took the faceoff.

Once the game got under way, Kip realized it would play out the same way as last time. The Hawks would dominate the ice and rack up the score, the Cougars would play dirty and try to cause as much pain as possible.

They kept gunning for Sergei, but true to his promise, he managed to keep out of their way. Although a few times it was just by a matter of inches. Kip nearly swallowed his mouth guard when a huge a Cougar defenseman almost squished Sergei against the boards. Sergei barely got out of the way in time. The Cougar ended up



hitting nothing but wood and glass as he slammed into the wall.

“Ha! Looks like somebody just body checked themselves,” Trey taunted from the net.

Several Hawks laughed at his comment, but Kip didn’t join in. He only knew the incident would fuel the Cougar’s anger. Then things got worse when Sergei scored first one goal, quickly followed by two more. While it was great that the boy was on a streak, Kip knew that only put a bigger target on his back.

Near the end of the second period, the game had really gotten out of control. With the score reading 5-0 in the Hawks’ favor, the Cougars had resorted to even more nasty tactics.

Kip perched on the edge of the bench as he watched Sergei’s line take the ice. The faceoff started clean enough, until the center passed the puck to Sergei. This time two Cougars descended on him. While Sergei was able to dodge the first one, he wasn’t so lucky with the second one.

The Cougar brought up his stick and slashed it across Sergei’s face. His head jerked sideways as a spray of blood cascaded over the ice. The Cougar followed it with a hard check to Sergei’s skull.

Kip jumped to his feet, a cry of denial ringing from his lips as he watched helplessly. Sergei slammed headfirst into the boards before he hit the ice, his right arm twisting at an unnatural



angle. The crowd let out a collective gasp while the Hawk bench erupted in yells of anger.

Not caring about anything other than Sergei, Kip leapt over the boards and skated to Sergei, who laid face down and motionless. The entire time, a voice in Kip's head chanted, *Not him. Anyone but him. Please. Please. Please.*

It seemed to take forever for him to reach Sergei's side. Pushing the refs out of the way, he went down on his knees. Shaking his gloves off, Kip reached over and very gently turned Sergei over, a sob escaping from his throat as he saw the condition the man was in.

A huge gash nearly covered the entire length of Sergei's brow, blood continuing to gush from the wound. Sergei's eyes were closed, he didn't move not even when Kip gave him a slight shake.

"Come on, baby, wake up," Kip pleaded.

He made a feeble attempt to wipe some of the blood from Sergei's head, but there was so much that all he managed to do was smear it. Kip let out a choked sob as he held Sergei to his chest.

"Please, wake up. I want to see those beautiful eyes of yours."

The arena had fallen silent. Not even the Cougars' own fans could get behind such a dirty, vicious penalty. The only sounds that filled the massive building were a couple sobs and Kip's pleas. He continued to hold and rock Sergei until



Trey came up and put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Kip, you need to let him go so the medics can get in," Trey soothed.

Kip glanced up and saw a couple of paramedics standing a few feet away. Every rink had a crew on hand for most games in case of emergencies. Kip gave Sergei one last squeeze before carefully putting him back on the ice.

"Hurry, I don't want him to get cold," he told the medics.

One of them nodded and they quickly went to work, bandaging Sergei's head and loading him onto a backboard. They then placed him on a stretcher and quickly wheeled him off the ice. Kip watched until they were out of sight.

Glancing down at his hands, he noted they were covered with blood. More crimson coated his jersey. The ice was the worst, a huge puddle of it marked the spot where Sergei had lain.

Sergei's blood. His boy. The one Kip loved more than anything in the world. A noise halfway between a snarl and sob tore from his throat as he turned and charged the Cougar who'd done the most damage.

The man tried to defend himself, but he proved helpless against Kip's anger. Kip tackled him, took him down to the ice and began to pound on his face. He only got in a few good punches before the



refs came over and yanked him off the Cougar.

More blood covered the ice, but this time it was the Cougars'. It gave Kip grim satisfaction to see the pain on the man's battered face. The refs kept a firm hold on Kip as they skated him over to the doors leading to the locker room. He knew without being told that he'd been ejected from the game.

Not that he cared, he would have left on his own anyway. Playoffs or not, there was no way he wasn't going to the hospital to be with Sergei. Kip went to the locker room and began to peel off his equipment. A few minutes later, Devon surprised him by coming in, too.

"Wait for a second and I'll go with you," he said as he began to tug off his pads.

"What about the game?"

"I got ejected, too, when I went after the other player who hurt Sergei." Devon flashed a grim smile.

They were just getting their street shoes on when a soft knock sounded on the door before a man entered. With dark hair that flopped over his blue eyes and a thin build, he couldn't be much older than Sergei.

"Hey, I thought I'd see if you needed a ride to the hospital," the stranger said.

Devon studied his face for a moment. "Don't you play for the Vapors?"



"Yeah, my name's Jochen. Sergei and I have been online buddies for a couple of weeks now."

For a fleeting moment, Kip wondered just how close Jochen and Sergei were before he pushed it aside. All that mattered was getting to Sergei. Kip nodded his consent and they rushed out to the car.

By the time they arrived at the tiny hospital, they'd already taken Sergei to their one trauma room. The nurse didn't have much in the way of an update, but she promised to let them know as soon as there was any news. Without any other option, the three men plopped into the hard waiting room chairs.

It seemed to take forever for the nurse to come back. Kip jumped to his feet as she approached.

"They sutured the cut on his head and stabilized his arm for right now. He's fractured his humerus and is going to need surgery to have a couple of pins put in place until it heals," she said.

"When does he go in for that?" Kip asked, breathing a sigh of relief that it wasn't more serious.

"Your team physician wants him to be transferred to the Battle Creek hospital, so he can oversee the operation."

"We have a team physician?" Devon asked.

Kip shrugged. "I guess we do now. When will the transfer take place?"

"As soon as we can get an ambulance here. If



you want, you can go back and see him. He's been asking for you."

Joy surged through Kip at the thought of finally being able to check on Sergei himself. He nodded and followed the nurse back into the tiny ER. She led him to a room in the corner.

Sergei lay on a bed, a sheet pulled to his chest. His injured arm was in a white cast and a fresh bandage wound around his head. He must have heard Kip approaching because he turned to look at him.

"I guess you were right. I should have worn that damn cage," Sergei said by way of greeting.

Kip rushed over and placed a soft kiss on his lips. "Don't beat yourself up over it. The only thing it would have helped with would have been the cut. Nothing could have protected your body against a dirty check like that."

Sergei nodded before asking, "What are you doing here? I was shocked when the nurse told me you were in the waiting room. You should be at the rink since the game has to still be going on."

"I kind of got ejected when I took my frustrations out on the Cougar who hurt you."

"No way," Sergei gasped. "You never get into fights."

"I know, but when I saw you hurt like that, I lost it."

"Wow, I bet Coach is pissing kittens."



"I'm pretty sure of it, especially since Devon was ejected for fighting, too."

Sergei's mouth formed a slight circle of amusement. "Shit, that means he actually had to coach a game by himself for once."

"Nah, he probably just made one of his assistants do it."

"Hmmm...I wonder if he picked the drunk or the one who can barely stand on the ice let alone skate a drill?"

They both shared a laugh before Kip pressed a kiss to Sergei's cheek. "You really had me worried for a while there, kid."

"So, what happens to me now?"

"They're going to transfer you to the hospital in Battle Creek. The one here isn't good enough for what you need."

"So this town's hospital sucks, just like their anthem singer does," Sergei quipped with a watery smile.

"Be nice, she tried."

"You're right, if anyone should be mocked, it's her hairstylist and vocal coach."

They both shared a laugh before Sergei's eyes began to droop. "Sorry, I don't think I can stay awake much longer. They gave me something for pain and it's really knocking me on my ass."

Kip pressed their foreheads together and held onto Sergei's uninjured hand. "That's okay, sleep."



I promise to be here when you wake up."

A few moments of silence stretched between them before Kip finally got the courage to say, "I love you." At first, he thought Sergei had fallen asleep and missed the declaration.

Then Sergei gave a soft sigh and replied, "I love you, too."

It took the ambulance crew an hour to get there. As they were transferring him to the cot, Sergei opened his eyes long enough to mutter, "Don't leave me, Kip."

When one of the paramedics looked as if he were going to protest, Kip said, "I'm his partner and I'm going with him."

A soft smile played on Sergei's lips at that declaration and there was a brief flash of pride in his eyes. Kip was surprised that he didn't have any reservations about publically announcing their relationship for the first time. He just reached out and reclaimed Sergei's uninjured hand as they wheeled him out.

As they went out to the ambulance, it didn't surprise Kip to find the whole team waiting for them. They all rushed forward to call out well wishes to Sergei.

Sergei grinned at them before asking, "Did we win?"

"Are you kidding? We creamed them," Trey replied.



“And we’ll cream them the next three games, too,” Devon added.

“We’ll teach them not to pick on one of us,” another team member put in.

If any of them noticed that Kip and Sergei were still holding hands, nobody remarked on it. If anything, a few of them wore pleased smiles. So Kip didn’t hesitate in leaning down and placing a kiss on Sergei’s cheek. “Okay, let’s get you back to Battle Creek, where we both belong.”



## *Chapter Eight*

Kip stretched his back, trying to work out some of the kinks from sitting in a chair for six hours. Leaving wasn't an option though. Not until he knew Sergei had made it through his operation. He wasn't the only one feeling that way either. The entire team was packed into the surgery floor's waiting room.

Trey came over and handed him a cup of coffee.

Kip accepted it with a mumbled thanks.

"How much longer do you think it will be?"

Trey asked.

"Hopefully not much."

"I don't think the hospital staff is too happy with us."

"What did you do now?" Kip demanded.

Trey held up one hand innocently. "Nothing, I promise. It's all the fans who are camped out in the parking lot that has the hospital's bloomers in a bunch."

Kip blinked in confusion.



Trey explained, "They started showing up right after Sergei arrived. They won't leave either."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Sergei has a way of making people fall in love with him," Kip mused with a bit of pride.

"Yeah, you should know that better than anybody," Trey replied with a knowing grin.

"Am I that obvious?"

"Every time you look at him, it's written all over your face. Plus, the way you reacted when he was hurt was pretty telling. I know you may not want to hear this, but I'm pretty sure your secret is out, thanks to that performance."

Kip waited for the familiar sensations of fear and anxiety to hit him, but all he felt was a sense of relief. Now he didn't have to worry about being discovered, or about having to make Sergei hide what they meant to each other. Now they could finally be together. There was one final thing he needed to do though, something that would make it so Sergei really knew how much Kip loved him. A way he could make up for all the hurt he caused the other man.

"Does Devon's boyfriend still work for the paper?" Kip asked.

"Sure, why?"

"I need you to call him for me. It's time I let everyone know the real me."

Trey's eyes bugged in shock. "Are you sure you



want to do that? What about your theory that the NHL won't ever accept you?"

"Fuck it. Sergei is way more important to me."

Trey smiled. "I knew you wouldn't let us down. Give me a few minutes to make the calls and set everything up."

\* \* \* \*

Sergei woke up and immediately wished he could go back to sleep the instant a huge wave of pain hit him. His head hurt, his shoulder hurt, even his back hurt. In short, he was one ball of agony. He let out a groan, the sound somewhat raspy due to his dry throat. Blinking a few times, he took in his surroundings.

He'd been moved into a private room and there were a ton of flowers, balloon bouquets and cards around him. So much so that he felt certain they'd accidentally parked him in somebody else's room. Then his gaze settled on Kip and Sergei's stomach did a happy flip.

Kip looked so uncomfortable, curled up in a chair way too small for his large frame. He was asleep, but the dark circles under his eyes indicated that he hadn't been getting much rest. Sergei cleared his throat and Kip jumped awake.

"Hey, babe," Kip said, as he got up and rushed over to the bed.



"Water?" Sergei asked.

Kip picked up a cup and brought the straw to Sergei's lips. Sergei drank his fill before asking, "How long have you been here?"

"I haven't left since they brought you back into your room last night."

"You didn't have to do that," Sergei objected even as a warm sensation went through him at Kip's thoughtfulness.

"I'm not the only one. You have a ton of fans who've been camped out at the hospital. They've been sending flowers and gifts, too."

Sergei gasped in shock. "Really? I didn't think they even knew I existed."

"What can I say? You have that effect on people?"

Kip reached out and caressed Sergei's cheek before adding, "The doctor said your arm is going to heal and you'll be able to play hockey again."

"How soon?"

"Not until next season."

Disappointment crashed into Sergei. "Crap, that sucks. I'm going to miss the playoffs."

Kip gave him a brief kiss. "Hey, you're still part of the team. You'll just have to help out from the bench for a while."

"I guess so," Sergei agreed morosely.

"There is something else you should know about."



Great, just what he needed, more bad news. Sergei took a deep breath to steel himself. "What is it?"

Kip held up a paper. "You should probably look at this."

With a heavy dose of trepidation, Sergei reached out with his good hand and took the paper. Unfolding it, his gaze rested on a huge black and white photo of Kip. Over it, written in bold black letters was, *Yes, I'm gay*. Sergei sucked in a breath, stunned silent.

Kip nervously cleared his throat and said, "I didn't get into detail about our relationship, although the whole world knows we're a couple because of the on-ice meltdown I had when you were injured."

"I wouldn't have cared if you told the paper about us," Sergei said, finally finding his voice. He couldn't think of a time where he'd loved or been more proud of Kip. Coming out had been his biggest fear, yet Kip had overcome it and all for the sake of their relationship.

"I did tell them about how the Cougars mistreated you because you're gay. I want the media to know how the coaching staff there didn't help you out. I hope you don't mind."

Sergei ran a finger over Kip's picture. "Of course not. Especially if it helps other gay players from being discriminated against."



"You should also know that they're pressing criminal charges against the Cougar who hurt you. They may even prosecute it as a hate crime."

"Really?" Sergei had never dreamed that they'd go that far to punish the player.

Sergei devoured the article before he lowered the paper and looked at Kip. "I heard you yesterday. When you told me that you loved me. Did you really mean it?"

Kip leaned down and gave him another kiss. "Yes, did you mean it when you said it back?"

Sergei nodded shyly. "Yeah, I did."

"Good, because now that I finally have you, I'm never letting you go."

Happiness surged through Sergei, washing away all the pain. Yeah, that was a plan he could definitely get into. "I'm going to hold you to that promise."



## Epilogue

Sergei clumsily dumped the box on the floor of their new apartment before collapsing on the couch. While several more boxes were strewn around, he couldn't find it in him to care enough to get up and unpack them. They'd been in the process of moving all day and he was just too tired.

Kip came in and caught him slacking off. "Hey, just because you have one arm, that doesn't mean you get to be lazy."

Sergei laughed. "Hey, I unpacked the most important things." He pointed at two framed photos on the fireplace. One was Kip's coming out article. The other was the team picture taken right after they'd won the championship. While Sergei wasn't in uniform in it, he did have a jersey on. He sat in the front row, Kip holding him in a possessive embrace.

Kip joined him on the couch. "I guess you have a point. I love how cute you look in that picture."



Sergei gave him a slug on the arm. "Cute is for puppies, kittens or pop stars. It's not for full-grown men."

Kip grabbed his fist and pressed a kiss to the knuckles. "Just give it up and admit you're adorable."

"Okay, but only if you admit that you're incredibly hot and studlicious."

"There you go making up words again."

"You know you love it," Sergei retorted.

Kip grew serious. "Yes, I do. Every day I find out something more that I love about you."

Sergei leaned in for a hot, lingering kiss that left them both breathless. "Ditto. And now we have the rest of our lives to fall more and more in love with each other."

"That beats anything the NHL could ever offer," Kip said with a loving smile.

Sergei couldn't have agreed more.



## *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. Go Wings! You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book or gorging on caffeine at her favorite coffee shop.