Heart in Hand

by salifiable

Summary

Darryl had realized very early on that for better or worse, he would be linked to Aleksey Kuznetsov for the rest of his life. But he never expected anything like this.

Notes

So after realizing that there are a decent number of people reading this story as original fiction, I've decided to post two versions: the public version with fictionalized names, and a private version posted here which is only available to registered users of AO3. If you're interested in why I've decided to do so, you can go to my livejournal post on it here.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

"Okay, so remember, you'll run through a couple of drills with the kids, and then a scrimmage for the last half hour or so," Katy says. Darryl nods, skating a couple of quick, lazy swoops on the ice. He's not sure why she's repeating herself - it's not like Darryl hasn't done a million public relations events like this before. Granted, it's the grand opening of the new Adidas Arena, so the entire PR team has been running around like crazy for a whole week's worth of events, and the moment they found out Darryl was coming back early from summer vacation, they basically booked him solid for the entire thing. And this is why Darryl's here now, waiting for a bunch of local kids to come in and play for a while on the new rink.

"All right, here they come," Katy says, craning her neck anxiously. Darryl looks at her curiously; he hasn't worked with her as much as other members of the PR staff, but it's sort of weird that she's so nervous over what should be a fairly routine event. Sure, there are a lot of fans in the lower bowl, and there's a decent amount of media clustered around, but there was a whole lot more fuss a couple days ago with the actual opening; now all the events afterwards are much more low-key.

The kids start spilling through the rink door, a handful of boys and girls not even in their tweens yet. Darryl smiles a little awkwardly at the first few kids who make it to center ice first, a couple of them openly gawking at him. It's not that Darryl dislikes kids - just the opposite, in fact. Playing with them is always fun, it's just that hero-worship always make him really uncomfortable, he's always worried about messing up somehow.

( A couple years ago, Darryl had been at another community event at when this little boy had came up to him, literally shaking with nerves. Darryl had smiled as wide as he could and crouched down,
but it hadn't helped much - if anything, the kid had looked even more terrified. But then before Darryl could say anything, the boy blurted out, "Knock knock." Darryl had scratched his head, but okay. "Who's there?" he asked. The kid had stared at him with huge eyes, completely silent, then abruptly burst into tears and ran away.

"Wow, I think you scarred him for life," Brynn had said, coming up to him; his family had been visiting him at the time. "What did you say to him?"

"Nothing, I didn't say anything!" Darryl had said, a little freaked out. Brynn laughed.

"Oh, Darryl, wait until the media finds out that in your spare time you enjoy traumatizing little kids," she'd said. Darryl had glared at her, still unnerved. "Thanks, sis, I guess that explains how you turned out, right?" Brynn had grinned at him sunnily. "Yup, if I turn out to be a screw-up, it'll be all your fault - see if you ever get a Hart Trophy after the truth comes out!"

After that, Darryl tries to be as gentle and smiling as possible whenever he's around kids. He just hopes he doesn't seem like a creep.

Eight, nine, ten... Darryl counts as each one skates towards center ice, then looks back at the rink door in confusion - he thought the plan was to have eleven kids, enough for a full-scale scrimmage. Oh, but here comes the last one, except... Darryl feels his jaw drop as a tall, hulking frame emerges from the tunnel and quickly bounds onto the ice, shaggy hair and gap-toothed grin unmistakable.

"Hey, Darryl." Aleksey Jakovlevich Kuznetzov says, grinning wickedly at him. "How is summer vacation, huh?"

Dimly, Darryl's aware of the low buzz going around the crowd in the rink, which probably makes it more likely that Kuznetzov is actually standing there and this isn't just a spontaneous hallucination.

"Uh, okay?" Darryl says. "Kuznetzov, what are you doing here?" All the kids are gaping openly at the other player, and sort of hilariously most of them are looking at him with varying expressions of dislike – except for one dark-haired little boy who’s gazing up at Kuznetzov with stars in his eyes, his mouth open in awe.

Kuznetzov grins at Darryl. “I just want to see new rink, want to see if it’s better than Verizon.” He makes a show of looking around, then turns back and shakes his hand in a so-so gesture. “I guess is okay, maybe.” He looks at Darryl expectantly. “But I hear you playing hockey today, not fair you start so early, so I drop by! You doing with drills, right? Scrimmage later?”

Now Darryl understands why Katy seemed so anxious; great, he’s being set up by his own PR team.

“Yeah, I was going to get started on a shooting drill,” Darryl says uncertainly.

“Oh, my favorite!” Kuznetzov looks at him mischievously. “You gonna be goalie?”

“No, I’m not going to be the goalie!” Darryl snaps back. “Okay you guys, so here’s how the drill goes…” Darryl says, turning back to the rest of the kids.

And so, as surreal as it seems, Darryl finds himself running hockey drills with ten kids from Pittsburgh and Aleksey Kuznetzov. All of the kids are pointedly ignoring the Washington hockey player, acting as if there’s only one NHL superstar on the ice instead of two.

All of them except for that one dark-haired boy, who after a few minutes finally musters up the courage to skate over to Kuznetzov and poke him in the side.
“Are you really here? Is that really you?” The boy asks suspiciously. Kuznetzov grins and bumps the kid gently, which of course means that the kid almost falls over.

“Yup, is really me. What’s your name?” And it’s like a flood bursting out from behind a dam.

“I’m Andy! You’re my favorite player ever except my dad and Jamie – that’s my older sister and she’s a know-it-all but Mom says that I’m going to be taller than her someday – they both always tell me that you can’t be my favorite player because you’re a Bear and we’re supposed to hate you but you always score the best goals!” the boy says, throwing his arms up in the air.

Darryl isn’t quite sure how much of this Kuznetzov actually understands, since it was hard enough understanding all of it even as a native English speaker, but the other player is nodding along anyways.

“You like score goals?” Andy nods enthusiastically.

“Yeah, and I always want to leap into the glass like you do except Dad says that that’s showboating and it means I’m not a good sport,” he says, becoming glum. Kuznetzov looks down at him for a moment, then nudges the boy companionably.

“No worry, Andy, I show you how to celebrate scoring goal, okay?” Kuznetzov skates out of line and corrals one of the loose pucks before coming back. When it’s his turn at the front of the line, he turns back. “Okay, look how I do this, all right?”

Kuznetzov blazes forward like he’s on a breakaway, then wrists in a laser into the empty net at the other end of the ice. He kisses his glove and thrusts his arms upward in triumph, then after a few seconds he brings them down and skates back.

“Okay, you see how I only celebrate for three seconds? That is time limit when you are one scoring goal, you see?” Kuznetzov says to Andy, who nods. “Now I show you how to celebrate when your teammate score, okay?” Kuznetzov gets another puck and skates it up the ice, then passes it to a very bemused Darryl.

Darryl stops the puck with his stick, then looks at Kuznetzov skeptically. Kuznetzov gestures at him impatiently. With a sigh, Darryl half-heartedly sends the puck into the net. He turns back, and is greeted by an armful of screaming Kuznetzov, the other player leaping onto him.

"What the-" Darryl has to remind himself not to swear in front of the kids. "Kuznetzov, get off of me!"

"Woooohoooooooo!!! Goooooooooooooaaaaaaaal! Goooooooooooooaaaaaaaal! Yay Darryl! Yay Colton! Go 88!" Kuznetzov yells, clutching on to Darryl even as Darryl staggers under his weight. Darryl finally succeeds in prying the other player off, and Kuznetzov winks at him once before skating back over to Andy. "You see? You celebrate teammate goal a lot more than your own, okay? Because when you score, you know you can always be better, but when other people score, that means team do well and that is most important thing. And your Dad won't yell at you any more, I promise." Kuznetzov says, kneeling down.

"But some of the guys on my team are jerks!" Andy says. Kuznetzov shrugs.

"Okay, but they still your teammate, you gotta stick together. Hockey is team sport, nobody win game by himself. You want game like that, you play tennis or golf, you know? Nothing better than team win, Andy." Kuznetzov pats the kid on the shoulder. "All right, your turn for shooting drill - remember, only 3 seconds to celebrate."

"Is because my teammates always want to celebrate longer, see? Now go on, go, go," he says, making shooing motions. Darryl tilts his head, thoughtful; this is not a side of Kuznetzov that he's ever seen before.

The rest of the drills run smoothly, with both Kuznetzov and Andy staying relatively quiet. But after the drills are done, Darryl can see the problem almost as soon as the words are out of his mouth: "Okay, now we're going to have a scrimmage, so let's divide up into two teams..." he trails off as nine kids immediately skate over to cluster around him, while Andy sticks to Kuznetzov's side like glue. Kuznetzov looks at Darryl, his eyes laughing.

"Is not very fair, is it Darryl? You really need so much help?"

Darryl opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, one of the girls next to him shoots back, "We're going to beat you by a couple of touchdowns, Andy, it's gonna be 14 to 0 by the time we're done with you!"

"You wish! You're going to begging us for mercy!" Andy says defiantly, then looks up at Kuznetzov uncertainly. "... Right, AJ?" Kuznetzov smiles at him.

"You bet! I play goalie, and you go out there and get hat trick, okay?" The kid squints up at Kuznetzov.

"You're going to play goalie?"

"Yeah, you watch, I get shutout!" Kuznetzov says, skating over to the bench to put on goalie pads and a chest protector.

Well, it's not quite 14 to 0, although it gets close; Kuznetzov is pretty laughable as a goalie, since he stays on his feet the entire time, although on the other hand he's big enough and quick enough on his feet that shuffling side to side in the crease works okay. The other kids shoot at Kuznetzov with a vengeance (Darryl winces every time they do, he's pretty sure that if Kuznetzov gets injured at Pittsburgh before the season even starts, then the entire Bears organization will probably come over to burn Adidas Arena down right after it opens), and each of them ends up scoring once, so that's good too. Darryl for his part manages to accidentally-on-purpose turn over the puck to Andy near the goal enough times that the boy pots more than a few himself against the other kid goalie.

"Okay, everybody, I think we're gonna call it a day," Darryl says finally, after the half-hour is up.

"Ha ha, Andy, we got 9 and you only got 3! It's a blow-out!" The same girl who was taunting Andy earlier skates around him now, mocking. The boy looks down at his skates, a discouraged slump to his shoulders.

"Well, that not fair, because there is only one of him and there are nine of you, and you guys only get three times as many goals as Andy," Kuznetzov says, skating up and bending down to sling a comforting arm around the kid. "So that make you how many time better than all of them?"

Kuznetzov asks Andy, looking down at him. Andy looks up at him, his brow furrowed.

"I don't know," he says finally. Kuznetzov opens his mouth, then shuts it.

"Okay, yeah, me neither," he confesses. "But you get hat trick, so hooray!" he says, taking off his goalie helmet and tossing it up into the air. Andy giggles, which turns into full-out laughter when Kuznetzov catches the boy up beneath his armpits and whirls him once in the air before setting him
Darryl feels someone tugging at his sleeve. He looks down to see one of the younger girls looking up at him earnestly.

"Can you twirl me around like that too?" she asks, pointing over at Kuznetzov. Darryl sighs, then carefully picks her up and spins slowly around, except then all the other kids want a turn to. Darryl's actually a little out of breath by the time he sets the last kid down, and when he looks over he can see Kuznetzov smirking at him.

"All right, you guys, I think that's enough ice time for today," he says loudly. "But before you guys go, I have a present for each of you guys..." he skates over to the bench and comes back with an armful of 87 jerseys that he autographed earlier, passing them out to each of the kids, and all of them start putting them on enthusiastically. Except, of course, for Andy, who takes the jersey Darryl hands him and holds it at an arm's length, looking at it unenthusiastically.

"But I don't want to wear this," the boy complains. He looks up at Kuznetzov. "I wish I could have one of your jerseys, even though I guess everybody at school would laugh at me..." he says, trailing off sadly.

Kuznetzov looks at him for a moment, then says, "Wait here, okay?" He skates over to the side of the rink and gets his duffel bag from off the bench. He skates back with it slung over his shoulder, then sets it down, unzips it, and rummages around for a couple moments before pulling out a red Bears t-shirt.

"Okay, Andy." Kuznetzov says, "First, I write, To Andy, Congratulations on hat trick, Alex Kuznetzov," the player says, scribbling on the front of the t-shirt. "Now, I take this and turn inside out, and shirt go inside jersey, see?" Kuznetzov says, fitting the t-shirt inside the jersey with the sleeves pulled through. "If you go home and get mom or dad to sew Bears shirt to jersey, then you can wear jersey everywhere and people think you are Hawks fan, but inside you know you rock the red, right?" Kuznetzov says, raising his hand for a high five. Beaming, the younger boy slaps his hand, then races off the ice to show his family his newfound treasure. The other kids trail off a little more sedately, but as soon as the last one is out of earshot, Darryl turns to look at Kuznetzov.

"Okay," Darryl says resolutely. "Why are you really here, Kuznetzov?"

"What, I can't just say hello?" Kuznetzov says, leaning on his stick. Darryl just raises an eyebrow, waiting the other man out. Finally, Kuznetzov drops his gaze, looking down at his skates.

"I want you teach me how to be winner," he mumbles. Darryl stares at him; he must have misheard, or misunderstood.

"Excuse me?" he tries.

"Look, you have Stanley Cup ring, Olympic gold, so you know how to win," Kuznetzov says impatiently, looking up. "I want to know how to do that."

Darryl feels an unexpected welling of sympathy for Kuznetzov, something he'd honestly never expected to feel for this particular player.

"You know what you told Andy earlier is true, right?" he says cautiously. "I didn't win any of those games by myself, and you didn't lose any of your games by yourself, either."

Kuznetzov shrugs. "But I need to be better, my team depend on it," he says. "And last summer you turn yourself into 50-goal scorer, so yeah, Darryl, you know how to get better. I want to learn how
to get better too."

Darryl hesitates. This is really weird.

"Like, what, you want to practice with me or something?" he asks uncertainly. Kuznetzov nods.

"Yeah, see how you practice, see how you train, see how you get better at whatever," he says. When Darryl still doesn't say anything, he raises his formidable eyebrows in a challenge. "Unless you afraid you show me anything, I beat you forever after that," Kuznetzov says, baring his teeth.

"I'm not afraid of you!" Darryl retorts. "Fine, you want to train together? Meet me tomorrow at eight at the Iceoplex, then."

Kuznetzov grins at him for real. "So late, sleepyhead? I gonna suggest seven, but okay!"
Kuznetzov skates away blithely, leaving Darryl standing alone and grinding his teeth in irritation.
Chapter 2

The moment Darryl opens his eyes the next morning, he’s already regretting that he’s agreed to spend any time at all around Kuznetsov, let alone train with him.

Here’s the thing: Darryl doesn’t hate Kuznetsov, he just finds him really irritating occasionally. Of course Kuznetsov is a great player, one of the best in the game right now, but geez - the way he runs around on the ice and hits anything that moves, and treats everything like it’s a big joke, and celebrates each goal like it’s his first and last - it just gets under his skin sometimes.

It’s not like they can’t get along at all - they’ve managed to have a few sort of friendly conversations in the past. But that’s always overshadowed by the way that the media completely overhypes their supposed rivalry; it never fails to give Darryl a headache. Darryl’s default answer now whenever they ask about it is that hockey is a team game, and that he himself doesn’t pay more attention to Kuznetsov than to any other player in the league. Except now Kuznetsov is forcing him to, so... great.

He drives to the rink, half-hoping that Kuznetsov was just joking around yesterday, or even that Kuznetsov somehow gets lost and ends up in Philadelphia instead. Well, okay, maybe that’s going a little too far – Darryl wouldn’t wish Flyers fans on anybody.

His hopes are in vain. Kuznetsov’s already on the ice when Darryl steps into the rink.

"How are you getting into all these places?" Darryl asks suspiciously as he skates towards Kuznetsov. "Are you bribing people or something?"

Kuznetsov grins. "But everybody know me," he says, not untruthfully. "I just smile and ask pretty please, and-"

"And they all run away screaming, is that it?" Darryl asks snidely, then immediately regrets it when Kuznetsov looks at him in surprise, then bursts out laughing.

"Yeah, exactly," he says cheerfully, coming over to skate circles around Darryl. "You so smart, Darryl, how you know?" Darryl rolls his eyes and doesn't respond, instead emptying the bag of pucks he’s hauled out with him onto the ice.

"Enough blabbing, Kuznetsov." he says. "You wanted to find out what I do during the summer?" Darryl lines all the pucks up neatly at the top of the left circle, and shoots five of them in a row at the net, aiming for the top right corner. The next five, top left corner. Bottom left corner. Bottom right corner. So on until he runs out of pucks. He glances up to see Kuznetsov looking at him with raised eyebrows.

"Really? This is all you do?"

"No, this isn't all I do, but it's how I start." Darryl says. "Every summer, when I pick what part of my game I want to work on, I set a daily training schedule for myself. I start out with two hours of drills in the morning, fifteen minutes per drill, so eight drills total. As the summer goes on, I'll start doing more difficult drills and stop with the easier ones."

Kuznetsov squints at him. "You also schedule when you can go to bathroom? Have timer on how long you can piss?"

Darryl glares at him. "Hey, you're the one who wanted to come over and-"
"Joke, Darryl, is only joke." Kuznetsov says, skating over. "Okay, shooting, I can do this."

Darryl hesitates. "You know the whole point of this is to improve the weak parts of your game, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, but I want you to show me whole magic schedule," Kuznetsov says. "You work on shooting last summer, you show me shooting."

"Fine," Darryl says, and so they do. Precision drills, pass-and-shoot drills, cycling and shooting, shooting off the rush.

"How you do all these drill yourself last summer? I don't get it." Kuznetsov says, after the two hours are up. "You practice here in Pittsburgh? You not go home at all to Canada?"

"No, I did go home," Darryl says, coming to a stop. "There's a rink near my house in Nova Scotia, and there are a few guys up there that I practice with. Or my sister, she's a pretty decent hockey player herself."

"Ooh, sister?" Kuznetsov waggles his eyebrows suggestively. "Is she pretty?"

"If you even go near her, I swear I'll break every bone in your body before I bash your head in," Darryl says. "She's sixteen years old!" And a huge fan of Kuznetsov, but there's no way in hell Darryl is going to say that.

Kuznetsov shakes his head, tut-tutting as he skates over to start gathering the loose pucks again. "If you want to scare guys away, don't say sixteen - you can say she two or two hundred, but nothing in middle." He finishes pushing the pucks into a pile and kneels, scooping them back into the bag. "Okay, what next?"

"Next is video review," Darryl says, skating over to the bench, Kuznetsov following.

"Hey, you always get so many people watching you when you train during summer?" he asks, jerking his head towards the stands.

"Well, not so much at home, but when I start training here in Pittsburgh, yeah, a few fans usually show up..." Darryl says distractedly, then takes a closer look around the arena. "Although usually not this many," he says, staring at the sheer number of spectators. The stands are more than half full, which is kind of ridiculous for a Tuesday morning at the beginning of August.

"Aaw, they just wanna see the first winner of Messier Leadership Award, Darryl," Kuznetsov says, waving to the crowd. They boo him heartily. Kuznetsov blows kisses back at them. "Say hi to them, Mr. Darryl Messier Colton!"

"I'll Messier your ass, you just wait," Darryl mutters, pushing Kuznetsov off the ice after giving a cursory wave.

"Ooh, promises, promises!" Kuznetsov sing-songs.

Kuznetsov is equally annoying in the video room after he settles into his seat.

"Where is popcorn, Darryl?" he demands.

"Does Fischer let you eat popcorn when he reviews film with you guys?" Darryl asks. "Now shut up so I can get my computer set up." The video room does, admittedly, look like a mini-movie theater, a few rows of seats and the screen at the front of the room. Basically every team in the
NHL has a similar set-up to review game footage and such, but Darryl likes this room, he's comfortable in it. He goes into the back room and hooks his laptop up to the projector, queues up the relevant footage, then come back and sits next to Kuznetsov.

"Okay," Darryl says, the first images appearing on the screen. "So when I decided I wanted to work on my shooting last summer, I wrote down all the players who I wanted to learn from," he explains. "After that, I went and found game film for all of them, particularly the segments where they scored or had a shot on goal. So, the next part of schedule is that I watch these other players for an hour, and take notes on what they do that makes them successful."

"Hm." Kuznetsov watches Jarome Kepner skate across the screen, then looks at Darryl slyly. "Is there film with me in here? You have something you wanna tell me?"

Darryl grits his teeth. "Yes, there is some footage of you, Kuznetsov," he says evenly, "But not a lot. We're not the same kind of player, and I'm never going to have as strong or as heavy a shot as you do, so-"

"Wait wait wait, say again? What was that?" the other player says, almost bouncing up and down in his seat in excitement.

"But oh yeah, who's the current holder of the Richard trophy? Oh, that's right, it's me." Darryl finishes, glaring at Kuznetsov, who subsides a little at the jab, but not much. "Look, the point of all of this is to figure out the best way to improve my game, not to be unrealistic and change it up completely. I don't score as many pretty goals as you do, maybe, but dirty goals count just as much as the pretty ones do." Kuznetsov stays silent for a few moments.

"Okay, this is old, so we don't need to watch. What next?"

"Well, um, after an hour of watching other players, I usually spend an hour watching footage of me," Darryl says. "So last year, that meant watching games where I scored goals, to figure out how I was scoring, and then watching games where I didn't score, divided up into games where I had shots on goal and games where I didn't have any or only a few. That way, I could figure out what I was doing that was working, and what was happening in the games where the other teams were shutting me down."

"You take notes on all of this?"

"Yeah, my notebook from last year is at home, but I have a new one for this summer," Darryl says. Kuznetsov is looking at him with a strange expression on his face. "What?" Kuznetsov shakes his head.

"Nothing, nothing. Okay, so that is two hours, that take us to... lunchtime?" he says hopefully.

"Well, yeah, it would normally," Darryl allows. "But it's only 10:30 right now - are you actually hungry already?" Kuznetsov shrugs.

"Okay, then what is next?"

"After lunch, I'll usually spend another hour or so in here, reviewing games that we lost, concentrating on playoff games, then if there are regular season games that I remember in particular, I'll watch those as well." Darryl glances over at Kuznetsov, who now looks like he's bitten into a lemon. "What?"

"You watch again games you lose?" Darryl looks at Kuznetsov for a moment, genuinely confused.
"You don't? But then how can you learn anything from them?" Kuznetsov slumps down in his seat.

"I mean, usually coaches show clips to team about what we can do better... but usually I try to just forget and move on, concentrate on next game, you know?" he mutters.

"But that's really stupid," Darryl says, shocked into candor. "I mean, yeah, you do have to concentrate on the games coming up, but how can you ever improve if you don't figure out what you've been doing wrong before? I'm sure that your coaching staff does a great job, but, I mean - look, you shouldn't have to rely only on other people to tell you how to get better."

"I know, I know, I just - I don't like watch myself lose, okay?" Kuznetsov says defensively.

"But..." Darryl takes a breath. "Yeah, I get it. But I don't think - look, trying to get over or to forget losing probably makes you feel better in the short run, but if you don't learn how you're losing and how you can stop it, then you're not setting yourself up for success in the long run. It hurts, but you have to carry your losses with you." Kuznetsov looks away from Darryl for a long moment, his profile shadowed from the uneven light reflecting back from the movie screen.

"Okay," he says finally. "So what game you gonna watch today? Jays or Lions?"

"Um, Jays, game seven." Darryl says. Kuznetsov heaves a big sigh and settles back in his seat.

"Great," he says. "Stupid Stanek."

"Yeah," Darryl agrees, heartfelt.

After they're done watching the game, Kuznetsov seems almost more depressed than Darryl.

"Wow, that was not fun at all, Darryl." he grumbles. "Now I definitely want lunch."

So Darryl watches Kuznetsov inhale three burgers, five orders of french fries, and two orders of barbecue chicken.

"How do you not weigh five hundred pounds?" Darryl asks, at once repulsed and unwillingly impressed. Kuznetsov points accusingly at the salad in front of Darryl.

"How you not look like a stick, Darryl?" Kuznetsov says with a full mouth of food. Darryl rolls his eyes.

"Just finish eating, there's a lot more left to do." He says.

"I'm done, I'm done, now what?" Kuznetsov says, hastily wiping his mouth.

"Now, floor hockey." Darryl says, getting up.

"Uh, what?" Kuznetsov says.

"Oh, you kidding me," Kuznetsov says when Darryl hands him a floor hockey stick.

"No, I'm not. Look, it's easier to practice longer and at a slower pace, and there's limited ice time available anyways," Darryl says, flipping the puck over a couple times on the blade of his stick. "I usually spend the first hour working on whatever it is I want to improve, so last summer I practiced shooting in here a lot. Second hour I spend going over the plays from the losses I watched earlier. But since you're here, you can help me redo some of the plays from the Jays game we just watched."
By the time they're done practicing, both Darryl and Kuznetsov are dripping with sweat. Kuznetsov wipes his forehead, grimacing.

"We done yet today?" he asks hopefully.

"Almost," Darryl says, pulling at his sodden t-shirt. "A two or three hour work-out, and then I call it a day." Kuznetsov buries his head in his head theatrically, letting out a pitiful moan.

But then fifteen minutes later in the gym, he's back to trash-talking. Of course.

"You call this jogging? Is like sleepwalking!" Kuznetsov says, loping easily along the treadmill next to Darryl. Darryl grits his teeth; if he gets in a pissing contest with Kuznetsov, he's just going to end up drained and exhausted. So, he is not going to get into a pissing contest with Kuznetsov, he is not going to get into a pissing contest with Kuznetsov, he is not-

"Okay, fine, we'll go faster," he says, speeding up. Kuznetsov matches him stride for stride, grinning all the while.

Forget drenched in sweat, two hours of running, weight-lifting, and biking later, Darryl wobbles off his stationary bike, trying to hide the fact that his legs feel like jello. Kuznetsov doesn't even pretend, just tumbles off the bike and lies flat on his back, chest heaving.

"You do this- every- day?" He asks plaintively. Darryl glares down at him.

"Yes, I do," he says. "And today's practice was shorter than usual, there wasn't as much video review. Now get up, the floor's filthy." With a groan, Kuznetsov pulls himself up with great effort.

"Okay, maybe little slower tomorrow. See you at eight again, right?"

Darryl opens his mouth, then closes it.

"Okay," he says. "Sure." It can't hurt to indulge Kuznetsov for another day.

Except the next day, there are even more people in the stands, and there's constant clicking and flashing from all the cameras people have out. Darryl resists the urge to blush; this is ridiculous, this is his home arena, he shouldn't feel uncomfortable. If anything, it should be Kuznetsov who's uncomfortable, but no, he's hamming it up like he's on the red carpet.

"Oh my god, stop that," he says, pulling Kuznetsov away from the glass where the other player is crossing his eyes and trying to touch his tongue to his nose, apparently engaging in a silly-face contest with a kid in the front row. Darryl feels like telling the kid that there's no way he can win, Kuznetsov has too much of a head start in that race. "C'mon, we need to start practicing."

"Okay, great! What we practice today, Darryl?" Kuznetsov says, bouncing up and down.

"Well, I've been working on getting better defensively," Darryl says. "But you wanted to improve your game, right? What do you think you need to work on? What criticisms of your game did you hear last year?" he asks.

"Russian, dirty player, no defense, choker, predictable, dirty hitter, no defense, show-off, not team player, choker, Russian, dirty, selfish, bad fashion, bad dancer," Kuznetsov rattles off.

"Whoa, whoa," Darryl says. "Wait, what?"

"I know, right? I dress great, and I'm good dancer!" Kuznetsov says indignantly.
"No, I mean..." What Darryl really means is that he had no idea Kuznetsov had taken all the criticism aimed at him so much to heart.

"But hey, we can work on defense together!" Kuznetsov says, brightening. "By end of summer, we gonna be Selke nominees, tell Belyakov he can't have any more."

"Okay, yes, today we can work on defense together, and then tomorrow you can go back to DC and practice by yourself," Darryl says emphatically. Kuznetsov looks surprised for a moment, then - amazingly - pouts.

"Oh, c'mon, Darryl," he wheedles. "Why you not want to practice with me? Can I stay please? Pretty please? With cherry?"

"Seriously, are you six years old?" Darryl asks in disbelief.

"Hey, if we practice together, then you get to practice defending against me," Kuznetsov says. "That's good practice, right? Here," he says, skating over to the bench and tossing a puck towards Darryl. "If I can take puck from you three times, then I get to practice with you."

"I don't think-" Darryl says, and in the time it takes him to say those three words, Kuznetsov reaches out and takes the puck back. "Wait, that's not fair!" Kuznetsov flips the puck up onto the blade of his stick and saucers it back to Darryl, grinning.

"One down - just keep away this time, right?" Darryl glares at him, and immediately skates backward, taking the puck with him.

Kuznetsov tries to poke-check, but Darryl fends him off successfully. They dance around for a bit, but then Kuznetsov goes right and Darryl spins left, and he loses track of Kuznetsov for seriously half a second and in that instant, Kuznetsov appears out of nowhere and deftly lifts Darryl's stick off the ice, stealing the puck. It's a sweet move, but Darryl's in no mood to appreciate it.

"Number two - be careful Darryl, you gonna have to practice with me for rest of summer!" Darryl grits his teeth and takes the puck back again. This time, he makes sure to keep a close eye on Kuznetsov; this time, the battle goes on for a while, long enough that Kuznetsov eventually comes to a stop, apparently to catch his breath.

"You really so afraid to practice with me, Darryl?" he asks.

"I'm not afraid of you, I just - look, I like to practice alone," Darryl says, watching warily as Kuznetsov glides ever-so-slowly forward. "And I don't think that practicing with somebody on an opposing team is really a great idea, so-"

"Your fly is down," Kuznetsov says suddenly.

"What -?" Darryl looks down reflexively, and - BAM! Kuznetsov lunges forward and knocks Darryl completely flat on his back.

Darryl stares up at the ceiling. There's audible jeering from the stands, which Kuznetsov acknowledges with a wave. "You know, I probably should've expected that," Darryl says, once he gets his wind back. Kuznetsov leans over him, a wide grin across his face.

"Was that clean hit? Maybe we can work on me being not dirty player instead," he says.

Darryl rolls his eyes, letting Kuznetsov help haul him upright. "Even the rest of the summer's not going to be long enough for that."
A few days later, Darryl has to admit to himself that Kuznetsov is actually a great training partner. Obviously it helps to have somebody as skilled as Kuznetsov to practice with, but hearing the other player's comments when they review tape is interesting as well. And maybe, just possibly, Darryl can sort of see why some people consider Kuznetsov charming - he can be hilarious, sometimes unintentionally so, and he's always bubbling with enthusiasm and energy - and silliness - whether it's the beginning of the day or the end.

But the one thing Darryl can't get used to is how much attention is being directed at both of them, just for training together in the off-season. After the first few days, not only are the stands at the Kia Center completely full when he and Kuznetsov do drills in the morning, but there are so many people crowded in that the aisles and stairs are jam-packed too. And not only has there been coverage from the local sports writers from both Pittsburgh and DC, but there's been national print and television coverage. ESPN actually showed up and interviewed them both for a thirty-second clip on Sports Center - which, okay, thirty seconds, but this is a network that usually forgets that hockey exists until the Stanley Cup finals.

Darryl doesn't think it can get any worse. Except, of course, then it does.

About a week and a half after he and Kuznetsov start practicing together, Paul - the Hawks' main PR person - is waiting at the side of the rink with an unfamiliar woman when the two of them come off the ice.

"Darryl, Alex, I'd like you to meet Tracy," Paul says. "She's an executive producer at NHL Network."

Darryl shakes her hand. There's a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Hi, it's great to meet you guys," she says. "I know you're both busy training, so I'll cut to the chase. We're interested in filming a reality show starring the two of you."

Darryl's reaction is instinctive and immediate. "No." Hell no. Fuck no.

Kuznetsov's reaction is a little different. "Cool! We win money at end of it? Pretty girls? Record contract?" He says interestedly. "I sing great, wanna hear?"

"No, no, not that kind of reality show." Tracy says, laughing. "We were thinking that we would film you guys training together now, then follow you separately during the regular season, turn it into a weekly half-hour, maybe hour long show. Are you guys planning on continuing to train together during the regular season?"

"Uh, no." Darryl says.

"Maybe, if there is enough time." Kuznetsov says, shrugging. "Not think about it yet."

"Okay," Tracy says. "Well, if you guys could manage to grab some ice time together during the season that would be great, either around the Bears-Hawks games or if you're in the same area, or if you guys have enough free time to make the drive between DC and Pittsburgh."

"Um, no." Darryl says.

"Ooh, Winter Classic episode would be cool," Kuznetsov says enthusiastically.

Darryl doesn't know whether he's become invisible, or if Kuznetsov and Tracy have suddenly become deaf to him, or if Paul has gone completely insane, but whatever is going on he really doesn't like it.
"Hey, um, Tracy, look. It's nice to meet you, but I'm really not interested or comfortable in being part of a tv show," he cuts in. Tracy looks at him thoughtfully.

"Darryl, I don't know if you realize this, but you and Alex are drawing massive, national interest for hockey in the middle of August," she says. "The number of people watching already - it's like Kobe and Lebron decided to start practicing together in public. The ratings that a weekly show following the two of you would get? It would be incredible for hockey - the two of you have a real opportunity here to grow the sport here, you could really spearhead mainstream interest in the NHL."

"My impression was that the two of us already do enough of that," Darryl says sharply. "Now, if you'll exc-"

"We'll give both of you full review of each episode before it airs," Tracy says, laying it down like a trump card. Darryl pauses, surprised.

"Really? I thought - that's not normal, is it?"

"Our interest isn't to play 'gotcha' journalism, or to make either of you out as bad guys," she says. "We just want to give fans an idea of what life in the NHL is really like. You guys don't have to give me an answer now, just think about it, talk it over with your family, friends."

"Don't worry, Darryl just shy, he gonna come around," Kuznetsov says, patting Tracy on the back. Darryl just snorts. He knows what he thinks about this whole mess, and he's sure his friends and family will agree.

Except they don't. They really, really don't.

"I think it's a good idea, Darryl," Paul says, when Darryl pulls him aside privately to ask him exactly what the hell he was thinking. "I don't know Tracy personally, but I do know a few people at NHLN, and they all say that she's legit. She's not gonna try to screw you over, apparently she really wants to make this work with you and Kuznetsov." When Darryl continues to look at him skeptically, the other man claps Darryl on the shoulder. "Look, you should talk to your parents and Vince about this, but you should seriously consider it."

Vince is no help either.

"I think it's a great idea," Vince says. Darryl shuts his eyes and sinks into the chair in Vince's office; predictable. When Darryl had realized that Kuznetsov was serious about practicing with him for more than a couple days, he'd asked Vince if it was okay for Kuznetsov to train with him at the Kia Center. Not only had Vince been okay with it, he'd actually laced it up to shoot the puck around with Kuznetsov and Darryl the next morning.

"I guess the only thing is that if she's serious about filming you during the regular season, then you should ask the team whether they're okay with it, maybe ask Tracy if the players can review episodes that they're in before they air, too." Darryl covers his face and lets out a muffled groan. "Well, it's still your decision. Go talk to your family about it before you make a choice."

But when Darryl gets his parents and his sister on video chat to discuss the situation, this is the first thing Brynn says:

"You're going to be filming a reality show with Alex the Great? Oh my god, you totally have to give him my phone number now!"

Darryl glares at her. "First of all, stop calling him that. Second of all, I've said no to that request the
"Now, Darryl, calm down," his mom says. "Paul actually contacted us and offered to have us talk to Tracy directly, so we've already heard her pitch. How do you feel about all of this?"

Darryl fidgets in his seat. "I mean, I don't really feel comfortable with it. It just - I don't want to have to put up with all of the added attention, you know?"

"Mm. Well, it's your choice, but I think it could be kind of fun, especially since you'll have final say over whatever they show," his mom says. "Take a chance, Darryl; I bet a lot of people would tune in to see you and Kuznetsov each week." Darryl slumps down in his seat, casting a desperate look at his dad, his last possible ally.

"Dad?" he asks faintly. "What do you think?"

His dad hesitates, obviously torn over something. "Is it true that Kuznetsov wanted to practice with you so you could be his teacher or something?"

"Um, not exactly..." Darryl hedges.

"Wow, he did, he really did," his dad says, seeing right through him. "That's wonderful - you should do the show just so everybody can see you showing Kuznetsov how it's really done, Darryl."

Darryl winces at that, but Brynn positions herself directly in front of the camera, her expression deadly serious.

"Let me make this very simple for you, Darryl," she says. "If you don't do this show with Kuznetsov, I will make your life absolutely miserable."

Darryl glares at her. "You're my little sister, you already do that. Mom, Dad, I really don't understand why you let her abuse me like this!"

"Oh, you think I already make your life miserable? If you say no, I will personally recruit Dima, and Crawford, and Moreau, and all the rest of your teammates to prank the hell out of you 24/7, and you won't get a wink of sleep from now until April," Brynn says, glaring back. "You know I have all your teammates wrapped around my little finger, I could totally pull it off, don't even pretend I couldn't!"

Darryl opens his mouth, and after a moment closes it. Dammit.

Two days later, Tracy's waiting for him and Kuznetsov again at the side of the rink.

"Fine," Darryl says to her, grumpily. "I'll do it."
Chapter 3

The cameras take a lot of getting used to, even though the crew does their best to be unobtrusive. It's not like Darryl is a stranger to cameras, but he's never learned the trick of acting natural around them, and apparently it shows.

"Look, just pretend they aren't there," Tracy says, pulling him aside after the first day of filming. "And they really might as well not be, because we aren't going to show anything that you don't okay. If you decide that you're not comfortable with any footage we have of you, that's perfectly fine, just let us know and no one will ever see it."

She grins wryly. "If we have to, we'll just show clips of Alex being silly by himself, God knows we're going to have enough film of that by the end of the week."

Because if Darryl acts stiff and wooden in front of the cameras, then Kuznetsov is the complete opposite. He's exactly the same person with or without them - that is, a hyperactive six-year-old who bounces off the wall (or the glass) all the time, jokes around with everybody and has no sense of reserve whatsoever. So of course, Kuznetsov takes it on as his personal mission to get Darryl to loosen up around the cameras, except his methods seem mostly to include teasing and making fun of Darryl or just straight out yelling at him to act more natural, neither of which work very well.

"Hey! Hey, why you looking at Bob, hm?" Kuznetsov says, waving a hand in front of Darryl's face after Darryl glances self-consciously at the camera again. "Just ignore him, he not interesting person here, I'm interesting one, okay?" Kuznetsov says. "Er, sorry Bob, I know you wild guy off the ice," Kuznetsov adds as an aside to the cameraman, who just grins and gives Kuznetsov a thumbs up.

"I'm trying to ignore them, but they're kind of distracting, okay?" Darryl grits out. There's a half a dozen people clustered around them on the ice; Bob, the second cameraman, the sound guy, the boom guy, two other random people with heavy equipment.

"Hm, well, if you pay attention to them, I'm gonna score on you," Kuznetsov says, deking around Darryl. Darryl throws his hands up in the air in exasperation.

"That isn't even the drill we're doing!"

"Oh." Kuznetsov comes to a stop, sheepish. "What we doing again?"

If Kuznetsov's mission is to goad Darryl into acting normally in front of the camera, then Darryl finds he occasionally has to remind the other player to keep his focus. For all that the other player is a couple years older than him, the comparison to a hyped-up six year old really is an apt one; it's like Kuznetsov has so much energy that his attention can jump from one thing to another, so he sometimes has trouble concentrating on one thing for long periods of time.

Darryl also finds out to his slight surprise that it isn't just video review where Kuznetsov has taken a less than proactive approach. Apparently the other player isn't really used to formulating and following his own long-term training plans, he's instead relied mostly on the Bears coaching staff for direction instead.

Kuznetsov shrugs when Darryl asks him if he's understanding the situation correctly. "I mean, they're coaches, I listen to them, do what they tell me do. It's what they paid for, right? It's what I'm paid for, too."
"Yeah, but c'mon, you can do better than that," Darryl says. "I mean, what do you think we should work on today?"

"Well," Kuznetsov says, hesitating. "I guess..." he thinks for a while, then brightens. "We can play juice boy again?"

Darryl glares at him. "No," he says. "That is not a training plan, we can't play juice boy all day!"

It's ridiculous, this obsession Kuznetsov has with juice boy. It's not that Darryl hates the game or anything, in fact playing juice boy is usually how the Hawks end practice. It's a game where everybody on the team takes a turn at taking a shot on goal, except the net has two hockey sticks stuck through each of the upper corners to form a small triangular hole - not much larger than the size of a softball - on the right and left side. If a player manages to shoot a puck through either of the holes, then he gets out of line and practice is done for him; everybody else continues taking their turn trying to score, until the last guy left is the loser and therefore juice boy, since he has to go get a tray of cups filled with Gatorade and serve everybody.

Except juice boy is kind of pointless when there are only two players, which Darryl keeps pointing out to Kuznetsov to no avail. It just turns into 'who can score first?' and so the game usually only lasts a few minutes. "But then we can play more juice boy because it not take so much time!" Kuznetsov says. "You just bitter because you never win."

"That's not true!" Darryl protests. "You're only ahead 20 to 4 right now!"

Kuznetsov skates backwards, taking the puck with him. "About to be 21 to 4," he sing-songs.

"No, you mean it's gonna be 20 to 5," Darryl snarls, skating after him... aaaand, he's just gotten suckered by Kuznetsov, again.

And this is a side of Kuznetsov that Darryl hasn't seen up close before either, but he probably should've expected it: for all that Kuznetsov is hyperactive, he's even more hyper-competitive. It's not just juice boy - the other player tries to turn everything into a bet about who can do better, whether or not they're doing drills ("I bet I can backcheck faster than you!" Kuznetsov says. "Too bad you never actually backcheck during games," Darryl retorts), working out ("I bet I can run farther than you," Kuznetsov says. "You're gonna eat my dust!" "You realize we're running on treadmills, right?" Darryl asks), even who can sign autographs faster for the crowd waiting for them outside the arena every day ("You know we're in Pittsburgh and not in DC, don't you?" Darryl hisses as Kuznetsov signs away with a flourish. "There are about ten times more people asking me for autographs than you, of course you're going to finish signing first!" Kuznetsov grins at him. "All I hear is excuses! Keep signing, Darryl!").

So yeah, Darryl might've wondered exactly how Kuznetsov could have become the player he was, considering his occasional lack of focus and his clowning around - but being ultra-competitive is the kind of characteristic that will make up for that, especially when it's coupled to the talent Kuznetsov has.

They fall into a rhythm, the two of them; Darryl gets Kuznetsov to follow and commit to the training schedule, even take the initiative on what they work on each day, while Kuznetsov does gradually get Darryl to act more naturally in front of the cameras - if only because Kuznetsov's incessant goading and needling eventually pushes Darryl into snapping back and trash-talking in return in sheer defense, cameras be damned.

But even if Kuznetsov manages to get Darryl used to the cameras following the two of them around, he can't do much to ease Darryl's awkwardness when directly confronted by them. Tracy
has both of them filming separate interviews that she can use as narrative and filler when editing the episode together. Sounds great in theory, except Darryl isn't really sure how to answer all of the questions thrown at him.

"So why did you and Kuznetsov decide to practice together this summer?" Ben, one of the film crew, asks.

Darryl takes a deep breath. Whatever his dad might wish, he's not going to say that Kuznetsov and him are practicing together because Kuznetsov asked him how to win. It would be unbelievably arrogant for him to say that and the media would have an absolute field day - even Kuznetsov doesn't deserve the kind of grief that would bring.

"Well, um, I usually start training in the summer anyways, but I decided to come back to Pittsburgh a little earlier this year. I guess, I guess Kuznetsov heard I was around, and, um..." he trails off. "He wanted to see if we could train together, so, uh, after a while - I mean, I had to ask Vince if it was okay, and I suppose Kuznetsov cleared it with the Bears..." he stumbles to a halt again.

"Let's try that again, Darryl - remember, you can say whatever you want, if you decide you don't like it afterwards we just won't use it," Tracy calls out from behind the camera.

The questions don't get much easier to answer.

"Why would you decide to train with a rival player, especially Kuznetsov?"

"Uh..." Darryl pauses helplessly. "I mean, um, it's actually not that unusual for players from different teams to train at the same camps during the summer, and..." he hesitates again. "I guess we both just thought that we could learn from each other by training together, and, um, it's worked out pretty well, I think. I've given him a few tips on my training schedule and practices, but I've been learning a lot from him too."

Well, that's better; that'll do.

"So why did you decide to film this show with Kuznetsov?" Ben asks.

"Um, I guess I thought it would be... cool?" Darryl says, really tentatively.

"C'mon, Darryl, tell us what you really think!" Ben cajoles.

"Fine. I'm filming this show because my little sister forced me to, and nobody with more sense stopped her." Darryl snaps. "Thanks Brynn, really means a lot to me, sis."

"Ha! That's great - more like that, Darryl, that was hilarious!"

Kuznetsov doesn't need to be pushed into being funny; they film his interview right after Darryl's, and so Darryl sticks around to hear what he says.

"So why did you decide to train with Colton this summer?"

Kuznetsov makes his expression very serious. "We plotting together to get revenge on Montreal," he says. He looks into the camera. "Watch out, Jays, Darryl and me got evil plans," he says with a straight face.

"And why did you agree to be on a reality show with him?"

"Well, I hear that maybe Hawks have opening for winger for Darryl," Kuznetsov says earnestly. "I
mean, I know guys he has now are real good guys, but I think, maybe Darryl give me a shot, and if everybody see how hard I try, maybe I have chance," he says. Everybody behind camera, of course, is trying not to laugh at his pleading expression - even Darryl has to crack a smile; if Prescott ever had a chance to put Kuznetsov on Darryl's wing for real, he'd probably think he'd died and gone to heaven.

A few days after the interviews, Tracy catches the two of them in the video review room after lunch, disc in hand.

"All right - you guys ready to watch the first episode?" she asks.

"Sure, let's do this," Kuznetsov says, bouncing a little in his seat. Darryl bites his lip and braces himself.

But he's pleasantly surprised; they've done a good job of putting together a coherent and entertaining narrative, and he's impressed at how they show both him and Kuznetsov in a favorable light, instead of building one up at the expense of the other. They use the interviews to weave the storyline of the episode, and of course they have Darryl playing straight man to Kuznetsov's comedic schtick, it was basically inevitable considering the kinds of answers the two of them give to the same questions.

Overall, though, the editing crew does a good job of painting a well-rounded picture of both of them. Darryl doesn't come off as irredeemably dull, they end up showing a few clips when Kuznetsov successfully prodded him into horsing around on ice, trash-talking each other mockingly. Kuznetsov doesn't come off as a complete clown, there's a decent amount of footage of him training hard with Darryl, an intense, serious expression on his face.

As the episode comes to an end, Darryl sits back, a little reassured that maybe this isn't going to end in disaster.

"Okay, so..." Tracy says. "What do you think? You guys have any suggestions? Anything you want us to take out or change?"

"I guess - the only thing is that I don't wanna show everybody when I talk about Bears game plans and stuff, can you find some clips that not so, not so specific?" Kuznetsov asks.

"Yeah, of course." Tracy says. "Darryl?" Darryl pauses.

"You know, I'll think about it," he says. "Can I talk to you later if I come up with anything?"

"Yeah, of course - we're probably not going to air the first episode until the regular season starts anyways, so we're not in a huge rush," she says.

Both Darryl and Kuznetsov end up talking to Tracy after practice with a few more suggestions for the episode, and after a couple more rounds of edits and suggestions, she shows them the final cut one more time. After neither of them raise any more objections, she nods in satisfaction.

"That's great, you guys. Anyways, we thought that since this episode focuses on the two of you training in the off-season, it probably isn't worth it to try and get another one out of that material. Instead of continuing to film you guys here at the Kia Center, I think it's better if we spend our time doing some more prep work for training camp and the upcoming games. We'll start filming again when you're back in DC, Alex." She raises an amused eyebrow at Darryl. "Unless you want us to stick around and keep filming you?"

"No, that's perfectly all right," Darryl says firmly, ignoring Kuznetsov's wild gesticulating. "I'm
sure the two of us can survive without the cameras," he says quellingly towards the other player.

Except that if Darryl had been secretly hoping that the absence of cameras would tone Kuznetsov down a little, he's out of luck. Kuznetsov continues teasing and needling Darryl all the same, right up until the day before he has to leave for Washington.

"No, really, do you ever shut up?" Darryl asks longingly, panting a little as he gets off the treadmill. It's literally the end of the last hour of their last practice together before Kuznetsov drives back the next day, and Kuznetsov is still trash-talking him. At this point, Darryl's feeling inclined not to say good-bye so much as good riddance.

"Aaw, Darryl, I know you gonna miss me," Kuznetsov says, bouncing down from his treadmill and flinging drops of sweat all over. Darryl wrinkles his nose. "You gonna miss skating with me, working out with me, eating lunch with me, playing juice boy with me - wait! Juice boy!" Kuznetsov points a finger at Darryl. "We at 99 to 43! I need to get to one hundred! Come on, we have to go back to rink!" he gestures to Darryl to follow him.

"We are not going back onto the ice just to play another game of juice boy, are you nuts? We just finished training!" Darryl says. Kuznetsov shakes his head sadly.

"You just scared to say how much you gonna miss me, I know Darryl, it's hard, it's sad - but you gotta learn to carry loss with you, right? You tell me that! So come on, I bet I can change and get to rink faster than you can!" Kuznetsov says, bouncing out of the room.

"That argument doesn't even make sense," Darryl begins, except Kuznetsov is long gone.

Darryl turns around resolutely, making his way back to the gym locker room rather than the rink one. He's not going to fall for Kuznetsov's goading this time; the other player is going to go through the entire hassle of getting into full hockey gear, going out into the dark, empty rink with nobody around because it's already so late, and Kuznetsov's just going to be left hanging there because Darryl is done, Darryl is going home, and Darryl hopes to hell that he doesn't see Kuznetsov in person again until the first Bears-Hawks regular season game -

"One huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuundred, Darryl!" Kuznetsov's voice echoes back across the room.

Darryl stops in his tracks, silently fuming. God. Damn. It. He spins on his heel and storms back towards the rink.

"I really hate you, you know," Darryl says as he comes over the boards, Kuznetsov already waiting at the blue line for him. The other player just smiles sunnily at him, pointing towards the net at the other end of the ice.

"I already set up, but just so we can make more interesting for last contest, I think we should play juice boy from here," Kuznetsov says, tapping his stick on the blue line itself. Darryl looks at him in confusion, then looks back down to far end of the rink at the net; in the dimness, the triangular holes are barely distinguishable at this distance.

"Wait, what? We're over a hundred feet away from the net!" Kuznetsov smirks at him, emptying the bag of pucks he's brought out with him.

"First one who scores wins..." he sing-songs.

Well, fine. Fucking fine. Darryl skates over, glowering, and lines up a puck to take his first shot.

This game of juice boy doesn't end in a few rounds, or even a few dozen rounds. Ten minutes, then
twenty, thirty, forty; Darryl's wrists are beginning to ache from the strain of shooting so much. He's wondering how to broach the subject of calling it a draw when Kuznetsov - improbably, impossibly - sends an absolute snipe across the ice and unmistakably through the upper left corner of the net, a slight metallic ping ringing out into the empty rink as the puck lightly scrapes across the post.

"Wooooooooooooooooooooooooooow!!" Kuznetsov screams, dropping his stick and flinging both arms in the air. "Champion! I'm champion! One hundred to forty-three, baby!"

Darryl glares at him. "Okay," he snaps. "Whatever. You're not actually going to score any goals like that during a game - if you're counting on that shot to take the Richard back this year, you're crazy." Kuznetsov bring his arms down, picking up his stick before skating over to pat Darryl on the shoulder.

"I know, you sorry you not gonna get your name on that trophy any more," he says pityingly. "Is okay, when I win next year I tell everyone is because you play juice boy with me all summer."

Darryl snorts. "Yeah, sure," he says bitingly. "That's pretty rich, coming from a player who took half a season to score his first hat trick last year."

"Hey, you watch, I gonna get a Mexican hat trick this year!" Kuznetsov says, pointing. Darryl opens his mouth to retort, then pauses, confused.

"Wait, a what now?"

"A Mexican hat trick! Six goals in one game, instead of three," Kuznetsov says. When Darryl continues to look at him in mystification, the other player gestures at his head. "You know, Mexican hat, is biiiiig hat, so Mexican hat trick is more goals!"

Darryl looks at him witheringly, and the other player deflates slightly. "Wait, is not real? But Brads tell me I need to get Mexican hat trick this year..." he says, then perks up. "Oh well! Is real now, and I'm gonna score one this year, you just see!"

"Yeah, well, you know what? Fuck you." Darryl says, now completely out of temper.

"Wanna bet?" Kuznetsov says, grinning.

"No, seriously, fuck you." Darryl bites out. Kuznetsov reaches over and pats him on the shoulder. Darryl just barely resists the urge to tear Kuznetsov's hand off.

"Awww, has it been so long since you got laid?" he asks sweetly, grinning.

And if it weren't for the fact that Darryl is exhausted, and incredibly irritated, and really, really just wanting to shut Kuznetsov up and wipe that fucking idiotic grin off the other's player face - if it weren't for all of that, there's no way Darryl would say what he says next.

"Okay, fine," he says. "I'll take that bet - if you score six goals in one game this season, you can fuck me. Happy now?"

That stops Kuznetsov in his tracks. The other player gapes at him, his mouth open. Then, after a long moment, Kuznetsov bursts out laughing. "Okay, Darryl, I get it, you really don't think I can do it. Well, I gonna show you - you gonna regret making that bet!" he says, skating away blithely while Darryl glares at him, fuming. Forget the fucking bet, Kuznetsov can just go fuck off for all Darryl cares.
By the time Darryl gets home, though, he's mostly calmed down. This is good, because even though Kuznetsov's back in DC, it apparently doesn't mean that Kuznetsov is done bothering him, even with both their teams returning for training camp and the pre-season right around the corner.

"How the hell did Kuznetsov get my phone number?" Darryl demands when the first text pops up. Leskov coughs awkwardly, and won't meet his eyes when Darryl looks at him suspiciously. "Dima, did you give it to him? I thought you guys weren't friends!"

"I mean, we make up before Olympics!" Leskov protests. "And you guys was training last week, no? He say he want to keep in touch with you!"

"Does this look like important training information to you?" Darryl asks, shoving his phone in front of Leskov. The other player takes a look and starts laughing. Kuznetsov's sent Darryl a picture of a plate piled high with buffalo wings, and the text underneath it says, 'Can I be your winger, Darryl?'

"What's so funny?" Moreau says, coming over to crane his neck, then lets out a sharp bark of laughter. "Oh man, we gotta get this on camera," he says, waving the film crew over even as he grabs Darryl's phone out of his hands, despite Darryl's protests.

That's the other thing - the first day of training camp, Darryl gathers everybody up in the locker room and asks them if they're okay being part of a reality tv show. He emphasizes that anybody who's part of an episode will get to watch it before it airs and can ask for changes if they want. He makes sure to tell them that if they decide that they don't want a camera crew following them around all the time, then he'll ask Tracy to restrict the crew to only filming him, since he's already committed himself.

Then, since he knows that if he were in his teammates' shoes he would want to some time to think and talk it over, Darryl tells them he'll ask what they've decided at the end of practice.

Except when they get to the end of practice, and everybody's gathered back in the locker room and Darryl broaches the subject, this is the response he gets:

"Well, so what do you guys think? Should I tell the cameras to go away?" Darryl asks. The guys look around the room at each, and after a moment Crawford stands up, looking Darryl in the eye somberly.

"After talking it over, we've decided that it's really inconsiderate, and thoughtless, and self-centered of you -" Crawford starts out.

"Yeah, okay, I'll tell Tracy that the camera crews shouldn't bother us, you guys won't have to put up with them," Darryl says apologetically.

"Self-centered of you," Crawford continues determinedly. "To hog all of the cameras to yourself. Really, Darryl, did you have no consideration for the rest of your teammates who want their turn in the limelight? I mean, seriously, if you don't give Davies over here some face time on television, how is he ever going to launch his career as a model?"

Darryl covers half of his face with his hand as the rest of the team hoots and hollers in playful support. "Okay, fine, fine, just don't blame me when you guys end up making fools of yourselves on tv, I definitely gave you a chance to opt out," he says. Davies raises his hand.

"Yeah?" Darryl says.

"When are they going to start filming us?" Davies asks, wide-eyed. "I want to know how much time I have to get a new hairdo, and if I should go get a facial tonight." Darryl throws his hands up
in disgust and walks away while the rest of the locker room erupts into laughter.

So yeah, the rest of his teammates end up basking in the attention from the cameras, and when Kuznetsov's texts start arriving, his teammates and the film crew both eat it up with a spoon - especially because his messages and pics become zanier and zanier.

A formation of fighter jets with Kuznetsov's grinning face photoshopped onto the nose of the leading plane, with 'Winger?' scrawled across the picture. A picture of a kitten leaping towards a fluttering bird, with 'Can I haz winger?!??!' written across it. (Darryl only just resists banging his head against the wall - whoever introduced Kuznetsov to lolcats should be shot.) And then a truly horrifying photoshoot of Kuznetsov's face pasted onto the graphic of a neon purple and pink winged horse, the kind of cartoon that decorates the backpacks of second-grade girls, and the message accompanying this one says, 'I believe I can fly - can I fly with you, Darryl?'

This is all bad enough, except then Kuznetsov starts sending Darryl multiple copies of the same text. Darryl calls him, irritated. "Why the hell are you sending me the same message so many times? They're bad enough to read the first time around!" Darryl hears Kuznetsov chuckle at the other end of the line.

"Count how many time I send to you, okay?" he says, then hangs up. Suspicious, Darryl counts the number of copies of the latest message Kuznetsov sent him - there are six. Darryl blinks, then realization hits - and Darryl gives up and does bang his head against the wall.

But none of the pictures can compare to Kuznetsov's grand finale. At the end of practice one day, Leskov grabs Darryl by the arm as Darryl's walking out of the locker room.

"Uh, what? Where are we going?" Darryl asks.

"Kuznetsov want me to show you video," Leskov explains as he steers Darryl to the video review room - this already sounds foreboding enough, except then Darryl realizes that the room is packed, the entire team is there along with Vince and Prescott. Darryl sits down, foreboding turning to outright dread. Leskov presses play, and the image of Kuznetsov standing on the ice at Kettler Iceplex appears on screen, a few Bears players clustered behind him.

"Darryl, you hard guy to convince, but I really think I could be good winger for you," Kuznetsov says earnestly. "So to help me show you, I ask some of my teammate to help me," he says, skating back towards the other players, who then arrange themselves in a row. Kuznetsov waves an arm at somebody off camera, and music starts playing. Darryl blinks, then sinks down in his chair when he realizes that yes, that song is what it sounds like, and yes, he is actually watching Kuznetsov and his teammates doing the Chicken Dance.

Of course, everybody else in the room finds this completely hilarious, they're all laughing their asses off, even Prescott and Vince - in fact, when Kuznetsov & company get to the part of the dance where they pair off, link arms and start twirling each other around, Vince laughs so hard he literally falls out of his chair.

Darryl sits there, fuming, his ears feeling like they're on fire. By the time the excruciating video ends, Darryl's already decided how he's going to take his revenge.

"Hey Dima," Darryl says. "Can you ask Petrov who I can talk to on the Bears if I want to play tricks on Kuznetsov?" Leskov looks surprised, then apprehensive.

"Um, you sure you want do that?"
"Yeah," Darryl says grimly. "I'm sure."

This is how Darryl gets in touch with Matt Bradshaw, who actually doesn't take much convincing to get on board.

"Wow," Bradshaw says, after Darryl outlines his ideas to get back at Kuznetsov. "You're actually pretty evil, Colton, I never would've suspected."

"So, you'll help me?" Darryl asks. Bradshaw laughs.

"Yeah, don't worry, I got it covered," he says.

So Darryl endures the next few days of random texts and messages from Kuznetsov, keeping faith that Bradshaw will follow through. And sure enough, Kuznetsov eventually calls him, suspicious. "Darryl, you responsible for this? All of sudden, everybody playing country music all around me! In locker room, during practice, after practice, everywhere! And they all sad songs with men telling women to stop bothering them," he says. "I hate country music, Darryl, I hate it!"

"Sorry Kuznetsov, I really have no idea what you're talking about," Darryl says serenely, then hangs up, feeling deeply satisfied. Then he calls Tracy.

"Darryl, congratulations on getting back at Alex," she says, sounding amused. "Can't let him walk all over you, right?"

"Yeah, I know. And I've been working with Bradshaw and Nilsson to put together a video for Kuznetsov, also," Darryl says. "I think they're gonna show it to him tomorrow, so I wanted to tell you because I definitely want you guys to be there to film his reaction."

"Oh?" Tracy says. "Well, we were there to film yours, so don't worry, we'll get him on tape too."

Tracy calls the next day, and she's already laughing when Darryl picks up the phone.

"Darryl, the two of you are hilarious - this is going to make for fantastic television, I wouldn't be surprised if people start subscribing to Versus just to watch this show," she says.

"So you got his reaction?" Darryl asks. "Is there any way I can watch it?"

"Yeah, I can e-mail the footage over to the crew in Pittsburgh, you can watch it today if you get the chance," Tracy says, still chuckling.

"Oh, I will," Darryl says.

The clip starts out innocently enough; it shows Kuznetsov and the other Bears players in the locker room getting into their hockey gear.

"Hey," Bradshaw says suddenly, "Where's Nilsson?" he asks, looking around the locker room.

"Yeah, I dunno - it's not like him to be late to practice," says one of the other players.

"Well, maybe there was traffic, or a crash or something," chimes in another. "We should turn on the tv to see if there's something on the news." he says, turning to turn on a flat-screen television behind him. At this point, Kuznetsov is still unsuspecting, but when Nilsson's image pops up on screen, his expression of surprise lasts only a moment before melting into amused resignation.

"AK," Nilsson says gravely, looking into the camera. "We been playing together three years now, and it's been good three years. I mean, I play center for you, give you lots of great passes, you play
wing for me, get lots of great goals. But now I hear you want different center, I have to say it really hurts my feelings." He shakes his head sadly.

"Even after I sign big contract this spring, and all you want to do is play winger for Colton?"
Nilsson pounds his chest with his fist twice. "It hurts, AK, it hurts deep down," he says. At this point everyone in the Bears locker room is cracking up, although Kuznetsov is hammering it up for the camera, staring at the screen in anxiety and biting his nails.

"So this is hard decision for me, I mean, is really painful," Nilsson says. "But after thinking about it long time, I decide maybe is better for me to go to team that really care about their centers, some place where they gonna value me." The other player takes a deep breath. "So I'm gonna ask Ted to trade me to the Hawks," he says. Kuznetsov leaps up at that, except then the tv goes split screen and Darryl, Leskov and Janssen show up on the left side.

"Don't worry, Nilsson, we'll take care of you," Darryl says.

"And if you think you gonna miss having Russian teammate, I'm here, so is okay," Leskov adds. "I'm better looking than AK, too."

"We'll probably start you off on the fourth line, but maybe if Prescott's feeling nice, he'll let you have some third-line minutes too," Janssen says.

"Geez, thanks guys," Nilsson says, turning to the right towards the three Hawks players. "Okay, I guess it's time to say goodbye, D.C. Thanks for three years, Bears, AK, I mean, it's been real. Pittsburgh, here I come!" The screen goes black, and Kuznetsov clutches his hair in distress.

"Noooooo! No, Backie, you can't leave me!" He yells at the screen, then goes running out of the locker room. "Niiiiiiiiiisssssoooonnnn, where are you? Come back to me, Nicky!" his voice comes echoing back even as the rest of the Bears are doubled over in laughter.

That night, Darryl isn't surprised to get a call from Kuznetsov.

"Okay," Kuznetsov says. "I admit, you got me. Is good joke, I think you give Bears fans heart attack with that video."

Darryl grins. "Yeah, well, you deserve it for making me watch you do the Chicken Dance," he says. "But anyways, now that the pre-season's here, I really don't think that either of us should be spending time on pranks anymore."

"Yeah," Kuznetsov says. "You're probably right." He heaves a sigh. "But is so much fun to make fun of you!" Darryl rolls his eyes.

The texts from Kuznetsov don't stop entirely, although they don't come as often and Darryl doesn't have to put up with any more elaborate photoshopped pics. More often than not they're just short one-liners, usually telling Darryl that he's just beaten the team at juice boy. He also texts Darryl every morning, without fail, the message '666666'. Finally, Darryl cracks and calls him.

"You're basically never going to let me forget that bet, are you?" he asks.

"Nope," says Kuznetsov cheerfully.

"Don't you have more important things to worry about?" Darryl demands. "Apparently you didn't do very well during the pre-season, or so I've heard. One goal, three points in six games? Really?"

"Aaaw, you worried about me? You so sweet, Darryl, really," Kuznetsov says. "But don't worry, I
just trying out some new moves, figure out how to put in what we work on during summer. But once it all start clicking, watch out!" He pauses for a moment. "You looking forward to puck drop tomorrow?"

Darryl smiles. "Yeah, start of the regular season is always exciting - where are you guys opening, at home?"

"No, Atlanta." Kuznetsov says. "But tomorrow is first episode of our tv show too, Darryl! Aren't you excited about that?"

Darryl winces. "Don't remind me," he says. "The local media hasn't stopped giving me grief about it, it's terrible."

"Ha, is only gonna get worse once everyone see it on tv, be ready," Kuznetsov warns. "But good luck for regular season, Darryl. I'm glad we get to practice together this summer."

"Thanks," Darryl says, oddly touched. "Good luck to you too."

And it's so, so good to get back to hockey, to real hockey, not just pre-season games for show. Well, okay, maybe playing against the Flyers isn't always the most enjoyable experience, but just being back on the ice with his teammates puts Darryl in such a good mood that even the post-game media scrum (with all the continued questions about Kuznetsov and the tv show) can't bring him down.

This is decidedly not the case after the second game of the season, although it has nothing to do with the game itself. 11 pm on Saturday, October 9th, and the Hawks have just finished beating the Wolves, a 4-2 win; it doesn't makes the sting of the playoff loss last year really go away, but it's still good to beat them anyways. Darryl's toweling off in the locker room after the media's done interviewing him, and then he hears someone give an admiring whistle. There are a bunch of players all gathered around the tv screen mounted on the far end of the room.

"Jesus, I hope he doesn't play like that against us," Crawford says, watching the tv. Darryl walks over and cranes his head, looking over shoulders.

"What's going on?"

"Last minute of the Bears-Warriors game," Moreau answers. Darryl looks at the score: 5-1, Bears.

"So what's so impressive?" he asks.

"All the Bears goals were scored by Kuznetsov," Crawford says. Darryl's knees suddenly feel like they're made of water.

"Wait- wait, what?"

"Yeah, I know - McGuire's told us about fifty times now that the last time anybody scored that many in one game was Weissner back in 2007," Crawford says. "Except now it looks like the Bears are pushing to make it six for him..."

And at that moment, Darryl can see the play developing in front of him like it's in slow motion - Nilsson holds on to the puck along the half-boards, and Kuznetsov feints around a defender like the other player is a traffic cone - Nilsson passes to Kuznetsov, and Kuznetsov takes a quick wrist shot which beats Brodeur cleanly, top shelf, left corner.

Darryl stares at the screen in disbelief; he can feel his blood turn to ice. He staggers backwards,
sitting down heavily on the bench behind him.

"I really hope he doesn't play like that against us," Crawford repeats, as Kuznetsov and the Bears begin to celebrate on-screen. The other players begin to drift away from the tv, but Darryl stays where he is, still watching the screen in shock. He can't move. This has to be a bad dream. This cannot be real.

"And so here we are, with the first star of tonight's game and the first player to score six goals in one game since Darryl Sittler," the reporter says, Kuznetsov still in hockey gear standing next to her. "Obviously an extraordinary performance, Alex, and a great way to start off the season - how do you feel about your game tonight?"

"Well, obviously, is always good to score goals, maybe not many people - including Darryl Colton - think I can score this many," Kuznetsov says, "But you never know until you try, right? Sorry Darryl, you lose bet, I win! I told you you was gonna regret making that bet," he says, grinning hugely.

At that, Darryl falls back against the bench, his head thunking painfully against the wooden surface.

"Wow," Moreau says, one of the few players still watching. "You made a bet that he couldn't score six goals in one game? Man, that's rough, nobody could've guessed that even Kuznetsov would do that.” He shakes his head. “You just got screwed, Darryl."

"You," Darryl says, arm thrown over his eyes, "have no idea."
Chapter 4

Darryl has been a professional athlete since before he could legally drink; he knows the rules about what is and what isn't acceptable behavior as an NHL player. Well, there are the bullshit rules about dealing with the media and the fans, but then there's the locker-room rules and those are different. Those are real, those mean something to the guys you have to live with day in and day out, the guys you go to war with, whose backs you watch and who watch yours. You break these rules, you better be ready to deal with the consequences. You don't insult a guy's mother or wife; you don't steal from a teammate (you can borrow money and, um, take a long time to pay it back, but you don't steal); and you never, ever back out of fulfilling a bet that you've lost.

Darryl is painfully reminded of this last rule as he leaves the arena; it seems like every single person he passes knows about the bet and makes sure to rib Darryl about it.

"Wow, you lost a bet with Kuznetsov? What do you think he's gonna want, your Cup ring or the Olympic medal?"

"Wait, what were the stakes? If we have to do the chicken dance on tape because you lost, I'm never going to forgive you, Colton!"

Every jab just stokes the anger and humiliation already building inside of Darryl to the point that when Crawford nudges him, Darryl rounds on him in irritation.

"What?" he snaps.

"Hey, calm down - no need to bite my head off," Crawford says, holding his hands up. "I just wanted to tell you that I think you should bet again, tell Kuznetsov double or nothing - if you score twelve goals in a game, then he loses!" Darryl looks at Crawford in exasperation.

"I'm not going to score twelve goals in one game unless there's a snowman playing goalie in the other net," he snaps. "And I don't see that happening, sorry."

"Yeah, but the point is that Kuznetsov's going to have to wait forever just to see if you can do it, so you never have to pay up on losing this one," Crawford points out. Darryl shakes his head and brushes past his friend, making his way to the parking lot. He gets in his car, shuts the door, and then presses his forehead to the rim of the wheel, closing his eyes. His thoughts are chasing themselves around in circles in his head, trying to see if there's a way out of this, but no. There isn't.

Kuznetsov just called him out for losing a bet on national television, which means that everybody in the NHL knows about it. Hell, give it until tomorrow morning and everybody in the AHL, ECHL, OHL, CHL, every damn league in North America will be gossiping about it - geez, it'll probably hit the news in Russia and then the KHL will know too.

Darryl pulls out his cell phone and after a moment of wrestling with himself, calls Leskov. "Dima, what's Kuznetsov's address in DC? Do you know?"

"Darryl? What - why you asking?"

"I'm asking because I lost a bet with Kuznetsov, in case you didn't hear," he grinds out. "And I think you owe it to me anyways, considering the fact that you gave him my phone number!"

"But I -"
"Dima!" Darryl snaps.

"Okay, okay, I not have it, but I can ask Petrov - will text to you once I get, okay?"

"Fine," he says, snapping his phone shut. He programs his GPS for DC, and even without a specific address, it looks like the drive is going to take over four hours. He takes a deep breath, and starts driving. After a few minutes, his phone vibrates; Leskov's texted him. Darryl enters the address on his screen, and then settles in for a long simmer.

There's an enormous number of emotions roiling inside him - anger, humiliation, resentment, shame, embarrassment, fear - yeah, fear, because Darryl can't even bring himself to think about the terms of the bet without shying away. What the hell was he thinking to make a bet like that? Well, okay, six goals in one game really is ridiculous, but of all the freaking players in the NHL who might actually be able to pull it off, Kuznetsov has to be at the top of the list.

It's honestly bizarre how easily Kuznetsov can get under his skin. Darryl feels like it's not an exaggeration to say that he's endured as much if not more trash talk than any other player in the league, and probably for longer - for all that he's one of the younger guys around, he's also been playing hockey since before he can remember, and opposing players have never been kind to him. So it's not like Darryl can't handle being teased or mocked; maybe he's still not perfect at keeping hold of his temper, but he's definitely gotten a lot better at it. He hasn't lost his temper outside of a hockey game in years, which is what makes him reacting so violently to Kuznetsov's goading so strange.

Okay, fine. I'll take that bet - if you score six goals in one game, you can fuck me. Happy now?

The memory of saying that makes Darryl want to drive off the road.

Well, I gonna show you - you gonna regret making that bet!

And the memory of hearing that makes Darryl want to drive off a fucking cliff. He swallows, grits his teeth, and keeps driving through the stifling darkness.

He continues seething internally the entire way there, and by the time he pulls up outside of Kuznetsov's house, his thoughts and emotions are in such turmoil that he slams out of the car, stomps up to the front door and starts both ringing the doorbell continuously and banging on the door to get Kuznetsov to let him in.

After what seems like hours but is probably only a few minutes, the door opens and an extremely sleepy-looking Kuznetsov opens the door.

"What the - Colton? What the fuck you doing here? Is 3 in morning!" Kuznetsov says, stifling a yawn.

"I - look, can I come in?" Darryl says, suddenly aware of the coldness of the night, the dead silence of the neighborhood around him.

"I - look, can I come in?" Darryl says, suddenly aware of the coldness of the night, the dead silence of the neighborhood around him.

"Uh, sure, I guess," Kuznetsov says, letting him in. "Oh, wait, I know, you can't wait to congratulate me on game, I see," Kuznetsov says, padding over to the living room. "But sit, sit," he says, gesturing towards the couch. Darryl sits down, so jittery and on edge that he feels like he's going to jump out of his skin at any moment. "So you watch game tonight? Is that how you know so fast?"

"Yeah, the last minute of it." Darryl says tightly. His stomach is churning, queasy as if he's experiencing sea-sickness. He involuntarily glances towards the door, then forces himself to turn
back. No, there isn't going to be any escape. He has to do this. "Do you have anything to drink? Like, hard liquor?"

Kuznetsov looks surprised for a moment, then a wicked grin spreads across his face. "Darryl, you just insult me, big insult. What kind of Russian you think I am?" He stands up, going over to a cabinet in the far side of the room. "What kind poison you want?" he says, opening the doors to reveal an impressive array of bottles.

"Uh - do you have any vodka?" Darryl asks.

Kuznetsov shakes his head, grabbing a bottle and a couple shot glasses. "Again with insult, Darryl! Insult, insult everywhere!" He comes back and sets the vodka and glasses on the table, then pours shots for both of them. "Cheers," he says, raising his glass, "to me winning bet, and to you losing bet." He downs the shot and Darryl follows suit, feeling the burn of alcohol shoot straight down his throat. He looks at Kuznetsov's smirking face, and - no. He's going to need more alcohol than that.

He pours himself another shot and downs it. And then another. And another. And another. And another.

"Uhh, Darryl?" Kuznetsov asks, looking at him warily. "Is something wrong? Why you do this? Oh, wait!" he says, bouncing up and down. "I know, is because you want to drink six shots because of bet!" Darryl glares at him, and deliberately pours himself his seventh shot.

"Um, oooooooookay?" Kuznetsov says, scratching his head. "Maybe eight, because of my number?" he guesses again. And of course that goads Darryl into downing his ninth shot, and then his tenth. After that, Darryl really does have to stop, because the room has started becoming unsteady enough that even holding on to the shot glass is a challenge.

"Darryl, are you ok? Really, there is something wrong?" Kuznetsov asks worriedly. "Um, I need call somebody? Fletcher or anybody?"

"Stop playing dumb," Darryl snaps, standing up and walking - well, okay, staggering - around the coffee table. "What's wrong is that I lost that goddamn bet, and now I'm here to pay up, and I would appreciate it if we could get this over with," he says, hauling Kuznetsov up by his t-shirt with one hand, "as soon as possible!" he grabs Kuznetsov's boxers with the other hand and pulls down.

The other player lets out a truly undignified squeak, recoiling with enough force that Darryl's hand rips the thin fabric of Kuznetsov's t-shirt. "I - wait - what?" He says, his eyes bulging.

"You heard me," Darryl says grimly, digging the condoms and lube out of his pockets and dropping them onto the couch before going to drag Kuznetsov's boxers off entirely. Kuznetsov grabs at them frantically and just barely manages to hold them up despite Darryl's forceful tugging.

"I - Jesus - I - Darryl, we not have to do this!"

"Yeah, we do," Darryl snaps, "Because I am not taking any more shit from you over this stupid bet, and I'm not letting you tell everybody that I backed out of it! If I have to tear your boxers off and - and do everything myself, I will," he says, stammering a little (because he really can't even imagine what doing everything himself would, uh, involve).

"But I not - I wouldn't-"

"Don't even try to tell me you wouldn't give me shit about not paying up, I won't believe you," Darryl grinds out, then decides to be more direct and so shoves his hand under the elastic of
Kuznetsov's underwear.

"But - *GEEZ* - oh my god, careful with equipment!" Kuznetsov says, letting go of his boxers to protect what is understandably a higher priority, and so Darryl successfully gets rid of Kuznetsov's underwear. "Wait - wait, Darryl." Kuznetsov says, grabbing both of Darryl's wrists. "Are you serious about this? You really want to do this?" He asks, looking intently at Darryl. Darryl swallows, feels the ground move unsteadily beneath him; but he looks back at Kuznetsov resolutely enough.

"Yeah. Yeah, I insist," he says. Kuznetsov studies Darryl for a moment longer, and then his shoulders slump.

"Okay - okay, fine," he says. "Go take off clothes, Darryl." he says, letting go of Darryl's wrists. Darryl stands there a moment, trembling slightly, then angrily takes off his sweater and jeans, then his underwear. Without prompting, he gets on all fours on the floor and looks downward, gritting his teeth.

"Darryl - Darryl, we really, really not have to do this," Kuznetsov says from somewhere behind him.

"What, can't get it up?" Darryl snarls. He knows he's not being wise right now, in fact he's about as far from being wise as possible, but he really can't help himself. "Or are you afraid I'm going to see how small your dick is? Don't worry, I won't tell your teammates, I'll just tell all the other teams in the league-

"*Darryl* - this not like you, I can't-" Kuznetsov says, sounding distressed.

"You goddamn well can," Darryl grates, "Or else I'll kill you, I swear I will." There's a long, fraught silence, and then Kuznetsov finally sighs.

"Okay - okay." Darryl hears Kuznetsov tear open a condom packet, snap open the bottle of lube and pour some out. Darryl closes his eyes and waits.

"What's taking so long?" he says, after he can't stand the silence any longer.

"Well, like you say, I do have to get it up," Kuznetsov snaps back. "Now just relax."

Darryl shudders as he feels Kuznetsov touch the small of his back with one hand, and then the other hand sliding down the crack of his ass towards -

The moment Kuznetsov's finger makes contact with that spot, Darryl jerks forward so violently he almost cracks his face on the floor.

"Okay, that's it, we not doing this," Kuznetsov says, rising up. Darryl scrambles around rapidly and grabs Kuznetsov before he can escape.

"No," he snarls. "We are - we are, you made the point of winning the goddamn bet and calling me out on it, and you're going to follow through with it if it's the last thing you do," he says. Kuznetsov looks away, swallowing hard. He takes a deep breath and then looks back at Darryl, his blue eyes intense.

"Okay. Okay, fine, Darryl, we do it your way," he says, firmly guiding Darryl back into position. But despite that, his hands are even more careful than before, and Darryl forces himself not to flinch away when Kuznetsov applies pressure to his hole again.
"Darryl, relax - the more you relax, the faster this go, okay?" Kuznetsov says, stroking slightly, the movement causing the lube on his finger to slowly warm. Darryl closes his eyes, and consciously forces himself to relax. "Okay - good. Now - " and with that Darryl feels a finger press slowly inside him, and it takes a superhuman effort not to move. "Is that okay? Darryl, you have to tell me if you okay," Kuznetsov says, his voice oddly gentle.

"Yeah," Darryl grates. His voice is like sandpaper. "Hurry up, just get it over with, all right?" he says raggedly.

"Shh, okay, okay," Kuznetsov says, stroking his finger in and out a couple times. "Now next finger - " Darryl reflexively clenches down at the new invasion. "Darryl, you need to relax, otherwise this not going to work, I guarantee," Kuznetsov says. Darryl hangs his head, and concentrates on loosening his muscles. "Good, good, now third finger," he says, and this time Darryl manages not to fight it. Kuznetsov strokes in and out a few times, and after a while Darryl manages to open his eyes. He can do this. He can.

"All right, that's enough," he says. "Get on with it, Kuznetsov." He feels the other man hesitate, and then carefully withdraw all three fingers. He winces, hears Kuznetsov get up behind him, feels a heavy, blunt pressure; he forces himself not to panic. "Well," he snaps. "Go on."

Except then when Kuznetsov finally pushes in, the pain is worse than anything Darryl could've imagined. He can't help it - he can hear himself keening in agony, a thin high sound at the back of his throat. "Darryl - you have to relax," Kuznetsov says, sounding strangled. "I promise, I promise it gonna be all right, okay?" Darryl feels Kuznetsov reach out and touch Darryl's lower back, rubbing small circles. "You don't have to be afraid, I swear I not gonna hurt you," he says.

And that is intolerable, the idea of Kuznetsov telling him not to be afraid. Darryl closes his eyes again and just makes himself relax, imagines every muscle in his body going loose and easy.

"Okay, good," Kuznetsov says, pushing in a little further. He starts a small sawing motion, and after what feels like an eternity, he's moving back and forth smoothly. Breathing heavily, Darryl eventually brings his head up a little and opens his eyes again. Okay. This is okay. He can handle this. He just has to wait until Kuznetsov - until Kuznetsov finishes, and then it'll all be over with - Darryl yelps and half-lunges forward when Kuznetsov presses a spot inside that somehow has him seeing stars, half-whiting out from pleasure. Kuznetsov makes a startled sound and manages to move forward with Darryl. "Oh, is right there, is it?" Kuznetsov says, sounding pleased, adjusting his angle a little and then also reaching a hand around to stroke Darryl's rapidly stiffening cock.

"Don't -" touch me, Darryl wants to snap, except then Kuznetsov hits that spot again, and it's all Darryl can do to try and hang on, a deep groan ripped from his throat.

"Good, good, come on, Darryl," Kuznetsov says.

And now Darryl can't help it, now every time the other man thrusts in leaves him breathless, his chest seizing with pleasure so overwhelming it's almost agony. And - and this is going to be quick, this is going to be embarrassingly quick, because Darryl is harder than he can ever remember being, Kuznetsov's hand stroking his cock in perfect time with his thrusts. "That's it, that's it, come on, come on," Kuznetsov says coaxingly, and it's finally too much - Darryl shudders as his climax tears through him, wringing pleasure from his body like water from a rag.

Kuznetsov's hips stutter behind him, and then Darryl can feel the other man's climax follow a few moments later, a pulsing warmth. They both stay still for a moment, panting; and then Kuznetsov withdraws carefully. Darryl winces, but that sting is nothing compared to bile of humiliation and
shame quickly rising up in his throat, threatening to choke him.

"Darryl - " Kuznetsov says, reaching out.

"Don't touch me," Darryl does snap out this time, recoiling so sharply that he collides with the coffee table, hard.

"Darryl - ".

"Kuznetsov, just go away," Darryl says, turning away and scrabbling blindly for his clothes, for something, anything to hold on to. His chest feels like a vise. He feels like he's going to throw up.

There's a moment of silence, and then Darryl hears some rustling that sounds like Kuznetsov putting on his own clothes, and then a few moments later there's the sound of the front door slamming. Kuznetsov is gone.

Darryl leans his forehead against the edge of the coffee table for a moment, trying to breath. He gets up, stumbles around until he finds a bathroom, then proceeds to scrub himself raw under blasting water. He goes back to the living room, forces himself to put his clothes back on.

After a long moment of internal debate - there's no way he can drive himself home, not after that much alcohol, and it's an ungodly hour in any case - he gives up; he collapses onto the couch and curls himself into as tiny a ball as possible.

He's never felt worse in his life.

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Except, no, there's further to fall; Darryl wakes up to somebody shaking him gently by the shoulder.

"Wha - " Darryl jerks his head and then immediately regrets it, pain stabbing through his temples like a dagger. His mouth feels like a small animal crawled to the back of it and died some time ago. He lies still for a moment, then carefully cracks open an eyelid.

Andrew Jameson is peering down at him, no small amount of amusement across his face.

"Uhh..." Darryl says, experiencing such a severe sense of disorientation that it makes him even dizzier than he already is. "Wha- what are you doing here?" he asks. He knows Jameson from playing youth hockey with him in Nova Scotia, but he hasn't seen him in years; the last he heard, Jameson was playing in the AHL for the Hershey Seals... which are the minor league affiliates of the Washington Bears, Darryl's brain sluggishly connects the dots.

"Kuznetsov called me at literally four in the morning to tell me to get down here, he said he needed somebody to drive you from his house back to Pittsburgh in time for your guys' practice," Jameson says in a mercifully quiet voice. "I have to admit, when he first said that, my reply involved mostly four-letter words, but AJ can be a pretty persuasive guy."

Darryl squints at him. "I - wait, aren't you playing in Hershey? You drove all that way?" Jameson grins.

"Like I said, persuasive. Now come on, get in the car - it's a long way back to Pittsburgh, we gotta get moving. Now, where are your keys?"

The sky is still gray outside, only a few touches of pink and gold from the sun that has yet to fully
show itself. Darryl glances at the clock on the dashboard as he gingerly settles into the shotgun seat and buckles up; it's only ten minutes past six.

"Seriously, Colton? You drive a Honda Civic? You know that you're a multi-millionaire hockey player, right?"

"It's a hybrid, it gets good mileage," Darryl mutters, settling his head back carefully in hopes that his headache isn't going to split it wide open.

Luckily, Jameson mostly leaves Darryl alone on the drive back, letting Darryl try to survive the trip by drifting off in a restless half-doze. Whenever Darryl shows signs of consciousness, he makes him drink from the enormous water bottle that Jameson apparently brought along with him, which also helps with the Advil that Jameson also hands Darryl.

"Kuznetsov said you might be a little hungover," Jameson says. "I can see he wasn't exaggerating, for once." Darryl freezes for a moment, terror seizing him - wait, exactly what else has Kuznetsov said? He looks over, but his tongue remains immobile; he cannot handle this, not right now. Darryl swallows. If Jameson's not going to bring it up for discussion, then neither is he. Darryl has other things to worry about; he has practice to get to.

Except that plan is shot down soon enough, too; Jameson drops Darryl off at the Kia Center a half an hour before practice starts, but Moreau takes one look at him and immediately shakes his head, grabbing Darryl and sitting him down. "Oh man, you got completely shitfaced last night, didn't you?"

"Well, maybe - but so what, I can still practice - " Darryl says, trying to get up, but Moreau's hand is heavy on his shoulder.

"Yeah, okay - Colton, right now I don't think you could remain upright on the ice for more than two minutes, not to mentions that you'd probably hurl on the way down, and that would be really, really gross for the rest of us," the goalie says. "Yo, Janssen, can you go find Prescott and tell him Colton can't practice today? Uh..." Moreau glances down at Darryl. "You can tell him the kid's sick, but he'll be in tomorrow."

Darryl closes his eyes. No, he's not going to take the coward's way out. "It's all right, Marc - you guys don't have to cover for me."

And soon enough, Prescott comes into the locker room. "Darryl?" Darryl looks up at him, head still pounding and eyes still bleary. His coach's mouth presses into a thin line, and he's silent for a long moment. "Darryl, I'm surprised and disappointed in you," he says finally. "In all the time I've known you, I've never seen you be so irresponsible." Darryl opens his mouth, but Prescott cuts him off. "No, I don't want to hear it. You're obviously in no shape to practice right now, so go home and sleep it off - we have our flight to Newark tonight, and you better fucking be on that plane, hangover or no hangover, you hear? And I can promise you right now that next practice that isn't a game day, you're going to do a score of suicides afterwards with everybody watching." He turns on his heel and walks out, leaving Darryl feeling lower than pond scum.

That evening at the airport, when Darryl sees all of his teammates sitting around by the gate waiting to board their charter plane, he feels his stomach churning and it has nothing to do with his lingering hangover. He's spent the entire day tossing and turning in bed, trying to sleep but unable to take his mind off of the gossip that has to be raging like wildfire across the hockey world right now. He honestly has no idea what story is out there now, and even the idea of finding out makes Darryl want to draw the blankets up over his head and never come out.
Darryl squares his shoulders, his hand tightening on the strap of his duffel bag slung over his chest. There's no help for it.

Darryl walks forward, and Janssen's the first one to catch sight of him. "Colton! Feeling better?" The other player says, getting up and coming towards him. "I hear you had quite a night last night, eh?" Janssen says, grinning mischievously at him. Darryl feels his blood run cold - Kuznetsov couldn't have been so stupid as to tell the truth, could he?

"You - you could say that," he says numbly. His other teammates have noticed his arrival, and Leskov's the first one behind Janssen.

"Why the hell you do something so stupid like that?" Leskov demands, taking Darryl by the shoulder and shaking him roughly. "If I know what you gonna do last night, I never give you Kuznetsov's address!"

"Aww, lay off him, he obviously gave Kuznetsov a run for his money, AJ sounded pretty wrecked when he called this morning," Dupuis says, grinning. "Although he made it to practice, so I guess he still wins."

"Yeah, but I heard Kuznetsov was completely gassed, couldn't skate for shit," Moreau says.

"I -" Darryl takes a deep breath. "Okay, exactly what have you guys heard?"

So it turns out that almost right after Prescott sent Darryl home, Kuznetsov had called first Prescott, then Mario to apologize and explain, and then at the end of the Hawks' practice, he'd called Leskov and asked to be put on speakerphone so the whole Hawks locker room could hear him.

Basically, Kuznetsov said that during the summer when he'd been training with Darryl, he'd tried to get Darryl to play drinking games with him. When Darryl had refused, he'd forced Darryl to take the bet that if he scored six goals in one game, then Darryl would drink with him - and even though he'd never meant for Darryl to think that he had pay up on the bet immediately, he must've given Darryl the wrong impression. When Darryl had showed up at his house last night, he'd just figured they might as well get drunk, he hadn't thought through all of the consequences. So, the fact that Darryl was hungover and everything was completely his fault, he was really, really sorry and he didn't want anybody blaming Darryl at all.

"I mean, he sounded like he felt really bad about the whole thing, kept falling over himself apologizing - I think he basically ended up making Prescott promise not to punish you at all, wouldn't hang up until coach said he wouldn't," Moreau says.

"I -" Darryl stops, nonplussed. It's actually a fairly plausible story, explains all of Darryl's behavior in a juicy enough way that people probably won't be tempted to dig deeper.

"I mean, are you idiot?" Leskov asks angrily. "You try drinking more than Kuznetsov? He Russian! You want to die because alcohol?"

"Hey, you're Russian, and I can totally drink you under the table, Dima," Janssen says, and Darryl sits down as his teammates turn their attention away from teasing him, his legs going weak with relief.

And it's really the oddest thing - instead of having to weather the fallout, Darryl finds that if anything, most people - his teammates, the media - are regarding the whole incident mostly with amusement, even a hint of admiration for honoring the bet. Even Prescott, far from making Darryl do the suicides he'd threatened (apparently Moreau's right, Kuznetsov got Prescott to relent),
instead just looks at Darryl sternly and tells Darryl never to make those kinds of bets again. Then he cracks a grin, as if he can't help it. "Look, if you must play drinking games with a Russian, go against Leskov, I hear he's a lightweight."

"What?" Leskov says, overhearing. "Not true! Coach, is not true, I swear!"

Kuznetsov, on the other hand, gets called out by some of the media and few hockey people for being irresponsible and immature, although apparently his super-apologetic attitude has negated the majority of it.

But even though it seems like Kuznetsov's called everybody in the Hawks organization from the owner to the janitor to apologize, there's still one person he hasn't called, that he hasn't been in contact with at all: Darryl.

At first, Darryl's more than happy to let it go; even the thought of talking to him makes Darryl queasy. But after the second day of radio silence, he's starting to get antsy. It's strange to realize, but Darryl's become accustomed to getting random texts from Kuznetsov - it's not like he looks forward to them or anything, but he's... he's gotten used to them, that's all.

Tracy ends up calling Darryl almost a week later, concerned.

"Have you been in touch with Alex at all?" she asks.

"No, I - I've been busy. I mean, he hasn't called either," Darryl says, defensive but not exactly knowing why. Tracy sighs, sounding exasperated.

"Okay - a few things here, Darryl." She says a little curtly. "One, I think that the reason why Alex hasn't called you is because he isn't sure if you ever want to hear from him again, and - "

"Wait, what? Did he say that to you?"

"No, but when I asked him why he hadn't called you, he looked at his feet and mumbled that it was up to you if you ever want to talk to him," she says impatiently. "Two, I mean - look, if we have to then yes, we can do this show just filming the two of you completely separately, but I gotta tell you that the overwhelming majority of the positive response we've had to 'AK 47 & Colt 45' has been because people want to see how you and Kuznetsov interact with each other, they - "

"Uh, 'AK 47 & Colt 45'?"

"Yeah, you know, the name of that tv show you're starring in?"

"Oh." Darryl frowns. "Why is Kuznetsov first?" Tracy makes a disgruntled noise.

"Because AJ suggested it and you didn't protest at the time, although I guess that just means you weren't paying any attention! Whatever, that's not the point - the point is that if the two people starring in a show I'm producing suddenly decide to cease all contact whatsoever, then I'd appreciate a little warning, okay?"

"I - " Darryl pinches the bridge of his nose. "I - look, it's complicated, okay?" Tracy's silent for a moment.

"Would it really be that hard to just call him?" she asks, her voice unexpectedly gentle. "I mean, I've seen him - he feels terrible about it, Darryl. I don't know whether he's actually smiled since that game, and..." her voice sharpens a little. "Well, I would hope this won't make you less inclined to call him, but his play has really suffered since then. He hasn't scored any goals, I think the most
he's picked up is a couple of secondary assists, these past couple of games he honestly looks like he's been playing sick or something."

Darryl closes his eyes, struggling with himself; as tempting as it would be just to wash his hands of the whole thing, he... he can't. He can't.

"All right," he says, letting out a deep breath. "I'll call him."

Except Kuznetsov doesn't respond to his first call, nor his second, or third. Finally, Darryl calls Bradshaw in exasperation.

"Colton?" Bradshaw answers warily.

"Hey - you guys are getting ready for practice, right? Is Kuznetsov there?" Darryl asks.

"Um, he is..." Bradshaw says slowly, then Darryl can hear him cover the phone and then there's the sound of muffled voices. After a moment, Bradshaw comes back. "Uh, sorry, he says he doesn't want to talk to you," Bradshaw says, sounding apologetic.

"But - " Darryl says, except Bradshaw's already hung up.

Well, there's obviously no solution to this except brute force. This time, the drive down to DC isn't through the pitch-black of night, but it's nearly as nerve-wracking the second time around; Darryl keeps trying to imagine what he can even say to Kuznetsov, what Kuznetsov might say to him. Is there any etiquette for this sort of thing? A rulebook somewhere?

Darryl pulls up outside of Kuznetsov's house, and just like before forces himself to walk up to the door and ring the doorbell. After a moment, the door opens, but when Kuznetsov sees who it is, his expression closes like a shutter over a window. Darryl swallows.


Darryl steps inside, and it's more than a little weird to see this house again in daytime, the rooms filled with streaming sunlight. Kuznetsov's retreated to the kitchen, so Darryl follows him.

"Sorry, you not get anything but water today," Kuznetsov says, his voice brittle. Darryl bites his lip, looks down.

"Kuznetsov - " Darryl's voice trails off.

"Why you here, Darryl?" Kuznetsov asks tightly. He's leaning against the counter, but he's gripping the edge behind him so hard that his knuckles have turned white.

"I - um, I..." Darryl stares at him helplessly. The silence stretches between them like a razor wire, sharp enough to cut.

"Are you - are you gonna call police?" Kuznetsov finally grinds out.

"I - what? I mean - why, why would I call the police?" Kuznetsov looks at him, his expression almost angry.

"To arrest me for sexual assault," he says, enunciating carefully. "For rape, Darryl."

"What?" The word feels like a blow to the stomach, knocking the air out of him. "I - wha - are you crazy? Of course I'm not going to have you arrested for rape, that would be ridiculous." Some of
"You were completely drunk out of mind," Kuznetsov says quietly. "You not really want to have sex, Darryl. Is not ridiculous." No, it is ridiculous - there's self-blame, and then there's self-martyrdom.

"You didn't force me to do anything I didn't want to do," Darryl says firmly. "I insisted. You repeatedly suggested that we stop, but I told you not to. That was my choice, and you're not responsible for the choices I make." Darryl takes a deep breath.

"And I appreciate how - how you've been trying to take the blame, but it's not necessary and it's not true. I'm the one who came up with the bet, I'm the one who drove here that night, I'm the one who decided to drink ten shots of vodka, and I'm the one who - who insisted. You didn't force me to do any of that, so you shouldn't have to answer for any of it, even for the made-up parts for everyone else. So, so stop telling everybody you're the bad guy in this story, okay?"

Kuznetsov lets out a huge sigh, a load seemingly lifted off his shoulders. But then he looks up at Darryl, his expression sharpening.

"But why you insist on having fuck? I mean, I really - " Kuznetsov makes a gesture of exasperation.

"Because we'd made a bet," Darryl retorts. "I don't back out of bets that I've lost, Kuznetsov, never have and never will - besides, you called me out on it on national television! We're NHL players - I mean, I know you said I was going to regret making that bet, but basically everybody from the Yukon to Tampa Bay would've given me grief about it if I hadn't followed through!"

Kuznetsov literally pulls at his hair. "When I say you gonna regret making bet, is because I was gonna give you shit about it for rest of your life! Like, you know, send you pictures of sixes on phone! Deliver six cakes to your house! Get Crawford to smash shave cream in your face six times! I not actually think I gonna get six goals in one game this year, you crazy? Nobody do it since 76!"

"Oh." Darryl feels really stupid.

"And so what if I tell everybody you lose bet! We not actually have to fuck - I mean, geez, you know, you can pay up by buying Bears team dinner six times or something, I dunno! And then I tell everybody you pay up, your teammates mock you about it, everybody happy!" Kuznetsov continues his tirade.

"I know we could've lied about it in public, I just - I just thought you were going to insist that I pay up in private!" Darryl snaps.

"Well, I wasn't!" Kuznetsov yells, glaring at him.

"Um..." Darryl feels extraordinarily stupid. "Sorry?" he offers.

Kuznetsov stares at him for a moment, his shoulders slumping. After a moment, his expression becomes even more wary.

"Darryl - was... was that first time you have sex with guy?" The question sounds like it's being dragged out of Kuznetsov, like he really, really doesn't want to ask.

"Okay, but - but, you did have sex with girl before, right? Last week with me not your first time ever?"

Darryl hesitates, trying to figure out whether to be truthful, but Kuznetsov interprets his silence correctly.

"Oh my god, I'm going to hell," the other man moans, turning around and literally banging his head against the wall.

"Jesus, Kuznetsov, stop it, you have enough brain damage already," Darryl says, grabbing him by the shoulder and pulling him away. "Look, so maybe as first times go, it wasn't - it wasn't ideal, but, I mean, I've heard it gets better -"

Kuznetsov suddenly seizes Darryl by the shoulders, hope blazing. "Wait, but you bring condoms and lube - so you do have sex before!"

"Those are left over from the Olympics," Darryl snaps. "You know how they gave out free sex stuff to all the Olympians, I just - it seemed wasteful to throw it away, even if I wasn't planning to use it." And he's ended up keeping it in his car because sometimes... emergencies arise for some of his teammates when they all go hit the bars, but there's no way he's telling Kuznetsov that he functions as condom dispenser for the Hawks.

Kuznetsov throws up his hands. "I don't understand! You know you are multimillionaire hockey player, right? Even okay looking!" Kuznetsov pauses, looking Darryl up and down. "Well, sort of."

"I know perfectly well who I am! Look, I just - it's always been difficult to meet girls -" Kuznetsov looks at him skeptically.

"Then you're doin' it wrong, Darryl."

"To meet girls who are actually interested in really getting to know me, and not, you know, not just girls who want to say that they fucked a multimillionaire hockey player, okay? I don't - I don't want to waste my time on people like that." Darryl says determinedly. Kuznetsov looks at him for a moment, then cracks a small smile - small, but real.

"Well, but maybe only reason you insist last week is so you can say you fuck a multimillionaire hockey player, hm?" Darryl lets out an involuntary snort of laughter, but then Kuznetsov takes him by the shoulder and looks Darryl in the eye, his expression very serious. "Darryl, I'm sorry. You deserve better - what happen last week was not good way to, to do that. You really deserve better."

Darryl swallows; it's a little difficult to meet the intensity of Kuznetsov's gaze. "Kuznetsov - it's okay. It was fine. I mean, right, not ideal, but it was fine." After a moment, he touches Kuznetsov's shoulder in return, tentative. "We're okay, right?"

Kuznetsov studies him a moment longer, and then he grins, his full-fledged gap-toothed shit-eating grin.

"Well, maybe you okay, but I'm great - I'm always great, is my nickname, Darryl!" Darryl rolls his eyes and steps away, glad to fall back into a more familiar dynamic.

"Hey, you haven't been playing so great from what I hear," he says.

"Not fair! Is difficult to concentrate on hockey when you think you gonna be arrested any time," Kuznetsov protests. Darryl reaches out and smacks Kuznetsov upside the head. 
"Well, you're not going to be arrested for anything except for crimes against fashion, okay? Your outfit is an eyesore," Darryl says, eyeing Kuznetsov's ripped acid-washed jeans and bright pink Sesame Street t-shirt. "And in terms of hockey, you definitely need to work on cutting off passing lanes, that second goal against in the Preds game was totally your fault."

"Hey, I - what, you watch highlights? I don't need take this from you, Darryl," Kuznetsov says, glaring at him. "I not one who miss practice last week! Now go away, you need drive back to Pittsburgh, traffic gonna be horrible."

Darryl lets Kuznetsov shoo him out the door, before another question pops into his head.

"Wait - so, did you really call Andrew Jameson at 4 AM to get him to drive me to Pittsburgh? That's a lot of driving for him, Hershey to DC to Pittsburgh to - hold on, I don't even know, how did he get back to Hershey after parking my car at the Kia Center?" Darryl asks, turning back. Kuznetsov fidgets, looking uncomfortable.

"I mean - I know you have to get back to Pittsburgh next day, and I know you not gonna be able to drive yourself back," he says. "And I find out last year that Jamie know you from when you was kids, so, um, I think is better if he can drive you instead of me, um, make you feel more comfortable. And I pay for him back for taxi to airport and for his flying back to Hershey, so..." Kuznetsov trails off, rubbing the back of his neck.

Darryl stares at him; unexpected kindness always makes him feel a little unsettled, a little awkward.

"Thank you," he says, finally.

Kuznetsov shrugs. "Well, Jamie get really really mad at me at first, and I have to apologize to Perry a lot too - that's Hershey coach - but, they gonna forgive me eventually!" Kuznetsov says. "Now go on, go away," he says, pushing Darryl towards his car.

And things return to normal, or at least what passes for normal. Kuznetsov goes back to texting him at least daily and calling him occasionally, and after telling himself to not be a jerk or a dork, Darryl makes himself respond more, texting and calling back. It makes Tracy happy, at least.
Chapter 5

With matters seemingly settled on the Kuznetsov front and the season now in full swing, Darryl lets his guard down a little - everybody's too busy concentrating on hockey, anyways. So, Darryl has little reason to be suspicious when Janssen gets him to go out clubbing with some of the guys after the Lions game at home. It's not his favorite way to unwind, but hey, Darryl's a team player on and off the ice.

Except Darryl notices that after they've been in the club for a little while, his teammates start acting a little - um, not the way they normally do. Usually whenever Darryl goes out with his teammates in public, they're always super-protective of Darryl, to the point that there's always at least one person sticking right next to him, as if leaving Darryl alone will signal invisible hordes of rabid fans that now is the time to pounce. Darryl appreciates their efforts, he really does, but it can get a little embarrassing.

But this time, the other three guys all drift off to other corners of the club, leaving Darryl alone at the bar.

"Uh..." Darryl says, watching Crawford enthusiastically sucking face with a blonde on one of the low couches along the far wall.

Janssen takes pity on Darryl's puzzled expression. "Hey, you don't mind acting as wingman for Max over there, right? Just keep the blonde chick's friend distracted so she doesn't notice blondie's making out with a complete loser, okay?"

"Um..." Darryl says, but Janssen's already disappeared onto the dance floor, and the girl sliding into the seat next to him is presumably the blonde's friend.

"Hi," she says, flashing a dimpled smile at him. "I'm Dana, it's nice to meet you."

"Uh, hi," Darryl says, wondering a little at Crawford's taste in picking Dana's friend - Dana herself is very pretty, shiny straight brown hair, straight white teeth, sparkling eyes. "It's nice to meet you, I'm Darryl."

They end up talking for a couple hours, but eventually Darryl looks at his watch and realizes that staying any longer is going to mean being completely miserable at practice tomorrow morning.

"Dana, I'm really sorry, but my teammates and I better get going - " Darryl says, pulling out his phone and texting Janssen, Leblanc, and Crawford. "But I really enjoyed talking to you, I hope your heater gets fixed soon."

"Thanks," says Dana, sounding a little sour - but if she can't understand what being a professional athlete requires, that's not Darryl's problem.

"Hey, how'd it go?" Janssen says, meeting Darryl at the club's exit. "Did you talk to - uh, wait." Janssen says, squinting back towards the bar. "She was totally not wearing a sweatshirt when I first left her with you."

"I know, that's mine - I gave it to her after she spilled a beer all over herself," Darryl says. "I mean, she was wearing a white tank top and it went sort of, you know, see-through. She couldn't go around the club like that, guys would totally get the wrong idea! So I gave her my sweatshirt to cover up."
"... There are so many things wrong with that story, but let's start with this - you wore a sweatshirt and windpants to a nightclub?" Leblanc says.

"I can't believe we let him - I think we didn't notice because that's what he always wears," Janssen says, shaking his head.

"Well, she kept saying she was cold anyways - when we were talking about how cold the weather's been, she said her heater was broken and so she really wished she had something to warm her up," Darryl says. "I should've thought to give her the sweatshirt even before she spilled her beer in any case, she was all over goosebumps."

Crawford squints at him. "Okay, so to recap - a hot chick comes up to you at a bar and you end up talking to her about the weather, then she says she's cold and needs something to heat her up and you end up giving her your sweatshirt. It's like she gave you a tennis racket to hit a beach ball and you still whiffed!"

"No, he didn't even know he was supposed to swing," Leblanc says.

"And exactly what is that supposed to mean?" Darryl asks, nettled.

"It's all right, Max - there's always next time, and we won't let him wear a sweatshirt either," Janssen says consolingly.

Whatever, his teammates don't have any right to tell him how to dress. The same trio insists on dragging him out to check out the Nashville nightlife after the Preds game, and Darryl shows up defiantly in a loose, long-sleeve t-shirt and khaki shorts; it's much warmer in Tennessee than it was back in Pittsburgh.

Except, like, thirty seconds after they get their drinks, Crawford spills his Guinness all over Darryl, completely soaking Darryl's shirt and shorts.

"What the - " Darryl says, scrambling to stand up.

"Whoops," Crawford says, sounding completely unrepentant. "Well, since the damage is already done..." He reaches over and pours the rest of the beer over Darryl's chest before Darryl can stop him.

"Thanks a lot, Max," Darryl says, glaring at him.

"Don't worry, we happen to have some clothes you can change into," Janssen says reassuringly, whipping a t-shirt and jeans out of nowhere. And then to Darryl's complete mortification, Janssen reaches over and pulls Darryl's t-shirt off before he can protest.

Darryl glares at Janssen and snatches the new t-shirt from the other player, pulling it on as quickly as he can. "I can't believe you just did that - and this t-shirt is way too tight, it - HEY!"

While Darryl is preoccupied getting the shirt over his head, Crawford goes one step further than Janssen and starts yanking down Darryl's shorts.

"What the - stop it!"

"You can't go around like that all night," Crawford says, "People will think you peed your pants or something. Here, put on the jeans." He continues pulling, and after a brief internal struggle, Darryl gives in and strips out of the shorts as quickly as possible, cringing with mortification that he's essentially standing in his boxers in public in the middle of a nightclub. And people have noticed -
basically everybody in the club is now gaping at them, some of them with open mouths.

"Thanks a lot you guys," Darryl hisses as he wriggles into the jeans, turning his back on the crowd. "Now everybody's staring at us, they must all think we're complete losers."

"Oh my god - is that Darryl Colton?"

Darryl freezes, then frantically zips the fly and buttons up - geez, these jeans are way too small. He's a little surprised that he's been recognized here in Nashville, but at least it's not Toronto or Montreal, at least there isn't going to be a mob on his heels within minutes. And his teammates always help deflect attention from him whenever he's recognized -

"Yup, that's him all right," Darryl hears Leblanc say. "Captain of the Pittsburgh Hawks, Stanley Cup Champion, gold-medal winner at the last Winter Olympics..."

Darryl turns to look at Leblanc in shock and betrayal, and then back at the curious group of spectators gathering behind him. A buxom redhead waves coyly at him and - literally - flutters her eyelashes.

"Well, you're welcome to score on me any time, Darryl," she says, stalking closer. Behind her is - if not the kind of unruly mob that would form in any of the Canadian cities - a more than respectable flock of women all converging towards Darryl, and the pack is certainly more than large enough to be entirely intimidating.

"Uhh..." Darryl says, backing up.

"Heeeeeeeello, ladies!" Crawford says, clearly relishing the sight. Darryl glares at him. Crawford grins and leans back, hands behind his head. "Hey, wingmen are supposed to help guys score, right?"

Darryl lasts ten minutes among the crowd before he does something he's never done in his life: he turns tail and runs.

"I cannot believe you went to the bathroom and climbed out the window," Janssen says disgruntled, once the rest of them catch up with Darryl back at the hotel. "Once that shit airs on tv, you are never going to hear the end of it, I guarantee."

"The clothes you guys made me wear were way too small, and I think I might be allergic to that t-shirt material, it was super-itchy!" Darryl defends himself.

"Oh my god - you are not allergic to cotton, what you're allergic to is interacting with hot chicks," Crawford says, his expression one of disgust. "I mean, thanks for attracting all of them - seriously, that was way cool - but wingmen aren't supposed to, you know, actually fly away!" Darryl glares at Crawford.

"Okay, look - if you guys want me to talk to girls to distract them so you can talk to their friends, then I'm okay with that, but I am not okay with you guys using me to try to attract them in the first place! Second, that footage isn't ever going to air because I'm not going to let it, and I don't think they got all of it anyways - " (Ben, who was the main camera guy assigned to follow Darryl, had sort of, uh, gotten a little trampled in the rush.)

"No no no, Ben totally caught enough of it on tape, and if you don't let them show it in the next episode, I'm totally telling everybody about that - um, that thing with the thing that happened three years ago," Janssen says, grinning a little. "You know what I'm talking about, Darryl."
Darryl stares at him, betrayed. "You wouldn't."

"I absolutely would."

It takes a repeated threat from Janssen to spill the beans about that thing with the thing, Crawford absolutely ripping Darryl a new one for being a disgrace to all wingmen everywhere, and Leblanc promising not to give away Darryl's identity anymore before Darryl finally relents and goes out with them for a third time, this time in St. Louis.

And this actually goes okay for the first hour or so, the four of them settled at the bar with drinks, nobody bothering them or anything. So Darryl does the dumb thing and relaxes, which means that he seriously almost jumps out of his skin when he turns to the side and sees an absolute blonde bombshell sitting next to him, smiling flirtatiously.

"Hi," she says, extending her hand. "You're Darryl Colton, aren't you?"

"Er... yes." Darryl says, gingerly shaking her hand. "I thought you said you weren't going to tell anybody who I was!" he hisses at Leblanc.

"You didn't say I couldn't!" Crawford sing-songs under his breath.

"Oh, no, I'm a huge hockey fan anyways," she says, winking. "In fact, I've watched every episode of your new show, I saw you had that bet going with Kuznetsov, right?"

"Uh..." Darryl says, his blood running cold for a moment before he remembers that there's no way she can actually know the real terms of the bet. No way. No... way.

"Well, I bet you that I can tie this cherry stem with my tongue, Darryl." She says slyly, plucking the maraschino cherry from her cocktail and pulling the stem off with her teeth. "If I win, then you can buy me a drink, hm?"

Darryl smiles uncomfortably at her as the woman's face undergoes a series of kind of disturbing contortions, although Crawford at least seems enthralled.

"There you go, Darryl," she says, opening her mouth and extracting the stem, placing it on right in front of Darryl. He tries not to recoil; ew, germs. "Now where's my drink?" she asks, her ruby-red lips curving upwards.

"Uh, right, of course," Darryl says, "Bartender, could we get some water over here?" Her mouth flatten a little, but then she smiles again when Darryl turns and hands the cup to her. "So, if you're a big hockey fan, you must follow the Blues pretty closely," he says.

"Oh, no, I like listening to jazz more," she says.

"... Right. Well, the game tonight was pretty exciting, don't you think? You know, the tipoff after the second half, the way that led directly to that fifth field goal?" Darryl says.

"Oh, I know, it was thrilling!" She giggles.

"Yeah," Darryl says flatly. "Anyways, I think tying that cherry stem smudged your lipstick, it's all over your chin. Maybe you should go fix it in the bathroom or something."

Her expression changes from flirtatious to confused, then confused to outraged, and then the woman flounces off in a huff.
"That," Leblanc says, turning to Darryl, "was ice. cold. I totally didn't know you had it in you, Darryl!"

"I hate women like that who go around saying that they're hockey fans," Darryl says, scowling at his drink. "Because then everybody thinks that all the women at hockey games don't actually know anything and they're all puck bunnies, and that is completely unfair when almost all of them are really great hockey fans!"

"You don't turn down a woman who looks like that and can use her tongue like that just because she gets a few hockey details wrong, Darryl!" Crawford says, his hands up in protest. "I don't care if she thinks we all play tiddlywinks, I'd still hit that!"

"She's not worth your time," Darryl says, then takes a closer look at the cherry stem still lying in front of him. "Look, she didn't even tie the stem properly, it's coming undone - see, I saved you from yourself, Max."

At that, Crawford groans loudly, putting his folded arms down on the counter and burying his head.

"This is impossible. Im. poss. ib. le."

"Are you okay?" Darryl asks. "Is he okay?" he asks Janssen.

"Yeah, he's fine, he's just - um, really disappointed that you're such a pathetic wingman," Janssen says, but Crawford pops back up, wild-eyed and accusatory.

"No, I've had it, I'm done - I mean, Kuznetsov might be a total douchebag but I completely agree with him that you need to get laid, but I am through - I know people have tried to set you up with girls, but I had no idea it was going to be this difficult! Apparently what it's going to take is locking you in a room with a naked swimsuit model after drugging you with a double dose of Viagra!"

"I - what?" Darryl says, outraged.

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"I cannot believe you talked my teammates into trying to hook me up! Actually, no, I can totally believe it, but I thought even you wouldn't stoop to this level!" Darryl yells at Kuznetsov.

"But I just wanna help you! You say is difficult to meet girls, I get them to find you girls! You very picky, everybody Crawford find is really hot, he have good taste," Kuznetsov says admiringly.

"Wait, how do you know what they looked like? Were - did he text you pics?"

"Janssen send it to me. And also I see what Ben taped, is very funny but very sad, too. Why you not keep last chick around?" Kuznetsov demands. "I mean, I know she don't know hockey, but you can teach her! And then she can teach you how to have sex!" Darryl shuts his eyes tightly.

"That's - I honestly don't even know what so say to that. But what did you even tell Janssen and Crawford, that I needed help finding girls? God, they're never going to let me live this down!" Darryl says, humiliation twisting hot in his stomach.

"No, I mean, I tell them I wanna make up for getting you drunk and getting you in trouble, and so they agree to help! You have good teammates, Darryl, whenever I go out with my teammate they always tell me to sit down and be quiet, say I gonna scare all the girls away with my face, or they say they can't watch me dance because it make them embarrassed," Kuznetsov says sadly.
Darryl is briefly sidetracked by the horrific image of Kuznetsov set loose on full nightclub, but then refocuses. "Look, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt here and assume that you were actually trying to help, but I really, really do not want or need you to interfere in my life like this. Directly or indirectly, I don't want you setting me up with girls any more, understand?"

There's only silence at the other end of the phone. Darryl massages his temple; he's getting a headache.

"Kuznetsov, do. you. understand?" he grates out.

"Okay, how about this," Kuznetsov says finally. "New bet, I bet you I gonna score a hat trick - normal hat trick, three goals - before you do, okay? If I win, I get to try and find girls for you."

"... And if you lose, then you're going to help me by trying to find girls for me, is that how this goes?" Darryl asks suspiciously. "No thanks, Kuznetsov, I'm fine without your help."

"Too bad! If you can make random bet without me saying yes, then I can too! And if you already worried who's gonna win bet, then you're in troooouuuuble!" Kuznetsov sing-songs before hanging up. Darryl barely restrains himself from throwing his phone across the room.

It's easy to tell that the rest of Darryl's teammates have heard about the new bet by the time the next game rolls around; October 29th at home against the Bulldogs, and conveniently enough the PR team also decides it's time for free hat night. ("Are you only doing this because of the bet with Kuznetsov?" Darryl asks Paul suspiciously. "Um.... no?")

Games against the Bulldogs are always chippy and everybody always plays with a bit of an edge against them, but less than five minutes into the first period it becomes very clear that the entire team is trying to set Darryl up to score.

"Uh, you know the point of the game is to score more than the other team, not to make Kuznetsov lose his bet," Darryl says to McNeil after the other player passes up a decent opportunity to shoot and passes it to Darryl instead.

"I don't see why we can't do both," McNeil says staunchly as they both skate back to the bench.

"Coach, can you tell them to stop? This is ridiculous!" Darryl says, turning to Prescott.

"McNeil, stop trying to set Colton up, we'll let Leskov take care of that," Prescott says.

"Thank you - hey, wait a minute!" Darryl says, turning back to glare at his coach, who only winks and grins.

Aaaand, yes, Leskov is one of the few players in the league who can bend the game to his will like that. Darryl gets his first goal in the twelfth minute of the first period unassisted, but when Darryl and Leskov get out on the ice at the same time during a power play to start the second, Leskov very obviously works to set Darryl up. It succeeds - assist for Leskov forty seconds in, goal to Darryl.

"Dima, it's not like Kuznetsov is going to get a hat trick immediately or anything," Darryl says, exasperated. "I don't have to score three tonight!"

"You never know with Lyosha," Leskov says darkly. "And I don't like him telling everybody I not good drinker, is not nice! Anyways, you just need one more, then you win and Kuznetsov can shut up, is good plan, no?"
Darryl's third goal is a bit of a fluke - the puck takes a weird bounce off Leighton's blocker, so Darryl takes a whack at it and the biscuit's flown into the net before the goalie even knows where it is.

The familiar blare of the goal horn goes off, and Darryl skates back to celebrate with his teammates, hats starting to rain down - except what shows up on the video screen above them is decidedly unusual.

"Congrats Darryl, on first hat trick in new arena!" Kuznetsov says, grinning. "I guess I lose bet, but don't worry, I pay up. Okay Hawk fans, here's deal - I know Darryl sometime have problem with too many hats, but for every hat you guys throw onto ice, I gonna donate $10 to the Darryl Colton Foundation. So, guys - " Kuznetsov holds up a poster, and in red, glittering capital letters, it says: 'THROW THE HATS!!'

The entire crowd goes berserk - hats are coming down so thick and fast that Darryl's actually have a little trouble skating around. "Did you guys know about this?" he yells; his teammates are all grinning, looking on in bemusement.

"We didn't know exactly what he was planning, although we knew he'd been in contact with Paul and everything, and I think he called Leskov yesterday to say that we oughta try to get you to win the bet tonight, otherwise he was gonna win," Davies yells back. "I think Dima thought he was just trash-talking, but this a pretty sweet way to pay up!" Darryl's about to reply - but as the noise and hat-throwing renew with a vengeance.

"Is that all you got, Pittsburgh?" He taunts. "Darryl doesn't think that's too many hats yet, I know you can do better!" The noise and hat-throwing renew with a vengeance.

"I gotta admit - even when he loses a bet, Kuznetsov still manages to give you shit," Davies says, shaking his head admiringly.

The hat-throwing ends up eating up more than half an hour, which is more than a little ridiculous. Darryl would feel bad about it, but eh, it's the Bulldogs. They can deal. The Hawks end up winning, 4-3.

So Darryl's feeling good about himself when he gets home, if half-torn between amusement and exasperation at Kuznetsov. But when the doorbell rings later that night and Darryl goes to answer it, his initial feeling when he sees who's bouncing up and down on his doorstep is surprise.

"Okay, that was pretty clever of you," Darryl says, opening the door to let Kuznetsov in. "Although I guess what I should be more worried about is the way you're conspiring with everybody in Pittsburgh behind my back, right?"

"I don't know what you talking about, Darryl." Kuznetsov says innocently. "All right, now do you have any vodka?"

"... No. Why are you asking?" Darryl asks, immediately wary.

"I cannot believe I gonna sleep with somebody who don't have vodka at home," Kuznetsov says, shaking his head.

"I - you - what?" Darryl asks.

"I mean, you win bet, so is my turn to pay up," Kuznetsov says, coming closer as Darryl retreats.

"Wait, but I never agreed to that!"
"Hm, I don't think I did first time around either, so too bad," Kuznetsov says cheerfully, Darryl now with his back literally against the wall. "And I already try to get you laid by hot girls, but you don't want that, so now you stuck with me!"

"No, wait, wait," Darryl says, grabbing at Kuznetsov's hands. "Really, why are you doing this?"

Kuznetsov fidgets a little, not quite meeting Darryl's eyes. "I mean... I feel really bad that your first time is so bad, and so - "

"I'm not going to be a pity fuck, Kuznetsov - " Darryl says, anger surging as he starts to push Kuznetsov away.

"But also is not okay that you now think I'm bad lay, Darryl - " Kuznetsov says, refusing to move. "I'm great lay! And you really need more practice having sex, maybe is good thing you not hook up with any of those girls and scare them off - "

"I am not having sex with you just to practice!" Darryl protests.

"But you really terrible at it!" Kuznetsov says, his hands reaching forward to slowly but surely unbutton Darryl's jeans, unzip his fly. "Come on, practice make perfect, you know that - okay, see, you don't rip other person's underwear off, you can take time - "

"Kuznetsov, this is crazy," Darryl says, although the brush of Kuznetsov's fingers against his stomach is causing a flurry of butterflies. "We can't - "

"Aw, you scared? Is okay, I won't tell nobody," Kuznetsov says, sliding behind Darryl so Darryl's back is up against Kuznetsov's chest, Kuznetsov's hands now gradually pulling Darryl's jeans down and off his hips.

"I am not scared - " Darryl says hotly, turning his head a little.

"Then why you shivering?" Kuznetsov whispers, then licks the tender spot between the edge of Darryl's jaw and ear, and at the same moment reaches into Darryl's boxers to stroke his cock.

Darryl can't help himself - a violent shudder runs through his entire body. Kuznetsov bites down lightly at the base of Darryl's neck, which doesn't really help with the shuddering, or the twisting heat of arousal flaring low and tight in his belly.

"Do you want me to stop?" Kuznetsov murmurs in his ear, his hand coming to a standstill on Darryl's cock - the light touch is making it impossible to think. "Because if you afraid, you can say no any time."

"I am not afraid, damn you - " Darryl chokes out.

"Good," Darryl can feel Kuznetsov's smile against his neck, and with that Kuznetsov begins deftly undressing Darryl, pulling Darryl's t-shirt off and then shoving Darryl's jeans and boxers all the way down.

It's odd - Darryl knows he he should tell Kuznetsov to stop, he should catch hold of Kuznetsov's hands and push the other man away - but he can't, he feels like a butterfly pinned to a page; the heat of Kuznetsov's lips against his neck, the curving warmth of Kuznetsov's body against his back, the sensation of Kuznetsov's fingers jerking his cock, it all leaves him feeling paralyzed, caught in a lust-thickened haze. The pleasure builds so gradually that Darryl doesn't even realize he's even approaching the edge until he's right there, until he's about to fall over.
"Ove - AJ, I'm gonna - " he stutters.

"Shh, shh, okay - " Kuznetsov slips his hand down and tugs briefly on Darryl's balls, staving off climax. "Where is bedroom? That's next lesson Darryl, beginner have sex in bedroom, couch in living room is for advanced learner, okay?"

"Do you ever stop trash-talking?" Darryl asks, rolling his eyes as he leads the way. Kuznetsov inhales and exhales a couple times, experimentally.

"I still breathing, right?" He says. "Now, okay - I know you know what these are, but you know how to use?" Kuznetsov says, digging lube and condoms out of the back pocket of his jeans and tossing them on the bed.

"Of course I know how to use them! I've read the directions!" Darryl says indignantly.

"... Right. Okay, show me," Kuznetsov says, starting to strip.

Darryl handles the condom, um, well enough, and he squeezes a generous amount of lube onto his hand, but when he finds himself kneeling behind Kuznetsov, Darryl's stomach is back to doing somersaults.

"Um - I don't - I can't..."

"Okay - now, remember what I do before? Use lube, and start one finger," Kuznetsov says, reaching back and guiding Darryl's hand. "If you do this with girl, if she very excited, then you not need to do this part, but is probably good idea with guys," he says. Darryl bites his lip as his index finger makes contact; then with excruciatingly careful effort, he eases his finger inside.

"Uh..." Darryl says. "I don't - I don't think I'm going to fit..." It's already really tight around one finger, there's no way this is going to work.

Kuznetsov makes a dismissive sound. "Don't have big ego, Darryl, you not that big. Okay, after one finger, go to two, then three."

"Or maybe I just don't think you're actually that big of an asshole, but obviously I'm wrong," Darryl grits out, but he follows Kuznetsov's instructions; after a few minutes, he's managed to work three fingers in and out smoothly.

"Okay, good," Kuznetsov says, at last sounding a little breathless. "Now you can try - but go slow," he warns.

Darryl grits his teeth and pushes in carefully, but the moment he's fully sheathed he has to stop, panting. "Kuznetsov, I - I don't think I can move, I'm going to come -"

Kuznetsov makes a disgruntled noise and moves backwards - Darryl yelps (oh, god, how embarrassing) and has to squeeze his eyes shut and think about glaciers and icebergs to stop from finishing too quickly. "Next lesson - is very bad manners to come too fast and leave other person hanging, you should be more polite than -"

"Jesus fucking Christ, do you ever shut up?" Darryl says, falling over Kuznetsov's back and reaching around to find the other man's cock, not fully hard but quickly stiffening after Darryl strokes it roughly a few times. And then it's a struggle to keep from climaxing too soon, the heat and pleasure escalating every time Kuznetsov moans, every time he moves.

Finally - finally, finally, he feels Kuznetsov freeze beneath him, and then the other man shudders
deeply and spills, hot and wet all over Darryl's hand. The sensation is enough to send Darryl over the edge too, and he feels like he's being torn in half, the intensity of his climax ripping him down the middle.

Darryl collapses on Kuznetsov's back, gasping. He can't tell whether the thunder in his ears is Kuznetsov's heartbeat or his own, and their skin sticks together a little, slick with sweat. For the next few minutes, the world narrows down to the single goal of catching his breath.

"Okay," Kuznetsov finally says, sounding absurdly, cheerfully nonchalant. "That much better this time, Darryl, maybe you getting hang of it."

Darryl rolls his eyes as he rolls off of Kuznetsov, although he does take a little care in withdrawing. "I'm glad you approve, that totally means a lot to me." Kuznetsov sits up, leisurely, and raises his arms to stretch, muscles rippling all the way down his back.

"Well, sex is fun, Darryl! I really don't want you to go away from first time thinking sex is no fun." Kuznetsov gets up and starts rummaging around for his clothes, although he winces a little as he bends over.

"I mean - it wasn't - " Darryl stammers, his mouth going a little dry. "It was, um, it was fun the first time around. At the end," he says, honesty compelling him to admit to Kuznetsov what he hadn't even really admitted to himself.

Kuznetsov looks over, his expression softening even as he pulls on his boxers, then his jeans. "I - good. I mean, you need have more fun anyway. Take stick out of ass and put something more enjoyable in!" he says, shimmying his hips a little.

Darryl stifles an exasperated noise and sits up to throw a pillow at Kuznetsov. The other man makes it impossible to feel embarrassed or awkward for long, mostly because those feelings quickly transition into irritation and annoyance. "Wait, so you score six goals and fuck me, while I score three goals and fuck you? I don't think this exchange rate is really, um, fair."

"Well, I'm easier than you are," Kuznetsov says, wriggling into his t-shirt. "But if you so worried about exchange rate, you can come up with better one for next time."

Darryl's breath catches in his throat. "Uh - next time?"

Kuznetsov looks at him in surprise, then throws himself back down on the bed in a dramatic expression of despair, one arm covering his eyes and the other flung outward, his hand landing on Darryl's thigh. "Okay, if you have sex just two time in your life and you not sure if you want any more, then we still doing it wrong." Kuznetsov removes his forearm covering his eyes and looks up at Darryl. "Do you want to stop, Darryl?"

"I - " Darryl pauses. Kuznetsov's eyes are intensely, unwaveringly blue, and his fingers against Darryl's thigh feel like a burning brand. For the first time in a long while, instead of saying what he should or what he ought, Darryl says exactly what he feels. "No," he says, his fingers unconsciously clenching the sheets. "No, I don't."
Chapter 6

So, a few things happen after that.

Tracy has Darryl and Kuznetsov review the upcoming episode of 'AK47 & Colt 45' by web conference at the same time, since she wants to air the entire storyline of the first and second bets between the two of them. Kuznetsov is conspicuously silent during the first part of the narrative, snippets of footage that Ben caught of Darryl watching the Bears-Warriors game in the Hawks locker room, then Darryl subsequently storming out; more clips of the next morning when Darryl walks into the locker-room at the Kia Center, red-eyed and looking ill.

Darryl feels more bemused than anything, because he honestly doesn't remember noticing Ben filming any of that; that must've been the tipping point in terms of getting used to the camera following him around, because these days he does actually forget Ben and Erik - the sound guy - more often than he notices them.

*Hey, you okay? you're not saying anything* Darryl texts Kuznetsov.

*Yeah, just. afraid i make bears look bad, make you look bad. and me, i look bad!* Kuznetsov texts back.

*Stop worrying, you already said sorry a million times, if ppl can't figure that out it's their problem* Darryl types.

Of course, then the part with Darryl's disastrous forays into clubbing rolls around, and Darryl immediately regrets having texted anything comforting to Kuznetsov at all, steaming as he listens to Kuznetsov's guffaws both audibly and textually.

*AHAHAHAHAHAHA* is Kuznetsov's first text. *sweatshirt, Darryl? really? REALLY?!? is his second. Then - I cant tie cherry stem with tongue. good we both know that not important to u in bed!*

Darryl glares at his phone and immediately deletes that last text message.

"Tracy, do we really have to show this part?" he asks out loud, leaning closer to the phone.

"You know, I believe that a certain Mr. Jordan Staal anticipated this request, because he called me a few days ago to tell me, and I quote, 'You tell Colton that he can run but he can't hide - if he tries covering up what an embarrassing failure he is, I'll make sure he regrets it.'" Darryl groans and lets his head thunk back in his chair, hearing Kuznetsov cackling on the other end of the line.

"Darryl, it's okay - I mean, I think it's actually refreshing to see a superstar athlete acting like a perfect gentleman instead of a horndog, you know? You're definitely setting a better example for people, anyways," Tracy says.

"Thank you," Darryl says, feeling vindicated.

"Although - really? You wore a sweatshirt and windpants to go clubbing?" She asks, chuckling.

"Look, it was really cold out that night!"

The rest of the clips seem fine, showing Darryl's hat trick against the Bulldogs with some added footage of Kuznetsov writing an almost obscenely large check to Darryl's foundation for all the
hats thrown on ice. Tracy seems really excited about using the story line in the upcoming episode, despite their differing concerns.

"C'mon, guys, I promise we aren't going to make you look like fools, okay? This episode is solid gold, I promise we'll spin it so it isn't embarrassing or damaging for either of you, I swear." Darryl hesitates; it is true that she hasn't let them down so far.

"Well... I guess," he says. Kuznetsov is a little tentative too, but also eventually agrees.

"Great! And again, we'll show you the final episode again before it goes to air, this is still a very rough cut. Also, I know these past two trips you guys made to visit each other weren't exactly planned, but would you guys be willing to keep making trips to practice with each other during the regular season? Having footage of you guys interacting with each other for the show would be really great," Tracy says.

"Yup! Booty call between DC and Pittsburgh!" Kuznetsov says cheerfully. Darryl makes a strangled noise while Tracy laughs on the other end of the line.

"Alex, I know your English has gotten a lot better over the past few years, but I think it could still use some improvement. Anyways, I know you guys drove for these past two trips, but you should really consider using an air taxi service instead, the flight has to be less than an hour long. I mean, since the only reason you guys would be taking those flights is for the show, I might be able to get NHLN to foot the bill..."

"Wow, really?" Kuznetsov asks interestedly.

"No, I think that's okay," Darryl says firmly. "I'm pretty sure that both of us can afford to fly back and forth, Tracy."

"No, no, I insist," she says. "It's for the show, so the show will pay for it."

After the web conference is over, Kuznetsov calls him immediately.

"Why you tell Tracy you don't want NHL Network to pay for flight, huh Darryl?" Kuznetsov demands.

"Look, aren't you going to feel guilty if a tv network ends up paying for - for booty calls, as you said? I still can't believe you said that, by the way!" Darryl says, blushing horribly even over the phone.

"Wait, is that trick question or something? First, nobody take what I say seriously, Darryl, and two, why feel guilty? I mean, yes, is definitely going to be booty call, but they also gonna film us!"

There's a long pause while the two of them both digest exactly what Kuznetsov said.

"Er, I didn't mean like that," Kuznetsov says, sounding bashful for maybe the first time in his life.

"Good," Darryl snaps, glaring at the air in front of him.

Even though flying does significantly cut down on the time it takes to get from Pittsburgh to DC and vice versa, it's still a bit of a hassle. This is how it ends up working: whenever they're both at home and between games, one or the other hops onto a plane and jets out, they meet up at the practice arena of whatever city they're in, and they skate around a bit and talk trash for an hour or so in front of the cameras. Then if Kuznetsov's in Pittsburgh he'll crash at Darryl's place, or if Darryl's in DC then he'll crash at Kuznetsov's place; visitor stays overnight and then catches an
early flight out the next morning back home. And nobody's the wiser that the guest rooms in both their houses look remarkably unused.

So, essentially, yes. Booty call between DC and Pittsburgh.

Again, maybe Darryl should have expected this, but Kuznetsov really is a remarkably transparent person; he is who he is whatever the circumstances, whatever the company. He's rambunctious and competitive and gleeful on the ice, off the ice, with his friends, with the public - and, as Darryl finds out, in the bedroom.

For one thing, Kuznetsov insists that Darryl start calling him AJ.

"Next lesson is if you start sleeping with someone who have long name, you have to find nickname for them," Kuznetsov - no, AJ says, taking off Darryl's clothes. "I mean, what happen if you find girl named Iakovlevskaia Barabanshikova, hm?"

"What?"

"Exactly," AJ says. "Or you can call them sweetheart, or baby, but you should say name a few time, otherwise they think you not know it. That's good lesson too, you need to know name of people you sleep with." AJ frowns at him. "You know my name, right?"

"Yeah, of course I do," Darryl says sarcastically, glaring. "It's Joe, right? Or is it Billy?" But something in Kuznetsov's earlier demand to call him AJ worries at the back of his mind, something about his expression, as if faintly resigned. "Wait a minute - you don't think I can pronounce your name properly, is that it?"

AJ shrugs, careless. "Well, nobody here do, unless they Russian also. But AJ is easy enough, right? I like how you say it before, too. A, J," AJ says, pushing Darryl back onto the bed even as he strips out of his own shirt. "A, like Aaaahh-mazing, and J, like Juuuuust awesome!"

Darryl glares at AJ even as his breath quickens from AJ's hands running down his chest, along his abs. "Stupidity is not sexually transmitted, stupidity is not sexually transmitted," he mutters under his breath, transferring his glare to the ceiling.

Rambunctious and gleeful is all very well in bed (okay, if Darryl is being honest then it's actually wonderful, not going to lie), but competitive can have its drawbacks. Like, the time AJ goads Darryl into seeing who can make the other person come more.

"I - win..." Darryl gasps out weakly - it's too difficult to even pant, even though he's completely out of breath.

"No, I win," AJ says, somehow managing to sound smug even though Darryl knows he's just as exhausted. "I manage to come more than you, I win!"

Darryl can't even muster up the energy to glare at AJ, although he gives it his best shot. He feels completely boneless, limp as a wet noodle sprawled out over the bed. "You know we both have practice tomorrow, right?"

AJ lets out a faint groan. "Uurngh," he says. "Okay, maybe we both lose."

Darryl still sometimes has to stop and try and wrap his brain around the fact that he's having sex on a regular basis with Aleksey Kuznetsov. There are so many things that are mind-boggling about that statement that it doesn't seem possible that it could be true, but there it is.
First, the fact that he even has a sex life of any sort is kind of unbelievable. When Darryl was ten his parents had given him the birds and the bees talk, and that went okay, and then when he was thirteen his agent had given him the if-you-knock-up-a-girl-your-future-in-hockey-will-go-up-in-flames-and-die-a-painful-death-and-then-I-will-cut-off-your-balls pep talk, and in retrospect that particular talk had been, um, a little excessive.

There's just never really been time for girls, and Darryl has always been awkward around them anyways. Whenever he has been forced to spend time around them - setting Darryl up on blind dates was an extremely popular pastime among his teammates during Darryl's first two years as a Hawk - by the end of the evening he's usually just confused and anxious and feeling like the whole business is more trouble than it's worth.

And maybe that reaction should've given Darryl a clue about his sexual orientation, because tied at second in terms of sheer what-the-fuck level, Darryl doesn't know whether to be more freaked out about the fact that he's apparently gay (or at least bisexual) or the fact that he's sleeping with Aleksey Kuznetsov.

Darryl's pretty sure that if he was sleeping with any other man, then the entire sexual orientation crisis would take precedence, but as it is Darryl just keeps getting stuck on which man it is exactly that he's having sex with. Darryl would really like to think that this means he's a well-adjusted individual who doesn't have a problem handling self-revelations about his sexuality... but no, it probably says more about how neurotic Darryl is that he keeps getting stuck at fucking. Aleksey Kuznetsov.

Then third - and most surprising, this is what trips Darryl up at random moments when he's going about the rest of his everyday life, makes him pause and occasionally pinch himself - the third thing is that, well, it's going well. Really well.

See, Darryl realizes that logically speaking, he should be freaking out about this a lot - like, a lot. Beyond what this means to him personally, even the possibility that they could be caught should have him slamming on the brakes as fast as possible. But their flights are already scheduled and paid for, and it seems silly for either of them to stay at a hotel when they can just crash with each other, and... okay, so he's never actually going to tell AJ this, the other man's head would swell up and explode from the ego boost - but the sex is, um. The sex is really great.

At least one part of his life is going well, because Darryl's life on the ice goes ahead and implodes. And, of course, it's all the fault of the Bulldogs.

It's the last game against the Bulldogs for a month and a half, which evidently means that the team from Philly wants to give Darryl and the Hawks a warm farewell; Darryl can already tell there's going to be trouble the moment he steps onto the ice. Well, okay, Pritchard immediately checking him hard into the boards and then leaning over to insult him makes it fairly obvious.

"So you think you can score hat tricks on us whenever you want, is that the idea?" Pritchard growls even as Darryl scrambles back to his feet. "You wanna make a joke out of us? Well, we'll see who's laughing at the end of tonight's game, Colton."

Darryl rolls his eyes as he skates away. Whatever.

But Pritchard is apparently hellbent on targeting Darryl tonight. Every moment they're both on the ice - which, unfortunately, is almost every shift Darryl has - Pritchard makes sure to shove him and bump him and body-check him at every chance he gets. As the game goes on the harassment gets dirtier and dirtier; an elbow jabbed into Darryl's stomach, a poke-check that should've been called for tripping, a push between Darryl's shoulder blades when Darryl has his back turned.
"Aww, is our little crybaby getting upset?" Pritchard sneers when Darryl shoves back at him. "Don't worry, you can have your pacifier after you lose this game, okay?" Darryl has to bite his lip hard to stop himself from retorting; the worse part is that the Hawks are losing, and losing badly. It's already 5-1 Bulldogs, and the second period isn't over yet.

Pritchard ramps up the abuse even more during the third period, to the point that Darryl feels like the refs must have blindfolds on. His teammates try to help him out as much as they can, but Pritchard refuses to drop 'em and Connors keeps line-matching Pritchard against Darryl; the other player keeps making a beeline for him no matter how many times Darryl's linemates push Pritchard away.

"No, you know what, I think you look good on your knees," Pritchard taunts, as Darryl struggles back up after Pritchard knocks the wind out of him. "While you're down there, why don't you blow me with those pretty dick sucking lips of yours, huh? We're already fucking you guys up the ass anyways, I'd love to come all over your fishy little face, hm?"

And that's it - Darryl completely loses his temper. Snarling, he charges at Pritchard and ends up... well.

Darryl ends up getting tossed from the game with four minutes left to play, and the list of penalties reads like a rap sheet. Charging, boarding, elbowing, slashing, spearing, cross-checking - the only reason why he wasn't called for kneeing and checking from behind is because the refs pulled him off of Pritchard before he could get them in.

Four minutes isn't nearly long enough for Darryl to calm down, though, and when the media clusters around him after the game in the locker room looking for a juicy quote, Darryl is still steamed enough that he intemperately obliges.

"Pritchard's a fucking idiot and a dirty player and a danger to everybody he's on the ice with," Darryl snaps. "I'm just sorry I didn't get the chance to take him out for good, guys like him don't deserve to play in the NHL with me and mine."

It's like he's thrown a lit match into a vat of oil. Darryl gets fined and reprimanded by the league and warned about suspension, but he really couldn't care less; the day he respects the commissioner of the NHL as a moral authority is the day he shoots himself in the head. But the media shitstorm that explodes is truly incredible, especially since Darryl doesn't think he's said anything particularly surprising. Everybody knows Pritchard's a dirty player; there are aliens on Mars who know Pritchard's a dirty player.

But the media takes what Darryl said and blows it up into this huge, enormous controversy; even worse, a significant portion of the hockey punditry ends up completely misinterpreting Darryl's remarks as whining about not being able to handle playing against Pritchard, or as Darryl saying that he's too good to play against the Bulldogs.

It ends up reviving all of the old media narratives about Darryl being soft and a diva and a complainer, and reporters start pestering Darryl about whether he has a problem playing against certain players, whether Darryl thinks the league should remove those players from the game, whether Darryl needs to toughen up. It's all complete bullshit, and it gets to the point where Darryl has to force himself to stay put and endure each media scrum, each presser.

The thing is, the controversy isn't going away - if anything, it keeps blowing up bigger and bigger. Well, okay, maybe some of that is Darryl's own fault. At the pre-game scrum before the Hawks' away game against the Stars, a journalist asks Darryl whether he regrets what he said about Pritchard.
"No, I don't regret what I said," Darryl bites out. "I meant every word, and I would say it again if I had to."

"But don't you think that it's beneath you to retaliate like you did against Pritchard? Aren't you basically stooping to his level by doing that?"

"Well, if there's dirty play going on and the refs choose not to do anything about it, then obviously players have to take matters into their own hands sometimes," Darryl says sharply, now thoroughly nettled. "I'm not saying it's the best way to handle things, but I'm not afraid to do what it takes to defend myself or my teammates."

And somehow, of course, the Stars end up hearing all of this, and somehow Steve Mack's twisted little brain takes what Darryl said and hears, 'Wow, Steve Mack, please take runs at Darryl Colton the entire game,' because that is exactly what Mack does. Darryl gets fed up with the abuse by the second period this time, and butt-ends and shoves Mack straight into the boards. Darryl doesn't get tossed this time, but he does get called for a two and ten for misconduct.

So that's Dallas, and it would be great if it ended there, but then basically the same thing happens in Anaheim, with Perry being the guy gunning for Darryl this time. Darryl never intended things to turn out this way, but that initial incident with Pritchard has somehow turned Darryl into a magnet for both receiving and dishing out dirty play. It's enough to give both Prescott and the entire Hawks public relations team nightmares, but Darryl really can't bring himself to muster up any regret.

"What the fuck are you thinking? I honestly never thought of you as a stupid, Darryl, but right now you're making Avery look like a goddamn genius," Prescott says, pacing back and forth. "Every time you take the bait and lash out at Pritchard or Mack or whoever and it takes you out of the game, that hurts us as a team, you understand? They love that they can provoke you like that because it makes you ineffective - and now every team out there is gonna be telling their goons to start running you, because they know it'll get you tossed!"

Darryl looks at him mutinously, chin up. "I'm not apologizing, I haven't said or done anything that I'm ashamed of. They're dirty players and I'm not letting them go after me without putting up a fight."

Prescott throws his hands up in exasperation. "If you keep going like this you will have apologize, because you're pissing off everybody - and I mean everybody. The league for calling them ineffective, the refs for calling them incompetent, the other players because they think you think you're better than all of them, and I don't mean that in a good way. If you don't stop this, you're going to start racking up suspensions left and right - the league's given you a really long leash so far by not suspending you yet, but right now you're just using it to hang yourself. When people are siding with Pritchard against you then you're really in trouble, I hope you realize that."

By the time Darryl and the team get back to Pittsburgh from their road trip, Darryl is thoroughly sick of the whole thing; he feels like he's under fire from all quarters. Even his teammates are quiet and subdued around him, although that probably has to do more Darryl biting their heads off every time they try to talk to him. When Darryl realizes that AJ is due to visit Pittsburgh the next afternoon, he groans and calls the other man to see if they can cancel.

"Look, I just - I'm not very good company right now, okay?" AJ just chuckles.

"Is okay - I can be good enough for two of us, no worry Darryl," he says, hanging up.

Darryl's still in a foul mood when AJ shows up at the Kia Center rink, and he glares as the other player skates blithely over.
"All right, so let's get this over with, okay? I'm sure you want to take a few pot shots at me too, so I can play goalie and you can start shooting, it'll be great." Darryl says snippily. AJ looks at him for a long moment, then turns to Ben and Erik, who are both standing waiting with the camera and sound equipment ready.

"Hey you guys, you can take vacation today, okay? Don't worry, I tell Tracy I give you day off." Ben and Erik exchange looks. "Um, but - we're really supposed to film you guys, you can always cut the footage later..." Ben tries tentatively.

"I know, but Darryl looks so mad that he's probably gonna make me cry, too embarrassing, you know?" AJ shakes his head sadly. "I'm private guy, I only cry when I'm alone and I can have whole box of ice cream just for me, okay?"


"He don't count, he cries too so doesn't matter if I cry in front of him." He says, shooing Ben and Erik away. "Now go have fun with day off! Go skydive! Surf! Have barbecue!"

"We're in Pittsburgh in November..." Ben mutters as he packs up the camera.

Once the two of them have left the arena, AJ turns back and looks at Darryl purposefully. "Okay, Darryl, is rough for you lately, no?"

Darryl bites his lip. "AJ, I really don't want to talk about this, okay? And since the cameras are gone, I don't know what we're even doing here anyways - I told you I wanted to cancel, you should've just - "

"No, no, but I wanna talk to you," AJ says, his voice uncharacteristically serious. "It all start with Pritchard, right? What he say to you?"

"He - " Darryl lets out a sharp sigh. "He told me to suck his dick, and said he wanted to come all over my face," he says, tired of censoring himself, of watching every word he says. "He was basically really mad about my hat trick in our last game against them, thought I was trying to make the Bulldogs look like fools - not that they need any help," Darryl says bitterly.

AJ leans on his stick, his expression severe. "He really say that to you? During game?"

"Look, if you don't believe me - " Darryl says hotly.

"No, I believe you, I know Pritchard is shithead," AJ says. "You not tell anybody else what he say, do you? Because media not say anything about it, they just say you go crazy."

Darryl exhales sharply. "No, it's not worth the fuss it would kick up. I mean, I've heard stuff like that since I was a kid - a lot of it even worse than what he said."

AJ looks puzzled. "So why you act like that, if you hear it before?"

Darryl looks down for a moment; a corner of his mind whispers that the other man has a point. He's never reacted this strongly to this sort of trash talk before; is it because he's afraid Pritchard could somehow suspect? What if someone overheard Pritchard? What if somebody finds out, what if somebody looks at him, and just - and just knows? Darryl winces even as the thought forms. But that's silly; he can't say any of this out loud, he knows he's being paranoid.

Darryl takes a deep breath and looks back up. "I'm just - I just got tired of it, okay? Look, I've taken
a lot of shit from other hockey players growing up, because they always, always targeted me for
dirty play. I mean, guys who were four, five years older would literally take whacks at my knees,
or elbow me in the head, or just shove me around because I was smaller than them and because I
was better than them, and they knew it."

"Oh, that happen to you also?" AJ says, interested. "Me too, is why I start hitting everybody, make
them think twice about playing dirty against me." 

"Yeah, well, my point is that I've paid my dues, and this kind of shit shouldn't be happening in the
NHL, not at this level," Darryl says, irritated. "I just - I just want people to play fair, is that too
much to ask?"

AJ chews his lip for a bit, looking at Darryl consideringly. "You know what your problem is,
Darryl? You don't know how to handle trash talk, like, really bad trash talk."

"What do you mean, I don't - "

"No, I mean, I think how you always handle trash talk before is you just ignore it, right? But what
if trash talk get really ugly, and it start hurting? I don't think you know how to deal, Darryl."

"Well, what's your advice then?" Darryl snaps.

"Okay, so, there two ways to handle trash talk," AJ says. "First way is to trash talk back, but you
too honest for that, Darryl. I don't know how you still like this, but you too sincere, you always
mean what you say. I mean, you always find really boring way to say it, but you always mean it.
That's big problem if you gonna talk shit."

"Yeah, well, talking shit shouldn't be a problem for you," Darryl says bitterly.

"I know - I mean, yeah, this is way I handle trash talk, I trash talk back. But you gonna have to do
it differently, I think." AJ hesitates. "There is - there is Russian saying, goes, 'На языке мёд, а на
сердце — лёд.' Um, in English, I guess you say," AJ scrunches up his face in thought. "I guess it
become, 'honey on tongue, ice in heart.'"

Darryl looks at him, eyebrows raised. "Um... okay."

"Look, part of problem is you only been saying bad things about other players - yeah, I know the
guys you been chirping these days deserve it, but you never say nice things about anybody, so right
now you just sound bitter."

"I - wait, for one thing that's not true, I do say nice things about other people, and so, what? I gotta
go around complimenting everybody now?" Darryl says defensively.

"Look, Darryl, you literally one of best player in hockey right now, one day gonna be among best
ever, everybody gonna mention you with Gretzky and Lemieux and Orr, right? But you don't say
good stuff about other players a lot, you say good stuff about playing other teams and stuff, is all
general - and yeah, yeah, I know is because you always focused on your own game, how you can
get better," AJ says, waving Darryl off as Darryl opens his mouth in protest.

"But it don't hurt you any to say good things about other guys, and be specific, you know? Like, in
Dallas - say something like, 'Is big treat to play Brad Summers again, I always admire him
playmaking,' or better, say something about young guys! Say, 'Jamie Roberts been playing really
well, is gonna be interesting to have game against him and see how he getting better,' stuff like that,
okay?"
Darryl looks at AJ, brow furrowed. "...I mean, all right, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"So that part is honey on tongue, right? You say sweet things about other players, and everybody think you great guy, classy guy. And then when you gotta talk about dirty guys, you say stuff like, 'Maybe Mack gonna be good player one day, but only if he learn to keep elbow down.' Or for Pritchard, you say, 'Well, he have so much potential to be decent defender, is very sad he feel like he have to play dirty to keep up with everybody else,'" AJ says, affecting a deeply patronizing tone. "See? That part is ice in heart, but it still sound sweet, so nobody gonna criticize you. You can just say is advice for them, and what they gonna say back, hm? Is still trash talk, just different kind."

"Well, I never hear you complimenting other players," Darryl snips back, annoyed. AJ looks back at him soberly.

"I do sometime, but look, I already bad guy. After last year everybody think I'm villain, so is too late for me. But you right, I need to be better too. I mean, did you see article about what Sedin say about both of us after he win Hart? He say really nice things, Darryl! Call both of us best players in league, say is honor to be there with us. And I forget to say something good about him to reporters - my mom yell at me lots after that," AJ says, broodingly.

"I - um..." Darryl feels off-balance, uncomfortable. It's just - it's so bizarre, he never would have thought AJ would think deeply about this sort of thing, or that he would actually try giving Darryl thoughtful advice. And so he latches on to the part of what AJ's just said that he can refute. "People don't actually think you're a bad guy, you know that, right? I mean... look at the votes for the Lindsay and the Hart last year, it's - you're not losing any popularity contests, okay?"

AJ shrugs a little stiffly. "Well, not yet. But you still Canada's golden boy, Darryl - Pritchard and Mack and Perry, is definitely not worth it to ruin reputation over those guys." AJ says. "That image need protecting, Darryl, is worth protecting. You still hero in NHL, one of good guys in league, and that mean a lot to your fans, okay?" AJ looks at Darryl intently. "You understand?" Darryl tries to look away, but the other man catches Darryl's chin and forces Darryl to look him in the eye. "This important, Darryl."

Darryl fidgets a little. "I mean... I guess," he mutters.

"So when you apologize for way you been behaving - when you apologize, Darryl," AJ continues, overriding Darryl's attempt to interject, "You gonna say, 'I apologize for what I say earlier, I expect better of me, and I decide what happen on ice is not worth all of trouble it cause off the ice, so I moving on, not gonna say anything else,'" AJ says sternly, finally letting go. "And you not gonna have any trouble saying that, because is all true, Darryl, right?"

Darryl looks down for a long moment, biting his lip.

"Okay," he says finally. "I'll think about it."

"Good. Now, other thing I want to talk to you about. You better than this physically too, I know you are, I see you avoid dirty play before, but it look like you forget how to do it. Darryl, is really, really not necessary to stand there and take it if these guys gonna run you - just get out of way and they go BOOM into boards, and everybody happy! Think of it like game, see how many times you can make other guys go BOOM!"

"Yeah, I seem to remember pulling that trick on you a couple times," Darryl says dryly.

"Right, but you need to start pulling again! So today we gonna work on checking drills, 'cause I
"... So basically that whole conversation was to trick me into letting you practice body-checking me, is that it?" Darryl says, an involuntary smile tugging at his mouth.

"Of course! But I got great music we can practice to, this song gonna be your theme song, okay?" AJ skates over to the bench and fiddles with a boom box he must've brought with him, and then after a moment music starts playing.

"Oh my god," Darryl says, torn between laughter and horror as he recognizes MC Hammer's 'U Can't Touch This.' "Where the hell did you get your taste in music? I honestly don't know whether it's worse than your taste in fashion, and that's saying something."

"I don't know what you talking about, this perfect song for you! Just sing it to yourself every time other player tries to run you, okay?" AJ says, grinning madly. "Or if you too scared to do checking drill with me, I can just dance instead," AJ says, starting to shimmy and jump along to the music.

"You can't touch this," he starts singing.

"No, no," Darryl says, trying to skate away even as he's doubling over in laughter. "Now I have to run away because I can't watch this, I'll go blind," he protests, then yelps and scrambles away when AJ starts going after him in earnest.

"Hey! Hey, you insult my dancing? Watch out, Darryl, I gonna run you over!"

An hour later, Darryl is breathless and lightheaded from skating so much and laughing so hard; AJ had alternated between chasing Darryl all around the ice and dancing along to the music he'd brought along with him, a mix of the worst and silliest music Darryl has ever heard in his life. But Darryl winces as the two of them head back towards the bench, AJ finally and mercifully shutting off the boom box. "Wow, I'm going to have bruises all over tomorrow, thanks for slamming into me repeatedly," Darryl says, gingerly stepping off the ice.

"Whatever, don't lie, you know you like it," AJ says, winking salaciously as he dances his way back to the locker room.

The next day, Darryl takes a deep breath when the customary pregame media scrum gathers around his locker.

"Before I take any questions, I'd - " Darryl pauses again, bracing himself. "I'd like to apologize for my behavior recently. I should hold myself to a higher standard, and I've realized that, that the recent controversy over my play and my remarks isn't worth the trouble it's brought to my teammates or the Hawks organization. I'm sorry for disappointing anybody who's found my behavior, uh, wanting, and I'm planning on moving on from all of this."

Some of the reporters surrounding him look a little nonplussed.

"So you don't anticipate any trouble from, say, Steve Wyatt this afternoon?" One journalist inquires.

Darryl grits his teeth a little. "Well, Wyatt always plays a tough game, and if he could just figure out how not to be so clumsy or blundering so he's tripping other players up all the time, he could become a very effective player," Darryl says evenly. "But the Lightning are a dangerous team, they've improved a lot - Trevor's always hard to play against, and of course Seelie is tearing it up again, it's impressive the pace that he's scoring at already this season. There's been a lot of buzz around Hurley too, I've seen some film and it looks like he's turning into an outstanding
defenseman, so, you know, it should be a real good game this afternoon," he finishes.

Now the entire crowd seems taken aback. The next few questions still try to get a rise out of Darryl, but since he refuses to take to the bait, they eventually peter out into more standard fare.

During the game Darryl manages to avoid any dirty play from Wyatt, the Hawks end up winning 4-2, but even better, the media coverage of Darryl post-game basically swings upward immediately. A significant number of commentators remark on his double-edged praise of Wyatt, but they still end up lauding him for taking the higher road.

"I guess what this really means is that I just need to be less honest," Darryl says cynically to Moreau in the locker room a few days later. "Because my opinion on Pritchard or any of those guys and how to handle them if they get out of control hasn't changed at all."

"Yeah, but it's not worth it to rock the boat," Moreau says, toweling off. "Seriously, just let it be, okay?"

"Hey, you guys see the highlights from the Bears-Bulldogs game yesterday? Kuznetsov destroyed Pritchard, just absolutely killed him," Staal says, coming up to them. "They're saying Pritchard's probably going to have to have surgery on his knee again, here, look," Staal says, bringing up the video on his phone.

And yes, those are really some monster hits AJ's delivering on Pritchard - clean and legal, all of them, but the last one drops Pritchard like a stone, the other player writhing on the ice while Kuznetsov skates away. The video then jumps to the post-game interview with Kuznetsov.

'So you played a really hard game today, Alex,' the reporter says. 'It looked like you were targeting Chris Pritchard in particular, any reason why?'

'No, I mean, just normal play, right?' AJ says, grinning. 'But I mean, I see how Pritchard keep running Colton in other game, and I think, geez, maybe Pritchard gonna come after me. So I get real scared and I don't want to give him chance, so I try hit him first if I can,' AJ says, the mischievous look in his eyes completely undermining his earnest tone.

Darryl calls AJ when he gets home. "So I have to dodge Pritchard while you get to run him over? How does that work?" he asks, although he's laughing a little.

"Hey, I'm better at running people over than you are! And Pritchard not allowed to talk dirty to you, I'm only one allowed to talk dirty to you, so he have to pay for that. Anyways, is like, you good cop, I'm bad cop! You make them look like idiot by being faster than them, and I run them over!" Darryl rolls his eyes, ignoring the strange warmth blossoming in his chest.

"You're not a cop, AJ."

"Why not? I could be cop! I could totally be bad cop!"

"Honestly, the idea of you in a position of authority is really terrifying, okay? You wouldn't be a bad cop, you would be a terrible cop."

"Pfft, you never meet police in Russia, do you?" AJ says dismissively. "I would be great cop there, no problem. But I don't need to listen to you insult me, I have better stuff to do - we going out for team dinner, and everybody there is glad Pritchard not gonna be hurting people for a while, okay? They appreciate me!" He says, blowing Darryl a raspberry before hanging up. Darryl smiles a little, putting his phone down.
"I do too, AJ," he says to the silent room. "Thanks."
Chapter 7

The way the media furor transforms rapidly from criticizing Darryl to commending him leaves a bad taste in his mouth, even though the press is fairly glowing with praise. It doesn't help that there's more than a whiff of smug self-congratulations to the whole thing, as if they're all simultaneously patting themselves on the back for scolding Darryl back into behaving himself.

The ironic thing is that Darryl has never worried too much about what the press says about him. Oh, he knows what the public perception of him is, bland sound bites and meaningless cliches - "Well, we just need to play our game and step it up a bit," "It just seems like they wanted it a bit more, we gotta dig down and outwork them next time, I guess it just wasn't our day," "Well, we had the heart and drive to pull out a win, and it definitely feels good," - he knows that it looks like he's so afraid of stirring up controversy that he's unwilling to say anything interesting.

But really, Darryl couldn't care less what they say (okay, that's not entirely true, when the press really rips on him it makes his mom upset, and that's never a good thing), but he's learned that taking the bland, boring route is the best way to make them go away as quickly as possible. He doesn't hate bad press, he hates how bad press (and even good press) takes time and energy away from playing hockey. So, Darryl's general opinion has been that it's just easier to give them what they want so he can concentrate on hockey, and in the past there wasn't really anything worth getting riled up about anyways.

This incident with Pritchard and the extended fallout from it - well, once Darryl does get riled up about something, it's really difficult for him to force himself to back down, even if he knows it's in his best interests; but AJ's advice on how to tell other players and the media to shove it without inciting riot does help, since there's a perverse sort of pleasure in, essentially, cordially giving other people the middle finger during interviews.

So it's ironic, given their respective reputations, that less than a week after all the controversy around Darryl dies down, AJ ends up getting into trouble because he cares too much about what the media says about him.

That's not what it looks like at first - at first, it looks like what gets AJ into trouble is getting tossed from the game against the Wildcats in Carolina for slew-footing Patrick Fourchette, then getting hit with a two-game suspension on top of it. It's like AJ's hit on Thackery last season all over again, with the media firestorm moving to descend on AJ's head, now that they've finished with Darryl.

Initially, AJ handles the criticism in the same manner as he did last year; a sort of mulish stubbornness at the post-game scrum, then an apology for hurting Fourchette (who ended up with a sprained ankle) but coupled to a steady refusal to admit wrongdoing, or to consider changing his style of play.

But this year's round of censure is even harsher and more severe than before, with more than a few commentators now calling him out for being both a coward and the dirtiest player in the league, which... Darryl doesn't know whether the hockey media has the memory span of an extremely distracted goldfish or what, but there's a certain player in Philadelphia that Darryl would personally put at the top of the list when it comes to guys who play dirty. Well, wait a minute, there's a whole truckload of guys in Philly that Darryl would put there before AJ. And then league-wide there's Pritchard, and Wyatt, and Letourneau, and Rothbaum, and Beauvoir, and... the point is, AJ would be fairly far down the list. But since he's undoubtedly a bigger star than all of those guys combined, he also makes the biggest target.
Even though AJ's words make it seem like he intends to brush away the criticism, his play on the ice after serving his two-game suspension shows how much it's actually rattled him; he's tentative and unsure on the ice, playing with only a fraction of his usual vigor or verve. Darryl had known, vaguely, that AJ's play last year had suffered both after the Thackery hit and after the Olympics, but he finds himself paying closer attention this time around, and - wow. It's ugly; not only is AJ going without goals or assists, but it seems like his checks have turned into nudges, like he's shying away from contact. He looks like an entirely different player than his usual self.

The criticism intensifies the longer AJ's slump extends, and the coverage is uniformly savage; even those who didn't excoriate him for slew-footing Fourchette start bashing him for his terrible play, for being mentally weak and a cancer in the locker room. One columnist writes that the only thing AJ is good for these days is taking stupid penalties so that the Bear's penalty kill can get more practice. AJ's text messages to Darryl at first become terse and humorless, then stop altogether. Darryl starts texting more to try and elicit some response, then finally gives in and calls since he isn't scheduled to go down to DC for another week.

"Hey - everything going all right?"

"Yeah, things great, Darryl, real wonderful." AJ says sarcastically.

"I was just - look, you should know better than to let the media get to you, it's stupid to - " AJ makes an exasperated noise.

"Look, I don't need you scold me too, okay? I got lot of it right now, thanks," he says, hanging up. Darryl rolls his eyes and tosses his phone aside.

And then, of course, the media eventually makes its way to Darryl to see what he thinks about all of this; at the post-game scrum after playing the Flames at home, a reporter asks Darryl for his opinion on the whole controversy and AJ's slump, which is the kind of question which would normally make Darryl's blood boil.

It's like this: even though Darryl's never hated AJ personally, he's definitely hated when the media tried to stir up shit by asking him questions about the other player for no good reason whatsoever. The two of them are completely different players, playing different positions on different teams with vastly different styles to their respective games, and Darryl's always resented the implication that their individual success is somehow tied to the other one's failure. Hockey is a team game, but the media unfailingly ignores that fact when trying to hype up the rivalry between the two of them.

But the reality show and the fact that Darryl has undeniably had so much more contact with AJ this year probably does make the question fair game, so Darryl grits his teeth for a moment and answers.

"Look, I don't think anything that AJ did was an intentionally dirty play," he says. "And I've seen enough of that in this league to know what it looks like. I caught a couple replays and while I agree that I don't think it looks, you know, particularly good or anything, AJ's said that he didn't mean to hurt Fourchette at all, and I believe him. It sort of looked like they were both off balance against the boards, and it was an awkward situation that ended up with Fourchette going down. It did look like a penalty, maybe for tripping or interference - but in my personal opinion, the punishment was a little harsh."

"So you don't think that Kuznetsoy's trying to compensate for his poor play recently by becoming a dirtier player? It seems like he might be lashing out a little since his game looks like it's started declining already."
Darryl looks at the journalist in frank disbelief. "Are you serious? On any given day, Kuznetsov is either the best hockey player in the world or close to it, and I don't see that changing any time soon - he's the last player I would ever count out, he's just way too dangerous. Look, everybody goes through slumps, but the thing with AJ is that you guys count his slumps in terms of minutes and shifts, while other guys get to go through rough patches for months at a time without anybody giving them grief." Darryl snorts. "I mean, come on - he probably just decided he wanted to give the rest of us a chance to catch up in the Richard and Ross races, seriously."

It's obvious that AJ's heard Darryl's comments when Darryl flies down to DC and joins him at Kettler a few days later.

"Is nice what you say, Darryl," AJ says, mouth twisting a little into a wry grin. "But you forget to follow up with saying bad stuff about me, like... 'Everybody go through slump, but Kuznetsov, this is like nosedive, this is like airplane crash and burn!' Or, you can say, 'Kuznetsov is best player in the world... at hurting other player.'"

"Don't be an idiot, you're not one of the guys I would try to trash talk like that," Darryl says, irritated.

AJ looks genuinely nonplussed. "... Oh. Um, really? So you mean what you say?"

Darryl glares at him, ignoring the slight twinge in his chest at the other man's expression. "Yeah, really. Although on second thought, it's probably too much to ask you to not be an idiot, because you look completely lost out there on the ice these days."

AJ immediately looks defensive. "I know! But I mean, I don't know what to do," AJ says, scrubbing at his head. "I don't - I try to play like before, but is difficult - I don't wanna hurt anybody, and I don't wanna get tossed. And then team have trouble, and I try play harder to make it work, but..." he heaves an exasperated sigh. "I don't know! Is like whatever I do don't work! Is like Montreal series all over again, except it not end, it keep going."

Darryl looks at AJ's weary and uncertain expression, and after a moment of internal wrestling, he comes to a decision. He turns and skates off the ice. "Come on, where's your guys' video room? We're going to review some film."

"Um... but they supposed to film us skating, right?" AJ says, trailing behind Darryl.

"Hey, you gave Ben and Erik the day off the last time you came over, it's only fair if I give your camera crew a vacation too, right?" Darryl says, already headed towards the locker room.

AJ's expression is mostly resigned and a little bit wary when he settles into the seat next to Darryl.

"Okay, so you know the drill - do you have the film from your guys' last few games?" Darryl asks.

AJ squirms a bit. "I mean... one of them?" Darryl narrows his eyes.

"Have you continued reviewing your games?"

"I just - I'm really busy! Schedule is really busy, Darryl!" Darryl looks at him sternly, and after a moment AJ deflates. "Okay, okay - is just, I really hate it, okay? I hate watching myself lose, I hate hearing everybody talk about how bad I playing, I hate - I hate how I keep letting team down, I - " AJ turns his head away, his voice cracking a little. Darryl hesitates, feeling intensely awkward, but after a moment AJ recovers himself.

"One of most annoying things," AJ says, looking down at his hands, "is how media always think
winners are good guys, it mean they hard workers and they have heart and they great leaders and everything - but look who in league is win Stanley Cup, right? Pritchard have ring, Wyatt have ring! But then guys like you, you ruin it because you really good guys, and then media fall in love with you and say is because you good people that you win." AJ frowns at his hands, intent. "But losers, losers automatically bad guys, it mean we selfish, weak, they say we don't have guts or heart or, or courage, they make it sound like we terrible people!" AJ looks briefly over at Darryl, expression almost fierce. "But you never gonna find any better guys than Nilsson or Kirk or everybody else we got in Bears locker room, I promise, not even you, Darryl."

Darryl looks at AJ for a long moment, looks at his downcast profile - his crooked nose, his lashes long enough to cast shadows. This time around, Darryl's not surprised to feel a wave of sympathy for the other man.

For better or worse, for all that Darryl resents the comparisons and the hype and the manufactured publicity, here's the truth: the truth is that Darryl and AJ are the two true superstars of the NHL, a pair alone at the top. Of all the other players in the league, Darryl's probably the one person who can best understand what AJ's going through - the pressure, the expectations, the spotlight looking for any fault, any flaw.

"Hey," Darryl says, touching AJ's shoulder. "You're a good person. You know that, your team knows that, and that's all that matters - everybody else, just screw 'em. Who cares what they think, everything they say about you isn't worth shit, okay?"

AJ sighs and leans forward, his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. "But I have to get better from last year, I just - I have to, and I not gonna get better if I don't listen to people who try tell me how to get better," he says, gloomy.

"Yeah, but you have to pick and choose what it is that you listen to," Darryl says. "Trust me, there's never going to be any shortage of criticism. Remember what we talked about during the preseason? You know enough about hockey and about your own game that you should be your own best critic."

AJ just looks down, shoulders slumped. Darryl nudges him, gently. "Come on, go put in the film for the last game, okay?"

They watch the first period of the Bears' game against the Eagles, sound turned off. AJ is completely silent, and when Darryl pauses the video the other player is staring straight ahead, grimly.

"I think - I think one of your problems is that you mostly play by instinct," Darryl says slowly. "I know you do drills and review video and train and all that other stuff, but it seems to me that once you get out there on the ice, you do what comes instinctively, instead of thinking it through. Which is probably when you play your best, when everything's clicking and it all comes naturally, but then what do you do if your instincts desert you? You have to figure out a way to still play effectively, because right now it looks like when you run out of ideas you keep going back to the same few plays over and over again, and people are gonna be able to shut you down if you become predictable," Darryl says.

AJ glances over at him briefly, but doesn't say anything.

"Like, look here - " Darryl rewinds the tape. "Here's your signature move, right? Coming down the left wing and pulling up at the blue line, then trying to cut to the middle to shoot. And a lot of times that works for you - but here they've got two guys on you already, they see what you're going to do. Knuble and Nilsson are still trying to catch up to you, see? You're rushing into the zone
without any support from your teammates, so just, you know, ease up a bit, let them catch up to you."

AJ snorts, sinking down in his seat a little. "Don't you know I'm selfish player, Darryl? Now you can see yourself, I guess."

"You're not a selfish player, AJ," Darryl says, shaking his head. "It can look selfish to other people, but I don't think you mean it that way. I think that when a game isn't going well for you guys, you feel like you have to take the team on your back and win it for them, and so you end up trying to shoot as much as possible. And, yeah, maybe that was what worked best your first couple years, but now you're on the same line as Nilsson the majority of the time! You know how much I would give to have a linemate as talented as Nilsson?" Darryl asks wistfully.

AJ grins a little. "I gonna tell your wingers what you say, they gonna get mad at you," he says, shifting.

"Ha, yeah, well - look, the two of you are one of the scariest sights for any blue line in the league, so you should let Nilsson help you out. You don't have to do everything yourself any more, it's not 2005," Darryl says. "That goes for the rest of your team too - they're talented enough that you shouldn't have to carry them every night, the point is that as captain you should be trying to lead them, get them to raise their game too."

AJ's silent for a while. "So you ever not know what to do on ice? That ever happen to you, Darryl?" he asks, turning to look at him.

"Yeah, of course. There are definitely games where it seems like nothing's working, and it's really easy to get frustrated and just keep trying the same things over and over, but what I try to do is calm down and think consciously about what I can change. If I'm on the bench, I'll try to analyze what the game's been like so far, and how I need to change my play - if I saw anything from the other team I can take advantage of, or if I can figure out why I'm not playing well." Darryl glances back at the paused image of the Bears-Eagles game on the screen.

"I think - AJ, it seems like how you're feeling really affects your level of play," he says, tentative. "When you're really happy or pumped up, that's when you play your best, but when you're sad, or worried - " about being arrested for rape, Darryl thinks but doesn't say - "You don't play well, your game basically goes downhill."

AJ squirms. "I mean, is normal, right? When I play good, I'm happy, when I don't play good, I get sad," he says. "And is not like I can say to me, 'Be happy!' and is gonna work!"

"No, but - " Darryl hesitates for a moment, but plunges ahead anyways. "Like, look at last year. After the suspension because of Thackery, and then after the Olympics, you had slumps after both of them. But you have to make yourself play well even when you're upset, or discouraged, or sad - that's the problem when you only play fueled by emotion, the highs are pretty high but the lows are really low, and when you get in a slump it's really hard to pull yourself out of it. You get stuck in this cycle of feeling bad, then playing poorly, then feeling bad about playing poorly, and so on and so forth. Playing by instinct and on emotion has gotten you this far - and yeah, I know it's pretty damn far - but you need to start thinking, you need to use your head to play the game instead of just your heart and your gut."

AJ chews his lip, expression thoughtful. "So basically, you telling me to get smarter." He appears to mull it over for a while, then glances back at Darryl, a familiar look of mischief reappearing in his eyes. "But this plan hopeless, Darryl, everybody know I'm caveman," he says. "I think better plan is for you make me feel happy so I can play good again! And sex make me feel - "
"Oh my god, I'm not having this conversation in public," Darryl says, instantly turning crimson even though the two of them are utterly alone. "No, what we're doing is we're going to watch the rest of this game. Then, we'll review each of your shifts, and you can tell me what you did wrong in that situation, and what you would do differently next time," Darryl says, picking up the remote and resolutely looking forward. "I know you don't like watching losses, but stop focusing on the past - think about it as figuring out how you can do better in the future, okay?"

AJ heaves a sigh and settles back into his own seat, although he doesn't seem nearly as tense or unhappy as before. AJ's arm brushes up against Darryl, and the contact sends a tingle of warmth through him. Darryl ignores it - but he doesn't move away.

(But about halfway through watching the third period, AJ yawns, stretches, and casually drapes his left arm over Darryl's shoulder. Darryl looks at him, eyebrows raised.

"Really? Really? Are you seriously trying to pull that move on me?"

"No!" Darryl glowers at him. "Well, I just try show you how to do it! So if you go to movie with girl, you know how to make move, not be afraid to touch her, right?" AJ says.

Darryl rolls his eyes even as he disentangles himself from AJ. "Yeah, whatever - you're not getting any until we get to your place, maybe not even then," he says. "If you're feeling that starved for physical contact, we can go do more checking drills later, it's like you think everybody's turned to glass or something.")

AJ's game doesn't turn itself around overnight or anything, but Darryl catches a few clips of the Bears' next few games, and he can almost see AJ thinking, the wheels turning in his head. The other player's still a little snakebit, he still has trouble converting a few prime scoring chances, but from the footage Darryl does watch it's clear that he's making a real effort to play smarter, especially away from the puck.

And then, in the Bears game against the Terriers, AJ doesn't so much burst out of the gate as explode. First period - goal, secondary assist. Second period - assist. Third period - goal, goal. Yeah, a five-point game is a nice way to break out of a slump, Darryl has to admit, watching NHLN's commentary on the game.

"And maybe even more surprising than Kuznetsov's incredible night - which, let's face it, wasn't that much a surprise, we knew he was going to break out sooner or later, folks - is who the Bearital's star thanked in his post-game interview." The anchor says, and the show cuts over to AJ wearing a hard hat with a towel slung over his shoulders, still soaked in sweat.

"I'm guessing it must feel pretty good to get back to scoring again, Alex," the reporter says. "What sparked such a dramatic turnaround for you?"

"I guess I just try to be patient, and of course my teammates and coach is all really great, give me suggestion on how to play my game, tell me it'll come back. Darryl Colton give me some really good advice about how to think about game better, too, so I gotta thank him. Thanks Darryl!" AJ says, grinning at the camera.

Darryl sinks down in his chair, simultaneously touched at AJ's gratitude and wincing at the knowledge that the shit has just hit the fan. "Well, wonderful," he mutters to himself.

Crawford's the first person to confront Darryl about it - the moment Darryl walks into the locker room the next morning, Crawford gets up in his face.
"So you decide it's your job to be Kuznetsov's personal coach now? What the fuck is wrong with you - he's on another team, I mean, come on, he's your archrival! And he's a fucking douchebag!" Crawford says angrily.

"Okay, a couple things," Darryl says sternly. "First, I'm not really sure where you got this idea, but AJ's not a bad person. He's - he's actually really helped me out this year, and if I can return the favor, then that's a good thing, okay? Second, I didn't give away any trade secrets or tell him how to beat us or anything! I'm pretty sure other people have been telling him the exact same things I said to him - actually, I know they have, because a lot of what I said was a rehash of what the hockey media has been writing about him recently."

Crawford continues looking at him with an expression of disgust, and Darryl abruptly runs out of patience. "Look, even if you don't trust my judgement, I don't have to answer to you. If somebody higher up wants to call me out for anything, then they know where to find me," Darryl snaps, brushing past Crawford.

It's a little harder to brush his dad off the same way. "Darryl, when I said you should teach Kuznetsov a lesson, I didn't actually mean that you should teach him a lesson!" his dad says over video chat that evening. Darryl resists the urge to massage his temples; he can already feel a headache coming on.

"Dad, I promise you I didn't tell him anything I shouldn't have. Our conversation was really non-specific, okay?"

"I don't care if it was non-specific, it's not your responsibility to help Kuznetsov become a better player in any way! In fact, I would say it's your responsibility not to help any opposing player, you should be focusing on your own game and your own team, and that's it."

Darryl throws his hands in the air. "What, so now I can't say 'good luck' to anybody on other teams? Are you being serious?"

"That's not the same and you know it, so don't even try to pull that on me." His dad looks at him, narrow-eyed. Darryl sets his jaw and looks back stubbornly. After a long while, his dad finally sighs, clearly exasperated. "Fine, do what you like," he says. After a moment he cracks an unwilling smile. "Well, Brynn will be happy to hear that you and Kuznetsov are buddies now, she's going to try to find some way to take advantage of it, I can tell you that."

Darryl blanches. "Oh, geez, she's not in the room with you, is she? Um, you can tell her..." he's drawing a complete blank, his mind unable to escape the idea of Brynn and AJ plotting together against him.

"Your next conversation with her should be an interesting one, I think," his dad says, chuckling as he disconnects.

The next morning Vince stops by the locker room and asks Darryl to stop by his office after practice. Darryl hesitates a moment before he goes in; he's not nervous, he doesn't think he's done anything wrong, but it doesn't stop him from feeling uneasy anyways.

Vince looks up as Darryl comes in. "Oh, good - have a seat," he says, gesturing before settling in to his own chair. Once Darryl's seated, Vince goes right ahead. "Okay, so I'm sure you've realized by now that Kuznetsov's comment the other day has kicked up a fuss, so I want to hear your side of the story before I come to any conclusions."

Darryl stifles to urge to fidget. "There's really nothing to tell," he says. "I just - I mean, he's been
off his game lately, and so, um, this last time I went down to DC for the show, I just tried to help him out a little."

Vince raises an eyebrow. "Help him out how, specifically?"

"Well, I - " Darryl bites his lip; he's not sure how AJ would feel about Darryl having this conversation with Vince about him, but in the end the easiest route is always the honest one. "He's been kind of down about what the media and everybody's been saying about him, so I told him that he was a good player and good person, and he shouldn't let it get to him."

Vince tilts his head. "And that was it?"

"I - um, so I told him that he should learn how to use his head better, and that he shouldn't always try to be the hero when he's got Nilsson on his line most of the time," Darryl says. "But that's, you know, that's not anything extraordinary, people have been writing that he should do that stuff for at least a year now, I think."

"Hm. So that was it?"

"Uh," Darryl wishes he could hedge, but honesty compels him to be thorough. "And then we watched the Bears' last game against the Eagles, and we talked about each of AJ's shifts and what he could've done better," Darryl says reluctantly. Okay, fine, so when it's put that way maybe Darryl can see why some people are objecting a little.

"I see." Vince regards him inscrutably. "Care to explain why you would help a rival in such a way? Especially when that rival is Kuznetsov, the guy that you're really supposed to beat?"

"I..." Darryl hesitates. "Well, are you asking do I want to beat him? Do I want to prove that I'm better than him? Yeah, of course I do," he says firmly. "But I want to beat him fair and square, not because he suddenly becomes a terrible player for some random reason," he says. "It's like - it would be like if AJ had some sort of freak injury and couldn't play any more, or couldn't play at the same level - I mean, yeah, after that I might be a better player than him, but I wouldn't get any satisfaction out of it. If anything, I'd be really sorry - well, uh, I'd be sorry that he was hurt, of course," Darryl adds hurriedly, "But I'd also be sorry because I'd win out of default, not because I proved I was better."

Vince looks at him for a while, a smile lurking at his lips. "You realize that with that particular example, you're basically implying that Kuznetsov is mentally damaged?"

Darryl snorts. "Well, if the shoe fits," he mutters. "I - look, I promise that I didn't tell him anything about our strategies or game plans or anything, we only talked about his play in that particular game, you know, I suggested a few things he could change or improve, maybe how he could've handled a particular situation differently." Vince raises his eyebrows. "What?" Darryl asks, defensive. "It's not like what I said to him was exceptional, I'm not some sort of hockey savant or anything where every word I say is top secret - I just sort of gave him a different perspective on how to see the game, that's all."

Vince shakes his head. "What you just said was either incredibly modest or exceptionally dumb, and I have to say I'm leaning towards the second option." Vince cuts off Darryl's instinctive protest with a gesture as he gets up and starts pacing in front of the window.

"So, I actually know exactly what I'm supposed to say here, as the owner of the Hawks and as someone whose primary interest is the success of this organization," he says meditatively. "What I'm supposed to say, Darryl," and Vince looks sharply over at him, "is that the only way I would
ever allow you to participate in a reality show with a player from another team - any player, let alone Kuznetsov - would be with the understanding that the two of you would basically be skating figure eights and shooting the breeze for the cameras every time you guys visited each other, not blowing the cameras off so you could critique his game and tell him how to get better."

"I - " Darryl starts, but Vince cuts him off. "Hell - what I was supposed to say in August when Tracy pitched this thing was that summer - fine, pre-season - well, okay, but for the regular season, I was supposed to say that there was no way in hell that I'd let my star player waste time and energy flying back and forth to another city just to let him fool around - " Darryl winces hard, "with not just any player, but his biggest rival!"

Darryl's shoulders open his mouth again, but Vince's not done.

"What I'm supposed to say here is that you've shown extremely poor judgment by helping an opposing player improve, and that by doing so you've not only compromised your integrity as a member of the team, but that your actions have undermined the health and functioning of the Hawks organization as a whole."

Darryl's shoulders are hunched and tense by now; he feels ashamed and guilty and angry and defiant, all at once. "Do you - do you want me to apologize?" Darryl forces himself to ask, the words sharp and bitter in his mouth. There's a moment of silence.

"As a matter of fact, no." And incredibly, Vince's smiling at Darryl as he returns to his seat, his expression filled with wry humor. "Were you listening, Darryl? Those are all the things I'm supposed to say, as the owner of the Hawks - more to the point, it's what people have been telling me - very insistently, I might add - to say to you."

Darryl stares at him, confused. "So... are you saying those things to me or not?"

"I'm not." Vince leans back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "Because as somebody who played a little hockey himself back in the day, and as someone who was privileged enough to play against the Great One himself for a while, well," Vince stops, reflective. "I have to say I understand your perspective - hell, I even agree with it, mostly. If you're going to beat him, it's only worth it if you can beat him while he's at the top of his game, not the bottom."

Vince gazes at Darryl a moment longer, then grins. "And I suspect saying this around other owners would get me blacklisted - but as a fan of the game, I want to watch the two of you playing hockey to the best of your respective abilities for as long as possible, to tell the truth." He pauses. "Although I wouldn't mind if Kuznetsov went easy on our blueline when he plays us, he was just absolutely brutal against the Jays."

The tension in Darryl's shoulders eases a little. Vince looks at him thoughtfully. "Tell me this - let's say that the guy we're talking about isn't Aleksey Kuznetsov of the Bears. Let's say it's, oh, Andrew Cornish on the Rays. If Andy was going through a slump and getting criticized left and right by everybody, and you guys somehow happened to end up in a rink together somewhere, what would you do if he asked you for advice?"

Darryl bites the inside of his lip. "I would do the exact same thing," he says. "I'd tell him he was a good person, and a good player, and I'd try to give him some tips on how to break out of his slump - and if there were specific game play situations he asked me about, yeah, I'd talk those over with him too."

"Mm." Vince tilts his head. "And why would you do that?"
Darryl hesitates. "Because he's my friend, and he asked me for help," he says, finally.

Vince smiles a little. "Good." He stands up, clearly satisfied. "I think you've answered all the questions I had, and for what it's worth, Darryl, I think your judgment's just fine. Your first responsibility is to your team, but I know you know that. Just be careful not to cross any lines, okay?"

Darryl gets up too, more than a little relieved. He's halfway out the door when he halts and turns back. "Wait - Vince, if so many people think that me interacting with AJ and doing this show with him is such a terrible idea, why did you say yes? Why did you let me?"

Vince regards him for a moment. "I know you don't usually like hearing this, but you and Kuznetsov are the two faces of the NHL; in a lot of ways, you guys are currently the most important representatives of the sport of hockey. So even though you doing the show is probably not a wise move for me as the owner of the Hawks, on a larger scale, as somebody who wants to see the game grow and thrive as a whole, yeah, this is a great way to publicize it - you and Kuznetsov together draw exponentially more attention than either of you alone. And don't forget that the league's agreement with Versus is up next year, Darryl. They're pushing as hard as they can to get a better tv deal next time - why do you think we're in the Winter Classic again, against the Bears? They want the highest rating possible, to show the networks that hockey is worth investing in. Having a really successful reality show produced by NHLN would be a very useful chip to have on the bargaining table during the next round of bidding. If this is the thing that could help push a deal with ESPN over the edge - " Vince shrugs.

"Uh..." Darryl can feel himself gaping a little. Vince grins.

"Yep, this whole thing is a little bigger than just you," he says, laughing. "Now go on, get out of here, I have things to do." He says, shooing Darryl out the door.

AJ calls Darryl that evening. "I'm really sorry I get you in trouble," he says contritely. "I really don't mean to!"

Darryl shakes his head. "Yeah, I know you didn't," he says. "Just, you know, don't thank me on television, or if there are any reporters around, otherwise I think a few of my teammates' heads might explode."

"Wait, what? I can make Hawks heads go kabloomey?" AJ says interestedly. "Wow, now I gonna thank you all the time! Darryl, thanks for tell me all Hawks secret game plans! Darryl, thanks for tell me how to beat you! Darryl, thanks for send me picture when you drawing on Crawford face while he's sleeping!"

"Hey, how do you know about that pi - " Darryl begins hotly, before he realizes that he's said too much. "Oh, geez," he says, wincing while AJ howls in surprised laughter. "Look, seriously, just don't thank me at all, okay?"

AJ has a few last hiccups of laughter before he can answer. "But I feel bad if you help me and I not thank you! I mean, I guess I can give you blow job or something - "

"No, that's really not necessary," Darryl cuts in sharply.

"Darryl, I don't understand! Why you keep trying turn down sex? You gonna make me feel terrible, I not that bad, right?" AJ makes a disgruntled noise. "I mean, maybe we can try phone sex?" His voice drops a full octave. "What you wearing right now, Darryl?" he asks, in a completely terrible imitation of a seductive tone.
"An expression of disgust," Darryl snaps as he hangs up the phone, ignoring AJ's protesting squawk.

... He also ignores the rush of heat to his groin. There's no point in encouraging AJ's ridiculousness.
Chapter 8

So the media's like a dog with a bone regarding this whole Darryl helping AJ break out of his slump story, but Darryl steadfastly refuses to give them anything but the blandest of comments, and having Vince back him up publicly helps immensely - "I don't see what's so controversial about all of this - the two of them are friends, Darryl decided to help Kuznetsov out a bit. I don't have any problem with it, so I don't see why you guys should either," Vince says at the next post-game media scrum. Of course, there's still everything controversial about it, but since Vince and Darryl both refuse to rise to the bait there's nothing the media can do about it.

On the Bears side, AJ handles it a little differently (of course). No milquetoast remarks for him, no, his strategy is to make as many smart-ass comments as possible.

"No, wait, when I say Darryl give me advice, I actually mean he give me advice on what lucky clothes I need wear to play better, so he tell me to wear this shirt," AJ says, gesturing at the front of his t-shirt so the cameraman can zoom in - it says in large letters 'Female Streaking Encouraged' on a ribbon strategically fluttering around the image of a nude female, loping merrily along.

"Well, he tell me to see game better, so he give me these glasses," AJ says at another scrum, pulling out a pair of red and blue 3D glasses from his back pocket and putting them on. "Now I just need to find way to wear under visor during game, and then everything perfect!"

"... You're wearing them upside down," one reporter points out.

"I know! That is secret of how it work, Darryl tell me so! They magic glasses!" AJ says proudly.

Calhoun isn't quite so, ah, colorful in fending off the media's questions, but he makes it very clear that he doesn't think that he or AJ have to justify anything to anybody, and so eventually, finally, after way more time than it should have taken, the media unwillingly drops the story and moves on.

So things calm down for both of them, as much as things can. AJ doesn't go out and have a five-point night every game, but his play does recover to what for him is a normal level - Darryl thinks that if he could graph how AJ's been playing so far this season, it would look like a roller-coaster with huge spikes and dramatic dips, but now it looks like AJ's finally settling into a more consistent level of play. This also means the return of AJ's good humor and sense of mischief, which leads to the expected consequences inside the bedroom.

"Oh, my god," Darryl says weakly, staring at the ceiling; he feels completely boneless, the force of his orgasm leaving him utterly limp. AJ wriggles up next to him, his mouth swollen and red.

"See, you shouldn't turn down blow job from me, is big mistake," AJ says, chiding. Darryl manages to turn his head to glare at him.

"Your blowjobs weren't like that before, were you holding out on me?"

"Is because this is thank you blow job! Before is just normal one." Darryl rolls his eyes and lets his head thunk back. "Don't worry, I know you scared because you afraid you never gonna be able give as good blow job," AJ says, "But is okay, I let you practice lots on me!"

Darryl snorts. AJ glares at him. "I not kidding, I know how you like to practice and practice until you become best! I will be brave and be, um, what they say - I can be guinea pig!" AJ pauses. "Although you should not really give blow job to guinea pig, that would be gross."
Darryl pulls a pillow over his face. "Oh my god, shut up."

A little while later, Darryl has found a very effective way to silence the other man; AJ is gratifyingly lost for words, panting and writhing against the sheets. Darryl pulls his mouth off the other man's cock to grin at him smugly. "Still think I need to work on my technique?" he asks, raising his eyebrows.

AJ raises his head to glare at him. "If you stop - " he breaks off gasping as Darryl squeezes his cock while stroking it, flicking the tip with his thumb.

"What, are you going to beg?" Darryl says, moving up to speak into AJ's ear. "I'd like to hear you beg, Алексей Кузнецов," he whispers roughly.

And that's enough to trigger AJ's climax - he jerks back so hard that his head slams into the headboard, violent convulsions wracking his body as he comes in long, hot spurts all over.

Darryl wipes his hand on the sheets, a bit taken aback by the force of AJ's reaction. "You look like a fish," he observes, smirking at the other man's stunned expression. "Or maybe an electrocuted sheep, I guess that's more appropriate."

AJ blinks a few times, then surges forward and wraps his arms around Darryl, squeezing tight. "You can say my name!" he croons delightedly. "You say perfect - how you know? You practice with Dima or something?"

Darryl squirms, trying to escape AJ's hold on him. "Yeah, I - look, you said before you didn't think I could do it, I don't like it when people tell me that I can't do something. Now get off me AJ, you're sweeter than - than Toronto in July!"

"Ha, nothing beat DC in summer," AJ says, "But nope, you can't call me AJ anymore, AJ is just for people who can't say Кузнецов right," he says, rubbing his stubbled chin affectionately against Darryl's forehead even as Darryl tries valiantly to disentangle himself.

Darryl snorts. "Oh, well, I've got a whole other list of names to call you, we can go down it if you like," he says sarcastically.

"Alex," AJ says firmly, flipping over so that his body settles over Darryl, trapping Darryl against the mattress. "You can start call me Alex, and I can start call you Darryl!"

"...You've been calling me Darryl this entire year."

"I know, I keep waiting for it to annoy you, but you never say anything, so I keep going." Alex says drowsily, his eyelids already drooping.

"Well, great, you're definitely annoying me now, so congratulations," Darryl snaps. "Now let me up - if I'd known you were going to be this clingy, I would've bought you a stuffed hawk from our gift shop!"

Alex makes a sleepy sound of approval. "Stuffed hawk would be cuddlier," he agrees, and then it's too late - he's fast asleep, sprawled all over Darryl. Darryl tries to pull free a few more times before giving up; his chest feels tight, a strange twisting sensation inside. It must be because it's hard to breathe underneath Alex's weight.

Alex tries to find other ways to 'thank' Darryl. The first is... a little bizarre.

"Really? You sent me a used copy of 'Lethal Weapon' with our heads pasted on the cover?" Darryl
asks, looking at the DVD skeptically. "... Why?"

"Because it seem like you don't understand what bad cop, good cop mean!" Alex explains. "So I send you movie to watch so you can get idea, okay? You good cop, I bad cop!"

Darryl pinches the bridge of his nose. "... Okay, so you should understand this line - I am entirely too old for your shit, got it?"

"Ha ha, very funny Darryl," Alex grumbles. "But I'm older than you!"

"Not in terms of intellectual maturity," Darryl snaps.

But the next thing Alex sends is more useful. In a game against the Riders, Darryl gets into a multi-player collision, enough of a pile-up that somebody's skate somehow slices the back of Darryl's left calf. Even though there's a decent amount of blood initially, the cut turns out to be fairly superficial - the trainer binds it up tightly and Darryl's back on the bench by the next period to cheer his teammates on, even if they won't let him go back out on the ice.

Alex calls him immediately after the game; Darryl picks up, rolling his eyes. "Okay, so I know you're going to give me grief for not playing the rest of the game, but they wouldn't let me because they said it might start bleeding again, all right?"

"What? No! I'm gonna give grief because you are idiot," Alex yells at him. "What the hell sock you wear, is made of tissue paper? You not hear about kevlar socks they have now? I been using for years now, what's wrong with you! You stupid person, I send you some so you can start wearing, okay?"

Darryl blinks. "Oh. Um... sure?"

The socks arrive the very next day; Darryl calls Alex after he tries them on. "So these are actually pretty comfortable," he says, wriggling his toes experimentally.

"And not just comfortable, they also stop your leg get chop off, idiot." Alex says. "Yeah, you very intellectual mature, whatever Darryl."

Darryl's about to retort when a piece of paper slips out of the box the socks were sent in. "Hey, what is - is this a business card?"

"Yeah, is guy I talk to at company that make socks, when they start making them they send me some so I can try out," Alex says. "And I realize I like them, so I ask for more to give to teammates. If you call him, he can give you more, you should give to your team too."

"I - " Darryl pauses. "Thank you, Alex," he says.

Alex makes a dismissive noise. "Just wear the socks, okay Darryl? I have interest in your legs, you know!" he says, salacious note entering his voice.

The gesture might mean more to Darryl if he didn't see Alex being continuously, carelessly kind to almost everyone he meets. The next time Darryl's visiting DC, Alex finds out that Darryl's never eaten at Five Guys. This is apparently an unthinkable deprivation, so Alex insists on dragging Darryl out of Stonebridge Rink to rectify the problem before they even start skating.

"I've had burgers and fries before, you know," Darryl says irritably.

"Okay, but you need to have their bacon cheeseburger with mushrooms and onions, and you never
have their cajun fries! I can't belie - "

"Hey, you got any change?" A passing panhandler says, thrusting a can in front of them. Darryl stiffens awkwardly, already ducking his head.

"Hm? Oh, yeah, sure - " Alex says distractedly, digging a ten out of his pocket and dropping it in while continuing to chatter on about burgers and fries.

"Whoa, thanks man!" The man says, peering inside happily. Darryl holds his tongue until they've walked out of earshot before turning to Alex.

"Hey, do you always do that, or is it - was that just for them?" Darryl asks, jerking his head towards Phil and Andrew, the two-man camera crew assigned to Alex - they decided to tag along because, apparently, Alex and Darryl getting fast food is just as fascinating as them skating.

"Huh?" Alex looks at Darryl uncomprehendingly, then at Phil and Andrew. "What, you think I need give them money too?"

"Yes please!" Phil pipes up.

"No, I mean - you don't know how he's going to spend that money, he could spend it on, you know, drugs or alcohol or something!"

"I wish I could spend my money on drugs or alcohol," Alex says wistfully. "But my mom kill me if she find out," he says, heaving a sigh.

"... I've seen your liquor cabinet," Darryl reminds him. "You don't need to spend any more money on alcohol."

Alex glares at him. "You guys don't understand! Is no such thing as spend too much money on alcohol!"

But when Darryl really breaks is the next time Alex visits him at Pittsburgh; they're on their way back to Darryl's place after practice when Darryl stops for gas, and Alex gets out of the car to stretch his legs. The next thing Darryl knows, Alex is somehow cradling a stray kitten in his hands and murmuring softly to quiet its thrashing.

Darryl literally throws his arms up in the air. "I don't believe this! I absolutely refuse to believe that you actually rescue stray kittens in your spare time, you're totally doing this for the cameras!"

Alex looks at him, brow furrowed. "... There aren't any camera around, Ben and Erik go home already," he says slowly, as if talking to a crazy person.

"I don't care, you're probably hiding a camera somewhere on you right now," Darryl snaps, watching Alex tenderly wrap his jacket around the frightened animal as it finally begins to calm down. "Where the hell did you even find it?"

"He running around back of gas station, he look really hungry, so I feed him some beef jerky, and eventually I catch him," Alex says. The kitten is looking up at him with wide, unblinking eyes, although it's still trembling a little.

Darryl sighs, reluctantly getting back into the driver's seat since Alex and his guest have apparently settled in. "It probably has rabies," he mutters. "Or fleas, you're going to get my car infested, I swear."
Alex makes a dismissive sound. "Whatever, I buy you new car. Honda Civic? Come on, Darryl, I can get you way cooler car!"

"How are you even going to take care of it? You're just going to let it run loose in your house while you're at practice?"

"I just send it back home to Russia to keep all my other pet company! There six other cat there too, and two dog, and used to have a sheep but don't worry, you still gonna have lots of friend," Alex says, scratching the kitten's belly. "One is even cat I rescue last year in America, just like you! There's Ghera and Nika and Mischa and - "

They're at a red light, so Darryl takes the opportunity to bang his head against the steering wheel at the realization that no, this isn't a trick, apparently Alex really does rescue stray animals as a hobby. "I cannot believe you're keeping that animal," he says. "What are you going name this one, Stray American Cat #2?"

"No, that hurt his feeling if he think he number two," Alex disagrees. "Hm... I mean, he have dark hair, and funny face, and he really really tiny..." Alex brightens, apparently struck by inspiration. "I know, I gonna call him Gary, after Gary Bettman!"

"You know what, maybe it's a good thing that joke wasn't caught on camera," Darryl says.

December rolls around, and then the morning of their game against the Hornets, Darryl wakes up feeling like absolute crap. He has a headache, his throat is sore and every part of his body aches like hell. When he tries to get out of bed, he literally can't - he falls back panting from pain. He gropes for his cell phone and calls Prescott.

"Hey Coach, I don't - I don't think I can play today," he croaks. "I'm really not feeling well."

"...You haven't been out drinking again, have you?" Prescott asks.

"No, of course not! I - " Darryl breaks off in a fit of coughing. It's like his lungs are trying to climb up out of his throat.

"Wow," Prescott says. "Okay, right."

Chris, one of the team's trainers, comes by a half hour later along with a doctor, and it's a struggle to get to the door to let them in. The doctor takes one look at Darryl and shakes her head.

"Flu," she says. "I mean, I'll do a physical exam and we'll send off a swab for a culture test to confirm, but I would bet money that you've got the flu."

Chris eyes Darryl reproachfully. "Did you get your flu shot this year?"

Darryl looks at him blearily. "Does it really matter now?"

Chris ends up staying with him for the whole day, and then when it becomes apparent that Darryl isn't really capable of anything except curling up in bed and feeling miserable, Chris makes up the guest bedroom and stays for the night.

"I'm really sorry you have to do this," Darryl apologizes.

"Hey, it's not a problem, and hopefully you're not going to be stuck with me as your caretaker too long anyways," Chris says before turning off the light.
Darryl finds out what Chris means by that the next morning, when he wakes up to see his mom sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at him with an expression of worry and affection.

"Mom? What are - what are you doing here?" He struggles to sit up.

"I'm here to take care of you, Darryl," she says, pushing him back down gently. "And possibly to take care of your house a bit too, you've lived here for less than a year and this is the state it's in?" she says, shaking her head.

"It's just a little cluttered, that's all!" Darryl protests. "What's with trying to guilt trip the sick guy?"

And he is really, really sick for the next few days. He only gets up to eat and to go to the bathroom, other than that he's in bed either sleeping or trying to fall asleep, since being unconscious is highly preferable to being awake and having to endure having a splitting headache, a wracking cough, and muscle pain everywhere all at the same time.

Eventually he recovers enough that he can shuffle around the house and at least sit in the living room and watch TV, but this also means that he's recovered enough to be sick of being sick. His teammates and a bunch of other people all call or text or e-mail him, which on the one hand is nice, but on the other hand it just makes Darryl more anxious than ever to get back on the ice. Alex texts him a couple times, then calls him on the evening of the fifth day.

"Why you get sick? Is because you just want to give me Richard trophy now?" Alex demands.

Darryl makes an exasperated noise. "Yeah, exactly, I decided to get sick because I didn't want to score more goals than you this year, you've discovered my evil plan," he says. "Feeling like my head is going to crack open and having every muscle hurt like hell is loads of fun, you should definitely try it yourself!"

Alex is quiet for a moment. "Is really that bad?"

Darryl sighs. "No - well, it was for the first few days, but I'm feeling a lot better now. Now I'm just really, really bored, there's nothing to do."

"Well, you can watch movie and stuff," Alex says. "Or you can order takeout from every restaurant in neighborhood and pig out! Would be fun!"

Darryl wrinkles his nose. "AJ, not all of us eat like pigs, you realize this."

"I don't mean just you, you can invite team over to eat, right?"

"They can't come over, I might still be contagious," Darryl says. "The doctor said I could have visitors in couple days, but she said I shouldn't even think about putting on skates until the 11th, maybe later."

Alex makes a sympathetic sound. "Wow, sorry. So you can't come to D.C. for next visit?"

Darryl sits down, suddenly tired. "No, I don't think so."

"Oh." Alex pauses. "Well, I guess I just have to wait and see you next time then, is too bad."

Darryl leans his forehead against the wall. "Yeah, it is," he says quietly.

"Eh? Wait wait, what? Is too bad you have to wait to see me? You not gonna make mean joke and yell at me?" Alex asks delightedly.
Darryl rolls his eyes. "I meant that it's too bad you're not going to visit me now, so I can infect you," he snaps. "Then you can get sick too, it'll be great."

"I know you just trying to hide how much you miss me, is okay," Alex says - Darryl can practically hear him grinning over the phone. "But you know what is good way to spread flu? Blow job! And you getting better, but still need more practice, so maybe I can come anyway to visi - "

"You're a nymphomaniac and a danger to society, and I'm not talking to you any more," Darryl snaps and hangs up. Even after this much exposure to Alex, there's a limit to how much idiocy Darryl can tolerate.

Two days later, Darryl's sitting on the couch playing his six hundredth game of Halo when he hears the doorbell ring. He gets up to answer it but his mom's already there, opening the door.

"Hi, you must be Mrs. Colton," Ben says, setting his camera down to shake hands. "I'm Ben, and this is Erik, it's great to meet you."

"And it's very nice to meet the two of you," his mom says warmly. "You guys have done a wonderful job of filming Darryl, it's been really interesting seeing what goes on in his day-to-day life."

"Uh..." Darryl looks at them in bewilderment. "Not that it isn't, you know, nice to see you guys, but what are you doing here?"

Ben shrugs. "Tracy told us that she'd talked to you and you've gotten better by now. She thought it would be a good idea to try to get at least some footage of you since we don't have anything for the past week, so she called your mom to see if it was okay if we stopped by."

Darryl scratches his head. "Well, I mean, if you want to watch me playing video games and eating soup, then... sure?"

His mom snorts. "Maybe if you know you're being filmed you'll stop whining so much about being sick," she says.

"I'm not whining! I'm just - expressing my annoyance at having to be cooped up in here all the time, that's all."

"Darryl, I know whining, and you've been whining nonstop since your cough went away enough that you could string two words together without hacking up a lung," she says. Darryl gives her a betrayed look and stalks back to the living room.

Darryl's moved on to playing Madden NFL 09 when the doorbell rings again. This time Darryl gets to the door first, Ben and Erik trailing behind - which means that they're perfectly positioned to record his expression of surprise when he sees Janssen and Moreau on his doorstep. Moreau's carrying three pizza boxes and Janssen... Janssen's carrying a bouquet of red roses.

"... What the hell is this?" Darryl asks, his eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline.

"Jordy here misses you more than I do," Moreau says around a mouthful of pizza. "But I think you'll like what I brought more anyways, I got all of your favorites - sausage and mushroom, and pepperoni, and barbecue chicken, I think," he says, peeking under the lid of the top box.

Janssen rolls his eyes, pushing past Darryl. "Don't listen to this idiot, the flowers aren't for you, they're for your mom."
"I - what?" Darryl stops dead in his tracks. Moreau cackles as he follows Janssen in.

"Too bad Crawford isn't here yet, that was a perfect setup for a 'yo momma' joke!" Moreau calls back. "You have any soda or anything? I'm freaking thirsty - oh, um, hi Mrs. Colton," Moreau says, suddenly subdued.

"Hello, Marc," Darryl's mom says, sounding amused. "Jordan, it's wonderful to see both of you again - and what are these, roses? How thoughtful of you!"

"They're not actually from me," Janssen says. "They're from - um, well, you can see in the card who they're from," he says, handing her the flowers. Darryl watches suspiciously as his mom opens the card and lets out a surprised laugh, a warm smile spreading across her face.

"Well, that's very thoughtful - thank you for delivering them, and thank you for coming over to keep Darryl company, he's been climbing the walls ever since he's been able to get out of bed," she says, giving Janssen a quick hug. "Now, Marc, did I hear that you were thirsty? Why don't we all go into the kitchen, you can have some soda and I can put these in a vase," she says, leading the way.

"Wait, are those from my dad? What do you mean, Crawford isn't here yet? And yeah, Flower, I totally appreciate you bringing me a bunch of half-eaten pizzas," Darryl says sarcastically to Moreau, who doesn't even have the grace to look ashamed.

"Hey, I was hungry! And I left some for you, although I guess you'll have to make sure to eat some before everybody else gets here," Moreau says.

"I - " Darryl's cut off by the doorbell ringing again. This time it's Payton, Bolton, Letourneau and McNeil, each of them carrying a bag of fast food from different places - McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's.


"Um, no, that's okay," Darryl says slowly, letting them all in.

"All right, feel free to steal Payton's lunch then if you want a burger," McNeil says, punching Darryl companionably, which almost ends up knocking him over. Darryl looks on in bafflement as his teammates invade his house, a glimmering of suspicion slowly forming in his mind.

That suspicion crystallizes and turns into recognition, then resigned amusement when a few moments later the doorbell rings yet again and it's a whole crowd of guys crammed onto his doorstep, all of them loaded down with food - Martin and Crawford look like they picked up chicken and broccoli and fried noodles from Cho Garden, while Allen brings lamb tandoori and garlic naan - Broucek, Volodin, Jameson and Dubrovsky are all similarly bearing bags of different varieties of takeout food.

"So you guys decided to hit up every takeout joint in the neighborhood, huh?" Darryl says, leaning against the doorway, unable to suppress an exasperated grin. He remembers filming the spot during the All-Star break and thinking that the joke of having Kuznetsov order food for him was pretty funny, but he never imagined Alex would want to redo it in real life. "I have to say you guys are pretty terrible delivery guys, you eat half the food on the way and all of it's cold by the time you get here."
“That’s because it’s fucking freezing out here! Now you going to let us in or not?” Crawford yells, pushing his way to the front of the crowd and into the house.

The rest of the team shows up in short order, bringing along with them more food and drinks. It’s a lot of people to crowd into Darryl’s house - a bunch of guys end up clustered around the TV going through Darryl’s collection of video games, a few others end up in the rec room playing truly terrible pool, while the rest just stay in the kitchen and systematically chow down on everything even remotely edible. Ben and Erik catch a good amount of rough-housing, trash-talking, and pigging out on film; his teammates are raucous, messy, vulgar (his mom wisely leaves them alone after a while), they end up basically destroying the carpet in his living room (chips and salsa plus cream-colored carpet equals disaster) - and Darryl couldn’t be happier to see all of them.

But around ten, Janssen glances at his watch and then looks at Darryl apologetically. "Hey, sorry we gotta go, but we have our flight out to Detroit tomorrow morning," he says, getting up and gesturing at all the other guys. "But you're going to be back playing soon, right? You look like you're feeling a lot better."

"Yeah, but Coach said he wants to make sure I'm fully recovered before he's going to let me play again," Darryl says, his stomach sinking.

Janssen's expression is sympathetic. "Well, now that you're not contagious, we'll visit, don't worry," he says. "Although, uh, not all at the same time again, probably. But Kuznetsov thought it would be funny to have the cameras film all of us invading your house, and I didn't think you'd mind? Um, it seemed like a fun idea, anyways," he says, a little tentative.

Darryl smiles, shaking his head. "No, it was fun - thanks for all this, Jordy, I appreciate it."

"Hey, don't thank me, thank Kuznetsov," Janssen says, holding up his hands.

"I will," Darryl says. "The next time I see him, I will."

But when Darryl's woken up a few hours later by his cell phone ringing, his first thought isn't exactly gratitude. "Kuznetsov," he mutters in irritation, rolling out of bed and padding to the front door to yank it open. "Are you - it's two in the morning, are you kidding? And I'm still sick!"

Darryl says, looking out at Alex blearily.

"But I bring you beer!" Alex says, holding it out like a peace offering. "I'm sorry, I try to get here earlier with everybody else, but plane get delay in DC because of fog," he says apologetically. "Um, can I come in?"

Darryl lets him in, then follows as Alex prowls around, entering the kitchen.

"Wait, so does that mean you're the one who sent my mom the roses? What - why would you do that?" Darryl asks suspiciously.

Alex shakes his head. "Oh, Darryl, you never gonna get girl to like you if you think you need reason to send flower," he says patronizingly. Darryl glares at him, and he grins. "I send it because I want to say sorry for sending entire Hawks team to house, I know they gonna make big mess, and I also say she is very brave to take care of you while you sick, I know how you get cranky," he says, winking at Darryl.

"I do not - oh, forget it," Darryl starts heatedly, then gives up. "Yeah, you're not going to find any food in there, I think Crawford even ended up eating the fried rice that was in the back of the fridge," he says, watching as Alex looks disconsolately into the ravaged pantry. "Just drink the
Pepsi that you brought, and - wait, did you bring other food too?" Darryl asks, spying a small, unfamiliar cooler bag on the counter.

"Hm? Oh, yeah, is my mom's lapsha," Alex says distractedly, rooting around in the lower shelves. "I guess, is Russian chicken noodle soup? I tell her you sick, so she make some for you. But we can't eat now, have to boil noodle because is frozen, and also you have to eat with sour cream and butter, otherwise is not as good."

Darryl looks at Alex for a moment, his chest tightening strangely. "You - you got your mom to make me chicken noodle soup? Is she visiting you right now?"

"Yeah, she and my dad come over a few days ago, gonna stay a month. She always make lapsha for me when I get sick, so you can eat too, get healthy again! You gonna like eating, is really tasty," Alex says, pulling out an extremely dubious pack of crackers and eying them speculatively.

"I'm sure I will," Darryl says quietly. "Um, Alex," he says after a moment, waiting until the other man looks at him. "Thanks for, uh, getting everybody over to visit me, it really - " his voice catches a little, he has to clear his throat. "I really appreciated it, so thank you."

Alex drops his eyes and fidgets, putting down the crackers. "Uh, is not problem, no trouble. I mean - actually, is evil plan to get whole Hawk team sick, and then you guys lose to us in our game in couple of weeks!" he says brightly, clearly pleased at his own cleverness.

"And so why are you here to visit me, then?" Darryl asks, amused.

"Oh..." Alex deflates, then waves a dismissive hand at Darryl's laughter and turns away. "Whatever, is there food in living room? Must have food, is not nice to not leave anything to eat!" Alex says, leaving the kitchen. "Oooh, wait, you have Guitar Hero?" he says, pouncing. "I bet I can beat you, Darryl, I rule at Guitar Hero! Come on, let's play!"

Darryl rolls his eyes, arms folded. "I am not playing Guitar Hero with you at two in the morning, what I'm going to do is go back to bed." Alex arches an eyebrow suggestively. "To sleep," Darryl says. Alex shakes his head.

"Aw, you scared you gonna lose?" he smirks, already loading the game.

Darryl opens his mouth, then after a moment shuts it. "I get the red guitar," he says spitefully, coming over.

"But that my color!"

A half an hour later, Darryl's looking narrow-eyed at the screen that is definitively telling him that he's lost.

"Woo! I win Darryl, I win!" Alex has his arms up in the air in victory, dancing around gleefully. "Bad-hearted, boy trap baby doll," he sings to the tune of the video game's last song. "I'm so damn hot!" he says, pointing at himself and shimmying. "Yeah, you so damn hot!" he sings, pointing down at Darryl where he's sitting on the floor, legs crossed; he'd gotten too tired standing.

"You're a terrible singer," Darryl says, unable to suppress a smile. "Don't ever go into music, people would seriously pay you to stop making that noise."

"Whatever, I'm great singer, you know it," Alex says dismissively, then yawns impressively. "Okay, I beat you, is good time to go sleep now," he says, plopping himself down and stretching out next to Darryl while pulling a blanket off the couch.
"Hey, I - " but before Darryl can move, Alex has already put his head in Darryl's lap, snuggling his face against Darryl's thigh. In the space of a few heartbeats, he's fallen fast asleep.

Darryl looks down at him, at Alex's peaceful face, the shadows playing over Alex's profile from the flickering light of the TV. He lifts his hand almost involuntarily, combing his fingers through the dark strands of Alex's hair and - and -

And Darryl can feel his heart somersault slowly out of his chest, straight into the possession of the man whose head is currently cutting off circulation to Darryl's right leg.

At that moment, Darryl Colton falls in love with Aleksey Kuznetsov.

"Fucking hell," Darryl curses, torn between paralyzing terror and overwhelming affection.
Chapter 9

Recovering from the flu is difficult enough already; the coaching, training, and medical staff are all handling Darryl with kid gloves, and if he so much as sneezes somebody's there eyeing him darkly and asking him whether he needs to sit down. On the one hand, Darryl appreciates the care and consideration, and he realizes that it doesn't do the team any good if he goes out only half-recovered and then gets sick again. On the other hand, he's going to go completely insane if he has to sit around and think about the fact that he's gone and done the most idiotic thing ever.

The thing is that being in love feels like a sickness in and of itself. Now when Alex texts, his stomach twists in a mixture of nervousness and anticipation that's completely new; when he thinks about Alex - which is all the time now - his chest gets tight and it's difficult to breathe. Darryl keeps telling himself to just stop thinking about him, but it's a difficult when everything reminds him of Alex. Okay, well, that's probably not that surprising considering that Darryl's entire world is hockey and Alex is, you know, a hockey player, but still - Darryl somehow finds himself short of breath every time he turns around, surprised anew at every fresh realization of the mess he's gotten himself into.

If somebody had told Darryl beforehand that love was going to be equal parts gastrointestinal distress and respiratory dysfunction, he would've tried a hell of a lot harder to avoid it.

Darryl's sure that the people around him can tell that he's messed up in the head, because he compensates for feeling confused and vulnerable by becoming more irritable and withdrawn, focusing only on getting back on the ice as soon as possible. Once he's recovered enough to take care of himself, he drops his mom off at the airport for her flight back to Nova Scotia. Before going through security, Darryl's mom hugs him, kisses him on the cheek, then whacks him upside the head.

"Ow!" Darryl says, rubbing the back of his head. "I'm still sick, you know!"

"It's your temper that needs fixing at this point," she says, looking at him severely. "I love you, but you've been damn near impossible to live with these past few days. Go take a page out of Alex's book, he always seems to have a smile on his face."

Darryl throws his hands up even as his stomach does a small flip-flop. "Why the fu- why in the world are you calling him Alex? You've never even met him! How the hell would you know if he's always smiling?"

His mom sniffs. "I've watched enough of your show to see that he seems like a very charming and thoughtful person," she says.

"That's only because of editing!" Darryl protests. "You know what TV is like!"

"And it was extremely sweet of him to send those roses and to bring that soup his mother made," she continues, ignoring Darryl entirely. "I'm just sorry he left before I woke up, I would've liked to have been able to thank him in person."

"Yeah," Darryl mutters. "It's a real shame." The truth is when Darryl had woken that morning only to find Alex already gone - a scribbled apology for leaving early on the kitchen table - his primary emotion had been relief; Darryl wouldn't have been able to handle facing him so soon.

But it's days later and Darryl is still at a complete loss for how to handle this. Darryl knows - or he
thought he knew - how to handle obsession, how to deal with constant desire; it just meant turning all of that into motivation to work harder, train harder, play harder. Longer hours at the rink, harder workouts at the gym, more review of game footage - Darryl had always believed that focus and drive were the keys to getting what he wanted, and the ring and medal sitting in the lower drawer of his desk seemed to prove it.

But this - this sort of dizzy, drowning feeling that seems like it's going to swallow Darryl up every time he turns around - this, Darryl has no idea what to do with.

When Darryl finally does get off the injured reserve list and back onto the roster, he can feel his internal freakout affecting his play, which makes him simultaneously furious and frightened. It's the strangest thing; he feels unsure and wobbly out on the ice in a way that he's never experienced before, distracted but unable to figure out how to fix it. None of his teammates or coaches really criticize him, though. They're all chalkng it up to the flu, or so it seems from their constant reassurance that it takes time to recover and he'll be back to himself soon.

Nobody even gives a passing thought to the idea that whatever is bothering Darryl might be something deeper.

Nobody, that is, until the game in Tampa against the Vipers.

Ryan Eaton takes one look at Darryl and immediately shakes his head, a skeptical expression on his face. The first stoppage of play where they're both on the ice, Eaton immediately skates over and bumps Darryl in the side.

"So what the hell's wrong with you? Don't try to tell me it's the flu, I've seen you sicker than a dog before and it's never made you look like an idiot on the ice."

"The only times you've seen me sick is when you or somebody else has gotten me blind drunk," Darryl grits out.

"Whatever, I've seen you on IR and it made you antsy and bitchy as hell, but not stupid. C'mon, what is it, girl trouble?" he asks jokingly. Darryl freezes. Eaton's mouth falls open. "Holy fuck, it is girl trouble," he says in awe. "Oh my god, Darryl the Kid's all grown up! That's so cute, I think I might cry - "

Darryl's never been so relieved to take a face off in his life. He skates over the dot, although Eaton's not letting him go that easily. "Don't think you're getting out of this, Colton - I'm making you spill your guts later, just you wait!"

In previous games against the Vipers in Tampa, Eaton's invited Darryl over to his house afterward to hang out - and in the past, Darryl's always appreciated the chance to catch up with his friend and former teammate. Today, not so much.

"So, how's Annie? Jeremy, Carter, they're both doing okay?" Darryl asks a little desperately, looking around the kitchen for help.

"Great, they're all doing great," Eaton says. "Wife's great, kids are both great, and if any of them were awake right now I'm sure they'd rescue you, but right now you're stuck with me." He sits Darryl down in a chair at the table and takes a seat across from him, then pins Darryl with a sharp look. "All right, spill - who is this girl? Is she pretty?"

Darryl snorts involuntarily. "God, no." Eaton looks at him strangely. "Um... sh - she's, uh, really ripped?" he tries. Eaton visibly pauses.
"Let's try this again - who is this girl, how do you know her, how long have you guys been together, and why haven't I seen a bajillion Canadian tabloids talking about where you and her are going on your honeymoon?" Darryl winces hard.

"We're not - she's not - it's not like that," he stammers. "We're not really in a relationship or anything, it's more - it's more like a friends with benefits kind of thing, sort of. We just, um, hook up whenever she's in town, or - um, right."

"I honestly don't know whether to be impressed or traumatized that you've finally developed into a playboy," Eaton says, looking conflicted. "But go on, does this mystery girl have a name?"

Darryl can't help flinching. "Sorry, not saying." Eaton raises an eyebrow. "I - look, it's not that I don't trust you, it's just, it's complicated and I really, really want to stay under the radar. You're actually the only person who even knows that there's anything going on, okay?"

Eaton looks at him narrowly, his expression only partially mollified. "Hm. Well, how long have you known her? How'd you guys meet?"

"I've known her for, um, wait - " Darryl thinks about it. "I first met her back in 2004," he says slowly, remembering the international tournament when he first laid eyes on Alex. "And we've seen each other around occasionally since then, but I really only got to know her better this year."

"So you liked her before, just couldn't get the courage up to talk to her?"

Darryl snorts again. "No, I always thought she was kind of annoying, she runs her mouth a lot. And she's a complete goofball, she's always screwing around and never takes anything seriously."

"... Okayyyyyyy," Eaton drawls, tapping his fingers on the table. "So we've established that you're not with her because of her looks or her personality. Is the sex really that good?"

"Well, the first time was terrible," Darryl says without thinking. "I was so drunk I almost puked."

Eaton looks freaked out. "Um, but I mean, it got better towards the end!" Darryl tries to reassure him. "It wasn't - look, it was totally consensual."

His mind flashes back to Alex's stricken expression during their confrontation afterward, the way Alex had gripped the edge of the counter until his knuckles went white. "Well, mostly."

"Mostly - " Eaton erupts.

"I mean she wasn't sure if she'd coerced me!" Darryl says desperately. Eaton sits back a little, but his eyebrows are still raised so high they almost meet his hairline.

"I was going to ask you this anyway, but - is this girl a puck bunny?" Darryl stares at him for a moment, then bursts into laughter.

"No, no no - she's a lot of things, sure, but she is most definitely not a puck bunny," Darryl says, trying to catch his breath.

"I'm being serious," Eaton insists. "I mean, I know - or at least I thought I knew that you were a good judge of character, and god knows enough girls have thrown themselves at you that you should be able to tell if she's a puck bunny, but - " he gestures in exasperation. "I mean, can you really be sure that she's not just sleeping with you because you're Darryl Colton, superstar hockey player?"

He says, using air quotes.

Darryl puts a hand to his face, trying to suppress a new wave of laughter. "I - yes, I can guarantee that she is not sleeping with me just because I'm a superstar hockey player," he says. "Of all the
people in the world, she would be the last person to be swayed or impressed by that, trust me."

Eaton looks at him narrowly. "But are you sure? Are you really sure? Because after the Olympics last year, everybody in Canada would be more than willing to hook up with you just for that one goal, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, I'm sure!" Darryl exclaims. "Look, seriously, she's - she's Russian, she was devastated after Vancouver. It's more that she tolerates all the 'Darryl Colton' stuff, she's definitely not attracted by it, okay?" he says. Eaton just looks at him, doubt clearly written across his face.

"All right, so why do you like this girl again?" he asks.

Darryl hesitates. "Because she's kind," he says finally. "She's actually one of the more softhearted people I know, but people don't realize because she has this, this brash attitude on the outside. And she's thoughtful, earlier this year when I was going through a tough time, she - um, she helped me out in a way that she really didn't have to. And she's funny - I told you she's a goofball, and her sense of humor can be kind of irritating sometimes, but," Darryl bites the inside of his mouth. "But it's never mean-spirited, it's more wacky and happy-go-lucky, that sort of thing. I - I have to admit she can be hilarious when she's not being annoying, although she never stops messing with me. And - um," Darryl can feel his ears already turning red. "Okay, by now the sex is really good," he mutters quickly.

When Eaton doesn't respond for a while, Darryl risks a glance up; the other man is studying him closely, a serious expression on his face.

"You've already fallen for this girl, haven't you," he says slowly, not really asking.

Darryl looks down, a by-now familiar lump forming in his throat. "Well," he says, quiet. "Probably."

"And I'm assuming that that's your problem now?"

Darryl brings his arms up on the table and puts his head in his hands. "I just – I can't do this," he says, his voice muffled. "I knew I shouldn't have gotten involved with her in the first place, but I just – there are so, so many reasons why this is such a terrible idea, you can't even imagine. I mean, first of all you saw how I've been playing lately, everybody thinks it's because I'm getting over the flu, but – I can't let this mess with my head, it would be a disaster, it would be completely unacceptable - " Darryl draws in a shuddering breath.

"Hey – hey, calm down," Eaton says, reaching out. "Calm down, falling for somebody who's kind and funny and who you have chemistry with isn't a tragedy, even if she is fugly or whatever."

Darryl manages to crack a weak grin. "She's not fugly," he objects. "Her face is just - um, distinctive."

Eaton snorts. "Yeah, that inspires confidence. Look, you're obviously really upset over this - is there some reason you already know why things won't work out for the two of you? I mean, what, do you have vastly different goals in life or something?"

"No," Darryl says. "We have exactly the same goals in life, actually." As in, winning the Stanley Cup as many times as possible. Winning everything and anything as much as possible.

"Okay," Eaton says. "Is it a family problem? I mean, is it that your parents don't like her? Or hers don't like you?"
"No, I mean, I've seen her parents around before, but I've never been introduced," Darryl says. "And my parents have never met her, although I already know my mom would really love her," he says a little sourly.

"Wait, what? You know your mom would love your girlfriend? Dude, you got the trickiest one out of the way, the rest of them will be easy after that," Eaton says. "Is it - does she not understand what it means for you to be a hockey player? Because I've known a decent number of guys who had to split because the girl couldn't handle the traveling and moving everywhere and stuff - although I guess you're only going to change teams if you want to, ever."

Darryl snorts. "I - um, no, she definitely understands what it means to be a hockey player. That's - not a problem."

Eaton raises an eyebrow. "Hm. So she'd fit in well with all the other WAGs?"

Darryl chokes; his brain breaks a little trying to imagine Alex hanging out with the Hawks' wives and girlfriends, coordinating various charity events with them, going - oh fucking hell, going shopping with them. It would be like giving a fox the keys to the henhouse. "Uhhh," he stalls. "No, um, I really don't think that would work out, um, at all. She - I wouldn't want to let her near them..."

Eaton's eyebrows snap together. "What, are you ashamed of her - "

"No! I'm not ashamed of her, she - her personality can be a little overwhelming, okay?" Darryl protests. "Look, I don't think you understand - I don't want to get into a relationship, I just want all this to go away. I want to stop feeling confused and miserable all the time, and I want to stop playing terrible hockey because I'm freaking out about this!" he says, his voice rising.

"Whoa, settle down," Eaton says, reaching out to get Darryl to sit down again. "Look, I don't understand what you're so upset about - it doesn't sound like there's anything that'll kill you guys as a couple before you get started, so what's the harm in giving it a try? I mean, I guess you'll break a million hearts in Pittsburgh - hell, you'll break every single girl's heart in Canada, it'll be payback for all of them falling head over heels for the Olympics," Eaton says, grinning.

"I don't - I - " Darryl can feel his chest start to seize up even at the thought of any of this going public. "You don't understand - if people find out about this, the fallout will be unbelievable," he says. And he can't help it, in his mind he can already see how it would all unfold - his teammates looking at him with expressions of betrayal, maybe revulsion; the inevitable and incredible firestorm of media coverage and criticism, journalists and reporters prodding and interrogating him at every turn; the verbal abuse from the crowds he'd have to endure at every arena; the sideways smirks and insults from other players; and, Jesus Christ, his parents finding out, the way they'd look at him in shock and disappointment, maybe - maybe even disgust - oh, god. Darryl squeezes his eyelids shut and presses the palms of his hands into them, grinding hard.

"Stop that, you're going to squish your eyeballs and go blind," Eaton says, pulling at one of Darryl's arms. "Seriously, why does the idea of going public have you so worked up? If I didn't know better, I'd think that this girl was either underage or a hooker." Eaton pauses, then pins him with a sharp look. "Wait, she isn't, is she?"

"No!" Darryl snaps. "She's not a hooker, and she's not underage! She's almost two years older than I am, actually."

Eaton whistles. "Whoa, going for the older ladies, huh? But tack on another decade if you want to start getting into cougar territory," he advises.
Darryl glares at him. "You're no help at all, you know that?"

"If you don't give me any information, I don't know how I can help!" Eaton says. "I don't understand - if hooking up with her was such a bad idea in the first place, why'd you even do it? I thought you had more sense than to get yourself into trouble, Colton."

Darryl stares down at his hands. "I mean, you're right," he says. "How - how we got started is a long story, but I should've known better. I should've stopped this a long time ago, but it didn't - it didn't feel like anything serious, you know? It was just - it was fun, and convenient, and neither of us was going to say anything about it, so - I just didn't think about it. I know that nothing's actually changed except inside my head, but - " Darryl scrubs at the side of his head in exasperation. "I don't know, now I'm stuck thinking about it all the goddamn time, and it... it made me realize that now I do have something to lose, that somehow this means something serious to me. And - " his voice breaks a little. "It just, it reminded me that if this goes wrong, then I have - " he takes a breath. "I have everything else to lose, too," Darryl says, quiet.

Eaton looks at him for a moment. "Darryl, if you're really this upset about it, then you should try to figure out if this is just a crush, or a fluke or something," he says slowly. "You said that you've probably fallen for this girl, so, you know, try to see if maybe you haven't all the way. It can be easy to confuse being in like or in lust with being in love, even for people who have a lot of experience with relationships. Although I gotta say, trying to forget a girl who's really gotten into your head - " Eaton turns his hands up, helpless. "Uh, good luck?"

Darryl lets out a sigh and looks up at the ceiling in despair. "That's great advice, you should totally take over for Oprah, suicide rates would go through the roof." He tilts his head back and looks Eaton narrowly. "You're still bitter over the Olympics, aren't you?"

"Well, duh," Eaton says. "But I'm sincerely trying to give you good advice, I really am! Just - stop worrying so much about what'll happen if your relationship goes public, figure out first whether you can, you know, let go of this girl. If you find that you can't, well," Eaton shrugs. "Cross that bridge when you get to it. It already sounds like a lot of the obvious problems aren't going to be an issue if you do decide to start a relationship, so things could still turn out okay, you know?" He grins suddenly. "This is actually kind of comforting, finding out that you're not a genius at everything. Darryl Colton, worst playboy in the world - all that money and fame and youth completely wasted, it's such a shame."

Darryl glares at him. "You're a terrible friend, you know that?"

Eaton leans back in his chair, satisfied. "Well, I try."

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Eaton's advice does actually help, since after their conversation Darryl manages to stop thinking about Alex when he's on the ice. His level of play subsequently recovers, enough so he's at least back to seeing the game like he's used to, even if he still gets short of breath at the end of shifts. It doesn't stop him from obsessing off the ice, though, try as he might. It also doesn't help that by the time Darryl's managed to start playing better, it's almost time for the first Hawks-Bears game of the season, down at D.C. two days before Christmas. And it's not new that the media goes into a frenzy wherever and whenever Darryl and Alex play each other, but this time around each question grates particularly hard. Really, there's no way in hell that Darryl's going to be able to figure out if he can let go of Alex if everybody keeps asking Darryl about him all the goddamn time.

And then, of course, Alex calls Darryl a few days before the game to invite the entire Hawks team to a Bears Christmas party at his house after the game.
"I know is maybe big problem for you guys to move flight later," Alex says, apologetic. "But we have afternoon game, so we gonna finish pretty early, right? Everybody can come over for couple hours, then go to airport?"

"I - " Darryl's chest clenches a little. He wishes he could go back to the days when he thought Alex was a loudmouth and an idiot; well, okay, he still thinks that Alex is a loudmouth and an idiot, but then Alex turns around and pulls stuff like this. Darryl also wishes he could say no outright, but he doesn't know how to without sounding like a complete jerk. "Um, I'll check to see if Vince and Coach are okay with it, and I guess they can talk to our travel people to see if they can reschedule the flight," he says, then frowns. "Although - Alex, I know you have a big house, but are you really going to be able to fit everybody? I don't know about your guys' Christmas parties, but ours can get, uh, kind of large."

"Is okay, if it get crowded I just shove all Hawks out to backyard," Alex says cheerfully. "Maybe I let you guys have some hot chocolate to stay warm, but only if you nice to me."

Darryl rolls his eyes. "Wow, thanks."

"Hey, Pittsburgh is cold in winter, right? I just trying to make you all comfortable!"

Vince and Prescott both agree to accept Alex's invitation, much to Darryl's chagrin; Vince even decides to come along, once Darryl tells him Alex specifically said Vince and his family would be welcome.

"That's very generous of him, although I guess it's a great chance to get some film for the show," Vince says. "Tracy probably suggested it to Kuznetsov, I wouldn't be surprised."

"I - right," Darryl says, his stomach sinking. Of course Alex wouldn't ask over the entire Hawks team just for the privilege of Darryl's company; it's a PR opportunity, nothing more. "Of course."

So all things considered, Darryl's already feeling sour the morning of the game, and his mood darkens further when the media crowds around in a veritable circus after the pre-game skate. A circus. Seriously, Darryl's reminded of the massive horde that was waiting for him in the Team Canada locker room after the gold-medal game, and not in a good way.

"You guys realize this is a regular season game, right?" Darryl says, scratching his head, although even that's difficult to do without somehow knocking into the ten million microphones and cameras shoved in his face.

"But aren't you looking forward to playing against Kuznetsov today? Do you think that getting to know Kuznetsov better this year will give you any sort of advantage playing against him?"

"Well, you could easily say the same thing the other way," Darryl points out. "But no, I think that Alex and I have both been careful not to give away any secrets or anything. Even though you guys have been hyping it up and everything, I know for me and for this team, we're just going to treat it like any other game on our schedule."

At least, that's what Darryl intends to do. He can't deny that last night he spent hours staring at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep due to worrying about how he was going to react when he saw Alex again. The two of them have only been in touch through texts since Alex's late-night visit to Pittsburgh, and so Darryl hasn't had to worry about modulating his voice over the phone or controlling his facial expression or anything like that, which is good. On the other hand, after one of Alex's texts Darryl realizes that he's spent more than half an hour parsing Alex's message and trying to figure out how to respond. Yeah, Darryl's basically turned into a thirteen-year-old girl,
because these days he finds himself agonizing over what to say back to a text saying, 'wassup Darryl?' So... great.

As it is, after the media's cleared out of the locker room and the team's getting ready to go out on the ice, Darryl pauses and takes a deep breath; he doesn't think he's going to do anything super-embarrassing when he sees Alex. He's not going to, like, swoon or anything.

Well. Unless the first thing Alex does when they get out on the ice together is run him over.

But no, the first thing Alex does when he catches sight of Darryl - Alex is lined up for the puck drop while Darryl's on the bench - is he looks over and mouths, quite clearly, 'We're gonna kick your ass,' a mad grin on his face.

Darryl grins back, a giddy fierceness suddenly rising in his chest; 'Bring it,' he mouths back, half-raising his left arm in challenge. Oh, it is on; Darryl knows how to handle this.

And so - in spite of all the hype and hot air, in spite of Darryl's previous apprehension - the game turns into a barn burner: back and forth scoring, a lot of hard hitting, an absurd number of penalties being called. For the first time in weeks, Darryl feels like he's back in his natural rhythm of play. By the time the second period rolls around, Darryl's fucking flying over the ice, it's like he's got wings on the back of his skates.

It's good that he's back on his game, because Alex is playing like a monster too - hitting everything that moves, shooting the lights out, skating through anything that gets in his way. As usual during Hawks-Bears games, the two of them are on ice at the same time for maybe a total of a minute and a half (which is why the media hyping up their 'rivalry' really makes no sense at all), but during that time Alex does take one good run at him, although Darryl manages to dodge out of the way.

"Gonna have to do better than that," he taunts, stick handling the puck away to safety.

"Oh, don't worry, I can give it to you harder if you want, baby," Alex says, smirking. Darryl stutters a half-step, and that's enough for Alex to swoop in and steal the puck. Darryl grits his teeth and gives chase; okay, maybe he doesn't completely have a handle on how to play against Alex.

It's 5-all with less than two minutes left in the third, and it looks like they're headed to overtime when John Cantrell jumps up in the rush, goes coast-to-coast and puts one past Moreau unassisted for the Bears, a top-shelf wrister that goes in untouched.

The goal horn goes off, the blaring drowned out by the huge wave of noise coming from the crowd. Darryl blows out a deep breath, the sting of losing at least softened by the knowledge that he's on top of his game again, and that he can face Alex without embarrassing or tripping over himself. Well, at least not too much.

Darryl's skating behind his teammates as they all head back to the visitors' locker room when Alex comes over, detaching himself from the celebratory dogpile at the Bears' end of the ice.

"Hey Darryl, good game," he says, bumping Darryl on the shoulder. Darryl's stomach does a somersault; wonderful, the only time Darryl's saved from feeling like a thirteen-year-old girl around Alex is when they're on the ice playing against each other, which means that he gets a grand total of three hours reprieve for the rest of the season. Great.

"Um, thanks," he says awkwardly. "Uh - Alex, do you think, do you think you could tone down the, um, the dirty trash-talking during games? It's kind of - not appropriate, and yeah, I know other people don't take you seriously but it's not fair play, okay?" he ends, irritated as Alex dissolves into
"Okay, okay, I guess it distract you too much," Alex says, snickering. "You guys all gonna come to my house after press is done, right? Have address, directions?"

"Yeah, we have a charter bus and everything. I still don't know how we're all going to fit into your house, though," Darryl says.

The answer is that Alex throws open every room in his house to his guests, from the dining room to the living room to the bedrooms - except for the guest bedroom apparently reserved for Alex's parents. (Darryl has a momentary heart attack when he thinks that he might've left behind a shirt or boxers or something in Alex's bedroom, but then he reassures himself that nobody would recognize anything belonging to him anyways, he doesn't exactly have a distinctive wardrobe. Unlike Alex.)

Even though Darryl thought it might've been a little awkward, having the Bears and Hawks players - and the coaches and owners and a lot of other people from the Bears organization - at a party together, the thing is that the world of professional hockey is a small, small world. A lot of people know each other already, and everybody at least has mutual friends. So with the help of liberal amounts of alcohol and plenty of food, every room of Alex's house is soon filled with the noise of talking, laughing people. Alex himself plays the part of gracious host, going from group to group to say hello, crack a few jokes. Darryl watches him covertly; he can't decide whether he wants Alex's attention or not. He takes another long swallow of beer and heads out to the back yard. Hopefully the cold air will help clear his head.

There's already a decent number of guys back there, kicking a soccer ball around in the open space past the deck; it's chilly, but there's only frost on the grass. Darryl's leaning against the deck railing and considering joining them when somebody taps his shoulder. Darryl turns around to see an older woman with short dark hair and an intense, hawk-like expression; she's accompanied by a younger man with similar coloring, dark hair and blue eyes. Even without introductions, the family resemblance gives both of them away.

"Mr. Colton, my name is Nikolai, I'm Aleksey's older brother," the younger man says in heavily accented English. "This is my mother Viktoria, she want to talk to you, she said she want to make sure you recover okay from being sick."

Darryl hastily sets down his beer, shaking both of their hands. "Um, it's an honor to meet both of you, please, call me Darryl. It did take a while to recover from the flu, but I'm feeling much better by now. Uh, Mrs. Kuznetsova, thank you very much for the - lapsha?" Darryl says tentatively. "It was very good, I really liked it."

Nikolai translates what Darryl's said, and after he's done she responds, her eyes still intent on Darryl; he resists the urge to squirm. "She say, please call her Viktoria, and she is glad you enjoy the soup, and that you do play very well today, but she hope you don't - don't try to play too much before you recover all the way, she say Alex never want to rest when he is sick." Viktoria suddenly reaches out and puts the back of her hand up against Darryl's forehead, as if checking for fever.

"Um..." Darryl sort of wants to duck away, but that would probably be rude. "No, really, my mom flew down from Canada to take care of me when I got sick, she wouldn't let me play hockey either if she didn't think I'd recovered, and then everybody with the Hawks has been making sure I'm okay too," he says, Nikolai translating simultaneously.

Viktoria suddenly smiles, the warmth of her expression transforming her face. She brings her hand down to pat Darryl's cheek a couple times, saying something in return. "She say she get thank you note from your mother, she is happy to give her recipe for lapsha if she want," Nikolai translates.
"She also say -" he pauses, says something to his mother in Russian. She looks back and replies emphatically. "She also say that she want to thank you for agreeing to let Alex practice with you this summer, and not being, um, not being asshole about it to him. After last year, she think that maybe Alex is a little sad to go back to ice, maybe playing hockey not make him as happy like usual. But whenever she see him on TV show practicing with you, he always laughing, he always look happy, so she say she is very grateful for that."

Darryl can feel himself blushing bright red. "I... um. Well, he's usually laughing at me, so I don't, I don't think I did anything in particular to make him happy," he stammers. "But - it, uh, it was fun for me too to practice with Alex, so I'm glad he asked."

After hearing Nikolai's translation, Viktoria laughs and looks at Darryl fondly, patting his cheek again. "Good luck, Darryl," she says herself. "But no when you play Bears, then no good luck."

Darryl smiles back, a little uncertainly. "Thanks," he says, his heart feeling squeezed.

"Hey, Nikolai, where does AJ keep his basketball? I think we're done with soccer, we wanna play some b-ball in the driveway," David Carstairs says, coming up to them.

"Is in garage," Nikolai says. "I can show you guys, if you want." Viktoria looks at her son and says something to him; he looks surprised, then apprehensive. He replies, but she waves dismissively, pushing him along.

"You want play basketball, Darryl?" she calls over her shoulder. "Is fun!"

Darryl shakes his head, watching as Nikolai and Viktoria and the rest of the guys who were playing soccer head around the house. He picks up his beer again, contemplating it for a moment; he guesses it's a good thing that Alex's mom seems to like him, although he can't imagine what her reaction would be if she knew he was sleeping with her son.

After a few minutes, Alex himself comes outside, bumping Darryl on the shoulder. "Hey, why you out here drinking alone? I was kidding when I tell you I gonna kick Hawks outside, come back in and talk to people!"

"There were people out here before," Darryl defends himself. "There were a bunch of guys out here playing soccer, and I actually talked to your mom and brother for a bit, too."

"Oh, really?" Alex says. "But where is everybody now?"

"I think they all went to play some pickup basketball in your driveway," Darryl says.

Alex goes pale. "Wait, what? They gonna play basketball with my mom?"

Darryl frowns. "I'm not sure if she was going to play, but even if she is, none of our guys are going to knock her over or anything," he says.

"No, no, you don't understand," Alex says, bolting away. Darryl follows to find Nikolai apparently trying to dissuade Viktoria from playing. Alex joining in. Darryl scratches his head; Viktoria doesn't look like a fragile woman - in fact, she's, er, quite substantial - but then again, maybe her sons are just overprotective. Alex finally throws his hands up.

"Alex, what's the problem?" Darryl asks, coming up to them.

"My mom want to play basketball with all of us," he says glumly. "But I guess if I can't stop her, then I gonna be on her team!" he says, brightening.
"Well, that leaves our team a player short, so... wanna join us, Colton?" Tangradi says, dribbling the ball a couple times.

"Um," Darryl looks back at Nikolai, who's wearing a resigned expression. "You don't want to play?"

Nikolai shakes his head emphatically. "No, no, is okay - you go instead."

Five minutes into the game, Darryl understands why Alex and Nikolai didn't want their mom to play ball; it's not because they were afraid she was going to get beaten, it's because she's beating everybody else without even breaking a sweat. Of course she's not as fast or strong or tall as the guys she's playing against, but that doesn't matter when she can pull up from thirty feet away and sink the ball without hitting the rim, all swish. Darryl and his team catch on quickly and start trying to guard her, but everybody on Alex's team just sets screens all around so none of them can get to her before she shoots.

After Darryl's team gets burned for five baskets in a row without scoring in return - Viktoria's not only an amazing shooter, she knows how to defend too, barking out one-word instructions to her team like a field general - Darryl stops and glares at Alex, sweat already gathering on his brow.

"You guys totally hustled us," he says accusingly.

Alex holds up his hands. "Hey, I don't force you guys to play, I even try to stop her!" he says innocently. He squints at Darryl. "You know she get two Olympic gold medal in basketball, right?"

"No, I didn't know!" Darryl protests. "Tell her to go easy on us, okay?"

Alex snorts. "She don't even know what that mean, sorry."

Darryl plays for a little while longer before giving up and subbing out; everybody on Alex's team is just feeding Viktoria the ball at every opportunity, not even bothering trying to score themselves, and it's a tactic which turns the game from a beat-down to a landslide. When Darryl gets to the sideline, Nikolai waves him over.

"Darryl, this is my father, Jakob Sergeyevich Kuznetsov," the younger Kuznetsov says; the older Kuznetsov is a white-haired, heavyset man with a genial expression and a firm handshake.

"It's good to meet you," Darryl says, getting his breath back. "Your wife is quite an athlete, I don't know how you keep up with her."

The older man laughs after his son translates. "He say he know better than to play basketball with her," Nikolai says.

The three of them end up chatting on the sidelines of the pickup game, and Darryl finds the Kuznetsov men an interesting contrast. Nikolai is much quieter than his younger brother, his manner almost taciturn; but as the conversation goes on it becomes clear that he's amiable enough, just reserved, only adding his own opinions or comments after some thought.

Jakob, on the other hand, is as gregarious and outspoken as Alex even with the language barrier, so his oldest son has his hands full in any case trying to keep up translating the flow of conversation. Darryl learns that Alex's parents often stay with Alex months at a time when he's in the U.S. and they'd planned to come to D.C. during the preseason, but one of Viktoria's relatives in Moscow had fallen sick, so they'd stayed in Russia to care for her until she'd recovered. (Darryl realizes in hindsight that if the Kuznetsovs had stuck to their original plan to come in September, then Darryl showing up at Alex's house and banging on the door at 2 a.m. after Alex's six-goal game in
October would have probably resulted in, um, a considerably different outcome.

Darryl also learns that the younger Nikolai lives in D.C., although in a less upscale neighborhood than Alex, and that he works as a team operations manager for the Washington Mystics, D.C.'s women's basketball team. Nikolai Junior also tells Darryl that Alex used to hate playing basketball against Viktoria as a child.

"Because she always beat us by a lot, and he hate it," Nikolai says, grinning. "And she call us names when we play against her, say it gonna toughen us up. Is why we don't want her to play against you guys, we know she want to try beat you all by hundred points."

Darryl raises his eyebrows. "That - sounds brutal. I guess I can see where Alex got his competitiveness from," he says.

Nikolai shrugs. "Well, maybe it help him become better at hockey," he says philosophically. "And Alex like playing basketball now, he says is relaxing now that he don't have to play against our mom." He grins a little. "But he still terrible, I don't think he ever gonna be good at it."

"Hey Darryl," Prescott says, coming up next to him. "I know we're all having fun, but the bus is coming to take us to the airport in about five minutes, can you help me round up everybody?"

"Oh - um, yeah, okay." Darryl says. He turns and calls out, "Alex, sorry to break up the game, but we gotta go catch our flight."

The guys stop playing - the ones on Viktoria's team seem reluctant to so, while the others look deeply grateful. Alex bounds over to Darryl. "Aw, so soon? But we just getting started!" he says, protesting.

Darryl rolls his eyes. "You guys already beat us once today, you don't have to beat us again, okay?"

Alex opens his mouth to respond, but at that moment Viktoria comes up and starts volubly berating him, gesticulating forcefully. Alex winces a little, then turns and wraps his arms around his mom in a bear hug, laying a smacking kiss on top of her head in an attempt to appease. "Well, I guess stop now is okay, maybe my mom stop yelling at me about how bad I play ball," he says, grinning.

So then it's time for everybody from both teams to exchange collective goodbyes, and everyone seems surprisingly sad to part considering the fact that, well, they're the Hawks and the Bears, and they're all going to see each other again in a week at the Winter Classic. But after Darryl and Prescott and Vince have everybody from the Hawks successfully herded on the bus, Darryl turns to say goodbye to Alex and his family.

"Alex, thanks for having us over, I know we all had a lot of fun," Darryl says.

Alex grins. "Yeah, I think Crawford maybe have too much fun," he says; he mimes throwing back a drink gleefully. "He gonna be okay?"

Darryl rolls his eyes. "He'll be fine for tonight, it's tomorrow morning that's going to be painful for him. But it was wonderful to talk to you, Nikolai, Nikolai," Darryl says, shaking each of Kuznetsovs' hands in turn. "And it was a pleasure to meet you, Viktoria, although I'm never playing basketball against you again," he says ruefully. Viktoria cocks her head, and once Alex translates for her, she laughs and reaches out to grab Darryl's head, kissing him firmly on each cheek before releasing him, saying something in Russian to him. Alex says something back to her in a protesting tone, but when she hits him on the arm he makes a disgruntled noise.

"She says is okay, you still better at basketball than me," Alex mutters resentfully. Darryl laughs,
then instinctively gives Viktoria a quick hug. "Hey, hey, what about me? Why don't I get kiss, why
don't I get hug?" Alex says, holding his arms out to Darryl mischievously.

Darryl stamps down hard on the abrupt surge of desire, the sudden flare of yearning. He can't have
this; he can't want this. "Whatever," he says roughly. "Anyways, you guys might've won today, but
just wait until New Years, we'll get you back."

Alex grins at him. "Looking forward to it, I know you can't wait to see me again!"

Darryl shoves his hands in his pockets. "Yeah," he says, turning to get on the bus. "Right."
The day after the game against the Bears is Christmas Eve, so Darryl takes a morning flight out to Nova Scotia to spend the next couple days with his family. It's good to see them again, not least because spending time with them gives him a break from thinking about Alex.

That's the theory, anyways.

"Mom says that Alex sent her roses when she was staying with you at Pittsburgh," Brynn says, bounding up to Darryl. "Why hasn't he sent any to me? You need to tell him to get on that right away!"

Darryl throws his arms up. "Seriously? You could've gone with, I don't know, 'Welcome home', or 'It's good to see you', but no, the first thing you ask picking your brother up from the airport for Christmas is, 'Why hasn't Alex Kuznetsov sent me roses?'"

"But I see you every Christmas!" Brynn protests. "Do you have any idea how cool it would be if he sent me roses? Everyone at school would die! DIE!"

"I'm your brother!" Darryl protests. "I'm pretty sure people still remember me at Shattuck St. Mary's!"

"Pfft," Brynn scoffs. "Old news, whatever, nobody's impressed by you anymore."

"Now, Brynn," his mom says, both his parents following Brynn a little more sedately. "Let's get Darryl home, you'll have more time to ask him about Alex there," she says, winking. Darryl makes a noise of sheer exasperation.

"It's good to have you back, son," his dad says, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Thank you," Darryl says.

To be fair, Brynn doesn't tease Darryl too much about Alex for the day and a half that he's home, only mentioning him, say, a half a dozen times or so. Darryl almost regrets getting her custom goalie pads as a present, although her smile and enthusiastic hug after she opens them makes him relent a little.

"Although you did a crappy job wrapping them," Brynn observes after she's finished putting them away.

Darryl drags a hand over his face. "It's nothing but criticism from you, is it?"

But Darryl actually takes the most heat from his mom about Alex after she learns that Alex invited the entire Hawks team to his house.

"He did what?" she says, eyes wide. "But that's so thoughtful of him! You have to invite the Bears over for something too, maybe a New Year's party after the Winter Classic? You have to reciprocate somehow, it would be rude if we didn't return the gesture," she says, visibly anxious.

"Uh... I mean, I'm pretty sure it was mostly a chance for the show to shoot some film," Darryl says half-heartedly.

"It doesn't matter," she says firmly. "Alex was kind enough to welcome all of you into his home,
it's the least we can do to show him and the Bears an equally warm welcome when they come to Pittsburgh."

It turns out that Vince's already two steps ahead of Darryl's mom, because when Darryl gets back to Pittsburgh and brings up the idea, Vince waves him off. "I talked to Calhoun about having a New Year's bash at my house after the Classic, it's all taken care of. It'll be even bigger, everybody can bring their families too since they'll all be in town too, it'll be great."

"Oh," Darryl says. "Wonderful."

If Darryl thought that the media hype surrounding the first Hawks-Bears game was ridiculous, then the hurricane of coverage that whips up around the Winter Classic is worse by several orders of magnitude. Apparently having a normal media scrum after morning practice won't work, there's simply too many reporters; the Hawks PR team ends up hijacking the press room of Heinz field for an impromptu pre-game press conference instead. This is how Darryl finds himself sitting next to Alex behind a table on a dais, looking out at a veritable sea of journalists.

"Darryl, Alex, can you guys talk a little about how excited you are to be playing in this game?"

Darryl resists the urge to roll his eyes. "Yeah, well, the last time we played, it was definitely a great experience, so I'm really excited about it," he says. And he is, he is excited - it's just that his level of excitement is inversely proportional to how much he has to talk about how excited he is.

"Wow, I guess Darryl want to remind everybody that he already play in one and I haven't yet," Alex says, grinning. "But yeah, I think is gonna be cool, gonna be sick, gonna be lots of fun for all the fans and everybody."

"It seems like the two of you have become a lotfriendlier this year from shooting the reality show together," another journalist says. "Do you think that it takes anything away from your rivalry, now that you guys don't hate each other anymore?"

"I've never hated Alex," Darryl says immediately, leaning forward. "That never - that was never an issue, not since the first time I met him and certainly not now. In fact, I - " Darryl bites his lip. "I would say that becoming friends with Alex and getting to know him better, I think it's - its actually helped me appreciate how great this rivalry is for the game," he says slowly. "I mean, I personally think that you guys over-hype us individually, but at the same time, you know, it does seem like when we play each other it does turn into incredible hockey, more often than not. So if Alex and I can help draw more attention to our sport and to help showcase it, then I think that can only mean good things, and - " Darryl hesitates a moment. "And this year has made me realize how lucky I really am, to be able to play against him."

There's a silence after Darryl's done speaking, and he belatedly realizes that he's probably said too much.

"Uh... Alex, do you have anything to say in response to that?" The original journalist asks. Darryl turns his head to see that Alex is gaping at him. But then the other man shuts his mouth, his expression turning mischievous.

"Wеееееll... I only hate him a little bit now," Alex says, smiling slyly. The room fills with laughter, and after it dies down the questions keep going. After that, Darryl does his best to give only mundane responses; it's too dangerous, he'll let Alex give the interesting quotes from here on out. After what seems like hours, the questions finally end; with a sigh of relief, Darryl shoves his seat back and follows Alex out the side door into the hallway.
"All right, I guess I need to get dressed - visitor locker room is that way, right?" Alex says, turning away.

"Um, I think so," Darryl says, and after a moment he reaches out and catches Alex's arm. "Hey, Alex - " he stops, his voice stuck in his throat.

"Hm?" Alex glances back. "What, you think I should take off clothes instead?" he says, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Alex, did you - did you ever actually hate me?" Darryl says, the question coming out in a rush. A year ago, six months ago, he never would've imagined how important the answer to this question would be to him.

"What?" Alex looks at him, surprised. "Oh, is joke, Darryl, not serious. I - " Alex glances down. "I wish I can have what you have," he says, sounding uncharacteristically vulnerable. "Olympic gold, Stanley Cup, I really - I really do want to get someday for Russia, for Bears. So maybe I get jealous sometime," he says, looking back up. "But hate you? No, I never hate you, Darryl."

Darryl balls his hands into fists, then forces himself to relax. So we're even, then, he wants to say. Because I wish I could have you.

"Well," Darryl says instead, "I'm not sure you'll be saying that after this game, because we're going to beat you guys into the ground."

"Ha! You wish!" Alex says, grinning as he bounds off.

No, you have no idea what I wish, Darryl thinks to himself as he heads towards the Hawks locker room. Something must still show in his face, though, because Crawford takes one look at his expression and comes over.

"Dude, what happened? Someone piss in your cheerios this morning?"

Darryl lets out a short huff. "No, it's - it just that the press conference was annoying, and long," he says, going over to his stall. "Seriously, there's only so many questions I can answer about a regular season game."

"Aw, c'mon, it's gonna be fun!" Crawford says, punching Darryl in the shoulder. "I'm pumped, how can you not be pumped to play the Winter Classic again?"

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"Ooooh my fucking god, it's fucking freezing I'm going to fucking freeze my fucking balls off," Crawford moans, bent over in two.

Darryl grins at Crawford's bitching, then turns his face towards the sky. Yeah, so it's cold and the ice is rough, but the entire stadium is electric with energy, and the light snow that started coming down halfway through the first period lends a little magic to the atmosphere. The game isn't the best hockey Darryl's ever seen, the puck jumping and skittering so that both teams have to chase it down, but still - thousands of roaring fans, a crystalline winter day, playing the best game in the world against some of the best players in the world; now that they're actually playing the game instead of just talking about it, Darryl would be hard-pressed to imagine anything better.

Nilsson scores to tie the game, tapping in a wraparound beneath Moreau's pads. Darryl lets out a breath as the red-clad contingent in the stadium erupts into wild cheers; okay, this game would definitely be better if the Hawks could win, Darryl thinks, swinging his legs over the boards for his
And the Hawks do pull out the win in the end; with less than three minutes left, Martin ends up taking a shot that gets tipped by Kunitz past Neuvirth's blocker, and Darryl and his teammates manage to hold onto the slender lead until the clock runs out.

Darryl's laughing and breathless in the middle of the Hawks' gleeful scrum around Moreau when he catches sight of Alex skating off the ice with the other Bears; he disentangles himself and skates towards Alex, conscious of paying the same courtesy that Alex paid to him.

"Hey, good game out there, Alex," Darryl says. Alex half-smiles at him.

"Thanks, is fun..." he trails off, raising his eyebrows as he looks behind Darryl. Darryl turns around and sees to his surprise that his teammates are skating over to catch up to other Bears and to congratulate them as well. "Uh, wow," Alex says, looking around at the Bears and Hawks players exchanging handshakes and jokes all around. "I don't know if we should be so friendly with you guys, fans gonna get confused," he says, grinning.

Darryl grins back, giddiness rising in his chest. "It's New Years, it's all right for today," he says, clapping Alex on the shoulder.

The friendliness continues unabated at Vince's house, where the size and noise of the party far outstrips the Christmas gathering at Alex's house. All the players from each team are there, of course, but so are a wide variety of people from every department of each team's organization - coaches, trainers, managers, sales people, public relations people, etc. Add in the fact that Vince told everybody that they could bring along friends and family, and the sheer number of people all crammed in is mind-boggling.

But even the overwhelming crush of humanity isn't going to deter Darryl's little sister when she's on a mission.

"Okay," Brynn says, holding onto Darryl's arm in a death grip as she tows him determinedly through the crowd. "You're going to introduce me to Kuznetsov right now, and you don't have a choice." The thing is, Darryl is much taller and much heavier than his sister, so theoretically speaking he should have a choice; he should just be able to dig in his heels and refuse to move. But when Darryl half-heartedly tries tugging his arm away, Brynn turns around and pins him with such a venomous glare that Darryl surrenders. Luckily, people keep stopping Darryl in order to chat with him, and even though Brynn might fulfill her sisterly duty of being a holy terror towards Darryl with unparalleled enthusiasm, she's reasonably well-behaved around other people. That means that she doesn't actually physically drag Darryl away his conversations, even if there are a few people where Darryl wouldn't really mind if she did.

But it's inevitable that Darryl's going to run into Alex sooner or later, and when Brynn's grip tightens suddenly, Darryl looks around in resignation. Alex is standing a few feet away at the open bar, talking animatedly as he waits in line.

"Okay," Brynn says imperiously. "Introduce me, Darryl."

Darryl tries not to wince; he has the sinking feeling that introducing Brynn to Alex is a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad idea, but he really can't see any way out of it.

"Hey, Alex," he says, touching Alex on the shoulder. "How are you, are you enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, hey Darryl! Yeah, great party, Fletcher really know how to get everybody to have fun!" Alex
"Yeah, um, it is," Darryl says. Brynn clears her throat ostentatiously, and Darryl barely stops himself from rolling his eyes. "Anyways, Alex, this is my little sister Brynn. Brynn, this is Alex," he says. If he exaggerates the pronunciation of 'little' just a bit, he's apparently the only one who notices.

Alex grins at her. "Hi Brynn," he says, reaching out to shake Brynn's hand firmly. "I can see who get all the good looks in Colton family, is great to meet you!" When Brynn doesn't respond immediately, Darryl looks down at her in surprise; if there's one thing that his little sister definitely is not, it's shy.

Brynn doesn't look bashful; instead, she's studying Alex intently, her head cocked to the side. Still holding Alex's hand, she says abruptly: "My brother is a better hockey player than you are."

"Brynn!" Darryl says, horrified. Okay, so this is going badly, although in a completely different way than Darryl thought it might.

Alex blinks a couple times, clearly taken aback. But then his expression softens, and the corner of his mouth quirks upward ruefully. "I mean, I know he win more than me," he says. "But I trying to get better, is why I want to train with him during summer. I'm glad he say yes, maybe I can find out how to win too."

Brynn scrutinizes Alex for a moment more, then breaks out into a wide grin, her entire face lighting up. "But you're way, way cooler than he is, I'm so glad that I'm finally getting to meet you! The jokes that you've been playing on Darryl are awesome, we should totally think of some more together!"

Alex throws his head back and laughs. "Okay, maybe we can make list, also ask everybody here for idea too," he says, smiling.

Darryl buries his face in his hands and groans; no, no, he takes it back, this is going terribly in exactly the way Darryl feared it would.

"Oh, come on, we not serious," Alex says, tugging at Darryl's arm. "We just joking around, okay?"

Darryl brings his hands down and looks at Alex darkly. "No, she's not," he says. "You don't know her well enough to tell, but she is definitely not joking."

But if Alex doesn't know Brynn all that well right now, they're quickly on their way to becoming fast friends. Darryl just sort of stands there, awkwardly, listening them laughing and chatting as if they've known each other for years. Even the thought of them scheming together makes his stomach churn with an uneasy mixture of irritation and low-grade fear.

And - and it's pathetic, but Darryl can feel a faint but real undercurrent of jealousy pull at him as he watches them; Brynn giggling at everything Alex says, Alex bending in to catch whatever Brynn's whispering in his ear in return.

Darryl takes a healthy swallow of wine and says, snidely: "I'm glad to see you guys getting along so well together. Alex, you know that Brynn's had a crush on you for years now? She even has a poster of you tacked up on her door."

Actually, one of Brynn's friends had given to her as a gag gift for her birthday a couple years ago, but Brynn had thought it was the most hilarious thing in the world. She'd even drawn sparkly pink hearts all around Alex's face before taping it up and triumphantly showing it to Darryl.
But if Darryl's intent was to embarrass his sister - and it was - then he's severely overestimated her capacity for embarrassment. Brynn laughs. "Oh, I didn't really have a crush on you, I just pretended to in order to annoy Darryl," she says matter-of-factly to Alex. "You wouldn't believe how irritated he'd get. But now that I've met you, I really do like you, you're awesome!"

"Well, I think you also awesome," Alex says, grinning. "Is good to know at least one Colton like me," he says, winking at Darryl.

"Oh, but Mom really likes you too, for being so sweet with the roses and everything!" Brynn says. "Come on, you should meet her!" she says, dragging Alex by the arm.

Soon enough, Alex is being extravagantly charming to both Darryl's mom and his dad, and while his dad is a little reserved towards Alex - thank god, at least there's one family member who isn't a complete traitor - his mom immediately warms to him. After ten whole minutes of conversation, she's beaming and smiling at Alex like he's her son.

"I hope the Hawks team not make too much trouble when they come to see Darryl," Alex says. "I know hockey players usually big pain when they get together, eat everything and make a big mess, really noisy and everything."

"Oh, no, it was very considerate of you to arrange for all of them to visit Darryl," Darryl's mom says, patting Alex on the arm. "To tell the truth, I appreciated it too. Darryl was getting very cranky."

"Really? That bad?" Alex raises his eyebrows. "Maybe I need send pretty girls instead of hockey players," he says, grinning at Darryl. "They even more distracting!"

Brynn snorts. "Why would you do that? Darryl wouldn't have any idea what to do with them!" she says. "I saw that episode, it was downright embarrassing."

"Brynn, don't tease your brother," his mom admonishes. "But it's true, Darryl's never been very comfortable around girls," she confides in Alex. "You seem to know a lot of people, maybe you can help him socialize some more, get to know somebody suitable."

"Mom - " Darryl wants nothing than for the ground to come and swallow him up. His face feels like it's on fire.

"Oh, Darryl, it does no harm to ask," his mom says, waving him off.

"Yeah," Brynn says, smirking. "Then you and your girl can go on a double date with me and AJ!" she says, slipping her arm through Alex's and grinning up at him.

Darryl literally just wants to lose consciousness at that moment; he doesn't care if it takes somebody stabbing or shooting him or elbowing him in the head, anything would be preferable to this. Alex, on the other hand, looks like he's valiantly trying not to bust out laughing, as if this entire conversation is the most hilarious thing ever.

...Okay, theoretically speaking, Darryl can see how this might be amusing. His - for lack of a better term - gay hookup is the object of his sister's crush and at this rate is going to end up as his brother-in-law, and his mom is pressuring said gay hookup into finding Darryl a girlfriend. Very funny. Ha ha. Ha.

Seriously, Darryl doesn't know when his life turned into raw material for Jerry Springer, but he doesn't like it one bit.
"Ah, I mean, I already try to find Darryl girls," Alex says in a voice full of suppressed laughter. "And I don't think it work out well, I think maybe we just have different taste in women."

"Well, I don't want you to go to any trouble, and I know you're in D.C. and all that," his mom says. "But maybe when Darryl comes to visit you, you can take him out with you, help him have some fun."

"I - Mom, I can't - Brynn, don't even sta - Alex, you - " Darryl sputters incoherently. "Dad, help me out here!" he says, turning to his one ally.

His dad shakes his head, the coward. "Sorry, I'm not touching this with a ten foot pole," he says. "You're on your own, son."

Alex laughs. "Always the women who win, right?" he says, grinning. "Is like that in my family too, don't matter what me or my brother or my dad say, my mom always right."

"Oh, is your family here? Is your mother around? I'd really love to meet her," his mom says.

"Hm? Yeah, all my family here, um, I can go find if you like," Alex offers. "Hold on, I be back really quick," he says, disappearing into the crowd.

Darryl's mom turns to him. "He's such a sweet boy, nothing at all like I imagined. It's a shame that we never met him earlier," she says.

"Yeah, he's - great," Darryl says. "Just great."

His mom narrows her eyes. "Don't take that tone with me, Darryl. You need to check that attitude right now, understand?"

"He's just jealous that he can't have Alex all to himself anymore," Brynn chimes in helpfully.

Darryl's saved from answering that completely unfair accusation when Alex returns with his family members in tow. Darryl's mom and Alex's mom immediately gravitate towards each other, and Alex ends up translating the rapid flow of conversation between the two women - which means that Brynn ends up in that conversation by default, since she's still clinging to Alex's arm. Darryl, on the other hand, ends up in conversation with his dad and Nikolai and Jakob. He half wants to keep an eye on Brynn so he can make sure she doesn't sucker Alex into marriage on the spot. On the other hand, even looking at the two of them makes his head start to hurt - so he ends up choosing the option that hopefully won't cause his head to explode.

It doesn't really help his mood when he realizes that his dad is getting along extremely well with the two Kuznetsov men - which is, well, a little unexpected. Ever since Darryl and Alex first broke into the NHL, Darryl's dad has expressed a certain distaste for Alex. Call it paternal pride, call it over-protectiveness, call it whatever - and if Darryl had thought about it, he would've been uneasy about his dad meeting the Kuznetsov family, except he was too busy worrying about how Brynn was going to embarrass him to death. But in any case, all it takes is a few compliments from Jakob to Darryl's dad about Darryl, and his dad softens up right away.

"My father says is great honor to meet you, he is very happy to meet someone who can raise great player and great man like Darryl," Nikolai says.

"I - oh, well," his dad says, a little flustered. "Thank you, it's - well, of course we've very proud of Darryl," he says, clapping Darryl on the shoulder, "but you should also be very proud of Kuz - of
Alex, he's also outstanding.

And soon enough, the men are chatting away just as friendly as you like, talking about hockey, football, soccer, the weather in Pittsburgh, the weather in D.C. - elephants, scuba diving, monster trucks; okay, Darryl doesn't know how they ended up talking about those last few subjects, but he's just a little distracted trying to keep tabs on the other conversation. And watching where Brynn puts her hands.

Seriously, there's no reason why Darryl should be upset that his family and Alex's family are getting along so well. No. reason. at. all.

It's Alex, of all people, who finally ends Darryl's silent suffering.

"I really wish I can keep talking with you guys," Darryl overhears Alex say, "but we probably gotta go talk to Fletcher, say thank you for hosting party and everything."

"Oh, of course, and we shouldn't monopolize your time, I'm sure there are other people you and your family want to talk to," Darryl's mom says, ignoring Brynn's protests.

"Yeah, uh, I saw Vince over in the living room earlier, we can go find him," Darryl jumps in.

As soon as Darryl's led Alex and his family out of earshot, Alex leans in and says, "Hey, you okay? You look really upset, like you really angry or something."

"I - what?" Darryl says. "No, I'm not!"

Alex looks at him doubtfully. "But you keep looking over when I talking to your mom and sister, keep going like this - " Alex scowls exaggeratedly, baring his teeth.

"I did not!" Darryl says. "I - I - " he casts around desperately. "I just don't want you spending that much time around my sister, that's all."

"Huh?" Alex looks surprised, then insulted. "Jesus, Darryl, you know she don't really have crush on me, right? She just want to get under your skin, and also I never gonna do anything, she's a kid! What kind of guy you think I am?"

"Well, good," Darryl mutters, hating himself for sense of relief he feels upon hearing Alex's denial, although for entirely different reasons than Alex assumes. "I don't want her to get any ideas, okay?"

"Aw, don't worry Darryl, you still my favorite Colton," Alex says, patting Darryl's shoulder. Darryl swallows.

"Right," he says, turning away. "Come on, let's go find Vince."

The rest of the party passes uneventfully enough, which is at least good for Darryl's blood pressure. Alex comes to find him before he and his family leave.

"Well, I guess I have to find you girlfriend now," he says, looking gleeful.

"No - I mean, no, that's really not necessary," Darryl grinds out.

"Oh, but I not gonna say no to your mom," Alex says, grinning. "She give me assignment, now I have to do it! Is not good to get on bad side of any mom, is bad for health," he says mock-solemnly.
And so a few days later, Darryl receives a text from Alex; he flips open his phone to see a picture of a beautiful blue-eyed blonde winking at him. The text underneath reads: so what u think about her?

Darryl stares in disbelief for a moment, then flattens his mouth and types back: too blonde.

The next day Alex texts another picture, this one of a buxom brunette puckering up; what bout her? she have dark hair! Darryl closes his eyes, exhales, then replies: Too dark. Alex's response comes a half an hour later. u so picky! oh snap darryl you know i like challenge!

And so Darryl has to endure pic after pic of gorgeous women getting texted to him (along with the normal quota of ridiculous messages Alex sends him); at this rate his phone's going to fill up before he can delete everything. Darryl gives up with even superficially plausible replies after the fourth pic: too pretty. teeth too white. smile too nice. eyes too big. He finally texts back in exasperation, shouldn't u be concentrating on hockey not girls?

Alex sends back, i can do both i got skill like that!

It's true, Darryl can't deny that Alex is playing well; he's piling up points at a sufficient clip that his name - along with Darryl's - is popping up in the Hart prediction articles that always start showing up at the beginning of each year. But really, it's - it's infuriating, if that's the word for it. Darryl feels like he's just now figured out how to compartmentalize playing hockey and thinking about Alex, but every time Alex texts or sends pics or whatever it's like repeatedly ripping a scab off a wound.

The games in January roll along; Darryl and the Hawks win more than they lose, and so do Alex and the Bears. The Bears are, not surprisingly, first in the Southeast, although the Vipers are nipping at their heels. The Hawks and the Bulldogs flip-flop at the top of the Atlantic every few games or so, but with the way the rest of the Eastern Conference is shaking out, the Hawks look like a lock to make the playoffs. This would normally put Darryl in a good mood, except the end of January means the All-Star Game. The All-Star Game not only means that Darryl has to fly to Carolina for the weekend while the rest of his teammates get a mini-vacation, it also means that Darryl is going to have to deal with Alex.

"Why in such bad mood, Darryl? Is gonna be fun, we can still relax there," Leskov says on their flight, trying to cheer Darryl up. Darryl smiles thinly; he can't even begin to explain why he's not looking forward to this weekend.

Once Darryl gets his itinerary handed to him in Carolina, he takes a look at the first thing on the list and stifles a groan. Darryl really, truly, sincerely has a lot of sympathy for all the fans who complain about the league shoving him and Alex down their throats, because one of the first events on Darryl's schedule for the weekend is another joint press conference with just him and Alex. It feels like he's stuck in a loop, as if the world is trying to maximize the amount of time he has to suffer stoically in Alex's company. Seriously, he just did this for the Winter Classic, this isn't fair at all.

"Hey Darryl, long time no see, right?" Alex says, grinning at him as he drops into the chair next to Darryl. Darryl smiles thinly; he can't even begin to explain why he's not looking forward to this weekend.

This time around, the questions from the media focus on asking the two of them to talk about their careers so far, since it's been five years since they both entered the league. There's all the normal bullshit asking them what it's been like for them, whether they're happy with their careers, whether
they're still ambitious, how they still stay hungry after accomplishing so much.

These have to be some of the stupidest questions Darryl's ever had to answer, and Darryl's had to answer a lot of stupid questions. They're young, they've both been in the league for less than five years, it doesn't make sense to ask them this sort of thing.

But Darryl puts his game face on and replies in his usual bland sound bites, while Alex stays remarkably cheerfully and answers with his usual good humor. And then-

"Now that you've been here in North America for a few years now, what does it mean to you to play in the National Hockey League? You were sort of in awe of the NHL when you came over your rookie year, but has that wonder worn off at all?"

Darryl has to stop himself from rolling his eyes, but Alex pauses before answering, his expression becoming unexpectedly serious.

"No, of course not. I always say NHL is best league in world, and I always know is big, big honor to play here. And is hockey, how I can not be happy to play hockey every day?" Alex says. "Hockey save my life, it really do - if I not play hockey, I don't know if I gonna be alive today. When I was kid in Russia, it was, like, pretty dangerous, sometime. Maybe I get in trouble, end up dead in the street long time ago," he says, a half-smile pulling at his mouth. "But KHL and then NHL help give me great life, great opportunity for my family, and I always grateful for it, I always gonna try play my best for everybody who help me get here."

There's a momentary pause, then another reporter asks, "Alex, speaking of what your career has meant to hockey, at the press conference for the Winter Classic, Darryl was very complimentary of you and what the rivalry between the two of you means for the game. Do you want to take the opportunity to return the compliment? What has it meant to you to play against Darryl? What do you think of him as a player?"

"Well, I can tell you that playing against him is pain in the ass," Alex says, eliciting general laughter. "But no, obviously Darryl is great, great player. I mean, after what he do in Olympics, he already gonna be legend in Canada forever. Of course I really appreciate what he can do on ice, nobody who is fan not gonna appreciate what he do, you know? And he is really hard worker, all discipline, everything with him always gonna be about hockey, hockey, hockey, is what I learn this year about Darryl." Alex turns, raising an eyebrow at Darryl. "See, I think hockey give me chance to have great life and go have fun, but Darryl think life give him chance to go play hockey, I don't know if he know what fun is," he says to the amusement of the audience.

Darryl feels his own expression freeze, an uncomfortable feeling curling tight in his stomach. Thankfully, the press conference wraps up a few questions later, and then Darryl and Alex are both free to go. Darryl catches up to Alex, feeling just as awkward as he did after the last press conference.

"Alex, um," Darryl says, then pauses.

"Yeah?" Alex looks at him.

"Were - " Darryl loses his nerve; he can't ask, he can't, it's too embarrassing. Instead: "Were you serious when you said that hockey saved your life? You - you sounded serious," Darryl stammers.

Alex raises his eyebrows, looking a little surprised. "I mean, yeah," he says. "People I go to school with, a lot of them get in trouble with drugs, with crime. Some people I know get shot, some people I know in jail, bunch of guys become gangster, so..." Alex grins at Darryl's expression.
"Yeah, I grow up in reeeally crazy time in Russia," he says, drawing out the syllable for emphasis.

"I - " Darryl says, then stops, lost for words. The idea of Alex of wasting his life as a thug, the idea of him shot and bleeding out on the street - it's almost as incomprehensible as the idea of what the NHL would have missed without Alex, what the league would have lost if Aleksey Kuznetsov had never become a hockey player.

And - and Darryl never would have met him.

Darryl swallows. "Well, I'm glad you ended up here," he says.

"Hm? What? Why you being so nice?" Alex demands, looking at him suspiciously. "Oh, wait, I see - I say is pain in ass to play against you, but you think playing against me is too easy, huh? Huh?" he says in mock protest, folding his arms.

Darryl makes a disgruntled noise. But then before he can stop himself - "Do you - do you think we would be friends if neither of us were hockey players?" he blurts out. So you said you never hated me, but do you even like me as a person at all? If I weren't any good at hockey, if we were just two random guys - would you even have said hello? he wants to ask, except he sounds like a teenage girl even to himself; insecure, needy, obsessive.

Wait, no, scratch that; Brynn would kill him for insulting teenage girls.

Alex squints at him. "Um... but we are hockey player," he says slowly, as if doubting Darryl's mental capacity. "I just tell you - maybe I not alive now if I not have hockey. And if you not play hockey... is like asking what if sky not blue? What if water not wet? What if Darryl Colton not play hockey?" Alex scratches his head. "Is this trick question?"

"Oh, forget it," Darryl says, giving up. "And I do actually know how to have fun, whatever you or my mom might think, so thanks a lot for saying that to the press," he adds in irritation.

Alex squints at him even harder. "Okay, you know most people think going to gym or watching old game where you lose is not fun, right?" he says doubtfully.

"Yeah, I know that!" Darryl snaps. "That's not what I do for fun anyways, I - well, I - " he sputters to a stop. Alex raises an eyebrow skeptically.

"Okay, because I told your mom I gonna try to help you have fun, you gonna come out with me and everybody else when we go clubbing after game on Saturday," he says, pointing at Darryl. "No choice!"

Darryl grinds the palm of his left hand into his eyelid. "I really, really think she was kidding," he grates out.

"I really, really think she not kidding," Alex says, grinning as he digs his phone out and thrusts the screen towards Darryl. "See, she even e-mail me to make sure I remember! 'Alex, please make sure Darryl have some fun this weekend,’ she say, and I not gonna let her down!’" Alex reaches out and pats Darryl on the shoulder, then skips down the hall.

Darryl barely stops himself from turning around and banging his head against the wall, but it's a near thing. He's doomed. Doomed.

The rest of the weekend goes by; there's the skills competition on Friday, then the actual All-Star Game on Saturday. They've changed the format of the game so it's no longer East against West, but instead the captains of each team take turns picking which players they want. Neither Darryl nor
Alex ends up being captains, the honors go to Markstrom and Kokkonen instead; Darryl's privately relieved, he's had just about as much of this entire sharing the spotlight with Alex business as he can take - any more of it and he's going to give himself away somehow, he just knows it.

The game ends up being so-so; Darryl's participated in a few of these by now and they're never the most exciting games in the world, but he's still conscious that it's supposed to be an honor, so he tries to take it seriously. The team that Alex is on beats the team that Darryl's on by a couple goals, and Alex hams up the victory unmercifully, skating over and raising Markstrom's arm in exaggerated triumph. Darryl rolls his eyes and skates off; some things really never change.

Alex catches up to him in the locker room afterwards. "Hey, remember, you gonna go out with everybody tonight," he says, pointing at him accusingly. "And not allowed to wear sweatshirt or sweatpants or anything like that, okay?"

Darryl looks at him, pained. "Seriously? Do I really have to?"

Alex pokes him in the chest. "Yeah, you have to. You coming out with us tonight or else, or else..." he grins suddenly. "Or else I gonna call Brynn and we gonna figure out how to prank you in Pittsburgh!"

Darryl blanches. "Okay, okay, fine," he says, scowling.

It turns out that a good number of the All-Star players are all in on the plan to go out clubbing, almost all the guys who are single (and a few who aren't). Darryl fidgets with the cuffs of his button-down shirt as he and Leskov walk towards the nightclub. "Alex isn't forcing you to come, so seriously, why are you here?" he asks Leskov plaintively. He's having flashbacks to being herded along similarly by Janssen, Crawford, and Letourneau; the feeling of dread and foreboding is exactly the same.

Leskov rolls his eyes. "I know is big surprise, Darryl, but some people actually think dancing and drinking is fun," he says, pushing Darryl into the club.

It's exactly the kind of establishment that Darryl hates; loud, pounding music, almost completely dark except for the flashing overhead strobe lights, girls wearing too much make-up squeezed into too-tight clothes, guys with popped collars drenched in cologne, people all jammed onto the dance floor - Darryl's already starting to get a headache.

"Really? When did Raleigh get a nightlife?" he mutters, massaging his temples. Leskov's dragged him up some stairs to a small suspended loft overlooking the dance floor, low round tables with small flickering candles everywhere, and the hockey players who've already arrived are hard at work getting drunk as quickly as possible.

"Hey, Raleigh's not a bad city to party," Eric Janssen says, leaning over. Darryl looks at him skeptically. "Okay, so maybe somebody dropped the club management a few hints that we'd be coming, and maybe it spread around the local grapevine that this place would be hopping tonight," he says, grinning. Darryl squeezes his eyes shut, grimacing; great, that'll bring puck bunnies out of the woodwork, no question about it. Janssen claps him on the shoulder. "Want a drink?"

Darryl pinches the bridge of his nose. "Yes, please."

Alex arrives a little while later, Petrov trailing behind him; the moment Alex spots Darryl, he comes straight over.

"You here! I don't have to call Brynn, too bad," he says, a wicked grin across his face. "Wait, wait,
stand up - you wearing okay clothes?" he says, making Darryl stand up; he wolf whistles, turning
darryl around. "Hot! You look very hot, Darryl, maybe even I hit that," his expression turning
mischievous. Darryl swallows, trying to will himself not to blush.

Petrov mutters something in Russian that sounds faintly derogatory; Alex let out a bark of laughter
and pounces on the other man, putting him in a headlock and unabashedly mussing up Petrov's
hair.

Darryl's stomach twists strangely at the sight; he sits back down, awkward.

"Лёша, Саша, Привет!" Leskov says, coming over to greet the other two, and they all end up
chatting animatedly in Russian. Darryl looks down at his drink. He should probably have another;
this is going to be a long night.

But after a little bit, Alex leans over and punches Darryl in the shoulder. "Hey, we gonna go dance
- wanna come?"

Darryl suppresses a wince. "Uh, yeah, no." Alex raises an accusatory eyebrow. "Hey, you just said
I had to come, you didn't say anything about dancing," Darryl says defensively. Alex mock-scowls
at him.

"Darryl, if you not come and dance, you gonna regret it," he says warningly.

Darryl rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I think I'll pass - I've seen you try to dance before, I don't want to
watch you stomping all over people."

"Hey, I'm good dancer!" Alex says indignantly. Both Leskov and Petrov start laughing. "I am!
Whatever, I gonna go dance now, you guys can stay here and suck," he says, sticking his tongue
out before turning away.

Darryl watches the three of them go, and downs the rest of his drink.

Over the next half-hour or so, more and more hockey players trickle into the club and make their
way up the stairs to the loft. Darryl ends up talking with a bunch of different guys and catching up
with them; even though he's managed to talk to a few guys over the past couple of days, it's still
nice to have a chance to catch up with people he hasn't seen or talked to in a while, especially the
guys in the Western Conference. Darryl is actually sort of enjoying himself when Anselm comes
up to him, a strange expression on his face.

"Hey, Darryl - uh, you know that Kuznetsov's trying to pick up girls for you?"

"What?" Darryl yelps, bolting out of his chair.

"Yeah, he's talking up every girl in the club," Anselm calls out, laughing. "I think he might be
sampling the goods, if you know what I mean!"

Darryl scrambles down the stairs towards the dance floor. Someone catches at his arm - Darryl
turns to see a glossy brunette smiling coyly at him.

"Hey, you're Darryl Colton, aren't you?"

"Uh, yes, sorry, I'm - " Darryl abruptly switches gears. "Wait, have you seen Aleksey Kuznetsov
around? I need to find him, it's an emergency." As in, Darryl urgently needs to kill him.

The girl pouts. "Yeah, he was over there," she says, pointing.
"Thanks," Darryl says distractedly, before plowing back into the sea of people.

After what feels like an eternity of squirming his way through the crowd, Darryl finally spots a familiar shaggy mane. He pushes forward and catches sight of Alex's back; he takes another step and -

And Darryl sees the other man passionately kissing a tiny blonde girl, his hands roughly groping her ass.

Darryl can feel his heart plummet straight down to the floor. He jerkily takes a step forward, then turns away blindly. He shoves his way out of the mob and heads straight for the exit.

"Hey, whoa, Colton, slow down - wait, are you leaving already?" Sturge says, grabbing Darryl's shoulders to steady him after Darryl nearly crashes into him.

"I - yeah, I - I'm not feeling well, I think I'm going back to the hotel," he mumbles, pushing Weber away.

Once Darryl gets inside the cab, he lets his head thunk back; he's in the middle of calling himself a hundred different types of idiot when his phone rings.

"Hey, where you go? Sturge say you not feel good, but you healthy! Why you not stay?" Leskov demands.

"I - I got a headache," Darryl says, closing his eyes. "I'll be fine, I'm just going back to my room," he says, then hangs up. A minute later, his phone vibrates again; in a fit of irritation, Darryl turns it off and then buries his head in his hands.

The truth is, he should have expected this. He's never - they've never gotten to a point where exclusivity was even a question that needed to be answered. Of course Darryl hasn't been sleeping with anybody else, but that's not really saying much since before Alex, he'd never slept with anybody at all. He should've expected that Alex would keep his normal habits as well, and he's absolutely certain that the other man is no monk. In retrospect, all of Alex's jokes and innuendoes about girls and going after them look different; at the time Darryl had thought Alex was just needling him, but he should've realized that on some level, Alex had meant everything he'd said.

Darryl rubs his hands over his face a few times and then looks out the window, the orange lights of Raleigh rolling by. He's known for a long time already that Alex is instinctively friendly, that Alex is a natural flirt, that Alex is affectionate with many, many people. The question Darryl should've asked earlier isn't whether Alex likes him as a person - of course he does, Alex likes anybody and everybody - the question he should've been asking is whether Alex - Darryl closes his eyes, faltering even at his own thoughts.

The question he should've asked is whether Alex prefers Darryl's company, whether Alex cares specifically for Darryl at all.

The taxi comes to a stop, and Darryl realizes with a start that they're outside the hotel. He pays the driver, then hauls himself up to his room. He falls back onto the bed and stares at the ceiling.

There's suddenly a loud pounding at the door. Darryl sits up and eyes the door warily.

"Open up Darryl, it's me," a familiar voice yells. Darryl winces; maybe if he stays quiet, the other man will go away. "I know you in there, I can see light under door!"

Groaning, Darryl gets up and opens the door. Alex stands there, brow furrowed.
"You okay? You not answering your phone!"

"I'm fine, I just- I had a headache and I wanted to come back to the hotel," Darryl says in irritation. "You didn't have to come back and check on me, I told Geno where I was going when he called."

"I know, but I feel bad since I make you come and everything, I want to make sure you okay," Alex says, putting his hand up toward Darryl's forehead. Darryl swats it away, trying to ignore the aching, tender feeling in his chest.

"I'm fine now, it was just the noise and heat and everything. This really wasn't necessary - you looked like you were enjoying yourself plenty back there, you certainly didn't have to tear yourself away on my account," he says, a sharp edge to his voice.

Alex grins unabashedly, wandering into the room and helping himself to snacks from the minibar. "Yeah, lots of pretty girl all around, is great! I trying to find one for you all evening, I promise your mom I gonna help you have fun!" He heaves a sigh, plopping himself down on the bed and tossing peanuts back like popcorn.

"I guess you had to kiss all of them to figure out which one was the best, huh?" Darryl asks, folding his arms.

"Oh, you see that? What can I say? They all want to kiss me, how am I gonna say no?" Alex says, upending the plastic bag to get the last of the peanut debris into his mouth.

"Right, it's because you're so irresistible," Darryl says, watching Alex chew enthusiastically with his mouth open. "Or something."

"Aw, don't be like that Darryl," Alex says, swallowing and coming towards Darryl. "Well, I guess since I not manage to find girl for you, it up to me now!" he says, a lascivious gleam in his eye. "Come on, you wearing too much clothes to have fun, Darryl," he says chidingly.

"I - " Darryl should say no. Every sensible, rational thought says that Darryl should break this off, should back away right now.

Alex reaches out and puts the palm of his hand against Darryl's neck; he strokes his thumb gently along Darryl's jawline. Darryl closes his eyes, a shudder running through him.

"Fine," Darryl says roughly, reaching up to unbutton his shirt. "Let's have some fun."

But the aching, tender feeling blooming in Darryl's chest is even worse afterward, the two of them lying spent on top of the sheets. Darryl looks over; Alex has a sleepy grin across his face as he snuffles a few times into one of the many pillows. As if he can feel Darryl gazing at him, Alex opens his eyes.

"I sorry you not have fun at club tonight," Alex says, propping his chin up. "I don't mean for you to get headache or anything."

Darryl lets out a breath. "It's okay," he says. "Alex - " he stops. But no, he's swallowed too many questions today already. "Alex, have you been sleeping with anybody else - anybody else this year?"

Alex appears puzzled for a moment. "Is this about girl who kissing me at club?" he asks. "Because really, is her who start kissing me! And no, I not been sleeping with any girl for while, I don't sleep with girl unless she my girlfriend, and I not have girlfriend since last July," Alex looks briefly mournful, then eyes Darryl accusingly. "I know you not this kind of guy, but you shouldn't sleep
with girl unless she your girlfriend, girls always serious about sex. Puck bunnies is ok to kiss, bad to sleep with."

"So - you don't have girlfriend right now," Darryl says, unable to stop himself; it's like purposefully pressing against a bruise.

Alex looks insulted. "Of course I not have girlfriend right now! If I have girlfriend, I not gonna be sleeping with you, is cheating, wouldn't be fair to her," he says indignantly.

"Right," Darryl says. "Of course not." He exhales. "And - and guys? You don't - you don't have a boyfriend hidden away somewhere?" Darryl does his best to keep his tone neutral.

Now Alex is looking at him like he's crazy. "I - boyfriend? Fooling around with guys isn't boyfriend, Darryl, is like - is just, you know, fuck buddies!" he says, brightening up as he hits upon the right term. "And nope, no guys either, is too much trouble, too dangerous. I'm clean, if you worried about diseases," he says, his expression clears with false understanding as he sits up and stretches.

"Well, that's good to know," Darryl says with some asperity, also sitting up. "It's nice we're having this conversation five months late."

Alex winks at Darryl as he gets off the bed and starts digging around for his clothes. "Better late than never! Nope, this hockey season there's nobody for me but you, Darryl," he says. "So far, anyway!"

Darryl can feel the growing ache in his chest threatening to choke him. "Well, lucky, lucky me," he murmurs to himself, watching as Alex gets dressed.

"Yeah, that's right," Alex says, grinning at Darryl as he slips on his jacket. "Go on, make fun - but don't worry Darryl, I still gonna find somebody perfect for you, you gonna see!" he says, blowing Darryl a kiss before sauntering out the door.

Darryl closes his eyes and presses his forehead against the wall. The irony is sharp enough to slice Darryl to ribbons; he certainly feels like he's bleeding.
Chapter 11

Two days after the All-Star Game, Alexander Petrov gets traded to the Dallas Comets for Brad Summers.

There are other parts involved in the exchange, to be sure - but those two players are at the heart of the trade, and it's definitely a big deal. Summers is a bona fide second-line center, one that fills a definite hole on the Bears, but Petrov has the scoring touch that the Comets desperately need if they're going to claw their way back into a playoff spot. The media pounces on it, and the rest of the league starts buzzing about it the moment the news breaks. It's a bold, ambitious move, one that shows that McPhee is serious about making a real run at the Cup this year and that he's willing to go all in.

But Darryl's reaction to the news is another wake-up call as to how much trouble he's really gotten himself into regarding Alex; Darryl's reaction should have been concern about the Bears becoming a much stronger contender - a lot of people in the media and around the league think that Summers could very well be the piece that puts the Bears over the top.

"Fuck," Crawford says, disconsolate, when the news spreads in the locker room after practice. "Well, don't worry, I bet we'll still be able to beat them in the playoffs, trade or no trade," he reassures Darryl, completely misinterpreting Darryl's expression.

"I - right," Darryl says, after a pause. "No, I'm not worried about that," he says, being perfectly truthful; his first instinct was to worry about how Alex was going to deal with one of his closest friends getting traded away. Dammit, he is in so much trouble.

When Darryl sees Alex a few days later in Pittsburgh to shoot more footage for the reality show, he can see that his initial reaction was right. It's not that Alex is sulking or purposely moping, but he's definitely missing his usual spark.

"So how are you doing, really?" Darryl asks, looking over at Alex in the passenger seat; they've finished filming at the Iceoplex and Darryl's driving them back to his house.

"Hm? I'm fine," Alex says, roused from staring out the window. Darryl raises an eyebrow at him. Alex sighs. "Ok, I guess - I guess I'm sad," he says, looking away again. "Sasha and me is really close, you know? He been on Bears since before I come over, and he's - he was my best friend on team," he says. He lapses into silence for a few moments, then turns to look at Darryl directly. "I trying really hard not to hate George for making trade," he admits. "I know I supposed to trust him to make best choice for team, make it so we can win Cup, and I do trust him, George is great guy, really smart, I just - " his voice breaks. "I really gonna miss Sasha."

Darryl swallows and looks back at the road. He wonders if McPhee really took into account how much trading away the captain's best friend would inevitably affect team chemistry; and then he wonders how Alex would react if Darryl were somehow traded to or left for the Western Conference, whether Alex would miss him at all.

"Well, I'm sure Petrov will do fine in Dallas," he says. "It's a good organization, they'll take care of him there."

Alex looks down. "Yeah, I hope so," he says, his voice quiet.

The silence stretches. Darryl opens his mouth, then closes it. He bites his tongue, wrestling with
himself over whether he should speak until he can't stand it anymore.

"Did you ever, um, did you ever fool around with him?" he blurs out.

Alex appears startled. "Hm? What, fool around, like fool around?" he asks, waggling his eyebrows. Darryl nods. "I mean, yeah - a few time, but long time ago. When we first become roommate for road game," he says. "But then I meet my second girlfriend, and also we decide is probably not good idea, too much trouble if teammate see or something." Alex tilts his head. "Why you ask?"

"Oh, just curious," Darryl says, tightly. And then, because he's never been the kind of person who could leave well enough alone, he says: "And - did, did you ever fool around with Dima?"

Alex shifts to look at him, his eyebrows raised. "I - no," he says, his voice clearly surprised, although there's a certain undertone of discomfort. "Why, Dima say anything to you?"

"No, I just - " Darryl clears his throat. "I just, you know, I want to have that conversation we should have had five months ago, the one where I ask you if you're clean, how many people you've slept with, that - that sort of thing," he says stiffly. It's not the best excuse, but it's not like he can tell Alex that he's asking because he's being idiotically, inappropriately jealous. He swallows, then looks sideways at Alex. "So, how many people have you slept with?"

"Oh," Alex looks nonplussed. "Well, I sleep with - "

Darryl braces himself; he doesn't really want to know, but it's been eating and eating at him for the past week, and he has to think that knowing the truth is better than continuing to imagine the worst.

"Four," Alex says.

Darryl's startled into looking at Alex directly. "Four." He says flatly. Alex nods, the corner of his mouth quirking upwards at Darryl's surprise. "Ty?" Darryl tries. "Forty? You meant forty, right? Or - four people a night? Four people at a time?"

Now Alex is laughing at him. "No, is just four - my second and third girlfriend, and Sasha, and Seva - he is old teammate from back in Russia, you not know him. Oh, and now you, so I guess is five." Alex mock-scowls at Darryl. "Remember what I say last time? Is not good to sleep with girl unless she your girlfriend, and I only have three girlfriend ever. And really, is not very good idea to fool around with teammate, it - " Alex's expression changes into one of genuine concern. "I mean - you, you thinking about fool around with Dima? Because - "

"No, I am not thinking about fooling around with him," Darryl grinds out. "I do not have any interest in Dima, and if you say anything of the sort to him, I will kill you." Apparently he doesn't need to go to the trouble of coming up with excuses, Alex is doing a fine job manufacturing them himself. It's almost funny how oblivious the other man is, except Darryl feels entirely too pathetic to laugh.

Alex studies a moment longer, then breaks out into a slow grin. "I knew you like me better than Dima! Ha, I'm Darryl Colton favorite Russian!" he beams, bouncing up and down in his seat.

_I like you better than anybody_, Darryl thinks to himself despairingly, even as his heart lightens a little to see Alex smiling again. Being in love with somebody who has no idea is the strangest feeling; every reaction is split right down the middle, bouncing back and forth between the bitter and the sweet.

Darryl had realized very early on that for better or worse, he was going to be linked to Aleksey
Kuznetsov for the rest of his life. But he never expected anything like this.

"No," Darryl says out loud as they pull into the driveway of his house. "Favorite Russian? That would be Belyakov."

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But it's painfully obvious from the Bears' next few games that Petrov's absence is affecting Alex, and affecting him badly. The Bears lose each of their next four games in blowout fashion, which wouldn't necessarily be an indictment of Alex's psychological state, but Darryl catches a few highlights of the games and Alex looks absolutely terrible, slow and ineffective. His post-game interviews are even more painful to watch - Darryl watches as Alex responds to yet another blistering question attacking his play.

"I don't know yet how to fix what I doing wrong," he says quietly. "Is not on purpose, I promise - I gonna keep practicing, I gonna keep talking to coaches about what I have to change, hopefully is gonna get better soon. I know how I play right now not acceptable, not to fans, not team, and definitely not for me."

Darryl turns off the TV, his chest tight with sympathy. He's been exactly where Alex is now, caught in a whirlpool of external and internal criticism with no relief in sight. It's one of the worst feelings in the world.

A glimmering of an idea starts to take hold; after a few moments of consideration, Darryl picks up his cell phone and starts to make a couple calls.

Things apparently haven't gotten any better by the time Darryl flies in to DC a week later for more filming, if Alex's drawn and weary expression when he comes to pick Darryl up at the airport is any indication.

"How is flight, okay?" Alex asks as they pull away from the pick up area.

"It was fine," Darryl says. He looks over, hesitating over whether to say anything. "Are you - are you doing okay? You look - "

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Alex says tiredly. "I know you gonna tell me I gotta play smarter, I gotta ignore feeling sad and everything - and I trying Darryl, I really do try," he says, his jaw set.

"I wasn't going to scold, and I don't doubt that you are," Darryl says quietly. "Alex, you don't - you should stop beating yourself up so much. You'll just end up squeezing your stick too hard if you keep worrying and tormenting yourself thinking about everything."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure if you was playing like I play right now, you not gonna relax or stop worrying," Alex says, his mouth twisting.

Darryl sighs and falls silent, contemplating the other man. The line of tension along Alex's hunched shoulders and neck is drawn tight as a wire. Darryl hopes that his plan will help instead of hurt, but maybe it'll just come off as interfering, or even worse, patronizing. But Nikolai had thought it was a good idea, so that's at least a little reassuring.

"No, don't take this exit, we're not going to Stonebridge," he says. Alex looks at him, his eyebrows raised.

"We not filming today? I thought - "
"No, we are, we're just not filming at the rink," Darryl says, digging out his phone to look up the address Nikolai sent him. Alex raises his eyebrows.

"Then where we going?"

"You'll see," Darryl says.

A half an hour later, Alex parks in front of the elementary school that Darryl's directed them to. He looks around, deeply skeptical.

"Are you sure we in right place?" he asks. "Maybe you mean for us to go get fast food instead of come here?" he says hopefully.

"Nope, we're in the right place," Darryl says, getting out. "See, there's your brother waiting for us - hurry, we're going to be late," he says, dragging Alex by the arm.

"But why you making me go back to school? Is hard enough to graduate first time!" Alex protests. "This not fair - now I gonna call Brynn, we gonna find way to make trouble for you," he says threateningly.

Nikolai rolls his eyes, overhearing Alex's complaints as they come within earshot. "You never need help to make trouble, Лёша, you always make by yourself," he says fondly. "Darryl, is good to see you again," he says, shaking Darryl's hand. "Here is visitor badges you guys have to wear," he says, handing one to each of them. "Come on, they gonna go into classroom soon."

"And - it's okay for the cameras to come in?" Darryl asks as Nikolai herds them through the door.

"Yes, yes, is no problem," Nikolai says as they walk through the hallways. "Mystics always bring their own camera to these visit too, is just a little more paperwork. They both already set up in classroom," he says.

"Wait, wait," Alex says, digging in his heels. "Mystics? What? I'm not going nowhere until someone tell me what happening," he says, his jaw set defiantly.

Darryl sighs and goes back to grab Alex bodily. "Come on - we're tagging along on a Mystics school visit, they're going to talk to the kids and then go play some hoops with them in the gym - this shouldn't be that difficult for you to understand, I know you've done plenty of these yourself with the Bears," he says, pulling Alex along.

"What? But why?" Alex says, eying Darryl suspiciously. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, I - " Darryl takes a breath. "I just - it's like I was saying to you, I saw on TV that you've been looking really terrible - "

"Thanks," Alex says.

"And you really have to stop beating beating yourself up and just give yourself a break, okay?" Darryl plows on determinedly. "If you keep obsessing over everything, then you end up only seeing what you're doing wrong instead of what you can start doing right, and it never gets any better. So, I thought - I thought it would be a good idea if this visit we did something other than hockey, and your brother said you, um, you like to play basketball to relax, and I remembered you had a lot of fun with the kids in Pittsburgh in August, and - " Darryl becomes acutely aware that he's rambling, and Alex is looking at him with strange expression. He takes a deep breath. "Anyways, I called your brother and asked him whether we could tag along with the Mystics if they had a school visit planned, I thought - I thought it might help." Alex is still looking at him oddly, and Darryl can feel
himself becoming defensive. "It - if it won't, I - "

"No, no, I just surprised, is all," Alex says, then flashes a smile of such unabashed affection that Darryl's breath catches in his chest. "Thanks, Darryl."

Darryl swallows painfully around the sudden knot in his throat; it's a good thing that Alex has already turned away, since it means he doesn't see the expression on Darryl's face.

"Саня, Colton, let me introduce, this is Monique Monroe and Katie Langhorne," Nikolai says, gesturing Darryl and Alex over to two tall and very muscular African-American women waiting for them outside the classroom door. "Monique, Katie, this is my little brother Alex Kuznetsov, and this is Darryl Colton - they both play hockey in NHL."

Darryl shakes hands with each woman; he knows intellectually that it isn't true, but he can't shake the impression that either of them could snap him like a twig.

"Nice to meet you guys," Monique says, smiling. "Guess the two of you decided hockey was too much of a wussy sport, wanted to give basketball a try, huh?"

"Nah, Darryl and me just decide let Lebron and Kobe have their own game, feel sorry for them," Alex jokes back. "Now we gonna go say hi to kids, or we gonna keep talk out here?" he says, his hand already on the classroom door.

Darryl hesitates after he follows Alex into the room; he hadn't thought to ask Nikolai what he and Alex should do during the visit, but Alex goes and cheerfully plops himself down among the mass of children already clustered around and sitting on the floor. After a moment, Darryl follows and sits down gingerly next to some of the kids, all of whom ignore him completely, and he realizes with a start that they're all girls. Darryl winces; maybe he should've asked Nikolai exactly what school they were going to.

Then again, if the idea was to cheer Alex up, maybe an all girl's school was the right way to go, he thinks sourly, looking sideways at Alex. The other man is grinning wolfishly at one of the girls sitting cross-legged next to him, already engaged in a spirited conversation with her.

"Hey you guys," Katie says, smiling, as she and Monique come through the door. "Thanks for inviting us to your class today, we're really excited to come talk to you about what we do as WNBA players, and to answer any questions you have for us!"

Darryl's been on plenty of these types of visits before, although he's always been the visitor - it's interesting to be on the other end, so to speak. Most of the content is generally the same; Katie and Monique talk about how important it is to work hard at school and to stay physically active. There's a bit thrown in about how they handle being female athletes, and one of the kids asks a question about why the NBA is so much more popular than the WNBA that has Darryl squirming, but after answering a few more questions from the kids, Monique puts her hands on her hips and says, grinning, "All right, now who's ready to play some ball, huh?"

Cheering, the girls start streaming through the door towards the gym.

It turns out the gym has four hoops that fold down from the ceiling, so Katie and Monique decide to set up four stations for the girls to rotate through, each emphasizing a different basketball skill - layups, dribbling, boxing out, free throws. The two women demonstrate each skill to the girls, and then soon enough Darryl and Alex are both rotating through the stations with the rest of the children.
"Hey Darryl," Alex says, beckoning Darryl over. "Tamisha here don't believe I'm pro hockey player, she recognize me from razor commercial I do a couple month ago, but she think is just because I'm actor or model or something."

"Weeelll..." Tamisha, a lanky girl who can't be more than eight, peers up at Alex skeptically. "I guess it would be pretty stupid to think that you're a model," she admits.

"Yeah, that's ri - hey, wait a minute," Alex protests, Darryl laughing next to him. "Darryl, back me up here, tell Tamisha I'm professional athlete!"

"Ah, you're right that Alex isn't a model," Darryl says, once he's managed to put on a straight face again. "Or an actor; see, the directors for that commercial actually walked around DC one day to find the hairiest person possible, to show that their razors would work even for somebody like Alex."

"Oh, come on," Alex says, obviously torn between laughter and exasperation. "You see what he doing here? He's lying to little kids!" Alex says, turning to Phil and Andrew who are catching the whole exchange on camera. "Darryl Colton, you a bad, bad man," he says, grabbing the basketball the previous girl bounces back to him, now that it's his turn in the free throw line. He sets his feet, balances the ball on his right hand, and shoots.

The ball doesn't even hit the backboard, instead sailing over it completely; it's one of the most embarrassing airballs Darryl's ever seen.

"Yeah, no way you play sports for a living," Tamisha says, shaking her head.

But the truth is, the fact that Tamisha and the other girls have no idea who they're talking to and joking around with seems to allow Alex to relax and loosen up, even more than the other time Darryl saw him around kids in August. He's smiling and laughing the entire time, even as Tamisha and then the other girls at first disparage, then try to give Alex tips on improving his basketball skills. Darryl hangs back, content to watch Alex take the haranguing with good humor, but then during the last few minutes of final scrimmage - Katie and Alex are on one team, Monique and Darryl on the other - Alex finally gives up and just waits for the girls on his team to get close to the basket before lifting them up so they can dunk.

"Hey, that's not fair!" one of the girls on Darryl's team cries out.

"Well, we gotta do what we gotta do to win, right?" Katie says, grinning. "Kuznetsov, if you even try to picking me up you're gonna throw your back out," she says warningly to Alex, who is trying to sneak up behind her.

"Oh, well, is worth try," Alex says, not looking at all embarrassed.

"Come on, you get over there, you gotta help us win too!" the girl who initially protested says to Darryl, imperious.

"I - " Darryl starts. The girl puts her hands on her hips and glares at him; she reminds Darryl entirely too much of Brynn. "Okay, okay," he says hastily, going over to the opposite basket.

When the bell rings, Katie and Alex's team are ahead by a couple of baskets, so those girls cheer briefly in victory before their teacher yells that it's time for everybody to go to lunch, and no loitering. But as the girls are filing out, Tamisha stops next to Alex.

"Are you really a pro athlete?" she asks suspiciously. Alex grins down at her.
"Go google Aleksey Kuznetsov, okay? And - " he digs out a scrap of paper from his wallet, an old receipt or something and starts writing on it. "If you call Bears PR guy, Nate, I tell him to give you ticket to a game, if you want to come watch."

Tamisha takes it, and gives Alex one last skeptical look before she leaves.

"All right, I guess we gotta go too," Alex says, heaving a sigh. "You guys get enough stuff for show?" he says toward Phil and Andrew, who are already packing up the camera and sound equipment.

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem," Phil says, coiling up a loose cable. "Nice change of pace from the rink, too." He nods at both Darryl and Alex. "See you guys later."

Alex is whistling as he and Darryl walk out of the school, back to his car. Darryl watches him slantwise, quietly satisfied at his own work, except -

"Damn, have you seen my watch?" he asks, suddenly noticing that his left wrist is bare.

"No, did you drop somewhere?" Alex says, looking at him.

"I must've, I took it off when we started doing free throws and put it in my pocket. Maybe somewhere in the gym - "

Alex follows him back, and while Darryl hunts around he can hear Alex start to dribble one of the basketballs around, shooting a couple times.

"Oh, there it is," he says, spotting the watch in one of the corners; it must have fallen out of his pocket and gotten kicked to the side. He looks up to see Alex airball another throw. "Really, I don't understand how your mom ended up with a son who can't play basketball at all," he says, shaking his head.

"Hey, I can play basketball! I bet I can beat you at Horse," Alex says, throwing the ball at Darryl's chest.

Darryl catches it, then looks around uneasily. "But th - "

"Aw, come on, they all at lunch, nobody gonna yell at us," Alex says dismissively. "What, you scared I'm gonna beat you?"

And really, Darryl's fallen for that particular taunt from Alex one too many times, except - well, the gym is empty, and they don't have to anywhere to be, and Alex is atrocious at basketball, so - "All right, you're on," he says, taking the first shot.

Except what Darryl had forgotten to take into account is that even if Alex is atrocious at basketball, Darryl himself is only a smidgen better. They each end up at H-O-R after way, way too many shots, but once they've gotten to three letters it's like both their hands turn to clay. Alex shoots, misses, then Darryl shoots, misses; Alex picks a new spot, shoots, misses, then Darryl shoots, misses - lather, rinse, repeat.

"Oh my god, this is ridiculous," Darryl says, finally throwing up his hands. "Come on, we should go, they're going to need the gym back soon," he says.

"Ha! I got last shot that go in, and you start first, so I win!" Alex says, pointing at Darryl in triumph.
"No, you didn't win, that's not how Horse works," Darryl protests.

"I did too win, I win Ho-or, I win Ho-or!" Alex sing-songs, dancing around.

"Jesus, shut up, you can't say that in an elementary school," Darryl says, stepping closer and frantically motioning at Alex to be quiet. "Especially not in a girl's school, you idiot!"

Alex blinks at him once, uncomprehending - but then realization dawns and the other man doubles over, guffawing.

"But I would win that game too, you know I would," he says, finally straightening up. For some inexplicable reason the sight of Alex's mischief-filled smile makes Darryl's chest fill with affection so rapidly and painfully that Darryl can't stand it, and so -

And so -

And so Darryl steps forward and presses a kiss against the corner of Alex's mouth.

It's quick, barely a second or two, but in that span Darryl can feel Alex freeze beneath him.

Darryl steps back hurriedly. Alex is looking at him wide-eyed, utterly still.

"What?" Darryl says nervously, glancing around - but no, the gym is still completely empty, it's still just the two of them. "I - Alex?" He can't read Alex's expression at all. The man is frozen in place, staring at Darryl like he's never seen him before in his life - as if Darryl's just done something extraordinary, something completely astonishing.

"Oh," Alex says, softly.

"What?" Darryl asks again, shifting from foot to foot. Seriously, he's starting to get a little freaked out by how Alex is looking at him.

Alex coughs, then suddenly becomes more animated than ever. "I mean, ho! If you gonna be so cranky about third letter, then I win at ho, okay? All right, you find watch, good, great, let's go," he babbles, positively fleeing the scene - before Darryl can explain that actually, yelling about winning 'ho' is only marginally better than yelling about winning 'hor'.

A few hours later, Darryl looks at Alex with a mixture of frustration and bewilderment. Darryl had thought that playing basketball with the kids had cheered the other man up considerably, but now he's is acting in a way Darryl's never seen before: Aleksey Kuznetsov is actually acting shy, almost skittish.

"Look, what the fuck's wrong with you?" Darryl finally demands after Alex tells him there are leftovers in the refrigerator and makes as if he's about to leave. From the first time Alex had Darryl over at his house (that initial drunken visit doesn't really count, to be fair), he's never been anything but a gracious host; this is deeply unlike him.

"Nothing! I - nothing, I just, I gotta, um, go, go out - somewhere - " Alex stammers, then disappears out the front door without another word.

Alex is still acting weird the next morning, not even meeting Darryl's eyes when he drops Darryl off at the airport.

"Alex, if I've done something wrong, if - if I've done anything to offend you - " Darryl says awkwardly.
"No, no, nothing wrong!" Alex says immediately, so defensive it's obvious he's lying. "Ok, nice to see you, now time for you to go away," he says, literally pushing Darryl out of the car. It looks like he's barely going to give Darryl enough time to get his backpack from the back seat, but at the last moment Alex rolls down the passenger side window and says to Darryl, half-guilty: "Darryl, um - thanks for visit with Mystics yesterday, is - " Alex swallows visibly. "Is very kind of you."

"No problem," Darryl says slowly. Well, great, but that's no explanation by why Alex is being so weird. Alex shoots him one last strange, unfathomable look - then pulls away, leaving Darryl as bewildered as ever.

Alex's uncharacteristic reticence continues; these days, Darryl's used to getting at least one text message a day from Alex, if not three or four. Usually short, usually nonsensical, but - but still, it's become something Darryl's become accustomed to - okay, if he's honest, something that he looks forward to.

Now, though, there's complete radio silence. No text messages, no phone calls, no e-mails, nothing. Darryl debates leaving Alex alone; obviously something happened during Darryl's visit that had upset him, so perhaps the best thing to do is to let Alex work through it himself.

But then Darryl considers whether Alex would leave him alone if their positions were reversed, and he realizes that nope, Alex would probably pester him more than ever. And so for the next few days, Darryl determinedly continues texting and e-mailing Alex, trying his hand at being as annoying as possible.

You forget how to use your phone? I know it's complicated for someone like you, but you never seemed to have any problems before, Alex!

Okay, it's weak, Darryl'll admit it - but he come on, he doesn't make it his life's work to irritate and annoy people the way Alex does. And he can't really needle Alex about hockey, because the original problem that prompted Darryl to set up the visit with the Mystics still remains. Alex's next two games after Darryl's visit are even more horrendous than the ones before it; it almost looks like Alex has forgotten how to skate, his play is so thoroughly terrible. But by the third game, Alex seems to get back in form, at least from what Darryl can tell from the highlights from the Bears' games; Alex still isn't responding to Darryl's prodding.

Eventually, though, Darryl's persistence pays off; Darryl and the Hawks are in Anaheim for the last game of their Western Conference trip when Darryl's phone vibrates. Darryl pulls it out of his pocket and sees that Alex's texted him for the first time in what feels like ages.

You think they put me in this room on purpose? Im not devil!

Darryl reads the message, then scrolls down to see that Alex's sent him a picture of what looks like a hotel room door, the number 666 on the plaque next to it. Darryl lets out breath that's half-laugh, half-strangled noise of exasperation and relief; he hadn't realized how much he's been waiting to hear from Alex.

Maybe when they heard your accent, they thought you were from New Jersey

He texts back, then slips his phone back into his pocket with a much lighter heart.

His good mood lasts all the way until the Hawk's pre-game morning practice at Anaheim Ice. In the flukiest of flukes, Darryl loses an edge and goes down flailing a little - shouldn't be a big deal, it doesn't happen often but ninety-nine times out of a hundred he just gets back up again. Except this time as Darryl gets back to his feet, he feels a sudden squeezing, wrenching pain in his back,
just below his left shoulder.

"Oh, come on, I'm sure it isn't anything serious," Darryl protests as the trainer probes at his shoulder, pulling Darryl's upper arm back to flex the muscle. "Ow - owowow," Darryl pulls his arm away hastily and glares at Chris.

"Yeah, okay," Prescott says, clearly unconvinced. "Nope, you're a scratch for tonight," he says, looking at Chris, who's shaking his head regretfully. "Better safe than sorry."

"Are you joki - oh, come on," Darryl swears, because the expression on Prescott's face tells him he's not winning this fight.

Darryl sulks the entire day, and he's frowning when he watches the game from one of the skyboxes that evening, sitting next to the assistant coaches. It doesn't really help Darryl's mood to see that the Hawks are winning; of course it's worse when he has to watch them lose when he can't play, but having to sit on the sidelines and watch his team celebrating and kicking ass without him isn't any fun either. He stops by the locker room briefly to congratulate his teammates after they beat the Bison 4-2, but after a few minutes of fidgeting he gets out of there as quickly as possible.

I *hate* being scratched, it fucking sucks, Darryl texts Alex, pulling out his phone in a fit of irritation.

??? Alex replies a few seconds later.

*Pulled trap muscle @ morning practice, got scratched for game vs bison*, Darryl texts back, flagging down a cab to take him back to the hotel; he really doesn't feel like waiting to take the bus with the rest of the team.

Aaww, u wanna come over and i can kiss it better? :P I have room aaaaall 4 me! Alex sends back.

Darryl snorts and is about to text back a sarcastic reply, when suddenly the pic Alex sent him this morning flashes in his mind's eye. He knows that hotel, he's stayed there before. Brow furrowed, Darryl quickly looks up the Bear's schedule - and sure enough, by some quirk of scheduling the Bears played the Kings tonight; Alex is only a few miles away.

*U already done w ur game? how'd it go?* Darryl texts.

Yeah, finish quick, back in hotel already - we beat LA 5-1!! Alex texts back.

Darryl half-smiles, then pauses. He thumbs back to Alex's previous message; that's right, Petrov used to be Alex's road roommate, they must not have gotten around to assigning Alex a new one yet. Darryl stares at the text for a moment, then thinks - well, why the fuck not?

"Hey," Darryl says, shifting up in his seat to talk to the cab driver. "Sorry, I want to change my destination - could you take me to downtown LA?"

About half an hour later, Darryl's standing in front of Room 666 of the JW Marriott, wondering if he's lost his mind. But evidently his body's decided that it has had enough of his mind's dithering, and so Darryl watches himself raise his arm and knock on the door.

There's no response for a moment, and Darryl has a moment of panic that he's in the wrong place. There are hundreds of hotels in Los Angeles, maybe -

The door swings open to reveal a very surprised Alex.
"Darryl?" Alex says, staring at him incredulously.

"Uh - " Darryl says, scrambling. "You - you said you would kiss it better," he stammers, gesturing vaguely.

"I - " Alex looks torn between laughter and bewilderment. "I guess I did, is true," he says, opening the door wider. "All right, come in."

Darryl goes in - his left shoulder is still giving off an errant twinge here and there, although he can already tell that it should be fine in a couple days. He really, really hates to admit it, but Prescott still probably made the right call to scratch him tonight.

Darryl turns and finds Alex just standing there and looking at him, that same unfathomable look.

"Oh, for - look, I gave you plenty of time to have your freak-out or whatever," Darryl says, irritated. "Stop acting weird, all right?"

"I - wha - okay! Sorry! I mean, uh," Alex looks incredibly jumpy. He coughs. "I mean, if you hurt, you should sit down," he says, gesturing to the armchair near the window.

So Darryl goes and sits down at the edge of the chair, except it's his turn to be startled when Alex kneels in front of him and carefully starts folding up the bottom of Darryl's shirt.

"Uh - "

"You say you pull trap muscle, which is shoulder, right?" Alex says, looking up at him. "So, which side?"

"Left," Darryl says dumbly, watching as Alex scoots around so he's kneeling behind Darryl on the left side. "Um, what - "

Alex traces a line down the upper part of Darryl's spine, then leans in and kisses his back. It's the briefest, lightest of touches - just a brush of lips over the base of his shoulder blade, Alex's finger still resting along the curve of Darryl's spine - but Darryl can feel a shiver run through his entire body. He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to stay still.

Except then Darryl feels Alex starting to roll his shirt down again.

"Whoa, whoa, what the hell are you doing?" Darryl turns, his eyes flying open.

Alex looks up at him, frowning. "You come here for me to kiss better, I kiss better. Isn't that point?"

"No, the point was for us to have sex!" Darryl snapped, unnerved into bluntness. "And we didn't do anything during my last visit either, so that's two chances for sex you've passed on!" Darryl peers at Alex suspiciously, trying to feel the other man's forehead. "Are you feeling okay? Are you sick or something?"

"No, of course I not sick!" Alex says indignantly, batting Darryl's hand away.

"Then what the fuck's wrong with you?" Darryl demands.

"Nothing, nothing! I, I just - " Suddenly Alex is looking everywhere except at Darryl.

_I'm just not interested in you anymore_, a voice whispers in Darryl's mind. Darryl swallows against
the sudden knifing pain in his chest - well, if that's the case, he's not going to give Alex an easy out. No, Alex is going to have to say it to his face.

"What? You having trouble getting it up these day?" Darryl says, an edge entering his voice. "Yeah, I think I see some gray in your hair," he reaches out, bracing himself to be pushed away.

But no, no, apparently an erectile dysfunction joke is exactly what it takes to get Alex to behave normally.

"Darryl - " Alex sounds like he's trying really hard to be angry, but his expression has already melted into exasperated amusement.

Darryl grins back, almost giddy with relief. "Well, c'mon, old man," he says, leaning in -

And Alex crowds him back against the window to deepen the kiss, back against the glittering golden lights of the city below.

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Davies is fast asleep when Darryl gets back to the hotel room in Anaheim, and he doesn't question Darryl the next morning when Darryl says he was at the hotel gym until late.

"You better not have made your back worse, though," Davies says, yawning as he gets out of bed. "Otherwise Coach is gonna kick your ass," he adds, disappearing into the bathroom.

Darryl spends the flight back to Pittsburgh looking out the window, pensive. There was still something strange about the way Alex had acted last night, he thinks. Alex had been - tentative? But no, that wasn't exactly the right word. He'd been - careful, more careful than a mildly strained back muscle warranted. It was almost as if he'd been afraid that Darryl would turn away if he pushed too hard. But that doesn't make any sense; Alex is the same guy who'd showed up on Darryl's doorstep and pushed him up against the wall, even after their first attempt at sleeping with each other would've sent anybody else running for the hills.

But at least Alex is talking to him again, so Darryl stops worrying about it. After a couple days of no-contact practice, his back is mostly feeling normal again. Much to Darryl's relief, Prescott puts him back on the roster for the next game, at home against the Riders. They win 3-1, so Darryl's in a good mood in the locker room afterwards - except the question he's blindsided by at the post-game scrum changes everything.

"Darryl, do you have any comment on the pictures showing Kuznetsov kissing another man in Los Angeles?"

For a moment, the room actually goes fuzzy at the edges. Darryl bites down hard on the inside of his mouth, the pain snapping his vision back into focus.

"I - excuse me?" Darryl's distantly amazed he can still speak, let alone sound relatively normal.

The reporter thrusts an article - apparently printed from Deadspin - in his face. Darryl takes it with suddenly nerveless fingers, and looks down to see a picture of him and Alex kissing in the hotel in Los Angeles. The photo was obviously taken from a great distance, probably from another building; the image quality is so poor that neither of them are clearly recognizable, but it's undoubtedly a picture of a man kissing another man.

"No," Darryl says; this cannot be happening.
"What was that?"

Darryl looks up, swallows. "No, I don't have any comment," he says roughly.

"But -"

"Sorry, I have to go," Darryl says, blindly pushing his way through to the crowd of reporters.

Darryl heads straight for his car, gets in and checks his phone. There's a number of messages and missed calls from other people, but Darryl scrolls down to see about a dozen missed calls from Alex, - no texts, though. Before he can lose his nerve, he tries calling Alex - it goes straight to voicemail, he must've turned it off. Darryl shoves the phone back in his jacket and starts driving. He can't think, he's having difficulty breathing - it feels like his heart is trying to pound its way out of his chest, a dull roar of blood in his ears.

As soon as he gets home he starts up his computer, brings up Deadspin and starts reading. It's the first article that pops up, splashed all over the page; it was posted a couple hours ago, it must've been published while Darryl and the Hawks were still playing the Riders.

After a few minutes, Darryl closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. He clamps down on the urge to laugh, because if he starts he's going to become hysterical.

It's not that it's funny - really, it's the furthest thing from funny - but it's just that if there was ever such a thing as a perfect storm, then this is it. The photographer hadn't even been targeting Alex, he'd apparently had no idea that he was actually snapping pictures of anybody famous - but, hey, right, so this is what paparazzi photographers do for fun; when there aren't actual bona fide celebrities around to pester, it totally makes sense to invade the privacy of anybody who's careless enough to leave the curtains open.

It still shouldn't have gone anywhere; a few grainy photos of two guys kissing in a hotel room isn't a story, it's not even worth batting an eyelash over. The pictures are grainy enough that trying to identify either of them is impossible, although Darryl sees with a jolt that on some of the images they've circled the tattoos on Alex's abdomen and back. But the tattoos only show up as dark smudges in the shots, though, so it's still not a smoking gun or anything.

But the day the Bears were L.A, apparently one of the Bears players tweeted about Alex getting assigned to Room 666. Even then, that's barely enough to figure it out - but somehow, somehow they did. The article has a screenshot of the tweet, then a picture of the Marriott.

An anonymous source confirmed that this is the hotel the Bears stayed at, right across from Staples Center. We took it upon ourselves to confirm that the photos were actually of Room 666.

Darryl scrolls down to see another picture of Alex's hotel room - same angle as the original shot, except now it's daytime and there's a person at the window holding up a poster saying, 'I am standing in Room 666', the words a little blurry but still perfectly readable.

The article goes on, but Darryl can't stand it anymore. He closes his laptop and pushes it away; he puts his elbows on the table and grinds the heels of his hands into his eyelids. It must've taken the people at Deadspin some time to put all the pieces of the puzzle together since the story is only being published now, and even then they still don't have the full picture - if they had any idea that it was Darryl in that room kissing Alex -

Darryl takes in a deep breath, telling himself not to hyperventilate. But he still feels like he's going to jump out of his skin; he gets up and starts pacing, except that's not enough either. He has to get
out of the house, otherwise he's going to explode.

Darryl quickly changes into track pants and a t-shirt and grabs his keys, then he's out the door and running along the dark, quiet streets. The familiar rhythm of falling into his stride, the impact of his feet hitting the pavement one after another helps calm him down a little; it at least clears his mind enough that he can start thinking again.

The evidence in the article is strongly suggestive, but it's only circumstantial; Alex hasn't been incontrovertibly outed, and Darryl isn't implicated at all in the story.

His steps abruptly stutter - wait, he isn't implicated in the initial story, but - it's not entirely out of the question that somebody saw him on the way to the hotel, or that somebody exceptionally suspicious might put Darryl's absence after the Bison game together with the time stamp on the photos.

But then Darryl comes to a dead stop, his blood freezing. Jesus fucking Christ, he's a fucking idiot - a hotel like the Marriott has security cameras all over the place. If any tape leaks then it's game over, instantly. Darryl looks up at the sky, trying to stifle the panic growing in his stomach.

Okay. Okay, think logically. A deep breath, and he starts running again.

First, both on the way to LA and back to Anaheim, neither of the taxi drivers had actually gotten a good look at Darryl; it had been dark, and Darryl had been wearing his baseball cap the way he usually does when he goes out in public. Second, the only person who could reasonably be suspicious of Darryl's absence after the Bison game would be Davies, and Dups isn't a suspicious kind of guy; Darryl just can't see him remembering Darryl's excuse and putting it together with paparazzi shooting photos of Alex in LA.

Third - even though there's undoubtedly tape of Darryl at the Marriott, the baseball cap should've helped shield his face from any cameras looking down, and it's not like the hotel would have anything to gain by leaking the video. In fact, it would be in their best interests to keep it under wraps, especially since Alex and the Bears' public relations and legal teams are undoubtedly going to put heavy pressure on them to keep any footage private.

But that right there, that's really the heart of the problem. The thing is, Darryl has no idea what Alex is going to do.

The easiest and probably most instinctive thing for Alex to do is to deny, deny, deny. Darryl doesn't have any doubt that the publicists and lawyers that Bears have are skilled enough that they'd be able to mount a truly formidable media offensive - the best defense is a good offense type of strategy, so to speak. But denial would inevitably spark further curiosity and speculation, and at that point it would mean Alex would be committed to bluffing his way out, betting that neither Deadspin or anybody else would be able to dig up more conclusive proof.

Or instead of denying it, Alex could come out. Darryl swallows, forces himself to keep running, forces himself to follow the chain of thought to the conclusion. One route Alex could take would be to come out as gay - well, really, as bisexual, but of course the media is going to focus on the part about liking men - but Alex could leave Darryl's name out of it. Again, it would be rolling the dice that nobody would find enough evidence to implicate Darryl too, but - it's a despicable thought, but Darryl can't stop the thought once it pops into his mind - but if Alex takes most of the heat in public, then maybe the media won't pursue the particulars of which men Alex was fooling around with.

Darryl grimaces; no, he can't count on that either. Tiger Woods getting raked over the coals for the
first dozen mistresses hadn't stopped the tabloids from going after the thirteenth, or fourteenth, or however many there ended up being. But then, by that point, those women had been seeking the notoriety, right? Darryl starts running faster.

Or - or Alex could come out, and pull Darryl out of the closet with him. Darryl stops, the sudden wave of nausea rising in his throat bringing him to a halt. He bends over, his hands on his knees; sweat drips down his face, stinging his eyes.

It's just that - in general, Darryl really does believe that honesty is the best policy, that being honest isn't just the most principled route, but it's usually the easiest, too. Except - except he can't even begin to picture the kind of shitstorm that would explode if it came out that it was him and Alex in that photo, if the public finds out that the two of them have been sleeping together for the past few months. His conversation with Malone back in December had conjured up all sorts of horrible images about what would happen in this exact situation, but Darryl knows beyond a doubt that the reality would be even worse than he can imagine.

Darryl goes down into a squat, hoping the dizziness will subside. It would be one thing if the two of them were coming out as a committed couple, if they could weather this hand in hand. Certainly the angle the media would take would be vastly different than if the whole truth came out, if they knew that -

Darryl's heart abruptly clenches so hard that he actually has to put a hand to the ground to steady himself, panting.

If they knew that Darryl and Alex are nothing more than fuck buddies, that they use each other for casual sex and nothing more.

Because that is the truth, isn't it? Darryl squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, then forces himself to look straight ahead, swallowing. Whatever his own feelings for Alex are, the truth is that Alex sees him only as one acquaintance among many - a warm body to have fun with when it's convenient, easily forgotten when it's not. Oh, their interactions this year have probably upgraded Darryl to the point that Alex considers him a friend, but Darryl has to stop kidding himself; Alex is the kind of person who has a thousand friends, the kind of person who's friendly with everybody and anybody.

Darryl exhales, hard - the forced breath feels like a dagger tearing its way up through his chest.

The question is this: is Darryl willing to destroy his career for the sake of a man who doesn't love him back, and probably never will?

Darryl has to put both his hands on the ground now - his chest feels like it's being crushed in a vise, he can't breathe at all. Hockey - hockey is everything. He can't - he can't -

Darryl shakes his head furiously and surges up off the ground. He can't finish the thought. The only thing he can do now is run.

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By the time Darryl lets himself back into his house, it's hours later; his muscles are trembling with exhaustion, but even after he drags himself up the stairs and falls into bed, he still can't sleep. He stares up at the ceiling, his mind unable to slow down. How the hell did he end up here? he asks himself.

Wait, no. He knows exactly how he ended up here; unbidden, the image of Alex bounding onto the
ice at Adidas Arena back in August rises in his mind. This started with Alex bulling his way into Darryl's life and sticking there, even against Darryl's initial protests and efforts to push him back out. Suddenly the dynamics of their relationship look completely different; looking back, Darryl can see how all season Alex has continuously goaded and irritated him into acting against his own better judgment, into acting in ways that are utterly uncharacteristic for him. It's like Alex genuinely drives Darryl insane; in retrospect, there's no way Darryl can justify to himself what he's done with Alex, for Alex, allowed Alex to do to him.

*What I'm supposed to say here is that you've shown extremely poor judgment by helping an opposing player, and that by doing so you've not only compromised your integrity as a member of the team, but your actions have undermined the health of the entire Hawks organization,* Mario's voice echoes in his mind, and at that moment Darryl knows that Mario was wrong to reassure him back in November, and his dad and Crawford were right to criticize him.

He has compromised himself. His developing feelings for Alex have blinded him from recognizing how unprofessional he's actually been. Darryl turns over, burying his head in his pillow. He'd always thought being unprofessional in the NHL meant getting drunk the night before a game, or not staying in shape, or showing up late to practice - but what he's done is far, far worse, and he doesn't know how to fix it.

Darryl doesn't know how long he lies there, anxiety and fear and recrimination chasing each other round and round in his head, but he suddenly hears what sounds like somebody knocking at the door. He remains frozen for a moment, but then his phone vibrates. He grabs it and looks at the screen - it's Alex. In an instant he's out of bed and down the stairs.

Alex pushes his way in the moment Darryl cracks open the door.

"Darryl - you okay?" he asks. "Are you - are you okay?"

Darryl can't help it; he lets out a sharp bark of laughter, the sound bitter in his throat. "Yeah, right, I'm doing fine," he bites out. "What the hell happened?" He feels like he has a live wire running through him, every nerve in his body jumping.

"I don't know," Alex says. He looks ghastly; hollows beneath his eyes, his face drawn and exhausted. "I have no idea what happen."

Darryl can feel his hands curl into fists, his nails biting into the palms of his hands. "Okay," he says. There's a dizzying sense of surreality about the whole situation, like he's stepped through a looking glass somewhere without realizing it. "So what's the plan? Do your PR people already have a master plan to deny that anything ever happened? Or are you here to tell me the game's up, that you're going public with the whole sordid story about the two of us tomorrow morning, splash it all over the headlines?"

Suddenly Alex looks incredibly angry, fury lighting up his face. "Of course I not gonna go public wi - "

"Good," Darryl says, cutting Alex off.

And just like that, everything becomes crystal clear.

"Great," Darryl says very precisely. "Then you and your people can figure out how you're going to sweep all of this under the rug and leave me the fuck out of it."

Alex takes a step back. "Darryl - " he says, his voice sounding uncertain.
"Did you not hear me?" Darryl says tightly. Now he recognizes what his body's trying to tell him, what this coiled, spring-loaded sensation means: he's itching for a fight, and unless Alex leaves then that's exactly what's going to happen. "Here, let me make it clear enough so that even you can understand - I want you to leave right now, and I don't want to see or talk to you again. You're the one who started all this shit with me this year, and now I'm taking myself out of it, got it? This is your goddamn mess, so you're the one who gets to clean it up!"

Alex is utterly still; Darryl can't read his reaction at all. The other man's eyes are shadowed, his expression closed.

Like a stone dropping through a pane of glass, a phone rings. Alex's hand goes to his pocket, but his gaze doesn't waver from Darryl's face.

"Okay," he says, his voice very soft. He takes a step back, then another, his left hand reaching out for the door handle. "Darryl - "

"What?" Darryl snaps, practically vibrating from tension.

"Take care, Darryl," Alex says, his eyes intent.

And with that he turns away, pulling open the door as he answers his cell. "Hello?"

The door closes, leaving Darryl standing there, alone.
Darryl doesn't know how he manages to fall asleep, but he must somehow; the alarm ringing in his ear the next morning wakes him up with a jolt. He drives to practice knowing that he must look like shit - he certainly feels like shit - but everybody's way too busy gossiping to pay any attention to him. Teenage girls have nothing on an NHL locker room when there's a juicy rumor to talk about, and this is the juiciest of them all.

"Hey, you see this?" Crawford demands, coming over to Darryl's locker and brandishing a tabloid. "You have any idea if that's actually Kuznetsov in the photos?"

Darryl grunts wordlessly, concentrating on getting dressed.

"Yeah, I guess it's impossible to tell," Crawford says, squinting closely. "But seriously, you didn't call him to try to get the inside scoop?"

"No," Darryl says shortly, lacing up. "It's none of my business." And it really isn't, not anymore.

"Yeah, but - "

"No." Darryl snaps, straightening up. "It's not any of my business, it's not any of your business, and it's beneath you and everybody else on this team to gossip about it. Some fucker may have decided to invade Alex's privacy and splash it all over the place, but I'll be damned if we jump all over it like dogs on raw meat, you understand me?"

The entire room falls silent at the vehemence in Darryl's voice. Darryl looks around sharply; there are more than a few shame-faced looks, but after a few moments a low murmur starts up again.

Darryl exhales and walks out of the room. Of course it's not going to actually stop them from gossiping, but hopefully they'll at least do it out of his earshot.

Practice is more than half over when Crawford gets the courage to sidle up to Darryl again.

"Hey," he says, scanning the sides of the rink. "Where're Ben and Erik? Aren't they supposed to be filming you?"

Darryl grits his jaw; he can almost see Crawford's line of thought - if Darryl's not going to offer up any information, maybe the camera guys will know something since the reality show films Alex too.

"Yeah, well, I don't know," he says. It's either evidence of how used Darryl's become to having them around or of how completely distracted he is that their absence didn't even register; well, all right, it's almost certainly the latter - Darryl's having trouble getting through even the simplest of drills today.

But Darryl finds out why Ben and Erik are absent once practice ends; Tracy's waiting for him rink side.

"Darryl, hey," Tracy says, coming after him as he comes off the ice.

"Tracy," Darryl says warily.

"Do you have a moment?" She looks tired, but there's a sort of suppressed energy about her that he
doesn't know how to interpret.

Once she's drawn him off to the side, she holds a pile of papers at him.

"What is this?" Darryl asks, taking the stack and looking through it.

"It's termination papers for your participation in '8 and 87'," she says.

"What?" he asks sharply.

"I assume you've heard about what happened to Alex in LA," she says. "I called Alex last night - well, more like extremely early this morning, really - and asked him to let us keep filming him."

"You what?" Tracy raises an eyebrow at his outburst. She looks at him for a moment.

"Darryl," she says slowly. "I promise you I have Alex's best interests at heart. I didn't ask just for the sake of being nosy - I asked because," she hesitates. "Because how Alex chooses to conduct himself in the next few weeks is going to mean a lot to an awful lot of people, and having that on film, on record is going to be really important."

"You - are you going to actually air that footage? You actually think he's going to, what, to admit anything?"

"I don't know," she says, looking at him directly. "I don't know how Alex is going to choose to handle this, and I don't know whether he's going to allow us to show any of what we actually film. I told him that if he didn't give us express consent, we wouldn't show a second of it on air, and we'd keep complete confidentiality about anything we saw or heard. He agreed, on the condition that I release you from any further participation in the show."

Darryl swallows. "You're going to stop filming me?"

"Yes," Tracy says. "Alex said that it wouldn't be fair for you to have to deal with everything that he's going to have to handle, and frankly speaking - " Tracy shrugged. "We're going to have all we can manage just focusing on him. And, well - " she bites her lip for a moment. "If this falls out the way I think it might, there isn't going to be much interest in what you're doing, anyways."

She gives him a brief, half-apologetic grin; oh, if only she knew, Darryl thinks to himself as he takes the pen she offers.

"So no more visits to DC for me," he says. "No more visits to Pittsburgh for Alex." What the hell is this sick feeling in his stomach? Darryl asks himself savagely. This is what he wants, isn't it?

Tracy lets out a short laugh. "Oh no, no no no," she says. "It's going to be a complete circus around him - you wouldn't want to deal with any of that, trust me."

"No," Darryl says, after a pause. "I guess not," he says. He signs the papers.

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Darryl tries his best to keep his ears shut, but it's impossible to ignore the rumors running rampant. Alex has apparently disappeared from the face of the earth - the Bears are on the last leg of their Western Conference road trip, but they play the last couple games without their captain. Darryl catches a clip of their post-game locker room scrum in Colorado, and it looks like all of them are keeping their mouths zipped - every question relating to Alex is met with a stony 'no comment.'
Their refusal to talk only means that everybody else feels free to gossip as much as they like; the media works itself into an absolute frenzy of speculation. The rumors range from denial - of course it wasn't Kuznetsov in the picture, the Bears were in a different hotel altogether - to uncomfortably close to the truth - that it is Kuznetsov in the pictures, that he's secretly gay and he's had an illicit lover for years - to outrageously despicable - that's definitely Kuznetsov in the pictures, but the other person in the photos is drugged, is a prostitute, is underage, is a drugged underage prostitute.

(Darryl doesn't know whether to laugh or cry about the underage rumor; he knows he's slightly smaller and lighter than Alex, but come on, seriously?)

And of course the media asks Darryl about it. No, he hasn't talked to Alex since the pictures were published; no, he would prefer not to speculate; no, Darryl didn't talk to Alex directly about Darryl no longer participating in the reality show, but as he understands it the producers want to focus their energies on filming Alex for the rest of the season, and he's perfectly fine with that.

Finally, after three days of silence, the Bears PR team issues a release stating that Alex will be holding a press conference at Kettler on Monday afternoon. Darryl doesn't really understand why they've waited so long; he'd expected at least a few dozen strongly-worded denials by now, perhaps with a handful of legalistic threats aimed at the various media outlets that are blowing up over the whole thing. But maybe Alex is just marshaling his forces to mount a full blown defense; maybe that sort of thing takes time.

Darryl wrestles with himself over whether or not to watch the press conference - watching Alex read aloud a pack of stilted, ghostwritten lies is going to be painful, Darryl can already tell by the twisting in his gut - but in the end he can't help it, he switches on the TV.

The first thing Darryl notices is that Alex looks different; he's clean-shaven, and he's had his hair cut short. He doesn't look like his normal shaggy, scruffy self, he looks - well, he looks like he's trying to come across as clean-cut and polished. He's wearing a dark, conservatively cut suit, a button-down shirt that's been ironed and pressed, brown leather loafers. He doesn't look like a hockey player, he looks like an accountant.

Alex pauses for a moment at the podium. His expression is - not what Darryl expected. He doesn't appear scared, or subdued, or guilty. He looks resolute, as if he's come to a decision that he's determined to stand by; an inner flame burning steadily, no wavering or flickering at all.

"Good afternoon," Alex says. "Thank you all for coming." He's speaking carefully, slowly; he seems to be making a real effort to clamp down on his accent. Darryl realizes with a start that he's not missing his upper left tooth; he must be wearing a spacer. "I am here today to talk about some photos that were published a few days ago, pictures that supposed to - that supposedly - " Alex corrects himself, looking down at the paper he has at the podium, "show me kissing another man." He pauses for a moment, swallowing, then looks up.

"I am horrified that Deadspin choose - chose to invade my privacy in such a offensive way, but - " Darryl braces himself - here it comes - "I am not ashamed or embarrassed of anything I have done. That is me in those pictures, and I am proud to say I am bisexual," Alex says, looking directly into the camera steadily.

Darryl's legs give out. He barely manages to catch himself; he sits down, heavily, on the couch.

"I have always been attracted to men and women, and although I never - have never been public about it, it is because I believe I have ri - the right to keep my personal life private," Alex continues. "But to deny now would suggest that I am ashamed of who I am, and I am not ashamed." He takes a breath. "And so I have agreed to allow Tracy Rosner and her team to
continue filming me for the rest of season, because I have nothing to hide." At that, an audible murmur breaks out from the audience in the press room, but Alex keeps going.

"You all probably - okay, definitely - " he actually cracks grin, a hint of his familiar mischief showing - "have lots of questions for me, and I promise I gonna be as honest and open as I can. I gonna try to answer everybody during Bears' normal press scrums, the scrums we got for practice and games, but - " Alex's expression abruptly turns serious.

"I know a lot of people curious about who is other guy in picture - " Darryl's blood suddenly runs ice-cold - "but I gotta insist that even if you guys not gonna respect my privacy, please at least respect him," Alex says, his voice intense. "I tell you right now he is not druggie, he not under eighteen, and he not prostitute - he is very private person, and is totally unfair for him to get drag into this. You guys can come after me all you want, is fine - but please, please not go hunting or chasing after somebody who don't want to get involve in this at all. I not even in contact with him anymore, so any question you have should be for me, just me."

Alex exhales, once. "Okay," he says, looking at his paper again, his speech regaining its previous formality. "Finally, I would like to thank my teammates for all their support, it - " Alex's voice gets noticeably rougher. "It is - it's really humbling. I want to thank Ted and Bruce and George for standing by me," he says, "and of course my parents and my brother, I never - I - this gonna be impossible without you guys." Alex swallows. "Most importantly, I want to thank all the fans who have sent their support and encouragement. It mean everything to me, and I promise - I swear, I am going to try my best to be worthy of your loyalty." He exhales. "Thank you," he says, then steps away from the podium.

Darryl turns off the tv, then puts his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He feels like he's been sucker-punched; he can't get enough air.

What the hell was that? "Of course I not gonna go public - " Darryl inhales sharply at the memory. Obviously something had happened between now and then to change Alex's mind, but he has no idea what. He gets up and starts pacing.

Did someone talk to him into this? But who would it benefit? Darryl can't imagine that Alex's family would want him to have to go through this, and it's obviously going to be a nightmare for the Bears. And - and how does this actually affect Darryl?

Darryl put his fingers up against his squeezed-shut eyelids and rubs vigorously. Has anything actually changed? Has anything actually changed? It's a rotten, cowardly thought, but the way Alex has handled this so far leaves Darryl safe, leaves him hidden. Would it actually help anything if Darryl came out too? Wouldn't it just worsen the impending shitstorm, worsen it exponentially? As ugly as the innuendo and speculation about Alex is now, Darryl coming out too would be like throwing a lit match into a vat of oil - an explosion causing immense collateral damage to Darryl's family, for his teammates, for Vince, for the entire Hawks organization.

No, the fallout would extend even further; the league would endure incredible abuse if it was revealed that its two biggest stars use each other as casual fucks - the sport's public image would suffer substantially.

Darryl puts his elbows on his knees and looks at the floor blankly, but there's no answer in sight. This move from Alex has taken him completely by surprise, and he has no idea how to react.

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The next morning, Darryl realizes that he's not going to be able to shut his teammates up no matter
how much he yells at them; the news is too sensational to resist. They're flying up to Montreal for a
game that evening against the Jays, but the plane might as well be taking them to the moon for all
that anybody's thinking about their destination.

"Dude, did you guys hear that they're moving his tv show to NBC on primetime?" Crawford says,
sitting with a bunch of the other guys at one of the tables along the side of the plane. Darryl's
seated on the other side by himself, trying not to listen; maybe he should get his headphones out.
"Yeah, the Bears' PR just put out a press release this morning about it, the - what's her name, the
producer? Tracy? Yeah, get what she said - " Crawford pulls out his phone, reading from the
screen.

"We hope to capture and broadcast, in real time, the story of one of the first elite male athletes to
come out as bisexual during his active career. I truly believe that Alex has an opportunity here to
transcend hockey, to transcend sports the way Jackie Robinson did, the way Billie Jean King did.
I'm incredibly grateful for Alex's courage in choosing this path and also allowing us to continue
filming him, and I hope we'll be able to show how he made this decision in the first episode we
show on NBC." Crawford snorts and puts his phone away. "I'd have thought Kuznetsov would've
had enough of cameras by now, but I guess faggots like attention."
Darryl flinches, hard - but Prescott's already there, brutally yanking Crawford up by the ear.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he yells. The entire plane goes dead silent.

"I didn't - I didn't mean anything by it, I just - " Crawford yelps, tears standing out in his eyes from
the pain. Prescott shoves the other man back into his seat savagely.

"Language like that is absolutely unacceptable, I can't believe you're such a fucking idiot that I have
to explain that!" Darryl's seen Prescott at a lot of different levels of angry, but right now the Hawks
coach looks genuinely incandescent with rage; the veins in his forehead are pulsing visibly, and his
face is turning a mottled red.

"No, you know what, this is important enough that everybody needs to hear this," Prescott says,
breathing heavily through his nose. "Davies, Janssen, get the guys at the back of the plane up here,
it's time for a team meeting," he snaps.

A minute later, the entire team is clustered around Prescott, who still looks like the slightest
provocation might cause him to explode.

"Okay," he says. "Let's get to the guts of it. If I hear any of you - and I mean any of you - " Prescott
looks pointedly at Darryl for an instant - "say anything homophobic or degrading about Kuznetsov,
I swear to god I'll send you down to Wilkes-Barre to the baby Hawks so fast it'll make your head
spin. If that means I have to send down every single goddamn one of you and end up coaching a
team of AHL and ECHL players, I'll do it in a heartbeat, don't fucking kid yourselves," he snarls.
"Hell, I'll pull from the Q, the OHL, from the goddamn fucking beer leagues if I have to!"

Prescott takes a couple deep breaths, apparently trying to calm himself. "I don't care if it's fucking
taboo to praise Kuznetsov in this organization, but you all know goddamn well that it's true," he
says, his voice a little quieter but no less intense. "Aleksey Kuznetsov is hands down one of the
best hockey players in the world, and who he chooses to fuck has absolutely nothing to do with the
fact that he's going to go down in history as one of the greatest players of all time - you should all
count yourselves fucking blessed that you get to see him in action, you understand me?" He looks
at each of them in turn, his gaze sharper than a blade.

"In fact, from now on I don't want to hear a single word out of your mouths against any of the
Bears - you guys can chirp every other team in the league all you want and I won't give a flying fuck, but I hear a single peep of trash talk privately or publicly directed against Washington and I swear I'll bag skate you in front of everybody next practice and scratch you for the next game, just see if I won't."

Now there's a distinct rustling from the audience. "But that - "

"Did I not make myself understood?" Prescott roars, loud enough that the sound reverberates around the closed space. "Maybe you think I'm overstepping some boundaries here, gentlemen, but I am the coach of this fucking team, and what I say goes! If I say jump, you say how high, got it? The one person I answer to is Vince Fletcher, and if he chooses to fire me over this then I'll gladly go - but until then, all of you answer to me."

Nobody responds. Nobody even moves a muscle.

Prescott glares at them. "Crawford, what was it you were talking about earlier? Kuznetsov's show being broadcast on NBC? Well, I'm glad you're interested, because I think watching it is a great idea - from now on, we're going to watch that show together, as a team. On non-game days we'll watch it live, game days we'll record it and watch it the next day. Consider attendance mandatory," he grinds out. He glowers at them for a moment longer, then throws his right hand up in a gesture of disgust.

"Playing in the NHL isn't a right, it's a privilege," he says quietly. "You earn a spot not only by how you play on the ice, but how you conduct yourself off of it. The way Kuznetsov has handled this makes it crystal clear that he's more than worthy of being in this league, and I sure as fuck hope that each of you can show that you're even a quarter as deserving - because right now, I'm not feeling too optimistic." He pins Crawford with one last acid look. "Think about that for the rest plane ride, all of you," he says, turning away in a clear sign of dismissal. "Colton, come over here," he says, jerking his head.

Darryl goes over as his teammates disperse silently behind him. Prescott waits until Darryl is next to him before leaning in.

"Are you going to back me on this?" Prescott says, his voice low.

"I - what?" Prescott's eyes narrow.

"What, do you have a problem with Kuznetsov coming out?" he says, his voice taking on a distinct edge.

"No, I don't - " Darryl feels like he's slipped down a rabbit hole somewhere. "I don't have any problems with it, I - " he swallows. "Thank you for saying what you said, Coach," he says, knowing that Prescott's not going to understand half the reason why Darryl is thanking him.

"Hm." Prescott pinches the bridge of his nose, suddenly looking weary. "Look, I know you don't like to talk about your own personal life to the press much less anybody else's, so if you want to go the whole 'no comment' route with the media then that's okay - but I need you to help keep the rest of the team in line, okay? I won't tolerate a single ugly word from anybody, because it wouldn't take much for it to spin out of control." Prescott looks back Darryl, his eyebrows raised. "Do we understand each other?"

Darryl forces himself to return his coach's gaze. "Yeah, we do."

After a long moment, the left corner of Prescott's mouth quirks up. "Good." He claps Darryl on the
shoulder. "You're a good man, Darryl," he says, leaving Darryl standing there with the sinking, sickening feeling that he's anything but.

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The Hawks lose to the Jays 2-0, but it's actually startling to see how much the media is now focused on the Kuznetsov story; the first question Darryl fields during the post-game press scrum is about Alex.

"Did you know that Kuznetsov was bisexual? Do you have any opinion on his decision to come out?"

Darryl's insides freeze; he can feel himself breaking out in a cold sweat. "Sorry, I won't comment on it," he says, his voice equally frozen. "Ove - Alex deserves to have his privacy respected, and I - I refuse to infringe on it any more than it's already been violated."

"But he's already declared that he's going to be open about it - "

"No," Darryl grates. "I do not have. any. comment."

After a few more terse 'no comment' replies from Darryl, the reporters finally give up and actually start asking questions about the hockey game that they're supposed to be reporting on. But there's no escape; back at the hotel, Darryl comes out of the bathroom after brushing his teeth to find Davies watching the TV intently.

"What, you looking for a west coast game or something?" Darryl says, going over to his side of the room.

"No, I wanted to see if ESPN was going to cover the Kuznetsov story at all - Bears had a home game tonight, I wanted to see if he's started playing again," he says. "It looks like he did," he says, nodding towards the screen.

"... One day after shocking the hockey world with the announcement that he's bisexual, Aleksey Kuznetsov made an emphatic statement that he's out and proud with his entrance for the Bears' game against the Riders," the broadcaster says, and the screen shows Alex bounding out onto the ice against a background of screaming Bears fans; he has a monster grin on his face, and he's holding a huge rainbow flag up above his head so it streams out behind him, bright and gaudy.

Davies makes a quiet sound of satisfaction. "Good for him," he says, turning off the TV and getting under the covers.

"Yeah," Darryl says, looking away.

"Hey, Darryl?"

"Yeah?" Darryl turns off the light.

"If you need any help getting Crawford or any of the other guys to shut up, just let me know - that's what Coach wanted to talk to you about on the plane, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Darryl says, swallowing. He gets into his own bed.

"I don't think there are actually any bad guys on the team, they can just be idiots sometimes, you know?" Davies says drowsily. "But I got your back, don't worry about it."
Darryl stares upwards for a moment; then he closes his eyes, pained. "Thanks," he says, miserable.

Heartbreak sliced him to ribbons a few weeks ago, but now he's quickly discovering that guilt is an even sharper blade.
Chapter 13

Darryl goes through the next two days on autopilot, his mind wrestling with itself in an agony of indecision. What should he do? What can he do? Knock on Prescott's door and confess? "Hey, Coach, forgot to mention it earlier, but that guy in those pictures with Kuznetsov? Yeah, that was me, it just completely slipped my mind, haha, funny, right, haha... ha."

Call Alex? But Alex seems to be doing just fine without Darryl; the few times that Darryl catches a clip on TV or sees a photo, the other man is always smiling, apparently carefree - which would seem to be impossible, considering that Darryl and the rest of the league have the privilege of witnessing the entire world of sports media drive itself completely batshit insane over him. Well, wait, no; it's not just the world of sports media, the mainstream news media is going after it too, a school of sharks scenting blood in the water.

"Dude, did you see this?" Janssen shows Darryl the screen of his phone as they're getting dressed for practice. "The Bears' PR guy tweeted the list of organizations requesting a press credential for their scrums - '5 reporters from ESPN, 3 from Sports Illustrated, 2 from NY Times, 1 from each of the following - Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, GQ, Men's Health, Vanity Fair, NPR, CNN, BBC, Televisa - " Janssen pauses, frowning. "Wait, seriously? Do they even know what hockey is in England? For fuck's sake, do they even have ice rinks in Mexico?"

Darryl would really, really like to think that there wouldn't be nearly such a big deal if an ordinary hockey player decided to come out of the closet - but the fact that it's one of the sport's marquee stars combined with the entire 'secret lover' aspect stokes the fire into a conflagration. By the time Darryl drives over to Prescott's house on Thursday evening to watch the show with the rest of the team, he's already seen and heard ads all over the place for it, it's beyond ridiculous.

Everybody else is already gathered around Prescott's TV in the living room, a few of them with beers, but for the most part it's a fairly subdued bunch. Crawford scoots over once Darryl sits down. "Hey, Darryl - " Crawford hesitates a moment, shamefaced. "I'm really sorry for what I said on the plane. I didn't mean anything by it, I really don't give a damn whether Kuznetsov is gay or straight or whatever. I just - I was being an idiot, and I wanted to apologize. I know you guys are friends."

Darryl swallows. We were, he thinks to himself. Maybe not anymore. "All right," he says, his voice tight. "So long as you don't do it again."

Crawford snorts. "Are you kidding? I don't want to get sent down to the AHL!"

"Good," Prescott says dryly from behind them. "Now shut up, it's about to start," he says, unmuting the television.

Darryl frowns as the intro starts rolling, a vaguely familiar beat starts playing, a couple bright guitar chords strummed out - the screen shows the clip from Tuesday night of Alex skating out onto the ice, the rainbow flag streaming above him -

I get knocked down,

The screen cuts to a clip of Alex getting knocked down by a Comet -

But I get up again,

The screen cuts to another clip of Alex smashing into another player -
The screen cuts back to the first clip; Darryl covers half of his face with his hand as the song keeps going, using different clips of Alex getting hit and hitting other people, but always returning to the original clip of Alex grinning and enthusiastically flying his rainbow-colored banner. Of course Alex would choose a trashy hyperactive Europop song as his theme, of course he would.

But when the intro fades away, the first person who shows up on the screen isn't Alex, but Tracy. She's seated against a nondescript light blue backdrop, looking directly at the audience.

"Hi, everybody," she says, forthright. "My name is Tracy Rosner, and I'm here to tell you a little of the background of this show, and how it all happened. I'm a producer at NHL Network, and up until last week I was the executive producer of a reality show called 'AK 47 and Colt 45' that focused on the two biggest stars in hockey, Aleksey Kuznetsov of the Washington Bears and Darryl Colton of the Pittsburgh Hawks." Darryl shifts, uncomfortable.

"As some of you may already know, this past week the website Deadspin published some photographs allegedly showing Alex kissing another man. Alex held a press conference two days ago acknowledging that that was him in the pictures, and that he's decided to be open about his bisexuality. Now, you might be wondering where I come into this, but when I first heard about Deadspin putting up the photos, I immediately knew that depending on how Alex chose to handle the situation, this might not only end up being one of the biggest stories of the year in hockey, but it could end up being one of the historic stories in all of sports. But even more importantly - to me, at least - was the fact that - " Tracy looks down for a moment, then back up.

"I knew that depending on what Alex decided to do, that his personal story about dealing with this could be incredibly important to thousands of people," she says slowly, as if weighing her words. "And so I asked him if he would let us keep on filming him, and, well - he agreed." There's a slight note of disbelief in her voice, as if she still can't quite understand it either.

"Since the focus of our filming and the main story we were trying to capture had changed so completely from what we were doing previously, we retooled our approach. We stopped filming Darryl, and we decided to take a much more focused, behind-the-scenes look at exactly how Alex made the decision he did, and how he's been handling the consequences of that decision. We negotiated an agreement to air the show on NBC, and since it really was a completely different show than what we were doing before, we renamed it 'AK 47' to indicate that this is Alex's story that we're telling. And so what you're about to see in tonight's episode is a record of what Alex went through when Deadspin first posted the photos. You're going to see how he decided that he was going to be honest, how he made the decision that - as a high-profile, currently active player in the NHL - that he was going to come out of the closet."

The screen fades to black, but when a new image appears it doesn't show Alex, it still shows Tracy, although in a very different setting. It looks like she's pacing back and forth in an office, apparently trying to reach somebody on her cell phone. She seems anxious, frazzled - her hair all over the place, dark circles under her eyes. A block of text appears in the lower left corner of the screen:

Tracy Rosner's office at NHLN Production Studio in Washington, D.C.
2:48 AM, Friday, February 18th

"Tracy, it's almost three in the morning - if he hasn't answered his phone by now, he probably isn't going to," says a voice off-camera.

Tracy turns and glares at somebody behind the camera, presumably the person filming her.
"Andrew, this could be one of the biggest stories you'll ever see in your career and you're b------- at me about staying up late?" she says sharply, the expletive bleeped out. "If it takes calling him every hour for the rest of the night, then that's what it'll f------ take, you hear me?"

"Okay, okay," Andrew murmurs, placating.

Tracy goes back to pacing, her back stiff with defiance - but the next moment she turns so suddenly she almost stumbles; shock cuts her off at knees, her expression abruptly going soft and vulnerable with surprise.

"Alex - " she says, groping blindly for a chair and sitting down. "Alex, it's Tracy - please, please don't hang up, okay? I promise I'm on your side, so just - just don't hang up, okay?"

After a moment, she lets out a shaky breath of apparent relief.

"Okay, good." Tracy turns to look at the camera. "Alex, can I put you on speakerphone? I have Andrew here with me, and he's filming me right now, but I promise you that if you tell me after this phone call ends that you want me to destroy any recording of it, I'll burn it all myself, okay? I won't say anything to anybody about what we discuss, and Andrew won't either," she says quickly.

There's a longer pause, but then Tracy's face lights up and she takes her phone and sets it on the desk after pressing a button.

"All right, you're on speakerphone right now," she says. "Now just hear me out, okay?"

Silence from the other end of the line seems to indicate assent, but for a few long moments Tracy doesn't say anything; her expression is a mixture of intense concentration and anxiety.

"I'm calling because I want to keep filming you," she says abruptly - there's a sharp, indecipherable sound from the other end of the line. "No, Alex, listen - " she says urgently, sitting forward. "I swear, it's not because I want the inside scoop or anything like that, it's because - " she puts a hand up to her face, biting her lip for a moment.

"Look, I don't know whether you're gay or bisexual, if you identify yourself as either of those," she says slowly, "but if you are - if you are, Alex, then how you decide to handle this - " she pauses, obviously struggling.

"Do you know who Jackie Robinson is, Alex?" she says, starting over again. "He was the first African-American to play in Major League Baseball, his first game as a Brooklyn Dodger was in spring of 1947 - before that, every baseball player in the Major Leagues was white. The kind of abuse and harassment he had to put up with was incredible - people would spit at him, threaten to kill him, threaten to kill his family. But he always behaved like a gentleman, and - and the way he conducted himself both personally and professionally, it's why he's one of the greatest heroes in American history, Alex - not just sports history, but in the history of this country, in the bigger story of how we grew and struggled and fought to become a society where everybody gets a fair shot at making their dreams come true."

She pauses, slightly out of breath.

"Alex, like I said, I don't know how - how you identify yourself, in terms of sexual orientation," Tracy says. "Maybe that's not you in the pictures at all, maybe - oh, I don't know, maybe the other person in the photos was an exceptionally masculine girl," she says. "But if there's even the smallest chance that you would choose to come out of the closet, that you would choose to fight this particular fight, then I want to be there to record what happens. Alex, it would be
revolutionary, it would be historic - it would be so, so important to capture your side of the story, do you understand?"

She stops, biting her lower lip, but there's only silence in response.

Finally, there's a soft, defeated sound over the line.

"Tracy, I don't even know what I'm gonna do right now." Alex's voice is quiet but clear over the phone.

"No, I know - and I swear, after this I won't ask a thing of you, I'm not going to try and influence your decisions at all. I just want to keep recording, just like a fly on the wall, you won't even know that we're there," Tracy says, standing up anxiously. "And seriously - you decide you don't want any of the footage released, I promise I'll destroy it myself, okay? Nobody will ever see a second of it unless you specifically tell me it's okay. If you say no then it'll be like nothing ever happened, nobody will even know that we ever talked about this."

There's a pause; it stretches, and stretches, and spins out, and then -

"Okay," Alex says, softly. "Okay, you can film. But only if you let Darryl out of show, not fair for him to deal with this."

Tracy lets out an audibly shaky breath; she closes her eyes briefly. "Thank you, Alex," she says, dropping back down into her seat. "Oh, god, thank you, thank you, thank you. Yes, Darryl, right, of course we'll release him." She looks down for a long moment, but when she looks up again she looks much more her normal self. "Okay," she says. "Alex, where are you right now?"

"Um, I'm driving on I-76 - uh, there is sign for exit to Murrysville, says is coming up."

Tracy frowns, turning to the desktop computer in front of her to look up an online map. "Alex, are you - are you near Pittsburgh? How the hell did you end up there?"

There's a noise that sounds like a laugh, though there's little humor in it. "Yeah, so when Deadspin post story, is 4:30 in California, and so I go to airport and buy ticket for first flight go east, and so I go to Chicago. And when I get to Chicago, I buy ticket for next flight go east, and so I go to Cleveland. But when I get to Cleveland is already midnight, no flight go anywhere near DC, so I rent car and start driving."

Tracy's frown deepens. "Why didn't you just get a direct flight to DC?"

"I just - I can't wait, I can't just stay there and sit still, I - when I got to airport I have to get on plane as soon as I can, just keep moving," Alex says, his voice agitated. "I know is stupid, but - "

"Okay, okay, I get it," Tracy says. "But you really shouldn't be driving right now, Alex. You must be exhausted, and I know you're overwrought, it isn't safe," she says, her brow wrinkling again.

"I can't - Tracy, I gotta keep going, I can't stop, I just, I - "

"Okay, okay," Tracy says, biting her lip. "All right, here's what we're going to do - Andrew and I are going to get in the car right now and drive towards Pittsburgh, and we'll text you the number of each exit as we pass it, okay? When we get to where you are, call me and get off at the nearest rest stop, we'll meet you there and drive you home, okay?"

"Tracy, you don't have to - "

"Alex," she says firmly, standing up. "I'm the mother of two teenage sons, and I would never, ever
want either of them driving at 3 in the morning while tired and upset. Please let me do this for you, okay? Or at least for the sake of the other drivers on the road!"

There's a half-rueful chuckle at the other end. "Well, almost nobody else driving right now, but okay," Alex says. "Okay, come pick me up."

The clip ends, then switches back to show Tracy in studio. "We drove a couple hours and ended up picking up Alex around 5 A.M. Then we turned around and drove him back to DC."

A fresh clip starts. It begins by showing Tracy in the driver's seat, in profile; Andrew must be sitting shotgun and shooting this by hand. The sky outside is already light. Another block of text appears in the left corner of the screen:

_Arlington, Virginia_

_7:09 AM, Friday, February 18th_

Tracy makes a turn, then cranes her neck forward. An expression of worry crosses her face, and she slows down and pulls over before turning to the back seat.

"Alex, are you awa - oh, you are."

"Yeah, I not sleep," Alex says, the camera panning back to face him. He leans forward in his seat; he looks completely wrecked - deep bruises under his eyes, his hair matted with sweat. "You need direction?"

"No, we're actually on your street, but - well, I think there are people staking out your house," Tracy says, pointing. The camera swings back forward to record the street ahead, then zooms in to focus on a handful of cars clustered in front of Alex's house, parked on both sides of the road. They're conspicuous not only because the rest of the street is clear, but also because all of the cars are occupied, a guy just sitting in the driver's seat in every single one; the camera even catches one of them aiming binoculars at Alex's house.

"F---," Alex curses softly.

"I can just take you somewhere else, you don't - "

"No, my family in there - I call them when I rent car in Cleveland, they tell me they gonna wait for me at my house," Alex says, anxious. "Okay, um, we can go round back, go through neighbor yard on other side and get in through backyard," he says.

"Will your neighbors complain?" Tracy asks, already making a u-turn.

"No, I mean, I friendly with them, shouldn't be problem," Alex says, glancing back at street.

It takes only a couple minutes to show Tracy parking the car, then the three of them sneaking through the neighbor's yard, and finally scrambling over the fence onto Alex's property - but to Darryl, it feels like an eternity. He stares unseeing at the screen, answers about what happened the rest of that night slotting neatly into place.

"Man, do you think his family knew before? No, right? Geez, I hope they go easy on him," somebody mutters behind Darryl, and Darryl can't help it - he flinches hard, even though he reminds himself that it couldn't have turned out too badly, since Alex had thanked his family for their support at the press conference. But Viktoria reacting badly would kill Alex, just kill him.

And when Darryl focuses on the screen again, he can tell that Alex knows it too - he's standing as
if rooted to the ground, and he looks pale and sweaty. When he turns to look at Tracy, it's clear even on camera that his pupils are blown wide open.

"Tracy," he says. "Tracy, I don't - I don't think I can do this," he says, trembling.

"Hey," she says, coming over and chafing his hands as if to warm them. "Hey, you can, Alex. Listen to me," she says, reaching up to make him look at her. "Your family loves you, you hear me? They must be worried out of their minds right now, you need to go talk to them, okay? Especially your mom, she must be going crazy right now."

Alex blanches even further, but he takes a deep breath. The camera follows him as he walks across the yard and onto the deck, then comes to a stop in front of the sliding glass doors leading to the kitchen. He hesitates for a moment, then pulls out his phone and calls.

"Мама, я дома," he says, his voice cracking. "Я снаружи, на террасе." Subtitles appear at the bottom of the screen: "Mom, I'm home. I'm outside on the deck."

The words are barely out of his mouth before the doors slide open and Viktoria comes flying out, almost tackling Alex in her haste to wrap her arms around him.

"Lyosha, Lyosha, my baby," Viktoria says, showering her son's face with kisses. "Are you okay? Are you all right?"

"Mom, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Alex says, his voice going all to pieces. "I'm so sor- " his voice fails. Viktoria draws back, looking almost affronted.

"Why are you sorry? Why should you be sorry when this is all the fault of some sick bastard who decided to take pictures of you?" she demands.

"Lyosha, is it actually you in those pictures?" Jakob asks, Alex's father and brother now out on the deck too.

Alex flinches - he looks almost ill with nerves. "Yes, it is," he says, finally looking up to meet his father's gaze.

"Lyosha, are you worried that we're going to be mad at you if you tell us you like men?" Viktoria says sharply, grabbing Alex's face and forcing him to look her in the eye. "You're our son! You're our son and we love you and nothing in the world can change that, do you understand?" She sniffs, derisive. "Man or woman, there isn't anybody out there who's good enough for my baby boy."

"Your mother is right," Jakob says, grasping Alex's shoulder. "Of course we're all going to talk about this a lot more, but Lyosha, we love you and we're proud of you no matter what," he says, firm.

Alex looks down for a moment, then back up, blinking rapidly. He looks over at his brother. "Kolya?" he says hesitantly.

Nikolai steps forward, a wry smile quirking his mouth. "Bratishka, it's always been my job to look after you and make sure you didn't get into trouble," he says, reaching up to ruffle Alex's hair. "You're not getting away from me so easily, especially not now when there's going to be more trouble than ever."

Alex laughs once, a choked-up sound; then he hugs Viktoria tight, burying his face in the crook of her neck. "I don't deserve you, any of you," he says.
"Of course you do," Viktoria says. "And you definitely deserve better than having idiots spying on you, the bastards," she says, fierce. "But let's go in, it's cold," she says, pushing her son indoors - and that's when she first notices the camera. "What are you doing here?" She steps forward, bristling.

"Mom, it's okay - " Alex puts a restraining hand on her arm. "Tracy called and asked whether she could keep filming me, and I said yes. And she helped me a lot tonight, she and Andrew drove up to Pennsylvania to pick me up, they drove me back here since I was too tired to drive safely," he says.

"Oh." Viktoria looks back at Tracy, her expression melting. "You help Lyosha come home?" she says in English, coming towards Tracy. When Tracy nods, Viktoria reaches out and gives her a huge hug, then kisses her on each cheek. "Thank you," she says, heartfelt, then turns and gives the same thanks to Andrew - the camera bobbles a bit, but then Viktoria steps back and gestures everybody into the house. "Come in, come in, it's cold and we can't talk too loudly, otherwise those bastards in front will hear us," she says, herding the group indoors.

"Do they know that you're in here? I'm sorry I didn't tell you to stay at Nikolai's apartment to wait for me, I didn't realize that they would actually wait here," Alex says.

"No, they don't know we're here. Once we noticed there were people watching the house, we stayed in the back rooms and didn't turn on any of the lights," Nikolai says. "They tried ringing the doorbell a few times, but they gave up after we didn't answer - I don't think they would have stopped if they knew we were inside."

Alex exhales in relief. "Okay, good." He runs a hand over his face, but somehow he already looks less wretched - exhausted but not ill, weary but not heartsick. "I need to call Mark, also Harry, let them know I'm back in Washington," he says, pulling out his phone. He turns away and starts pacing around the kitchen, his family looking on anxiously.

"Hi, Mark?" Alex winces at the volume of Calhoun's response, clearly audible even on camera. "Yeah, I'm home, I'm in Arlington," he says. "No, I fly to Chicago, then to Cleveland, then I drive back from there, I get home just few minute ago." He listens to Calhoun's reply. "Yeah, I talk to my family already, they here with me right now." He pauses again. "No, I know, we see them outside and so I sneak in through back, I don't think they see me." He pauses again, and this time a slight frown appears on his face. "No, I not sleep, but I should call Harry - " he stops, biting his lip and bowing his head. "I - but - " he tries to interject, but apparently unsuccessfully. "Okay," he says finally. "Okay, I get it. All right. Yeah, yeah, I will, okay." He hangs up, rubbing the side of his nose, but his expression is one of bewilderment.

"What did he say?" Viktoria asks, coming up next to Alex.

"Well, he said I should apologize to you and dad for making you guys wait for so long before I got home, he said he got gray hairs waiting to hear from me and he's not even family," Alex says ruefully. "And then he told me I should go straight to bed and sleep for a couple hours, and that he wants to see me in his office at Stonebridge at 10 AM."

"He called us right after you called from California," Jakob says. "He's the one who told us there would be people watching the house, and he said not to answer any phone calls unless they were from you. I'm sure he'll help you figure out how to handle this."

Alex looks down, tension stealing back into his expression. "Yeah, I'm sure he will," he says, quiet.

"Alex? What's going on?" Tracy says, looking at him worriedly.
"Oh, nothing bad - just, Calhoun tell me to take nap and then go to Stonebridge at ten to meet with him," he says.

"Okay, great," Tracy says briskly, looking at her watch. "Look, I need to get out of here so I can get to Pittsburgh with termination papers for Darryl," she says. "Andrew, can you stay here and drive Alex to Stonebridge at ten? I'll give you my car keys," she says, digging through her purse.

"But you gonna need it - " Alex starts to protest.

"What, you think you can just pull out of the driveway in your own car or something? They'll mob you the moment you open the garage door! No, it's no problem for me to jump the fence and walk to a main road, I'll call a cab from there," she says, standing up. "But Alex - " she comes over and touches his shoulder. "Listen - I meant what I said earlier. If you decide you don't want me to show anything, I'll destroy the footage and Andrew and I won't say a word to anybody. And for what it's worth, you have my friendship and support no matter what you decide to do." She sticks her hand out. Alex looks at it for a moment, then reaches out and gives her a quick hug instead.

"Tracy, thank you," he says, his voice a little scratchy. "I really - I'm really, really grateful."

"Nonsense," she says. "All right, I gotta go, but I'll be in touch, okay? Call if you need anything from me," she says as she slips out the glass doors. The clip fades to black, and a commercial for paper towels comes on.

Darryl draws his knees up and drops his forehead against his kneecaps, trying to control his breathing. He's aware of his teammates buzzing with conversation behind him, but he can't listen to any of it right now. His mind's eye keeps going back to Alex's expression standing in the backyard, looking completely wrecked - like his heart had been cut out and splayed open, pinned against a wall for target practice. Why would he let himself be shown on national television like that? He knows that Alex is a fairly open person, but still - to show himself at his most vulnerable? Why would he do that? Why?

Darryl's no closer to sorting out his jumbled thoughts or feelings when the commercial break ends.

This time it's Andrew in the studio, providing the requisite narration: "I stayed with the Kuznetsovs for a few hours, and then Alex and I snuck out the back again and I drove him to Stonebridge. We managed to get to Mr. Calhoun' office without too much trouble, which is when I started filming again."

A new clip starts, showing Alex outside standing outside of an office door, hesitating. The text in the lower left corner reads:

Mark Calhoun' office at Stonebridge Rink, Arlington, VA
10:03 AM, Friday, February 18th

Alex takes a deep breath, and knocks.

"Come in!"

Alex opens the door and goes in, the camera following.

"Alex - " Calhoun leaves his computer and comes around his desk quickly, enveloping Alex in a hug. "Jesus, thank god you're all right," he says, holding Alex back to look him up and down, his expression one of stark relief - although that changes quickly when he catches sight of the camera. "What the - " he starts, heated.
"No, no no, is okay," Alex says, moving to block Calhoun. "Tracy call me earlier and ask if she can keep filming, I say yes. She promise that if I not want to show any of it, she destroy it and not say anything to anyone, is okay, seriously," he says, trying to get the other man to calm down.

Calhoun casts a long, suspicious look aimed slightly above the camera lens, presumably at Andrew, but he finally backs down. "Okay, if you're sure. Here, sit down, you still look exhausted," he says, gesturing at the chair in front of his desk as he goes back behind it. "All right, you want to tell me what's going on?"

Alex sits down, his shoulders stiff. The camera is positioned behind him and focused on Calhoun's face, so even though Alex's expression isn't visible, the tension in his voice is crystal clear. "Mark, that is me in the pictures. I - I guess I never tell you, but I, um, I sometime fool around with guys," he says. "Although, only one at time! Um, I mean - and I still like girl also - but I only have one of them at time too! Uh - "

"So what you're trying to tell me," Calhoun cuts in mercifully, his mouth twitching, "is that you're bisexual, is that right?"

"Yeah, um, that word, right," Alex says. His shoulders somehow become even stiffer. "Mark, if you want to trade me from Bears, is okay," he says, his voice brittle. "I understand."

The camera is trained on Calhoun the entire time, so it fully captures how surprise blooms across his face, his eyebrows going up and his jaw dropping down; he's literally gaping. His face stays like that for a comically long time after Alex is done talking. Then his jaw snaps shut and his eyebrows lower in decided anger. He leans over and picks up his office phone, dials a number.

"Hey, George? Yeah, can you come up to my office for a moment? Thanks," he says, hanging up. Alex's shoulders hunch, and he seems to shrink in on himself.

Marcus's office must be nearby or he was waiting for this call, because he comes in only a few seconds later. "Alex, you - " Marcus says, his face lighting up.

"Hold on, George, before you give him a warm welcome and everything," Calhoun says, getting up again to stand next to Alex, leaning back on his desk. "You should know that he admitted that that is him in those pictures, and so he just told me that he would be okay with it if we wanted to trade him. So, you know, not only does he think that we're homophobic a-------, he also apparently thinks that your job is a piece of cake, since he thinks that you can pull off a deal for him this close to the trade deadline."

Marcus blinks once. Twice. Then he steps forward and clips Alex round the ear. "What the hell, you think we're g------ bigots or something?" he demands. "Also, do you have any f------ idea how much time it would take to pull off a halfway decent trade for you, to put that kind of deal together? More than a g------ f------ week, I can tell you that!"

The tension in Alex's shoulders eases a little, but only a little. "I - um, okay, I'm glad you guys still want me on Bears, but - but I don't know if the team gonna be okay with it," he says.

"Wow, you must really think we're a bunch of scumbags around here, don't you?" Marcus says, incredulous.

"No, that's not what I mean," Alex protests. "I - look," he says, taking a breath. "I don't think that anybody is gonna, like, spit at me if they find out," he says. "But you know not everybody gonna be completely fine and happy about it, you know is true," Alex says, looking up Calhoun intently. "And anyway, beside that, I - " he swallows. "Yesterday I just ditch them on road trip right before
game, without say anything to anybody. They - " he looks down. "They probably gonna be really mad at me - they should be mad at me, is really rotten thing to do."

"Hey," Calhoun says sharply. "You told Harry that you had to go back to talk to your family, that absolutely counts as saying something to somebody. You think he didn't tell the rest of the guys you had to go? You think they don't understand?" He shakes his head. "Never mind, let's rewind a bit. You talk to your family yet? How are they handling this?"

Alex exhales. "Yeah, we talk about it a lot this morning. My parents - well, mostly my mom - yell at me a lot, but, um, they okay with it, they really supporting me and everything," he says.

"That's good," Calhoun says, genuine relief on his face. "Family's the most important thing, but you know that already. Are they still at your house?"

"Yeah, they still hiding from the reporters outside, me and Andrew sneak out from backyard so they don't catch us," Alex says.

"Okay, good," Calhoun says. "Now - " he hesitates. "Do you know how you want handle this?"

Alex looks down, his brow creasing. "No, not really. I - I know I gotta explain to team what happen, they have to know what really going on." He bites his lip for a moment, then looks up, his expression resolute. "I really appreciate that you guys want me to stay on team and everything, but decision not just up to you, is really for team to decide," he says. "I lie to them about who I am, I leave them right before game without explain anything, I bet they have to answer a billion question about me yesterday even when they don't know nothing. Is not, is really, really sh---- thing to do to them, you know?" he says, running a hand over the nape of his neck. "I mean, I need call Harry, and I should go fly back - "

"No," Calhoun and Marcus says simultaneously. "No, you're not going anywhere, we need to think about security for you," Calhoun continues, scowling. "And I can call Harry, don't worry about that right now."

"I - but, okay, even when they get back," Alex says, clearly deciding to pick his battles, "I gotta talk to them, ask them whether they still want me on team - no, seriously," he says adamantly, his expression mulish. "Look, I not - you guys both know that even with best case, this still gonna cause a sh--load of trouble for everybody," he says, looking at Marcus and Calhoun intently. "Is not fair to them that I just dump this kind of mess on them, and they don't even get choice about whether they wanna deal with it," he says, low. "Even if they decide they okay with me stay, I - I should probably step down from captain, I not - "

"Alex, don't you think you're overreacting a little? Or, you know, a lot?" Calhoun cuts in, folding his arms.  

Alex looks down again, and when he speaks again his voice is noticeably rougher. "Maybe, but - Mark, George, I gotta leave choice up to rest of team, okay? You guys support, it - it mean a lot to me," he says, his voice cracking. "But if team decide is not good for me to stay anymore, then I gonna have to insist on trade," he says. "Is only - " he pauses, obviously struggling to find the right word; he takes out his phone and types something in. "Is only honorable thing to do," he says, looking up again. "And is only thing I got left, Mark. Only thing I can do to make up for everything is - is do honorable thing from now on," he says, swallowing. "Please don't take that away, I - " his voice fails. He bows his head.

Calhoun looks down at Alex, compassion written clearly across his face.
"Alex," he says, gently, after a moment. "Alex, I think you're giving your teammates too little credit, and I also think that you're over-emotional right now and not thinking clearly. So - " he puts up a hand to stall Alex's protest. "I want you to go and get a solid 8 hours of sleep, and I want you to eat a couple good meals. If, after all that, you decide you still want to have that conversation with your teammates, then - " he pauses, studying Alex's expression intently. "Then yes, we'll honor your wishes, if you feel so strongly about it," he says slowly. "But you know that if you tell them, the truth is inevitably going to come out. If it was just me and George and your family, we'd be able to keep it a secret, but telling twenty-something people..."

"Yeah, I know," Alex says, his voice a little wobbly. "But they deserve to know, is not fair to them. I - I figure out how to handle rest later, I guess."

Calhoun lets out a deep breath. "All right. But for right now, you're going straight to my house - no, I'll send a car over to your house to pick up your family and take them back to my place, it's not safe for you guys to be there," he says sternly, cutting off Alex's protests. "I live in a gated community, reporters aren't going to be able to get in. No, no, don't even try, you know your mother will be more comfortable and a lot less worried about you if you're all staying with me."

Apparently, mentioning Viktoria is the best way to preemptively win an argument with Alex, since he just shakes his head and gives in. "Okay, okay," he says, standing up. "I guess, car can pick me up too after it go to my house? Andrew, you probably need go home and sleep too," he says, turning towards the camera. "Maybe can call Tracy to figure out who else gonna film me and everything."

"Okay, good, sounds like a plan," Calhoun says, satisfied. "And Alex - " he puts a hand on Alex's shoulder. "You know that you've done nothing wrong, don't you?" Alex looks down and away, putting his hand on the nape of his neck. "You've done nothing wrong," Calhoun repeats. "Even though you've given me about a hundred new gray hairs, I'm truly proud of how you've been handling this," he says, forcing Alex's chin up to look him in the eye. "Tomorrow, we'll talk about this with Nate and the rest of the PR team to figure out how to deal with this together, okay?" The corner of Calhoun' mouth quirks upward. "You're not in this alone, Alex."

Alex flinches, almost imperceptibly, but then he looks up. "Mark - thank you," he says, reaching out and giving the other man another hug. "George, you too," he says, embracing Marcus briefly. He takes a deep breath. "Okay," he says. "I see you guys tomorrow, then." And the clip fades to black.

Prescott mutes the TV as another commercial break starts. "Still think Kuznetsov's a douchebag, Crawford?" he asks dryly.

"Okay, sorry, I get it, I guess he is a good guy," Crawford says, looking ashamed. "I can't believe he offered to get traded somewhere else, that's crazy," he says. "Geno, did you know about this?"

Malkin shakes his head. "No, otherwise I ask Shero to make call to Marcus, right?" he says. "No, I not hear anything about it."

Darryl gets up and goes to the kitchen. He takes a beer out of the fridge, then leans his forehead against the stainless steel surface of the refrigerator door. What the fuck is going on? None of this makes any sense - it's obvious that Alex had understood the potential consequences of coming out, but it sounded like he was already leaning towards it by the time he'd talked to Calhoun and Marcus. So why had he told Darryl that he wasn't going to go public? "Of course I not gonna go public wi - " Darryl brings his head up sharply, his eyes widening at the memory of the cut-off word. Not gonna go public wi - what had he been going to say? Not gonna go public with you?
Darryl puts a hand over his eyes, shuddering, trying to ignore the cracking sensation in his chest. Well, he should be glad that Alex had thought the same way he had, that Alex had realized that - that whatever it was they had going on between them, it wasn't worth the controversy it would cause to drag it out into the light. Better to cut it off now, before it could cause any trouble.

The floor starts swaying beneath him; Darryl puts his other hand on the counter to keep himself upright. So - so Alex was willing to deal with no end of trouble for the sake of being honest with his teammates, for the sake of doing the honorable thing.

But not for the sake of his relationship with Darryl.

Fine. Fine.

"Colton, get back in here - it's about to start again!" someone - sounds like Dupuis - calls out.

Darryl goes back into the living room, sits down.

"Hey, you okay?" Crawford says, peering at him. "You look kind of upset."

"No," Darryl says, looking away. "It's nothing."

The lights dim and Prescott unmutes the television, and this time it's not Tracy or Andrew on screen, but a vaguely familiar-looking man with sandy hair and glasses.

"Hi, my name is Nate Ewing. I'm the director of media relations for the Washington Bears, which basically means that I'm in charge of the public relations staff for the team," he says. "The moment Deadspin posted their article, we were flooded with calls, e-mails, people literally coming to our offices at Stonebridge and knocking at the door. Deadspin posted on the evening of Thursday, February 17th, and the next two days were both the busiest and least busy days of my professional life. Busy, of course, because we've never had to deal with such a demand for information. Not busy, because at that point we really didn't know how Alex wanted to deal with all of it, so we ended up turning everybody away until we could talk to him.

I ended up talking to Alex on Saturday, and what you're about to see is my conversation with him that morning."

The screen transitions to show Alex standing in front of another office. The text in the lower left corner of the screen reads:

Nate Ewing's office at Stonebridge Iceplex, Arlington, VA
09:01 AM, Saturday, February 19th

Alex knocks, and after a moment opens the door and goes in.

"Alex, Jesus, it's good to see you," Nate says, getting up hurriedly from his desk and hugging Alex.

"Is good to see you too, Nate," Alex says, returning the embrace. "I'm kinda surprise you happy to see me, I think I just make lot of work for you and Sergey," he says, rueful.

Nate snorts. "Well, that's why Mark pays us the big bucks, isn't it?"

Alex ducks his head. "Yeah, um - " he says, awkward. "Mark explain to you what - what happen?"

"Yeah, he filled me in on your conversation with him yesterday," Nate says, looking at him keenly. "He said that you don't know how you want to handle this yet, is that right?"
Alex fidgets. "No, I - I don't. I don't know if - " he breaks off, looking down.

Nate studies him silently for a moment. "Alex," he says, gentle. "I want you to know that both personally and professionally, I will fully support whatever choice you make. If you want to deny everything and sue the hell out of that photographer, we can do that. If you want to issue a statement that it was you in the pictures but you won't be answering any questions about it, we'll kick out every reporter that dares to ask. If you want to tell the whole world that you're out and proud, hell, we'll throw you a coming out party," he says, squeezing Alex's shoulder briefly. "But before you do make a decision, there's a couple things I want to talk to you about."

He turns and puts his hand on top of a stack of papers on his desk. "These are the letters and paper copies of the e-mails we've received that criticize either you or the Bears for being gay," he says, looking at Alex over his glasses. "Some of them are - well, frankly speaking, some of them are incredibly crude and abusive. There were a couple that we - " he hesitates. "There were a few that were threatening enough that we called the police, and they have the originals of those now," he says neutrally. Alex stiffens, his expression turning stony. "And yesterday, a season-ticket holder called to cancel his seats. He said he wouldn't support anything that didn't fit with his 'family values.'"

"I - " Alex looks away, the tendons in his neck standing out.

Nate regards him silently for a moment. "So I'm fairly sure you already know this, but I'm going to lay it out for you as clearly as I can," he says. "If you decide to come out as bisexual, you are going to receive death threats. Your family is going to receive death threats. Dozens, maybe hundreds of people are going to threaten to hurt you. Fans, other hockey players, other coaches will insult you, harass you, laugh at you, ridicule you, try to provoke you into fights. Your teammates are going to have to put up with similar treatment, although you'll be the main target. You'll definitely need body guards - hell, we'll have to overhaul security for the entire team. The media will go crazy, you won't have any privacy at all and they'll ask you a million invasive and completely inappropriate questions. More season ticket holders - maybe a lot more, I don't really know - will cancel their seats over this, and honestly I'm not sure how this will affect our overall finances," he says. "You need to understand this, Alex - coming out would put a huge bullseye on your back."

Alex takes a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. He looks back up, his jaw set. "I'm not coward, Nate."

"I know you're not," the other man said. "But you wouldn't be the only one affected - it would affect your family and the rest of the team too."

Alex swallows. "Well, I - I don't know whether I still gonna be a Bear, I need to talk to rest of team," he says, dropping his gaze.

Nate eyes him dubiously, but visibly makes the decision to let it go. "If, on the other hand, you decide you want to deny everything," he says, "well - " he pauses, chewing his lip. "Denying something that's true is always tricky," he says, an ironic edge to his voice. "But Deadspin's story is shaky enough that it's probably doable. You'll still have to deal with the media prying at your private life for a while, and you'll have to cut off any, um, current relationship you might be in - "

"No," Alex says, making a sharp, abortive gesture. "No, that not gonna be problem no matter what I do, come out or not," he says, quiet.

Nate raises his eyebrows. "Okay," he says slowly. "Well, you'd still have to be completely honest with me and Sergey about all of your, uh, past relationships too, so that we can figure out how to cover for you if we have to," he says. "But if we pull it off, then everything would go back to normal for you. It might take some time for the gossip to die down, but like I said, I think it's
"Nate, I'm sorry," Alex says, "but I can't talk to you or anybody about who, who I have relationship with, it would be sh---- thing to do, I not gonna do it, I can't," he says, his voice soft but resolute.

Nate leans back against his desk, crossing his arms. He looks at Alex for a while, his expression speculative. "Okay," he says finally. "Okay, I won't push - at least, not right now," he says. "But do you understand what I've been saying to you?"

Alex meets his gaze steadily. "Yeah, I get it."

Nate pins him with a sharp look. "And?" he prompts.

Alex lets out an explosive breath. "And I still don't know, I... I feel bad if I lie to everybody, but..." he trails off.

Nate studies him carefully. "Well, since you haven't run screaming yet," he says slowly, "there's somebody I guess I need to introduce you to."

He ushers Alex out of the office; the camera follows the two of them as they go down the hall.

"Tom is a good friend of mine, which is the only reason why I didn't hang up on him when he called me last night and asked to meet you," Nate says. "I haven't said anything to him about what's really going on, so you don't have to worry about that - but that means you should also be careful about what you say," he cautions, stopping in front of another door. "And listen - " he hesitates, lowering his voice. "Alex, you need to do what's best for you, all right?"

Alex looks at him confusedly. "Um, okay?" he tries.

Nate gives him one last cryptic look before opening the door.

It opens to a meeting room; the conference table in the middle of the room is covered with about half a dozen separate piles of paper. A stocky, middle-aged man is sitting at one of the seats around the table, but he gets up once he sees Nate and Alex come in.

"Hi Nate, Mr. Kuznetsov," he says, coming forward. "Thanks for letting me come, it's a real honor to meet you," he says, sticking his hand out.

"All right, Alex," the man says. "My name is Tom Gutierrez, and I'm the coach of one of the local youth hockey teams. I'm also a member of the DC Chapter of PFLAG," he says.

"Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays," Nate clarifies at Alex's quizzical look. "It's an organization that does a lot of advocacy work for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people."

"Yes, that's right," Tom says, nodding. "Anyways, like I said, I'm a coach for one of the Bantam teams in the area, and let me tell you, every single kid who plays for us is a huge, huge fan of yours," he says. "As to why I'm here, well, Deadspin posted right before our game on Thursday night, and I don't think anybody heard a word I said the entire night because they were all too busy talking about you."

"I - " Alex falters; he swallows and looks down.

"No, no, my team is a bunch of good kids, they're great kids," Tom says, holding his hands up.
"I've talked to them a lot about my work with PFLAG, and I've gotten some of them to volunteer at PFLAG events, so they definitely weren't trashing you or anything. No, they were actually - " he pauses, looking a bit bashful. "They were actually pretty worried about you, to tell the truth. Yesterday at practice, a couple of them came up to me and asked whether we could use a half hour to write letters to you. I guess since they know that I know Nate, they figured I might be able to deliver them somehow," he says. "The thing is, once the idea got hold of 'em, they ended up asking me to contact other coaches in the area and see if they could get their teams to do the same thing, and so - " he picks up one of the stacks of paper and holds it out to Alex.

"I ended up going around and picking up all of these last night, and then I called Nate to see if there was any way I could deliver them in person," he says, Alex slowly reaching out to take the letters from him. "I realize that this is kind of jumping the gun, since - well, for all I know, Deadspin is just selling a load of b-------," he says frankly. "But those kids poured their hearts into these letters, and if there was any chance of getting you to read 'em, well." He shrugs. "I knew I had to give it my best shot, anyways."

The camera zooms out to show Alex starting to read, his forehead creased but his expression otherwise unreadable.

Tom hesitates, obviously treading carefully. "If, on the other hand," he says, deliberately, "And I'm not trying to imply anything here, I'm really not," he says. "But if Deadspin isn't just selling a load of bull, then..." he takes a deep breath. "Then you could be a hero to a lot of kids out there, if you decided to come out," he says quietly. "A real hero. There aren't a lot of role models for young LGBT athletes, and certainly nobody with your profile, nobody who plays a team spor - "

"Nate," Alex interrupts suddenly, his head coming up, his eyes wide with alarm. "Nate, this kid, what he write, it sound like - "

"Is that the letter from ----- --------?" Nate says, coming over; the name gets beeped out. "It's okay, Tom and I went through the letters last night to see if there were any red flags," he says. "Tom had -----’s coach call him, ended up getting the kid to talk to his parents, and I think - they were planning to get him an appointment with a psychiatrist as soon as possible, right?" Nate says, looking at Tom.

"Yeah," Tom says, nodding. "He's a good kid, don't know him all that well personally but I know Coach ------ thinks the world of him, real promising prospect."

"So he's okay right now? He - he not do anything to himself?" Alex says, his voice tight.

"Yeah, he’s fine," Tom says, his voice softening. He hesitates. "If - " he breaks off when Nate sends him a sharp look.

For a long while, the three men stand there in silence, Tom and Nate looking on as Alex continues reading.

Finally, Alex puts the letters down.

"I’m not hero," he says, looking directly at Tom. His eyes are bright with tears. "And I make terrible, terrible role model," he says. The camera zooms out a little more, enough to see Tom’s expression closing over - becoming guarded, resigned. "So I’m really sorry you guys stuck with me, I’m sorry there not anybody better who do this for you," Alex says, his voice cracking, "but I gonna try my best, I swear."

The camera pans over to Tom, catching the slow dawn of realization. "You - you mean - " he starts,
"Alex," Nate cuts in, quietly. "Remember what we talked about, Alex. You need to do what’s best for you, remember?"

"I know," Alex says, his voice thick with emotion. "I know, but Nate, if there kids out there who need me like this, then I gotta do it, I gotta be honest," he says. He looks down for a moment, then back up. "Tom, if - " he swallows. "If I write letter back to these kids, can you deliver back to them?" he says, awkward.

Tom's mouth is agape, as if he can't really believe what he's hearing. "I - yes, of course I will," he says, scrambling. "I - Alex, I can't even begin to say how much this means to me, how much this is going to mean to - "

"Yes, yes, you've done quite enough damage," Nate says dryly, nudging Tom towards the exit. "I'll give you a call when we've got something to send back, okay?" he shuts the door behind him, then turns back to look at Alex, arms crossed.

Alex puts a hand on the back of his neck, biting his lip. "Yeah, I know, is - is really stupid to do this," he says, looking down.

"No, that isn't quite the word I'm looking for here," Nate says, squinting. "Or, it's not the only word," he amends. He studies Alex carefully. "But if you are going to do this, then you need to be really, absolutely sure," he says, his voice intent. "Your life is going to go under a microscope, you can't do this halfway."

"I am sure, I know is gonna be hard," Alex says, his shoulders drawn up, defensive. "Nate, I promise I gonna - how you say? I gonna clean up act, I gonna be better, I promise I try be good," he says earnestly.

Nate snorts. "It's not your behavior I'm worried about, it's everybody else's," he says. "You're really going make Sergey and I work hard for Mark's money, aren't you?"

Alex swallows. "Well, I mean," he says, his expression uneasy. "Like I say before, I dunno if I still gonna be Bear, maybe I gonna be somebody else problem after tomorr - "

"You have absolutely no idea how angry it's going to make the guys to hear you talking like that, do you?" Nate says, shaking his head. "Well, fine, you can find out yourself tomorrow after they get back from Colorado."

Alex looks up cautiously. "Um, then - " he hesitates. "Do you, do you think you can help me read and reply to letters right now? I - you know my English not very good, so I - I want to make sure I say thing right," he says, his hands clenching and unclenching nervously.

Nate looks at him for a long moment. "Yeah," he says finally, his voice gentle. "Yeah, I can do that. Let me go get my laptop, and I'll get Sergey in here too, we'll do it all together," he says, then turns and slips out the door.

The camera turns and focuses in on Alex; he takes a deep breath in, then lets it out - something about his posture suggests a great weight settling over his shoulders.

He pulls a seat away from the table, sits down. He picks up another letter and starts reading, and the clip fades to black.

Nate appears again on-screen, in studio.
"The reason why I told Alex that he had to do what was best for him was because I knew that as soon as he saw those kids' letters, he was going to decide to come out," he says, looking faintly resigned. "He's got a huge soft spot for kids, he would never be able to bear the thought that he was letting any of them down, no matter the personal cost to himself." He makes a sort of half-proud, half-exasperated face.

"Anyways, we spent the rest of the day answering those letters. By the time he left, Alex was one hundred percent committed to coming out, and doing it the right way - being as open with the public about his bisexuality as he could, trying to be squeaky-clean with respect to his public image, that sort of thing." He pauses, pushing up his glasses. "The rest of the team got back from Colorado the next day, and George had everybody come straight from the airport to Stonebridge so Alex could talk to them all at once. This next clip shows his meeting with them."

A new clip fades in; it shows the inside of the Bears' locker room, Alex standing in front of the rest of his teammates who are all seated along the sides, in front of their stalls. The text in the left corner of the screen reads:

Bears' locker room at Stonebridge Iceplex, Arlington, VA
1:22 PM Sunday, February 20th

Alex clears his throat. At first glance he looks calm, but when the camera zooms in it captures the way his hands are trembling slightly.

"Hey guys," he says, then takes a deep breath. "First, I wanna say I’m sorry I leave you guys so sudden in California," he says. "I needed come back to talk to my family, but I know is sh---- thing to do, just leave you guys without say anything, you guys have to face media and questions and, and play without me and everything, so I’m really sorry about that," he says. He looks down for a long moment. The rest of the Bears watch him silently, nobody moving a muscle. Finally, Alex looks up.

"So truth is, I’m bisexual," he says, his voice soft but steady. "That’s me in pictures that Deadspin post, I did - I did meet up with a guy in LA after game." He swallows. "I know not telling you guys mean I been dishonest, especially since I know even before this happen that if it come out, it gonna cause a lot of trouble for you guys, for Mark," he says, his voice breaking. He takes a deep breath. "And since I plan on being honest with everybody, I plan on telling public the truth," he says, his voice wavering a little now. "I know is gonna cause even more trouble for team, which is why I tell Mark that if you guys want, then he should trade me somewhere else."

"What the - why the f--- would we want that?"

Alex looks towards the unseen voice, his expression wooden. "Because is gonna be huge sh--storm when it go public, with media and other teams and everything," he says. "And I wanna - I gotta give you guys choice whether or not you want to deal with it. I mean, I know - " he rubs the back of his neck uneasily. "I know is also sh--- thing to do to new team, but at least they gonna have warning, they not - I not give them blindside hit the way I do to you guys." Alex brings his hand down, looks away for a moment. "Or if you guys, um, if you guys okay with me still play as Bear, then - " he looks up, his jaw tightening a little. "Then I can step down as captain, if..." his voice falters; he looks momentarily lost.

"I know is important for captain to be leader of team, for everybody to - to trust and look up to captain," he says quietly. "I understand if, if you guys want somebody else to wear C, I mean," he lets out a breath that almost sounds like a chuckle. "You guys deserve somebody better, definitely," he finishes, his voice becoming surer. He clears his throat. "Uh, okay, I guess - I guess I leave you guys alone to make decision," he says. "I - sorry, you, um, you guys gonna have to decide today, so
George can start calling other teams for trade," he says, his voice cracking.

"Who was this guy?" Kirk says, rising to his feet, his face thunderous.

"I - what?" Alex looks completely taken aback. Then his expression hardens. "Kirk, I'm not gonna tell you - is not important," he says.

"Did he hurt you? Did he coerce you in any way?" Kirk demands.

"Uh..." Alex looks genuinely flabbergasted. "No, of course not," he says, sounding utterly bewildered. "What - Kirk, you not ask me these kind of question if is girl," he says, an edge entering his voice.

Kirk throws his left hand up in a gesture of barely suppressed fury. "Yeah, because one, I've yet to meet a girl who could physically overpower you but there sure as hell are guys out there who could do it, and two, pictures of you kissing a girl would barely cause a blip but you kissing a guy would sure as f--- kick up a sh--storm, and I'll bet you dollars to donuts that this punk knew that damn well," he says, glaring. "Did he try to blackmail you and it went wrong somehow? Dammit AJ, if this guy made trouble for you then you better tell me his name so I can go chop his d--- off," he says, breathing hard.

Alex gapes at him. "I - no," he finally sputters. "Jesus, is really so hard to believe I like guys? Is completely - um, what is word - "

"Consensual," a voice supplies.

"Thank you, consensual, is completely consensual!" Alex says, pointing. "And he's good guy, is not - Kirk, I promise, was not blackmail," he says, his voice intent. He hesitates a moment. "Is - is because you have problem that I, uh, like guys - "

"Yeah, right, that's the part I have a f------ problem with." Kirk grates out. "Just please, please tell me you were at least being safe.

Alex looks at him, hopelessly confused. "Uh... safe?"

"Condoms, AJ," Kirk bellows, gesturing in a way that apparently isn't appropriate for family television, since his hands are blurred out. "Did you use f------ condoms!"

"Yes, yeah, of course I use condom," Alex scrambles. Then he wrinkles his nose, looking insulted. "You really think guys not want to sleep with me unless is for blackmail?" His nose wrinkles even further. "And what do you mean, there guys out there who have more power than me? I - "

"Oooookay," Bradshaw says, standing up as Alex starts flexing his arm muscles indignantly. "I think that's just about enough of that; AJ, why don't you go play outside for a moment and let the grownups talk," he says, his mouth twitching even as he nudges Alex out the door.

Kirk wheels around as soon as Alex is out of the room. "Right, so if AJ goes, I go too," he says heatedly. There are furious splotches of color across his cheekbones. "I don't care if I have to pay George a million dollars to make sure I end up on the same team as he does, if that's what it takes then I'll do it in a heartbeat."

"Me too," Nilsson says quietly, standing up and crossing his arms.

"Me three," another voice says off-camera.
"And me," says another.

"Yeah, me too - so basically, we're going to make Marcus an extremely rich man to trade the entire Washington Bears team to another city, it'll be great," Bradshaw says, clapping his hands together briskly. "Okay, seriously - is there anybody who actually wants to kick AJ off the team?"

The entire room stays silent. Bradshaw surveys the room, eyebrow raised. "Nobody? Good, because it would be way easier for whoever's got a problem with AJ to leave, than for all the rest of us to pick up and move to - to Calgary, or whichever GM Marcus can sucker into taking the whole sorry bunch of us," he says dryly. He pauses a moment, apparently trying to figure out what to say next.

"Okay, so," he says slowly, "I get that we're probably all surprised - or at least, I was surprised, anyways, and I bet we all have a bunch of questions for AJ. But he's still the same guy we've always known, he's still the same person who's been a really good friend to each and every one of us. If you feel - um, uncomfortable or awkward, or if you want to ask him anything, I'm one hundred percent sure that he'd be more than willing to talk to you, I'm sure he wouldn't judge anybody or anything."

"I'll judge you," Kirk cuts it darkly. "I'll judge the f--- out of you."

Bradshaw sighs at him. "Kirk, c'mon, calm down, okay? You don't have to get all angry before anybody even says anything, and being mad won't help, anyways," he says, impatient.

"Before anybody says anything? Did you not just hear what AJ was saying in here?" Kirk shouts, looking positively murderous. "Okay, I'll tell you why I'm angry, since nobody seems to get it," he says. "I'm angry because apparently AJ thinks that we're the kind of people who'll stab him in the back the moment he turns around. I'm angry because he's expecting us to treat him like garbage, as if he needs our permission to stay on this team. I'm angry that he thinks that we think that being bi disqualifies him from being captain," Kirk snaps. "Yeah, Brads, I do have to get angry, because I'm f----- furious that he has such little faith in us!"

He glares around the room. "Look, if any of you want to talk to AJ or - or Brads or whoever and whine to them about how uncomfortable you are because you're afraid of catching cooties, then fine, go ahead," he grits out. "But I'm warning you guys right now, you come complaining to me and I'll haul off and punch you in the face, I swear I will. You worried he's going to check you out in the showers? Grow a pair, if he hasn't hit on you by now he probably isn't going to, sorry to burst your bubble!" His voice starts rising. "You scared about the media sh--storm about to hit? Suck it up, I guarantee you AJ's going to get it about a billion times worse, they're going to put him through living hell for this. You think you're gonna get grief from the rest of the league? Jesus f---- -- Christ, you're a goddamn hockey player! Get over it or get out, find another job where you can cry more," he snarls.

He looks away for a moment, his jaw working uselessly.

"Look, I don't know and I honestly don't care if any of you have, like, religious or political problems with this or whatever," he says, lowering his voice. "But to me, this is personal. This is about friendship. This is about loyalty. This, this right here is about courage, you hear me?" He looks around, his expression intense. "I bet we all like to think of ourselves as tough guys - playing with broken bones, facing other guys in fights, blocking shots and taking hits," he says quietly. "But I guarantee you that in your entire career as a hockey player, you're never going to face a truer test of character than what you choose to do right here, right now."

He pauses, his face utterly serious. "So what I intend to do is get AJ back in here, yell at him for
being a complete idiot for ever thinking that we would take him up on his offer - on either of his offers, and then I intend to go yell at Mark and at George for letting AJ be an idiot." He inhales, his nostrils flaring, then lets his breath out. "Now, who's with me?"

The camera zooms out; a few guys rise to their feet immediately. A beat or two passes, and then the rest of the players start getting up. Some look uncertain, some look as nervous as hell - but in the end, the entire team is standing, gathered around Kirk and Bradshaw.

"All right, all right you guys, group hug, c'mon," Bradshaw yells out half-mocking, but the pride in his voice is clear as he grabs onto the guys nearest to him, mashing them inwards to trigger a spontaneous mass embrace.

"Ow - get off my foot, you're crushing my toes -"

"Maaaaan, you reek - you forget to use deodorant yesterday?"

"Wait, is that my shirt? I knew somebody stole it!"

"Okay, I think that's enough togetherness for today," Mueller says, grinning as he breaks away. "All right, I'll get him in here," he says, going off camera. "AJ, c'mere!" he yells. "We want to talk to you!"

A moment later, Alex appears in the locker room again. His face is set, stoic - but his expression cracks slightly when Kirk storms over.

"So sorry to disappoint you, but you're damn well stuck here with us, got it?" He glares at AJ. "You're a f------ idiot, Captain!" he says, unceremoniously whacking Alex upside the head before storming out.

"Complete moron, Captain," Bradshaw says, coming over and grinning as he not-so-lightly cuffs Alex round the ear, then follows Kirk out.

"Du är en idiot, Kapten," Nilsson says very seriously, mussing Alex's hair unmercifully before making his own exit.

"F------ dumbass, Captain."

"Ty jsi debil, Kapitán."

"How do you say it in Russian again? дурак? Yeah, that's you, Captain."

One by one they file out, each of them calling Alex some variation idiot and summarily hitting him on the head with varying degrees of force. Alex's expression goes from apprehension to shock, from shock to gratitude, and then from gratitude his expression finally ends up at a sort of unsteady, poignant giddiness, as if he can't quite believe what's happening.

A few seconds after the last player leaves the locker room, Nate reappears, coming up to Alex.

"I told you they'd be mad," Nate says, leaning sideways against the wall as Alex sits down on one of the benches, rubbing his head ruefully. "Can't say you don't deserve it, after giving them so little credit."

"Hey, I just get billion shots to head, be nice to me, okay?" Alex says, but he has a huge, dopy grin on his face that's wavering around the edges, like he's trying to decide between laughing and crying.
"Yeah, I'm not sure whether we'll be able to tell the difference between you with brain damage and without," Nate returns dryly, although he's smiling too. He pauses, chewing his lip for a moment. "So, you're really, positively sure you want to do this?"

Alex takes a deep breath, blows it out. "Yeah, I'm sure," he says.

Nate studies him closely, his eyes narrowing. "Kirk said you still wouldn't say anything about the other guy in the picture," he says slowly. "I don't - " he hesitates, glancing towards the camera briefly. "Alex, I know I said earlier that I wouldn't push, but - " he hesitates. "But I really think you need to tell me who this guy is."

Alex is already shaking his head. "No, no, you don't understand," he says. "Is not important, it don't matter at all, it really don't."

Nate grimaces a little. "I - okay, I hate to ask, but I have to in order to do my job. Is there any particular reason why you're hiding who this guy is? Is - and you have to at least tell me this, Alex, I'm going to have to insist - but is there, um, is there any legal reason why you don't want to talk about him?"

"No, no, is not anything like that," Alex says emphatically. "You not understand, he have nothing to do with any of this. He's just guy I know, friendly with, there nothing shady about it, I swear," he says. "Is just, it never anything serious, you know? Never gonna turn into something, um, long-term or anything like that." His face is turned away from the camera, but his voice remains steady; he sounds sure. "You know is gonna get really crazy around here soon, is not fair to make him deal with everything when he don't want to at all."

"Wait, have you been in touch with him?" Nate says sharply, straightening abruptly.

Alex looks down, but only for an instant. "Yeah," he says, looking up again. "I talk to him right after Deadspin post, we - we agree is better if he not get involve," he says.

Nate eyes him balefully. "You're sure there's nothing shady about him, right? He's over 18? Not a prostitute? Nothing like that?"

"Nate, I promise, is nothing like that," Alex says, standing up. The camera captures his expression now; he looks pained, heartfelt. "Look, what I do - what I gonna be doing from now on, is not for him, not because of him, it have nothing to do with him at all," he says. "I not even talking to him anymore, completely end, okay?" When Nate continues to look at him suspiciously, Alex tries smiling. "Look, I just want all attention only for me, right?" he attempts to joke, jamming his hands in his pockets. "But honest, is better like this, is - " his voice slips, just a little - "is less stuff to worry about," Alex says, his voice earnest.

After a long, long silence, Nate finally lets out a deep sigh. "Okay, I'll take your word for it," he says. "But you better not be lying to me, you understand?"

The corner of Alex's mouth quirks up. "I not lie to you yet, Nate," he says, his voice low.

Nate gives him one last, measuring look. Then his own mouth turns upwards. "All right, then. We gonna do this?" he says, holding his fist out.

Alex's expression turns into a grin - half-defiant, half-gleeful recklessness, but a grin nonetheless. "Yeah," he says, bumping fists with Nate. "We gonna do this." And the screen fades to black.

Crawford lets out an explosive breath next to Darryl. "Jesus," he says, his voice awed. "It's like a movie, the commissioner must be drooling all over this," he says.
"I know, right? Can't imagine what the tv ratings are gonna be like - "

"Shit, it's gonna be like a traveling circus around the Bears after this - "

Darryl stays mute while his teammates start chattering around him; in contrast to his earlier turmoil, he feels strangely calm, empty. That's that, then. Alex said it himself; "It never anything serious, you know? Never gonna turn into something, um, long-term or anything like that." Darryl lowers his head, looks down. "Is better like this, is - is less stuff to worry about."

And so the door he's been agonizing about walking through has been distinctly, irrevocably shut: Alex on one side, Darryl on the other.

Another commercial break, then the show comes back on; Nate appears again, narrates some more, and then it cuts to show the footage of Alex's press conference from Monday. Darryl sits through all of it, numb, unseeing.

"Hey - " Darryl starts at the nudge on his shoulder. He looks up to see Crawford looking at him, eyebrows raised. "Show's over, dude." Darryl looks back at the tv; the credits are rolling, the rest of the guys are starting to get up and leave.

"Oh," he says. He gets up stiffly, his joints protesting.

"You okay? You have too much to drink or something? You seem - you seem kind of off," Crawford says, eying him doubtfully. "You gonna be okay driving home?"

"Yeah," Darryl says, swallowing. "I'll be fine."
Chapter 14

Thursdays instantly become Darryl's least favorite day of the week; the rest of the time he can do a fairly decent job of blocking out anything and everything related to Alex and the Bears. Sure, it means putting in his earbuds and listening to loud music whenever he's around his teammates - in the locker room, on the plane, wherever he can get away with it; they seem to take the hint. At least, it seems like they refrain from talking about Alex whenever he's around, but maybe they're just being careful because of Prescott's earlier flare-up.

Avoidance also means that he has to stop watching television - not just ESPN or Versus or specifically sports-oriented channels, he switched over to CNN once and felt his chest start constricting once he realized what he was watching; it was a round-table discussion talking about the wider societal impact of Alex coming out - sociologists and sportscasters and gender theory scholars (gender theory scholars, for crying out loud) all gathered round. Darryl's pretty sure that most of the people around that table have never seen a hockey game in their life.

Even surfing the web isn't safe; it seems like every other site has some sort of ticker or pop-up with the latest news headlines - Digg or reddit or whatever. Intellectually, Darryl knows that Alex's story isn't actually monopolizing the airwaves or the Internet, but every time he encounters another unexpected mention it feels like a punch in the stomach, so he quickly decides that disconnecting entirely is probably the safest route.

But on Thursday nights he can't escape. When Prescott says something he means it, and so every week the team meets up to watch the show. When they're at home, they all gather at Prescott's house; Vince even drops by a couple times, which - is really wonderful, another person to witness Darryl's inevitable nervous breakdown. If they're on the road, Prescott either gets them together in a meeting room at the hotel or has them watch a recording the next morning if they've got a game. Watching the episodes in the company of his teammates while trying to keep his face impassive - it's honestly the most difficult thing Darryl's ever had to do; he would rather run a thousand miles, climb a thousand stairs, slog through a thousand bag skates than have to do this, but there's just no getting around it.

And so he goes, and he watches, and he listens, and he tries to keep himself as still and silent as possible.

The episodes are a curious mix of all sorts of clips compiled together; the footage ranges from Alex answering questions for the press - footage that's already been broadcast, probably available to anybody with an internet connection - to recordings that are truly behind-the-scenes, capturing Alex in private with the team, with his family.

The press conference clips are the easiest to watch, by far - they're even amusing, or at least a lot of them are.

"So usually, press scrums are where reporters come into the locker room and ask the players any questions they have, usually after practice or after games," Nate explains. "But we realized that having fifty people - no, I'm not exaggerating - trying to crowd around Alex really wouldn't work. So in order to accommodate everybody, we decided it would be easiest if Alex held his own daily hour-long Q&A sessions in the media room." He pauses. "Initially, Sergey and I thought that Alex would hold these sessions alone, but his teammates decided that, um, they didn't want to let him hog the spotlight all by himself."
It soon becomes clear that 'not letting Alex hog the spotlight' actually means that the rest of the Bears take turns getting up there with him and running interference whenever they hear a question they don't like. The clips show Alex sitting behind the usual cluster of microphones, except he's always flanked by a pair of teammates, one on each side. Their methods of running interference differ a little, at least in terms of what they talk about whenever they jump in to save Alex from answering.

"Are you aware that several evangelical Christian groups now intend to protest outside every Bears game, since - "

"No, but thanks for letting us know," Nilsson cuts in smoothly. "But you know what I want to protest? Is how it's so difficult to find good pickled herring here in U.S. If only place I can find Swedish food is at Ikea, then there is big problem, I think." He frowns forbiddingly. "Maybe I need to ask Swedish embassy get involved."

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"Don't you think you've hurt the reputation of the sport by getting caught up in this type of scandal? There's been a number of people lobbying the commissioner to suspend you for inappropriate conduct."

Carstairs snorts. "Yeah, if I were on another team I'd be lobbying to get AJ to stop playing for any reason possible, even a shi - uh, surely stupid one like that," he recovers, glancing at the camera. "You know what, tell Commissioner Bettman to come up with a fair and consistent way to hand out suspensions, and then we'll talk. So, you know, in a million years or so."

"You know what would be way better to lobby him about? The environmental and recycling policies of every team in the league," Bradshaw jumps in from the other side. "It's unbelievable how much goes to waste - "

"Geez, Brads, give it rest, would you?" Carstairs throws a balled-up piece of paper at the other man over Alex's head. "We've heard this lecture about a billion times!"

"Are you going to pick that up?" Bradshaw demands. "The recycling bin's over there, see it? I expect better of you than littering, Carstairs."

Although it appears that all of the Bears players get their turn accompanying Alex, the pair that shows up the most often are Bradshaw and Kirk. It's not hard to understand why; the two of them are both quick-witted and well-spoken, they both have a sharp sense of humor.

"Were the relationships you had with your previous girlfriends real or fake? Did you ask them to act as beards for you so you could sham being straight?"

Alex's face creases in confusion; Bradshaw leans in to quietly translate. Alex's expression first shows understanding, then his jaw tightens. "No, every relationship I - every romantic relationship I been in, I really do care for that person," he says. "I'm bisexual, I made sure I use right word," he says, his tone deceptively mild.

"Yeah, it means he likes women and men," Kirk puts in, enunciating. "It's not that difficult a concept to understand, people can like two things equally at the same time, imagine that. Take Brads, for example - you ask him to pick between chocolate and vanilla ice cream, he couldn't do it if you paid him a million dollars."
"Nope," Bradshaw says mournfully, shaking his head. "Just can't choose! They're both delicious, no way I could pick one over the other, sorry." He heaves an exaggerated sigh. "Sometimes I just have to give up and get chocolate-vanilla twist, you know, the soft-serve you get where it's combined?" Bradshaw gestures, twirling his index finger in the air. "Yum!"

"Good point," Kirk says gravely. "Hermaphrodites deserve love too, just like everybody else."

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"Are you currently in a relationship with a man or a woman right now?"

Alex's face closes over. "No."

"Could you tell us what you're looking for in a boyfriend or girlfriend? Do you look for different qualities or similar ones?"

"Uh - " Alex looks taken aback.

"Yeah, that's totally an appropriate question to ask," Kirk snaps, his eyebrows lowering. "In fact, that's such a fantastic question that I'm going to take that one for myself, I don't want AJ to get all the good ones. So, what I'm looking for in a girl is a great sense of humor, somebody who can laugh at herself, but somebody who's kind to others, low-maintenance," he says, ticking off his fingers. "Somebody sporty, she should enjoy exercising, we can go on runs together. I like long walks on the beach, sunsets, holding hands, yeah, all that sort of stuff," he says, scowling at the room. "Anything else you'd like to know? Zodiac sign? Favorite color?"

"I've got a question - can I get your number?" A feminine voice calls out.

If Alex's expression was taken aback, then Kirk looks like a deer caught in the headlights. Bradshaw just about falls over, literally holding onto his sides.

"Don't bother, really, he's not worth it," he says, gasping, once he can speak into the microphone again. "He's serious about the running, he'll run you ragged, he's got a treadmill in his dining room - "

"Let's move on," Kirk grinds out, Alex laughing helplessly next to him. "Next question?"

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"Several players around the league have said anonymously that they're uncomfortable playing against you, since they're not sure whether you might be checking them out. Do you have anything to say in response?"

"Who - " Kirk explodes, but Alex puts a restraining hand on the other man's arm.

"No, is okay," he says, smiling. "You can tell them they don't have to worry, because I have standard, and guys in NHL - " he shakes his head dismissively. "See, if I was gonna go out with guy in NHL, then one, he have to be better looking than me," he says, putting a finger up.

"AJ, you know that doesn't rule out hardly anybody," Bradshaw says, looking
concerned. "A few, sure, but -"

"Two, he have to have more teeth than me," Alex continues, putting another finger up.

"You've gotten four knocked out so far, right?" Kirk says. "Okay, there's a decent number of guys missing more than that, but -"

"And three, he have to be better hockey player than me," Alex says, flicking up a third finger; he bares his teeth, looking around the room defiantly. "So not many guys in league have anything to worry about, right?"

"But AJ," Bradshaw says earnestly, taking Alex's hand. "I'm so sorry to remind you, but -" he takes a deep breath. "I'm already married."

Alex's face falls theatrically even as titters run around the room. "No, Matt, say is not true!" he says, grasping Bradshaw's hand in his, exaggerated. "Wait, but maybe I can just switch place with your wife sometime, right?"

"Yeah," Bradshaw can't suppress the huge grin on his face anymore. "I'm one hundred percent sure that Amy would have no problem if you could just come by on the nights when the baby's waking up every couple hours crying, she would absolutely love that," he says.

"Oh," Alex hastily withdraws his hand. "Er, maybe no."

"Hey, you're better looking than AJ," Crawford says, elbowing him after that clip. "And you're not missing any teeth, right?" He grins at Darryl meaningfully. "Better watch out, Darryl!"

"Yeah," Darryl says, getting up and going to - to the kitchen, to the bathroom, to anywhere away from the TV. "Right."

"That was a joke, Colton!" Crawford yells after him. "It didn't mean anything!"

"I know," Darryl mutters to himself. Alex was joking. It didn't mean anything. It didn't.

That isn't even the clip that makes Darryl squirm the most, though. The ones where Alex answers for himself, the ones where he takes the questions seriously are harder to take.

"What strategies have you been using to cope during the most difficult time in your life? It seems that -"

"My oldest brother died in car accident when I was eight year old," Alex says quietly, leaning forward. "This isn't worse time in my life, not by long shot."

"Well, professionally, then -"

"Last year, teams I was on lost in Olympics, in Stanley Cup, in World Championship," he says, his mouth twisting a little. "This not - this isn't difficult compare to that, either; is never difficult to tell truth, is never too difficult to do right thing," he says, his voice steady.

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"The other guys you've been in relationships with, were they hockey players?"

Alex looks over in undisguised disgust. "What, when it mean like hundred percent
chance we gonna get caught? Really? You really think I gonna be that stupid?" he says, a thread of genuine anger in his voice.

"Is that a definite no, then?"

"Why do I have to spell out for you? And I already told you guys I not gonna answer questions about people I have relationships with - you know what, we're done here, is enough for today," he says, abruptly rising.

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"Many players around the league have been very outspoken in their support of you, but a number have declined to say anything, most notably Darryl Colton. Are you hurt or disappointed by - "

"Darryl Colton is one of best people I know," Alex interrupts. His voice is low, sure. "Is not responsibility for him or anybody else to comment at all, why should they?" He rubs his forehead for a moment. "No, I mean," he looks down briefly. "I'm really very grateful for everyone who say kind things, but you guys shouldn't go asking everybody to say stuff, okay? Nobody should feel like they have obligation or anything, seriously. This - " his tone takes on a note of irony. "All this really have nothing to do with hockey, I just have so much fun talking to you guys all the time."

After that particular clip airs, Darryl gets an earful about it from Brynn on their next family video call, which - yeah, he really should've seen coming.

"Why haven't you said anything in public to support Alex, though?" Brynn demands.

Darryl resists the urge to bury his head in his hands. "I don't get it, how do you have time to give me this kind of grief? From what I remember, Shattuck St. Mary gives plenty of homework, shouldn't you be busy doing that right now?"

"Darryl, don't be snippy," his mother says reprovingly. "Brynn, I'm sure he has his reasons." She looks at him expectantly.

"I - " Darryl swallows; there's a huge knot in his throat. "I just - I don't want to interfere," he says. "This isn't - Alex shouldn't have to comment on my comments, he - he already has enough to worry about."

"No, Brynn, he has a point - " his dad says warningly as Brynn opens her mouth. "It's not any of Darryl's business, he wouldn't be commenting on other players' personal lives, there's no reason why this should be any different."

"But he's your friend," his sister says, clearly exasperated. "You have the weirdest hangups, I swear!"

"Brynn, tone it down," his dad says. "Kuznetsov seems to be doing fine - he's certainly getting enough support from Washington, anyways."

It's true; the episodes also show Alex and the Bears playing both at home and away. These clips don't show much of the actual play on the ice, but they instead show what goes on around the games.

"Hey, what's this?" Alex demands, coming over to a cluster of his teammates; it looks like the team's in the home locker room at Verizon, getting ready for a game.
"What's what?" Mueller says, pulling his helmet on and buckling the straps.

"This," Alex says, thrusting out the sleeve of his jersey; he hasn't put it on yet. The camera zooms in a rainbow heart-shaped patch sewn on the upper half of the sleeve, a capital 'C' in the middle. "What - I didn't ask for this, why it get put on?" he asks, suspicious.

"Well," Bradshaw says earnestly, "the front office decided we wanted to appeal more to the ten-year-old girls in our fan base, so that's our new logo - oh, and we're changing our mascot to a sparkly pink unicorn, so - "

"Don't listen to this dumbass," Grayson cuts in, rolling his eyes. "Look, we've all got them, not just you, see?" he says, turning to show a similar patch - although without a C - on his jersey.

"But I - " Alex starts, looking perplexed and slightly unhappy.

"No," Bradshaw says, pointing at him. "No, you are not allowed to protest because you think it's tacky, you're the guy who once wore Daisy Duke shorts to a team meeting, you don't have no fashion sense, you have negative fashion sense."

"Is only one time! And is my first year here! And, and I, uh, I was out of laundry!" Alex protests.

"Shoo," Bradshaw says firmly. "Go put your sweater on, we gotta get out there, move it," he says, nudging Alex away none-too-gently.

Alex's brow remains furrowed even as he and the rest of the team finish getting dressed and tramp out of the locker room, but his expression transforms once he steps out onto the ice.

"I - oh," he says, his eyes going wide.

The camera pans to the left to see what he's reacting to, and -

Screaming fans dressed in the Bears' customary red are waving rainbow flags, rainbow banners, rainbow-colored signs all around the jam-packed arena. The camera zooms in some of the fans, and it captures the rainbow heart patch sewn on their jersey sleeves; the view pans right slowly, and it becomes clear how much care and thought many of the fans have put in to showing their support. Some of the flags look like they're hand-stitched, many of the signs are beautifully illustrated, and a number of the phrases written on them are witty as well as heart-warming.

And then there's the more direct approach. The camera zooms in on five girls in a row together, wearing nothing but sports bras and shorts while dancing around - but the letters painted in bright red on their stomachs are easily readable:

W-E ♥ A-J

The camera pans to the right, and just next to the girls there's a string of shirtless guys dancing even more wildly. The letters on their chests read:

W-E ♥ A-J M-O-R-E

The camera returns its focus to Alex; he looks overwhelmed.
"I - " he clears his throat. "Brads, I thought - I thought we already do all this when we play against Senators last week," he says.

"What, you thought that was a proper coming-out party? Yeah, okay," Bradshaw snorts.

"Right, so - basically, Mark had Nate and Sergey publicize and market this game as 'Pride Night,' and they've been working with a lot of local groups to attend and come with - uh, all the accessories," Mueller says, shading his eyes as he looks up around the stands.

"Local - groups," Alex says slowly.

"You know, the local hockey community, gay advocacy groups, businesses, church groups - anybody who might be interested," Mueller says. "I think there's a bunch of people who came from out of state, too. Yeah, see - the Bears are here from Hershey, they're sitting over there," he says, pointing. "Anyways, Nate and Sergey also got the patches made up and distributed, told everybody to wear 'em tonight since we'd have them on, so," he shrugs. "Here we are, I guess."

"But - " Alex looks down; he swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly.

"Hey," Mueller says gently, "Don't feel awkward about all the attention. Tonight's about pulling the fans together, it's about showing everybody who's watching that the Bears are an organization that supports the gay community whole-heartedly, you understand?"

Alex's face remains averted for a moment. Then he looks up.

"What you talking about, I love attention!" Alex says, a blinding grin across his face. He takes off like a rocket, raising his arms above his head as he skates round the edge of the rink; "Woooooooooooooo!" he yells, and the crowd roars back in deafening approval, decibel upon ear-splitting decibel.

There are a few other places where Alex also receives a warm welcome, although they're a little more understated than the crowd at Verizon.

The camera shows the Bears coming in to what looks like the Wolves' visitor locker room, judging by the brown and yellow logo on the floor. Cantrell's the first to enter, and he catches sight of something that first makes him confused, then makes him laugh.

"Yo, AJ, get over here," he calls back, turning around. "I think I know which one's your locker!"

The camera swings around; the room is lined with wooden stalls that look ordinary enough, except - the camera zooms in on one in particular. There's a rainbow flag with the corners tacked up on the stall, and in front of the flag sits an enormous vase full of flowers, bright bursts of red and orange and deep purple.

The camera turns back to Alex, who looks equal parts bemused and amused, eyebrows raised.

"Aw, look, there's even a card!" Cantrell says, pushing him forward. "Go on, open it."
Alex picks up the envelope, opens it, reads the contents. He lets out a startled laugh.

"What does it say?" Allsworth peers around curiously.

"Nothing, just - Wolves wanna remind me gay marriage is legal in Canada, if I ever wanna move," Alex says, grinning.

"But it's legal in D.C. too, isn't it?" Allsworth says, squinting.

Alex swats him over the head. "Shh, if my mom hear all this she gonna get ideas, okay?"

---

Sean Brunner pops up on screen, seated in-studio.

"So, a while back I told the Advocate in an interview that I'd stand by any kid or anybody who played hockey who was afraid about coming out to his team," he says. "Kuznetsov beat me to the punch in terms of telling his own team, but I figured I could, you know, support him while he came out to everybody else," he says. "So this is a bit we filmed right before the Bears played the Riders, we ended up showing it on the arena screen during intermission."

He vanishes and a new clip starts, showing Alex standing in the Riders' locker room, Brunner standing next to him and attempting to look protective and menacing... which he doesn't quite pull off, since Alex is, oh, four inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than him.

Alex takes a deep breath, looking down; it seems like he's trying to give the impression of being nervous, but the way the left corner of his mouth keeps quirking upward ruins the effect. He looks up, the edges of his eyes creased a little.

"So, you guys probably wonder why I'm here, but - there something important I feel like I should tell you guys," he says, eyes sincere. He bites his lip, then blurts out: "I'm not natural blond."

There's a stunned silence.

"You're... not a natural blond," Jorgens repeats, trying to understand. It looks like he's having a lot of difficulty.

"Yeah, you got a problem with that?" Brunner says threateningly, stepping forward.

Stiegel scratches his head. "Is this, like, code? Russian slang or something?"

Alex shakes his head sorrowfully. "No, is true," he says, heaving a sigh. "My hair is actually dark, I know is hard to believe. From now on, I gonna let my hair grow out without put color in," he says. "Oh, and I'm bisexual, but you guys already hear that," he adds, offhand.

"Uhh..." Jorgens still looks deeply baffled. "Your hair is dark right now, Kuznetsov," he says slowly.

"What?!!?" Alex puts on an expression of shock. "But I go to salon first Saturday every month, I pay lots of money!"
"Sorry, AJ," Farstad says, grinning. "You're definitely already brunette, hate to tell you." He leans back, obviously trying not to laugh. "Why would you want blond hair, anyways? Dark is better looking for sure."

"You think so?" Alex perks up. He turns to Brunner. "Is true, Brunner? I really not blond right now? But hairdresser keep tell me I have to come back, my roots showing!" Alex holds a lock of his hair out, crossing his eyes upwards anxiously.

Brunner hesitates, obviously torn. "It's true, AJ," he says gravely. "But now you don't have to wait for your hair to grow out, so there's that." He tilts his head, eying Alex's hair critically. "Actually, you could use a bit of a trim. And obviously the salon you go to right now is garbage - come on, we'll go see what my hairdresser can do for you, Vanessa's great," he says, steering Alex out of the locker room.

"Why you even need hairdresser, you have buzz cut - "

"But - " Jorgens says, still perplexed.

"You wanna come too, Cally? You could use a dye job, you've been going gray for a while now!" Brunner calls back.

"Hey!"

The clip fades out and Brunner reappears in studio.

"I just want to make it clear, neither Kuznetsov or I meant to mock or make fun of coming out," he says. "I know - and certainly Kuznetsov knows - that the process of coming out can be really, really difficult and scary, even for people whose families and friends support them. But part of the point we were trying to make is that after you come out of the closet, life goes on, it's not always going to be serious and sad and everything. You can have fun with it, laugh about it - the idea was that for me, for my teammates, the fact that Kuznetsov is bisexual isn't a big deal, and so AJ and I brainstormed together to give it a twist, play a joke or whatever." Brunner shrugs.

"Seriously, knowing that Kuznetsov swings both ways doesn't make a bit of difference in how I see the guy, just like I don't give a - I don't care if his hair is blond or brown or blue. He's still an opposing player, he's still a guy who I have to bother as much as I can, try to throw him off his game," he grins. "The game we played against the Bears after filming that spot? Yeah, I was chirping him the entire time, almost got him to take a swing at me," he says, smirking.

Brunner isn't the only person chirping Alex; a number of clips show that some of the other teams and their fans aren't nearly as welcoming as the Wolves and the Riders. It's - a little difficult to watch. It's not like Darryl doesn't have experience playing in hostile environments; hell, he knows he's had to deal with more than his fair share of booing and heckling over the years. But the intensity and degree of malice and dirty play directed at Alex at some of the arenas is still - it's still astonishing.

But Alex seems determined to stay good-natured and cheerful through it all, his grin fixed firmly in place; he treats the booing like cheering, putting a hand to his ear and waving his arm in encouragement; from what little game footage the show does air, he looks like he's making a point of playing with even more exuberance, even more of his characteristic joyous enthusiasm; he absolutely refuses to be provoked.
"Come on, queer, wanna dance?" Demmers shouts, the din of the crowd howling behind him so loud that he's barely audible.

Alex cocks his head to the side, then grins. "Okay, since you ask so nice!"

Demmers throws a punch. Alex dodges, then comes up to deftly grab Demmers's hands; he starts waltzing around, manhandling the other player.

"What the - "

"You ask to dance, we dance," Alex says, relentlessly trying to move Demmers in circles. "Geez, I can see why you want practice, you need help on footwork," he shakes his head.

Alex's teammates don't take nearly as kindly to all of this; the clip with Demmers is the closest Alex ever comes to fighting, or at least it's the closest thing the show airs. It's a little surprising Demmers even got that far, because it seems like every time another player so much as looks at Alex funny one of the Bears zooms in to confront him, snarling. The second episode in March shows a montage of each of the Bears players getting in fights - presumably to protect Alex - set to Ironically peppy music; Nilsson, Mueller, Kirk, Bradshaw, Grayson, Cantrell, on and on. Literally everybody on the Bear's roster makes an appearance; even Svoboda and Korsakoff get in on the fun, tossing aside their goalie masks.

The first few snippets show Alex trying to stop his teammates from defending his honor, but after a while he apparently gives up; the camera catches him standing in the background, looking resigned, exasperated, slightly and unwillingly amused. But he puts his foot down when Ehrenstrom tries to go after Borisch on the Islanders.

"Oh no, nonono you don't," Alex says, grabbing Ehrenstrom round the waist and hauling him back. "Brads, help me out here!" he calls out, jerking his head towards Borisch.

There's a brief tussle as both Ehrenstrom and Borisch try to escape the people restraining them, but then the refs intervene and Ehrenstrom lets Alex pull him away, albeit reluctantly.

"Why'd you stop me?" Ehrenstrom demands.

"Because is embarrassing!" Alex says.

"What? I wouldn't embarrass myself!" Ehrenstrom says, indignant.

"Not embarrassing for you, is embarrassing for me," Alex says. "You're teenage rookie, that guy's veteran, he this much taller - " Alex puts his hands about a foot apart - "and this much heavier - " he flings his arms apart, "than you, no way you gonna fight him, got it?"

Ehrenstrom sniffs. "I'm not a teenager, I turned twenty last year."

"Whatever!" Alex throws his hands up. "You not over America stupid drinking age, you're still teenager!"

"Hey, everything okay over here?" Bradshaw says, skating over.

Ehrenstrom turns to him, his expression sulky. "No, AJ won't let me fight," he says.
"Why is it okay if everybody else on the team does it?"

"Well, they all old and crazy, brains already like scramble eggs," Alex says. "Too late for them, no hope anymore. Your brain still young and fresh, gotta keep safe!"

"Yeah," Bradshaw agrees, grinning. "That's about right."

But the really personal, behind-the-scenes clips, those are the ones that Darryl can hardly bear to watch.

"Oh, good, you're here," Calhoun says, getting up from his desk as Alex comes into his office. There are two tall, solidly-built men seated in front of Calhoun's desk, although they rise once Alex enters.

"This is Lawrence Grove and James Owens," Calhoun says, the two men reaching out to shake hands with Alex in turn. "They're your new bodyguards."

Alex's face falls a little. "I - really?" He looks at Grove and Owens. "Uh, no offense, is just - "

"Alex, you know it's necessary," Calhoun says gently. "Neither of them will interfere with anything you want to do or where you want to go, but - yeah, they'll be following you around any time you're not at my house."

Alex bites his lip for a moment, then sighs, apparently resigned. "Okay," he says. "Um, so - how should I pay for - " he starts.

"What? No, the Bears will pay for it," Calhoun says, startled.

"So you mean you're gonna pay for it," Alex says, his eyebrows snapping together. "Mark, you - "

"No," Calhoun says, cutting him off. "No, Alex, not another word about it, you're insulting me by offering, you understand?"

"But - " Alex looks mutinous.

"Hey, if you both want to pay us full-rate so we get double, James and I don't have any problem with that," Grove puts in.

"Haha, very funny," Calhoun says drily. "No, I'll be the one writing the checks. Alex, be nice to them, I don't want to hear that you've mistreated them in any way," he says.

"What you talking about? I'm nice guy!" Alex protests, hands up.

"I'm referring to the fact that they'll be driving you everywhere, which means you'll potentially be subjecting them to your taste in music," Calhoun clarifies.

Alex rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I have great taste in music, we can listen to Justin Bieber and Black Eyed Peas and Nickelback all day long!" he says happily to the bodyguards, a shit-eating grin across his face.

"Um..." Owens looks worriedly at Calhoun. "How much are you paying us again?"

---
The camera films Alex sitting in a conference room - the same one at Kettler in that earlier episode - except now the table in the middle of the room is literally covered with piles and piles of paper; Alex is leaning back in one of the seats, intently reading when there's a knock at the door and Mueller pokes his head in.

"AJ?" he says, coming in.

"Hey, Mule," Alex says, getting up and giving the other man a hand clasp and half-hug. "What're you doing here?"

"Megan and I decided to take the kids to the public skate this morning," he says. "Heard you were up here, thought I'd drop by and see if you wanted to grab some lunch with us." Mueller frowns at Alex. "For that matter, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, just - " Alex waves a hand at the table. "Reading fan mail, that's all."

Mueller furrows his brow. "I thought that Nate and Sergey usually handle that for you."

"Yeah, but - " Alex glances down for a moment. "Some of, um, some of letters and e-mails I been getting, I feel like I have to reply personal, you know?" he says, slightly defensive.

Mueller scrutinizes him for a moment, then puts his hand out. "Here, lemme see," he says. When Alex hesitates, he raises his eyebrows. "Come on, give," he says, motioning.

He reads through the letter silently, Alex fidgeting nervously. "I - um, I don't, I make sure either Nate or Sergey look at what I write back," he offers. "Is not like - "

Mueller looks up, his brow furrowed even more deeply. "Is all your mail like this?"

"Like what?" Alex says, blinking. "And this not all the mail, Nate and Sergey read through everything that come in, they just give me ones that - that is better if I can reply," he says, putting a hand up on the back of his neck.

Mueller looks at the conference table, buried in paper. "What, this is after filtering?"
He puts a letter down, picks up a stack of papers, starts leafing through them. "This is going to take you forever to get through!"

Alex drags the heel of his hand across his cheekbone, swallowing. "I know, but - " he shrugs helplessly.

Mueller looks at him sharply, his mouth thin. Then - "Is that your laptop? Is there wifi in here?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah - hold on, I need save reply I was writing - " after a moment, he lets Mueller take over the computer. The older man slides into a seat and starts typing briskly, Alex watching in bemusement. "You need to send e-mail? Uh, I mean," he glances away. "Sorry, I - "

"I am writing," Mueller says, business-like, "to the rest of the team to tell them I am taking you and your two buddies out there to lunch with my family, but that at 1pm sharp we are coming back and I want everybody who's free to be in here with us to help read and reply to this mountain of mail," he says, jabbing away at the keyboard.
"Oh, but - these kids, these people, they write to me," Alex protests. "Um, no offense," he adds hurriedly.

"I know," Mueller says, his tone compassionate. "But there's no way you could ever hope to reply to even a fraction of these before a million more come in - and I bet having to read and write in English makes it even more difficult, doesn't it?" he says, eying Alex shrewdly.

"I do okay," Alex says, glancing sideways. "Nate and Sergey help me if I don't understand something, and - and there's letters in Russian, I answer those too."

Mueller looks at Alex for a moment. "AJ, trying to respond to every one of these yourself is - " he clears his throat, "That's really admirable, but if you want to reach the most people possible, then here's what I suggest: the rest of the team and I will read through the letters Nate and Sergey say need to be answered, write a reply - no, seriously, these kids will be thrilled with a personal response from a real NHL player, even if it isn't you - and then once we've written our bit, we'll tell you what the kid said, you can add a few lines to the end and they'll get to hear from two Bears instead of just one, okay?" He tilts his head, the skin around his eyes creased. "Sound good?"

"I - " Alex stops, looking down, chewing his lip.

"Yeah? Spit it out," Mueller says, raising his eyebrows.

Alex stays silent for a while. Then he looks up from beneath his lashes, mischievous: "Brads is gonna yell at me for wasting paper by printing e-mail out, I don't want him to see - "

Mueller lets out a hoot of laughter, reaches over and ruffles Alex's hair into a rumpled mess. "All right, smarta--, come on," he says, hooking his arm around Alex's shoulder and steering him towards the door. "Where do you want to go for lunch?"

"Ooh - can we go to Hooters?" Alex asks, bouncing a little.

Mueller squints. "I thought you were bi, I thought that was what all this was about," he says, waving a hand at the table as they walk out of the room.

"I am! Chippendale show in Vegas look like fun last year, maybe - "

"So remember that part where I said I was here with my wife and kids? Why don't you, um, watch what you say during lunch..."

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The text in the left corner of the screen reads:

Mark Calhoun' house  
Potomac, Maryland  
3:21 PM, Thursday, Feb 24th, 2011

The camera follows behind Alex as he walks into a spacious, expensive-looking kitchen. Viktoria, Jakob and Nikolai are all gathered around the counter, heads bent in furious but hushed discussion - but when Alex walks in they break apart.

"Mom, Dad, Misha," Alex says, going over to hug and kiss his mother on the cheek.
He looks at his family's faces, at their grim expressions. "What's wrong? Is - "

"Lyosha - " Viktoria bites her lip, not quite meeting her son's eyes. "Why don't we all sit down - "

"Mom, what's going on? Is someone sick, or - " Alex's voice starts rising.

"No, no, it's nothing like that." Jakob interrupts, putting a hand on Alex's shoulder. "Do you remember a couple years ago, I introduced you to ------- --------, that old school friend of mine?" he asks, the name beeped out.

"Um, I think so? Is he the one who got a job working for the Hockey Federation of Russia?" Alex asks, his forehead creased.

"Yes, that's him." Jakob pauses. "I got a call from him today, he wanted to warn me that the federation is planning to release a statement denouncing you for unnatural and immoral behavior," he says carefully. "And that anybody choosing to behave in such a way was a dishonor to Russia, and would not be welcome as a member of the national team.

Alex's face goes still, and then in the next moment he turns away and bends in half, as if he's been punched in the stomach.

"Lyosha - " Viktoria scrambles over to him. The camera comes around; Alex has his left arm over his stomach, his right hand bracing against the sink. He turns his head away when she tries to put her arm around his shoulders, but there's no disguising the way he's gasping - long, ragged breaths on the edge of becoming sobs.

After a few moments, Jakob takes a tentative step forward, his face etched with pain. "Lyosha, if - " he hesitates. "------- said that the federation would change its mind about publishing the statement, if you - if you said you didn't mean it, that this was all a mistake and you don't like men - "

"Jakob!" Viktoria snaps, rearing back. "Lyosha, get up - get up right now," she says, pulling Alex upright. "You're not going to let this beat you, you hear me? Stand up, Lyosha, look at me," she says, forcing Alex to look her in the eye. "Now tell me, she says, steel in her voice. "Have you lied about anything? To us, to Mark, to anybody?"

"No," Alex says, his voice breaking. "I've told the truth as much as I've been able to, as much as I could."

"And have you acted with honor? Forget what the federation says, they don't know sh- about honor," she bites out. "Have you done what you thought was right?" she demands.

"Yes," Alex whispers. "Yes, I've tried - " his voice falters.

"Do you remember after the Olympics last year, you called your father and I and apologized for not winning anything? Do you remember what I said to you then?" The fierceness in her eyes is extraordinary, a star flaring with blinding brightness.

"I said that the most important thing was for you to be a good person, I said I didn't care if you never won another hockey game in your life as long as you always did what you thought was right. It was true then and it's true now, there's nothing more important than that, nothing, Lyosha! The hockey federation can go f--- themselves,"
she says vehemently. "You're better man than that, you're a better man than all of them, the f----- cowards. I'll be damned if you feel like you have to hide who you are when you've done nothing wrong, when you have thousand times more honor than the entire federation put together," she says, trembling with rage. "I am not going to let you degrade yourself like this. I am not going to let you ruin your honor or your integrity over a pack of gutless dogs, do you understand me?"

Alex swallows, bowing his head for a long, fraught moment.

When he looks up again, though, his eyes are clear.

"I understand," he says quietly. "I'll make you proud, I promise." He tries cracking a smile, albeit a shaky one. "But don't you think you're being a little overdramatic?"

Viktoria snorts, not fooled. "We're Russian," she says, releasing him. "It's in our blood."

Alex glances away again. "Am I still Russian, if Russia doesn't want me anymore," he says softly, his mouth twisting.

"Yes," Viktoria reaches out again, cupping Alex's face in her hands. "You will always be a son of Mother Russia," she says. "And more importantly, you're my son, and Jakob's son, and Kolya's brother," she says, firmly. "That will always be true, Lyosha, you need to remember that."

After that clip ends, Leskov gets up and stalks out, his face pale and set.

"Dima - " Janssen starts, concerned.

"I have to - I have to make call," Leskov snaps, disappearing through the doorway.

"I should too," Vince says, his expression grim as he rises to his feet and follows Leskov.

Crawford looks around, baffled. "Dude, where are they all going?"

Janssen stares at him in disgust. "You moron, you don't think Dima wants to call Kuznetsov and ask him what the fuck all that was about? And Vince's probably making some calls to people he knows in Hockey Canada, I wouldn't be surprised."

Crawford scratches his head. "But Hockey Canada can't do anyth - "

"Jesus Christ, it's called politicking! Pressure! Transcontinental arm-twisting! He's probably trying to figure out what the fuck Hockey Canada can do about this," Janssen snaps. "Thank god they don't have a brilliant thinker like you over there to fuck things up!"

"Okay, sheesh, you don't have to get so upset," Crawford says, stung.

Janssen narrows his eyes. "Were we not watching the same show or something? Do you not understand what just happened on that screen over there?"

"No, I get it, I do, but obviously the Russian Federation didn't release a statement or kick him off the national team or anything, because if they had, we would've heard about it by now!" Crawford argues.

The entire team buzzes with discussion and speculation through what little is left of the episode,
barely paying any attention - Prescott lets it go, maybe figuring that there's no shutting them up. Darryl stays quiet through all of it, trying to endure the sick feeling twisting in the pit of his stomach. After the show ends, he gets up and walks out the door without a word to anyone.

He sits in his car for a moment. Then he turns the key and starts driving home.

When the Hawks had lost Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Finals in '08, it had hurt. Of course it hurt; knowing that the Cup had been within reach and then watching it slip away had felt like a gut wound, a deep and visceral pain that had stayed with him the entire summer, through the entire season until June '09, when he'd been able to hoist the Holy Grail himself.

When he'd been passed over for the 2006 Team Canada roster, when he'd first realized he wasn't going to be representing his country in Torino, it had felt like - it had felt like every time anybody had ever slighted or underestimated him, every time anyone had ever told him he was too young to do what he wanted to do, achieve what he knew he could achieve - it had felt like all those times rolled into one and a million times worse, because this was the Olympics. But even then, he'd known - Hockey Canada had known, his family had known, basically everybody had known - that his turn was coming, that in 2010 he'd be in Vancouver wearing l'Unifolie on his sweater, his nation's flag flying brilliant red and snowy white above him.

No; the closest thing Darryl can think of goes back further, much further. His parents have told him that they started realizing what he might become when he was seven, although by that time Darryl had already known that the only thing he wanted to do, the only thing he could ever imagine wanting to do was play hockey, forever and ever. He can't remember a time when his life wasn't hockey; sometimes it feels like he was born with stick in hand, skates on his feet and already laced up.

But when he was seven, he'd taken an awkward fall during a game and sprained his ankle. His mom had taken him to the doctor, and so Darryl had ended up with a splint and instructions not to play hockey for a week. That had been upsetting enough already, but then a couple days later one of the older boys from the neighborhood had dropped by, taken one look at the splint, and then told Darryl with a serious expression that that was the kind of splint they used when they wanted to mark which foot to chop off.

Looking back, Darryl can appreciate how much of asshole that kid really was - seriously, that's first-class douchebaggery right there, and Darryl's seen a hell of a lot of it by now - but at the time it had felt like the world was ending, like the sky was crashing down around his ears. He'd hobbled back to his room as fast as he could, slammed the door shut and pulled the blankets over his head, crying so hard he couldn't breathe.

To this day, he can remember it very clearly - the distinct sensation of his heart cracking, hopelessly, inside his chest.

And even that feeling, Darryl is certain, even that has to be nothing compared to what Alex must've felt hearing that the Russian Federation was turning its back on him, what he must be going through right now.

To be told that you were a dishonor to your country, because of your unnatural and immoral behavior -

Darryl pulls into his garage and parks, which is good thing because his vision is starting to go blurry.

He takes his phone out of his pocket, flips it open, scrolls down his contacts list; he hesitates
slightly over Alex's name, but -

But what can he say? If it had been Darryl coming out of the closet instead of Alex, this is a price he never would have had to pay, a cross he never would have had to bear. Not just Darryl, either - he can't imagine Hockey Canada rejecting any Canadian player at any level who came out as gay or bisexual; hell, they'd probably launch a diversity campaign or something. What the fuck kind of sympathy can he offer that won't sound like pity?

And then, and still - "Is better if he not get involved," he can hear Alex's words echoing in his head, even more than a month later.

He swallows, and keeps scrolling. Once he gets to 'Ryan Eaton,' he hits send.

The phone rings a couple times, and then: "Colton? What's going on, how are you doing?"

Darryl gets out of his car, lets himself into the house. "Uh, not much," he says, biting his lip. "Just, did you happen to watch Alex - um, I mean, Kuznetsov's show tonight?"

"The episode that was just on? Yeah, it was brutal, wasn't it?" Eaton makes an incredulous noise. "I can't believe that Russian hockey would do that to him - I mean, talk about stabbing a guy in the back, seriously."

Darryl squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. "Yeah," he says roughly. "Anyways, I was just calling because, um, you guys played the Bears last week, right? Did he seem okay to you?"

"Oh." Eaton sounds taken aback. "But you've been talking to him, right? I thought you guys were buddies," he says.

The lump in his throat isn't getting any better. He makes a noncommittal noise. "I just - I haven't gotten to see him in person, though, and I thought since you're in his division, so -" he breaks off.

"Oh, I see." Eaton pauses, then says slowly, "We did play the Bears last Wednesday, and - well, Kuznetsov seemed fine, as far as I could tell. But I don't know him well, I don't know if I could really say. I mean, obviously he's really good at hiding things."

Darryl frowns. "I - what do you mean?"

"Did you notice the date of that segment on the episode tonight? You remember what that producer lady said in the intro to it?" he says. "She said that Kuznetsov hadn't wanted to show it at first, but he finally decided to this week. That bit was filmed back at the end of February," Eaton says. "He's been carrying that around for more than a month, you realize? I bet the higher-ups in Russia have been pressuring him like crazy to take everything back, he probably finally got fed up with them trying to screw him over, decided to put it out there."

"You - you think that wasn't the worst of it," Darryl grates out.

"What? No, I thought it was pretty clear that that was just the beginning," Eaton says, sounding surprised. "Or at least that's how I saw it, anyways."

"But - " Darryl sits down.

"I don't know whether he's going to show any of the rest of it, though," Eaton says, "I think the point was to shame the Russian Federation into either quitting or committing, instead of just dicking around with him, you know? Oh, wait - " he makes a sound of sudden understanding. "You know what it is? I bet they've been threatening him over Worlds - if the Bears get knocked out of
the playoffs early again this year, I bet they've been telling him he can't be part of the team they send to the World Championships, I would lay money on it."

He pauses a moment. "Man, I know I'm not supposed to say this since they're a division rival and everything, but I really hope that the Bears are still playing by then," he says, rueful.

Darryl brings his hand up to his face, rubs his left eyelid a couple times. He tries to take a deep breath in and out, but it's difficult. "I - " he rasps, but he can't continue.

"Yeah," Eaton says. "I know, it sucks." He lets out a sigh. "Let's talk about something else - what's going on with your love life? How's it going with your girl?"

"Wait, how is that something else?" Darryl thinks wildly to himself, an edge of hysteria creeping in. He clamps down on it, clears his throat. "She was never my girl, you know it wasn't like that," Darryl says, looking down. "But it's over, anyways. It... something unexpected came up, it didn't - things didn't work out," he say, haltingly.

"Was - did she hurt you? Did she do anything tha - "

"No, no, it wasn't anything like that," Darryl says, almost tripping over himself. "She's - " he swallows. "She's still one of the most extraordinary people I've ever met," he says, his voice barely audible.

When Eaton speaks again, his voice is gentle. "So what happened?"

Darryl closes his eyes, turns his face away. "I decided it wasn't worth it, to stay in a relationship that wasn't going anywhere," he says, quiet. "Especially when it was clear that - that she wasn't ever going to care for me the way I cared for her," he says, his voice wavering.

"Oh, Darryl," Eaton says, his tone full of compassion. "I'm so sorry, kid, I really am," he says. "I mean, I don't - " he hesitates. "I don't want to prod too much, but - are you sure?"

Darryl swallows. "Yeah," he says. "She said it was better that we weren't involved, it would be less - " his voice cracks. "It would be less of a distraction."

Eaton doesn't say anything for a while. "If I were in Pittsburgh right now, I would be getting you so, so drunk," he finally says.

Darryl lets out a choked-up laugh. "Eaton -"

"No, seriously, there would be twenty shots lined up in front of you right now, I'd get Crawford and Janssen and Dima and Moreau to come over, and we'd go through a hundred handles of vodka before the night was over," Eaton says, warming to the subject.

Darryl shakes his head, a wobbly smile on his face. "Our livers would explode," he says. "Not to mention that Prescott would kill all of us."

"If our livers exploded, we'd all be dead anyways," Eaton explains patiently. He hesitates a moment. "Darryl, I know that maybe it doesn't feel that way right now, but things will get better," he says. "Are you still in touch with her?"

"No," Darryl says, his voice low.

"Good," Eaton says. "All of that 'let's stay friends' crap, none of that works until you're really, completely, one hundred percent over her," he says. "Otherwise you just get sucked back in and
become miserable all over again, and that's no good. You need to move on, you need to stop thinking about her, okay?"

"No, I know, I've been trying to, but it's difficult," Darryl says, scratchy. "I just - I keep seeing her everywhere."

Eaton makes an understanding noise. "Everything reminds you, hm?"

Darryl lets out a breath. "Yeah, you could say that."

He looks out the window; the darkness outside is quiet, empty, still.

"I did what I did because I thought it would hurt less," Darryl says, his voice scraped raw. "But I can't imagine how anything could hurt more than this."
Chapter 15

The rest of the week goes by painfully slowly. The last days of the regular season always make Darryl twitchy and impatient, but this year he feels like he literally can't stand it. At least when the playoffs start, he'll be able to ignore everyone and everything and just focus on hockey without feeling guilty about it. That's his job, after all; this is his life, to play hockey.

Also, he can't imagine that Calhoun or Fischer will let Tracy continue filming Alex or the Bears once the regular season ends, which means that he only has to endure watching one more episode of the reality show; he doesn't think his heart could take any more of the strain. They've moved the date of the episode, too - instead of Thursday, they've pushed it to Monday, April 11th, two days before the playoffs start. He just has to make it through this last one, and then he'll be okay.

So it's with an internal sigh of relief that Darryl sits down in his now-customary spot in Prescott's living room, near the TV but off to the left, next to the doorway to the kitchen; sitting up close means that nobody can see his reactions, and the ability to make a quick escape has been invaluable over the past month.

The first thing Tracy says when she shows up onscreen in-studio confirms what Darryl had thought. She's seated next to Calhoun, but Tracy speaks first.

"As some of you may already know, this is the last episode of 'AK 47,'" she says, looking at the camera. "Mark, Harry, Alex and his family and the rest of the Bears have been very obliging in allowing our crew to film them, but we all agreed that it wouldn't be appropriate for us to record once the playoffs started, so this is the finale of what I hope has been an informative look at the past few weeks have been like for Alex." She takes a breath. "Although we haven't edited or changed any of the footage that we've shown, there is a significant part of the story that we haven't shown. There's been an incredible amount of abuse, an incredible number of threats directed towards Alex, threatening to harm or kill him, his family, his teammates," she says slowly. "Now, most of these never reached Alex or any of the other targets due to screening, but it does nothing to change the fact that there are people out there who thought it was a good idea to make these threats in the first place."

"For the most part, our fans and everyone else in the league has been extremely supportive of Alex, but there's recently been some backlash against these shows of support, which I find disappointing," Calhoun adds, the camera panning over to him. "A few people have said that we've actually hurt things by making such a big deal over Alex, by filming this show and putting such a huge spotlight on him. They say that if we'd just acted as if this was all normal, then that would've ultimately done more for the acceptance of gay hockey players. There are a few things I'd like to say in response to that," Calhoun says.

"It's true, in an ideal world this would be all be a non-issue. In an ideal world, it wouldn't matter if Alex or any athlete were gay or bi or straight, because nobody would care. But we don't live in an ideal world, and to pretend otherwise is both naive and dangerous. I know Alex - and all of us around him, too - would have much preferred it if him coming out of the closet could have happened with minimal controversy, but we all knew that it was inevitably going to become a media circus. So, we did our best to turn that to our advantage, to show everybody that Alex is proud and open about who he is and that he doesn't have anything to be ashamed about."
Calhoun pauses, shifting in his seat.

"Tracy, myself, Nate, and Alex and his family had a long discussion about showing the material that you're going to see in the next segment, but in the end we all decided that it was important to tell the whole story of what Alex has gone through. Despite warnings from the police that showing the letters and other material that's been sent to Alex could inspire copycat threats, we want to show everybody why supporting Alex publicly and emphatically is so important, the kind of hatred and homophobia that we're fighting against," Calhoun finishes.

"We don't show the following material lightly," Tracy adds, her expression grim. "There have also - " she takes a quick breath in, her nostrils flaring. "There have also been a few attempts to physically attack Alex," she says, her mouth tightening. "However, all of those incidents are currently under active criminal investigation, and so we can't report directly on them or show any of the footage we've recorded. But the material we're about to show is probably disturbing enough," she says, a note of irony entering her voice. "This material is not appropriate for young audiences, and general viewer discretion is advised," she says, before the clip fades out.

The next moment, a letter appears onscreen; it looks like only identifying information has been blacked out, but none of the ugly language. An unfamiliar, offscreen voice begins dispassionately narrating - but then Darryl starts reading what the letter actually says, and he can feel the blood draining from his face.

There's a dry croaking sound behind him, and Darryl turns in time to see Leskov bolt from the room. Darryl scrambles to his feet, hesitating momentarily when he passes Prescott.

"Coach - " he says, urgent.

"It's okay, go," Prescott says, his own expression pained, understanding.

Leskov is in the foyer, far enough away from the living room that the TV is no longer within earshot. He's standing in the far corner with his back turned, his shoulders drawn in, but when he turns when Darryl approaches.

"Sorry," Leskov says, his arms folded defensively over his stomach. "Sorry, I can't watch that, I - " he looks away, biting his lip.

"It's all right," Darryl says, knowing full well that he's completely undeserving of Leskov's apologies.

Leskov takes a deep breath in, lets it out.

"Is not just - " he looks down for a moment. "Is not even really about whatever they gonna show in there," he says, looking up. "Is that I can't stop thinking, if is this bad for Lyosha in America, how much worse is gonna be when he try to go home."

Darryl inhales sharply. "What do you mean?"

Leskov unfolds his arms and jams his hands into his pockets, his expression stony. "Darryl, what Федерация хок - er, what Russian Hockey Federation want to do, they want to kick Lyosha out - is not just them. Most Russian think gay people is sin, a lot people think should still be crime," he says quietly. "I mean, he should - he should be okay in Moskva, in Sankt-Peterburg," he says, a little doubtfully. "And it kinda help that he rich and famous, I guess. It probably mean nobody can
hurt him without people pay a lot of attention."

"You - you really think that - " Darryl can hardly speak.

Leskov grimaces. "I really hope I'm wrong," he says. "Maybe is not gonna be problem, maybe when he go back is gonna be fine," he says, his voice uncertain. "But a lot of people in Russia, they see this like personal insult, they think Lyosha is traitor to country." He runs a hand over his face, his expression pinched and drawn with worry. "Lyosha not like other Russian player, other foreign player who come to NHL. He always think Russia is home," he says, uneasy. "Is gonna be hard for him, if he have to live in America permanent, if he can't go home again."

Darryl looks down, trying to get control of himself. Once he's reasonably sure of his expression, he looks up. "Geno, you know that - you know that the stuff they're showing on TV right now, those are just the really crazy people, they're a tiny, tiny percentage," he says with difficulty. "You've seen it - most of the people around the league, most of the fans have really supported him. He - " Darryl glances away, swallows. "Alex is always going to have friends here, Geno," he says, his voice cracking.

Leskov musters up a slight smile. "Yeah," he says, blowing out a sigh. "Yeah, I know." He shakes his head. "Geez, is depressing to think about - can we talk something else, maybe?"

"Yeah, sure, of course," Darryl says, immeasurably relieved. "Uh, right - so, the Pirates lost against the Rockies yesterday," he says, latching on to the first thing that comes to mind.

Leskov looks at him, the corners of his mouth turning upward a little more. "I thought we gonna try talk about something happy," he says. "Pirates not happy."

"Oh," Darryl says. "Um, true." He bites his lip. "We've been having really nice weather lately," he tries.

The two of them make stilted conversation for what feels like an improbably long time, although it's probably only twenty minutes or so. Finally, Dupuis appears in the foyer, coming over to them.

"Okay," Dupuis says, jerking his head towards the living room. "It's over, you guys can come back now, it's safe."

Leskov goes back quickly, but Darryl hangs back a little.

"How bad was it, really?" he asks, quiet.

The other man's expression is grim. "It was ugly," Dupuis says, his voice low. "I'm glad Geno didn't see it, that's all I'm going to say."

The rest of the team doesn't seem inclined to talk very much about it either; when Darryl goes back to sit in his spot, he can see that everybody looks subdued, even shell-shocked. "Hey, Colton," Crawford leans in. "The next time you talk to Kuznetzov, could you tell him that whenever we've been chirping him, we don't - we don't actually mean - "

"I'm sure he knows," Darryl says harshly. He clears his throat, tries again. "What I mean is, I'm sure he can tell the difference between normal trash talking and, and homophobic hate speech."

"I know, but..." Crawford's expression remains troubled. "It's just, nobody deserves that. Nobody should have to put up with that sort of thing."

Darryl's saved from replying when the commercial break ends. This time around, Nate is seated
"So in the first part of this episode, we've shown you the kind of hatred and prejudice that Alex and his family and friends have had to deal with," Tracy says. "But the truth is, we haven't told the other side of that story yet either, and that's the story of all the work that Alex has been doing to fight against homophobia in hockey."

"Well, Tracy is giving herself too little credit," Nate says, glancing at her. "The show has been doing a wonderful job of showing what Alex has been trying to do at the NHL level, but for the past month and a half, he's also been doing outreach to as much of the wider hockey community as possible, and a lot of that has intentionally been behind the scenes." He pauses, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"The messages that Alex received from kids in the DC area when Deadspin first posted, those were really the key factor in his decision to go public, they really convinced him that it was the right thing to do. So while Alex and I were writing the statement for his press conference, we talked a lot about how he wanted to reach out, but he insisted on having as little publicity as possible. The Bears organization already has a lot of established relationships with the community in DC, so it was easy to set up more local visits for him relatively quietly. But Alex also felt very strongly about doing as much outreach as widely as possible, especially for the people who had written to him - because after the press conference, a huge flood of letters and e-mails and messages from all around the world just poured in, the volume was overwhelming." Nate takes a breath.

"Setting up outreach visits outside of DC was a little more difficult, and in the end Sergey and I ended up sorting through Alex's correspondence and trying to map it out to match the Bear's schedule. For example, if the Bears had a game in Atlanta against the Cyclones, we would try to schedule him to visit all of the youth teams and schools and groups in or near Atlanta who had written to him, and the same thing for all the other cities where the Bears had away games."

"Although didn't people start hearing about what Alex was doing, and so even more people started asking him to come talk or visit? I feel like you guys scheduled every waking minute that Alex wasn't at practice or at a game," Tracy asks, looking at Nate.

Nate nods, his mouth quirking. "The hockey community is a pretty close-knit one, and so I guess you could say that word traveled," he says.

"I'm actually amazed that you and Sergey and Alex managed to keep this so under wraps," Tracy says. "I know that for you guys - the Bears PR staff, I mean - it's normally your job to publicize it when your players do community outreach, and usually local newspapers and media report on this sort of thing too, especially for somebody as high-profile as Alex."

"Well, even beyond Alex's personal feelings on the matter, it still made sense to try to keep things quiet for the sake of security," Nate says. "Not just Alex's safety, either, but the safety of the people he was visiting."

Tracy turns to look at the camera. "You guys might be wondering why I'm asking Nate all these questions about Alex's schedule, since from our past episodes it probably seems like our camera crew has been following him around 24/7," she says. "But Alex was insisted that he didn't want us to accompany him on any of his visits, that he didn't want even us filming any of his outreach work at all. I might be offended, except it
sounds like he insisted on a complete media blackout, is that right?” she says wryly to Nate.

"Oh, don't take it personally,” Nate says, grinning a little. "The thing is, Alex didn't want there to be any perception whatsoever that he was doing this for publicity, that he was trying to use this to improve or polish his public image or anything like that,” he says, turning serious. "And he was adamant that there couldn't be any cameras or reporters around at all, he wanted the kids to feel as comfortable as possible talking to him, to say whatever they wanted to him without being scared that they were being recorded or watched in any way."

Tracy shakes her head. "I know that the common perception of Alex is that he loves the spotlight," she says. "And while it's true that he's been letting us film his personal life without complaint, when it came to his outreach work it was a complete one-eighty," she says. "I've worked in sports media for twenty years, and I've never seen any professional athlete so allergic to attention. It took a lot of talking, a lot of coaxing to finally convince Alex to let us do this segment. We had to tell him repeatedly that this really would be the most effective way to raise awareness about LGBT acceptance in sports, that showing everybody how dedicated and passionate he is about this on TV would have a huge impact."

"We should probably stop talking about this next segment and actually explain what it is," Nate says, arching an eyebrow.

"Right, so - since we obviously didn't have any firsthand footage of Alex's visits, we got his permission to contact all the groups, teams, schools that he had visited to ask if we could come and interview them," Tracy says. "Ask them what Alex talked to them about, whether his visit had made an impact, whether there was anybody who wanted to tell us their individual story. The response was extraordinary," she says, glancing at Nate. "In the end, we were only able to go film at a fraction of the places Alex visited, but I think we managed to get some pretty powerful footage regardless," she says.

Nate nods. "Alex is going to get a chance to speak for himself later in this episode," he says, "But I do know why Alex finally agreed to let Tracy do this, I know what message he wants to send with this segment. Alex might not be able to personally visit or write to every lonely or confused kid who's out there watching right now, every person who feels lost or hopeless," he says, looking directly at the camera. "But this is Alex's way of telling you that you are not alone," he says, his voice becoming rougher. "No matter what situation you're in, no matter who you are, there are people who will listen to you and help you," he says. "There are people who will stand as your friend, and yes, that absolutely includes Alex," he says, his gaze intent. "He will stand as your friend if you need him, just like he stood as a friend for all the people you're about to see."

"Oh geez," Crawford sinks down in his seat, watching the screen through his fingers. "Shit, this is going to be even worse to watch than the last part!"

Janssen looks at him sharply. "The fuck are you whining about?"

"I don't mean worse, like, worse, just - fuck it, there's gotta be kleenex around here somewhere, right?" Crawford says, looking around.

It soon becomes clear exactly what Crawford is talking about. A new clip starts; there's a teenage boy dressed in full hockey gear, standing at the side of a rink and looking straight at the camera.
"My name is David Marshall," the boy says; he can't be more than fifteen, gangly and a little awkward looking. "I've played hockey since I was three years old, and I first realized that I was gay when I was twelve." He raises his chin, but it doesn't disguise the way he's trembling. "The past few years, it's - " he swallows. "It's been really difficult, because I didn't see how I could be both, a hockey player and gay," he says, his voice cracking.

"But then AJ came out in February, and when I saw that he could do it, I realized that yeah," he says, squaring his shoulders. "Yeah, I can do this too."

"Fuck," Janssen swears behind Darryl, not very quietly.


"Okay, fine, don't hit me," Janssen hisses back. "And don't hog the kleenex, other people are gonna need some too!"

The footage shows kids from all over the country, from what must be every NHL city the Bears have played at since February - and not just hockey kids, either. It looks like Alex spoke to kids on basketball teams, football teams, soccer teams; to kids at youth centers who are, um, clearly not athletes; to church youth groups, to college clubs, to classes of elementary school students, to kids of all shapes and sizes.

But it's the kids like David that hit the closest to home; watching interviews and montages of these kids and their families, their friends, their teammates, their classmates - what makes it particularly affecting is that these kids are so much like them, or at least who they once were. It's an odd, odd feeling, like looking back in time. Darryl knows he took a somewhat different route in the sport than these kids, but the world of youth hockey is still a familiar one, one that he left not too long ago.

And what they say, the stories they tell - the amount of hidden suffering, the inner torture inflicted, the expanse of cruelty silently endured; Crawford's right, Darryl can hardly bear to watch this either, even though these are the kids where things turned out well in the end.

It takes less than five minutes for the entire room to start sniffing, and when Darryl glances around he can see a number of his teammates blinking rapidly. The commercial breaks let them recover themselves a little - a breather between wind sprints - but it's still a near thing.

"Seriously, Coach, did you not vacuum or something?" Crawford demands, blowing his nose violently, his eyes very red. "This is like the worse allergies ever, I swear."

Prescott raises his eyebrows. "You don't have allergies, but nice try," he says drily, although he's blinking a little himself. "But we're almost to the end, just hang in there for ten more minutes, okay?"

Crawford makes a face. "All right, fine," he says, settling down grumpily.

This time when the commercial break ends, it's Tracy and Nate again, but it looks like they're standing at a hotel conference room. It seems that there's some sort of formal dinner going on in the background, people in evening wear seated around tables set with china and crystal.

"And now we're coming to you live from the Hilton in downtown DC," Tracy said, using a microphone as if she and Nate are reporters on scene. "Nate, since you helped to set this up, why don't you tell us where we are and what's going on?"
"Sure," Nate says, holding his own mic. "But first I have to clarify, I didn't set this up at all. We're at the Washington Plaza Hotel at the Equality DC Gala, which is an annual event put on by the Metro DC PFLAG chapter in order to raise funds and to raise awareness, and they really deserve all the credit. They were really anxious to have Alex as their guest of honor this year, and the moment he heard he was more than happy to come, the organization of PFLAG and the Metro DC chapter in particular have been huge supporters of Alex for the past couple months, he felt this was the least he could do for them."

"It's lucky that they're holding their gala right before the playoffs start, isn't it?" Tracy asks.

"Well, the original date for this event was actually set for next week, but the organizers were incredibly gracious and moved the date in order to accommodate Alex and the Bears, after end of the regular season but before the playoffs," Nate says, looking at the camera. "I know, I know, you're going to complain to me about Alex's crazy schedule again, but this time it really can't be helped," he says, grinning at Tracy as he holds his hands up. "The playoffs always start in April, the league sets that."

Tracy shakes her head, smiling a little. "The reason why Nate is being so defensive is because I've been trying to get Alex to sit down for an interview for the show for the past month and a half, but it's just been impossible to find any time he was free," she says. "But we've been able to snag a few minutes with him here, we finally managed to corner him," she says. "We have Charlie standing by with Alex in another room, so let's go to them now."

The camera cuts to another room in the hotel, an unfamiliar man - must be Charlie - standing next to Alex, once again flanked by Kirk and Bradshaw. The three of them are dressed in tuxes, looking very polished.

"Thanks, Tracy," says Charlie. "We're here with Alex, along with Matt Bradshaw and Lewis Kirk. Now that the regular season is over and the playoffs are about to start, it seems like a good time to ask you guys what the past few weeks have been like," he says, turning towards them. "Alex, you've been on quite a journey since your press conference in February. What have you learned from this experience?"

"I learn that Bears have best fans in world," Alex says promptly. "They been unbelievable, is incredible how much they support our team, how much they cheer for us everywhere. Like, wherever we play now there people rocking red in stands, scream like crazy," he says. "It really mean a lot to all of us. And then for me - " he clears his throat. "My teammates, they all been like brothers for me," he says, his voice becoming slightly rougher. "I know that tv show let everybody see a little bit how they protect me, how they stand up for me and everything, but I don't think you guys get whole picture of how great they all been. They been greatest friends I can ask for, I just - I'm really grateful," he says.

"I see. And so given everything you've gone through with them, then, is it even more important for you to win the cup this year, to get a ring for yourself and your team?" Charlie asks.

Alex looks a bit perplexed, as if he's not sure whether Charlie actually heard his reply. He opens his mouth, then stops, his expression turning intensely thoughtful. "I - " he halts, then shakes his head. "Sorry, I want to make sure I say this right, I don't want
mess up," he says, a little awkward. "Um, Brads - can you maybe get Sergey to come, so he can translate?"

Bradshaw looks startled, but then shrugs amicably. "Okay, I'll be right back - don't go anywhere," he says, deadpanning to the camera before disappearing.

"Sorry, is great question, I want try to give good answer," Alex says, apologetic. "Um, you have other question you want to ask?"

"Oh, well - " Charlie rallies quickly. "So you've talked about what you've learned from all of this," he says. "Do you regret your decision to come out at all?"

"No," Alex says, shaking his head. "Well, there couple things I want to do different, if I do again," he amends. "I tell my family first, and team, Mark, Harry, George. Is not good that they find out from Deadspin. But if you asking if I'm sorry about be honest with who I am, then no," he says. "And if I know how much it gonna mean to so many people, then I would do this earlier."

Charlie seems like he's about to ask another question, but at that moment Bradshaw comes back onscreen, a dark-haired man with a narrow, quick face following him - this must be Sergey.

"AJ, you wanted me to translate for you?" he says, looking at Alex curiously.

"Yeah, Charlie ask me how important is for me to win Cup this year," Alex says, then starts speaking for a bit in Russian. Sergey raises his eyebrows, his tone questioning in his reply - but Alex nods his head once, emphatically, adding a few sharply-spoken words. Sergey hesitates for a moment, then finally turns back to Charlie.

"All right, this is what he wants to say," he says, before taking a breath and starting.

"Of course it's always important to try to win the Cup," Sergey says. "That's the goal of every player in the NHL. It's always important to try to achieve as much as possible. But there are more important things than winning the Cup," he says, Alex looking at him intently. "I know that saying that is going to make a lot of people criticize me, but it's true. The Stanley Cup is just a piece of metal, in the end," he says. "It's like a medal, or a flag - it's not the thing itself that's important, but what the thing represents. And what the Cup symbolizes is the pinnacle of hockey, which I really believe is the best sport in the world."

Alex starts speaking again, his expression still serious. Sergey listens, concentrating, then continues: "Hockey is fast, it's beautiful, it's violent. It demands skill and toughness, grit as well as grace. But it's what the sport teaches you about life that's really most important. At its best, hockey teaches you discipline, courage, loyalty, friendship, honor. It teaches you to work hard, it teaches you to trust in others, it teaches you strive for something greater than yourself."

Sergey pauses, and Alex talks again. Sergey takes a moment before speaking again, his brow knit in concentration. "But if you - any of you listening or watching tonight - find yourself in a situation where the integrity of the sport has been destroyed, then get out. If the people around you are making you do anything that makes you less of a person than who you really are, then you have to walk away. And I mean anything, it's not just about who you like or want to date. If people are bullying you, or pressuring you to do drugs, or to cheat, or if they're making you bully other people, if any of that
is happening to you, then winning games isn't important at all. Winning is impossible, because they've already rigged it so everybody loses. Sports are supposed to show what people can accomplish at their best, physically, mentally, both inside and outside. But the integrity of your character has to come first - any victory on a field or court or rink is meaningless without it."

Alex talks at some length this time. Sergey chews his lip while listening, then says: "But here, the integrity of the sport has not been ruined. I've said it before and I'll say it again - the NHL is the best league in the world, and I consider it a real honor to play here. I've already talked about how supportive my team has been about all of this, but really the entire league has been wonderful. The NHL is full of great athletes who are even better people, and that's why winning the Stanley Cup is important. At the end of the season, the best team in the NHL wins the Cup; not the team with the most skill, not the team with the most toughness, but the best team. And everybody - the media, the fans, everybody - likes to think the best team means the team with the best guys, even though that's not true at all," Sergey says.

"Some of the best guys I know in the league have never won the Cup, but they're still better men than I could ever hope to be. And so that's why winning the Cup this year is particularly important: it's because even though I know better, even though a lot of people know better, I don't want there to be any doubt," Sergey says. "The Washington Bears this year are the best group of guys in the league, no question. It would be impossible to ask for better teammates, or better friends."

Alex cuts in again, and Sergey translates: "I said earlier that after all we've gone through, I feel like they're all brothers to me," he says. "I guess that's me being a little selfish, because even though I wish we could all stick together as a team forever, I know that even by this summer, there are probably going to be guys who leave. But I'm always going to think of each of them as a teammate no matter where they go, other teams, retirement, whatever. So yeah, I do want a ring. I do want to hoist the Cup - because I want all of us to be able to share that victory together, and to have that memory to hold on to, no matter what else happens in the future."

Charlie has a vaguely stunned look on his face when Sergey finally stops speaking, which is understandable - asking for a glass of water and then getting bowled over by a wave would tend to be overwhelming. Bradshaw is gaping as well, although he recovers quickly enough.

"Hey, if we're bros now, does that mean you'll buy me that Maserati I've had my eye on?" he quips, nudging Alex eagerly.

Alex snorts, speaking for himself again. "Yeah, right," he says. "You can go ask Misha if I ever buy him car - actually, you should ask him what is like to have me as little brother, then you realize why I say is selfish of me," he says, grinning wickedly.

Kirk, on the other hand, is looking at Alex with a thin-lipped expression. He doesn't seem pleased. "Charlie, I know you mainly wanted to interview Alex, but do you mind if I say a few words?"

"Uh, no, go ahead," Charlie says, scrambling a little.

"Great," Kirk says, turning to look at the camera directly. "Alex is being too kind," he says bluntly. "No, really, he's being too kind - he's making it sound like we've been doing some extraordinary favor for him, when this is what teammates should do for
each other. He's also downplaying how much he's had to endure personally; sure, we've all tried to help as much as we can, but Alex recognized from the beginning that he was going to become the center of attention more than ever, that he was going to have to watch how he acted, what he could say," Kirk says. "Don't get me wrong, I think he's done an outstanding job representing both the sport of hockey as well as LGBT athletes, but I don't think people really appreciate the cost to Alex himself."

"Lewis, I - " Alex cuts in, looking uncomfortable.

"You had your turn already, so zip it," Kirk says, raising an eyebrow at him. "Anyways, there's a clip I want to run that shows what I'm talking about. Amy, if we could run that now?" he says, speaking to somebody behind the camera. Alex, Bradshaw, Charlie, Sergey all look various degrees of surprised, but then the screen fades out and the new clip pops up.

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Alex is standing in front of his stall, his back to the camera; he's turning something over slowly in his hand, apparently lost in thought. The rest of the dressing room is empty. "Hey, c'mon, hurry up - we're all going out for lunch, remember?" Bradshaw says, coming up to nudge Alex's shoulder. He's already dressed in his street clothes. "Dude, why are you looking at your sock like that?" Bradshaw says, his brow furrowed. "It's kevlar, it can't have holes, can it?"

"Hm?" Alex looks up at him, startled. "Oh, no, no hole. What, everybody go already?" Alex says, glancing around. "Sh-- sorry, just second - " he curses, hastily taking off his other sock.

"Don't worry about it, it's fine," Bradshaw says. He hesitates for a moment. "Look, Alex, are you doing okay?" he says, his voice low.

Alex shakes his head. "Yeah, of course I'm okay, I - "

"Hey," Bradshaw says, bumping Alex's shoulder harder this time. "It's me, remember? The guy who's been on your team from the beginning, ever since you got here - you can't lie to me, you're not allowed to," he says, mock-stern. "So I'm going to ask again," he says. "Alex, are you doing okay?"

There's a long silence; for a moment it doesn't seem like Alex is going to answer. Then he lets out a sigh.

"Is just - you remember guy in picture that start all this, right?"

"Yes," Bradshaw says, for once without any trace of flippancy.

"Before all the crazy stuff happen, I really care a lot about this guy, and I thought he care about me too," he says quietly, turning his head to look at Bradshaw. The camera captures a sliver of his profile, the oblique angle enough to catch the tightness about his mouth, the tiredness creasing the corner of his eye. "But now I don't know if he ever actually care about me at all."

Bradshaw looks at him for a while, his expression drawn with worry. "Alex, you know that - "
"You guys, what's taking so long? Everyone's outside waiting," Kirk says, walking in. "Oh, uh - did I interrupt something?"

Alex shakes his head briskly, his demeanor changing immediately. "No, no, I going to change room right now, be out in second," he says, scampering away. "You know Cantrell still slowest, don't yell at me, Louie!" he yells.

Kirk raises an eyebrow at Bradshaw. Bradshaw shakes his head and mouths, 'tell you later,' clapping Kirk on the back and pulling him out of the room as well. "Yeah? Everybody knows that you spend hours on your hair now, ever since Brunner introduced you to his stylist," he calls back.

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The clip fades out, and the camera returns to Charlie, Alex, Bradshaw, Kirk and Sergey in the hotel room. It's clear from their expressions that they've seen the clip too, on some screen provided by the crew. Charlie is looking in astonishment at all three hockey players, Bradshaw is looking at Kirk with an expression of anger and anxiety, Kirk is looking at Alex with a mixture of defiance and sympathy, and Alex -

Alex looks like he's been stabbed in the gut.

"Alex, did you know about that clip? Did you know you were being filmed?" Charlie asks eagerly, apparently recovered.

"No," Alex says, the word sounding as if it's been wrenched from his throat. "No, otherwise I ask Tracy to destroy it." He turns to Kirk, his jaw tight. "Lewis, why - " he says, low.

Kirk returns his look levelly, though with compassion. "This is what I meant," he says, turning back to Charlie and the camera. "Alex has done such a good job of being a role model and doing all the right things in public that people don't realize how this has hurt him personally," he says. "And that's wrong, people need to see that this isn't a fight that he's picking for fun or attention."

Sergey looks like he wants to intervene, but it's too late, the whole thing spiraling further and further.

"Alex, you said in that clip that before all this happened, you really cared about the guy you were photographed with," Charlie says, looking at Alex. "Do you still care for him?"

Alex's expression crumples instantly.

He turns away, bringing the back of his hand up to his mouth in a defensive gesture. But there's no hiding the way his shoulders are drawn together, hunched over.

"AJ - " Bradshaw says, touching Alex's arm - but Alex jerks away, the movement slight but unmistakeable.

After a second, he turns back. His mouth is bleeding a little, the red shocking against the pallor of his face. He must've bitten through his lip.

"I'm sorry, I not gonna answer that," he says.
Charlie looks taken aback. "Why not?"

"Because is private," he says. His voice is quiet, bruised. "And so is not important."

Charlie opens his mouth, but shuts it when Sergey shoots him a glare that could cut through steel.

"Uh, right, of course," he stumbles. "Oh, oops, look at that - we're almost out of time. Do any of you have anything you'd like to wrap up with?" he says hastily.

"Actually, yeah," Alex says, surprisingly. He takes a deep breath, straightening his shoulders. "Lewis is right that I been trying to be good role model," he says, his voice almost sounding normal again. "I don't know how well it work, but I been trying hard as I can," he says, looking at the camera directly. "But now that regular season is over, I not gonna talk about it anymore. Is like I said before - none of this stuff really have to do with playing hockey, and this is time of year when games count most. I can't concentrate on anything except playing," he says. "Until June, I not going to answer anymore questions from media, answer anymore letters, go to anymore school, any of that. After that, yeah, I definitely start doing all of it again, but right now, I owe to my team, to Bears fans to just concentrate on this. And I owe to other teams and to league, I can't take attention away from Cup, is too important," he says. He fishes his cell phone out of his pocket, deliberately shows the camera as he turns it off.

"From now until playoffs end, I not gonna answer phone, I not gonna look at e-mail, I not gonna talk to anybody except my teammates, coaches, Mark, George, my family," Alex says resolutely. "Media when I got to, but only about hockey. And to all Bears fans who been supporting us through all this - " he pauses, swallows. "We gonna do our best to bring Cup home to you," he says, his voice scratchy, his gaze unwavering.

Charlie nods; even he can recognize how fitting a finish that is. "All right, folks," he says, turning to face the camera himself. "It looks like that's all the time we have, and just as a reminder, you can watch the NHL playoffs right here on NBC, starting this Wednesday, April 13th. Alex, Matt, Lewis, Sergey, thanks again for everything, and good luck," he says, shaking hands.

The clip fades. And like that, the show ends.

Darryl stares at the screen, the credits rolling meaninglessly before his eyes. He feels - he's not quite sure what he feels.

He feels like his chest is frozen into a thousand jagged, splintering fragments. He feels like the slightest touch will shatter him to pieces. He feels like he's already broken apart.
"Goddammit, that's totally psychological warfare!" Crawford says despairingly behind him. "Now everybody and their mother will be rooting for the Bears! Hell, after watching that, even I don't want them to lose, and they're the Bears! Jesus, now what the fuck are we supposed to do?"

"Hey - " Prescott says sharply. "Hey, everybody listen to me," he says, raising his voice. The chatter and rustling of the other guys quiets down. Darryl makes himself turn around, every joint feeling stiff.

"Okay," he says, looking around the room. "So Crawford here just asked how we're supposed play against Washington after watching that. I'll admit, it's a fair question. If I didn't already have committed loyalties, I would root for them. The Bears are a team worth rooting for. But what Kuznetsov said a few minutes ago about the integrity of the game - that should mean something to you," Prescott, eying Crawford.

"In fact, that should mean something to all of you. How do you think he and the Bears would take it if you played any less than your best against them, if we do end up playing them this year? I'd view it as an insult, myself - like the other team didn't respect me, didn't think I was worth the effort." Prescott stands up, folding his arms. "No. We owe it to the fans, to the league, to the sport itself, and yeah - to Kuznetsov and to the Bears - to play the best damn hockey we can." He looks at each of them in turn. "How are we going to play them, if we do? The same as always. We're going to try like hell to kick their asses." A chuckle runs around the room. The corner of Prescott's mouth quirks upward. "All right, now get out of here, you guys have a few slightly important games coming up," he says, making shooing motions.

Darryl gets up, moves slowly towards the foyer. The idea of going home and staring at the ceiling is unbearable.

"D," he says. He can barely recognize his voice. He clears his throat, tries again. "Davies, could you - could you drop me off at the Iceoplex? I don't think I'm safe to drive right now, and I, um, I forgot my windbreaker there," he says.

Davies looks at him strangely. "Sure, no problem." He furrows his brow, studying Darryl more closely. "Are you all right? You look -"

"I'm fine," Darryl says shortly, turning away.

Darryl doesn't say anything in the car, and thankfully Davies lets him be. But when Darryl gets out of the car, Davies leans over and says, "Okay, I'll right out here, waiting," he says, looking at Darryl expectantly.

"Oh, I - " Darryl swallows. "I was planning to work out for a little while," he says.

The other man's forehead wrinkles. "I don't think that's a good idea, Darryl -"

"Yeah? And who made you the boss of me?" he says, more sharply than he intends.

Davies just looks at Darryl, his gaze entirely too understanding. "Okay," he says, finally. "Just promise me that you won't do anything stupid. When you're done working out and need a ride home, you can call me whatever time it is, got it?" his voice is gentle.

Darryl doesn't deserve his friends. "Don't be stupid, I'll call a cab," he says roughly. Davies raises
an eyebrow. Darryl rolls his eyes. "And I promise not to do anything stupid," he grates out. He's already done enough stupid things for a lifetime.

Davies shoots him one last look, then finally drives off.

Darryl lets himself into the building. He walks past the locker room, past the cardio room, past the weight room. He goes into the small studio at the end of the hall, the one with nothing in it except mats on the ground and a punching bag hanging in the corner.

Darryl takes off his jacket, takes his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans, takes his cell phone out of the front pocket, takes off his watch ( - the goddamn watch, the gym, shooting baskets, that kiss - ). He puts them carefully next to the wall. He straps on the boxing gloves in the corner, walks over to the heavy bag.

Darryl then proceeds to beat the shit out of it.

He beats the shit out of it for a long, long time.

After a while, it occurs to him that he should check his hands to make sure they aren't bleeding or anything.

His arms trembling with exhaustion, he takes off the gloves.

Skinned knuckles. Stinging hands, lobster red skin. No blood, though. At least Prescott won't kill him. Even though he deserves it. Even though -

God, he can't do this. He can't.

Darryl goes over and picks up his phone with difficulty, sweat making his hands slippery. It feels like he's the one who's been beat up. He sits down, his back to the wall and knees propped up.

He scrolls down his contact list, hits send, listens to the rings. After three, four, five, six rings, Eaton picks up.

"Colton? You better be dead or dying, calling me at three in the fucking morning," Eaton says, sounding half-asleep but nevertheless incredibly irritated.

Darryl pulls his phone away to look at the screen. 3:07 AM. Fuck.

"Sorry," he croaks, bringing the phone back to his ear. "Sorry, I'll - "

"Shit, you're not really dying, are you?" Eaton says, sounding more awake by the second. "You fucking idiot, call 911, here, I'll even give you the digits to dial, it's 9, then - "

Darryl squeezes his eyes shut; he can't laugh, if he starts laughing he'll start crying and then he'll never stop.

"I'm not dying, you moron," he says.

"Moron? Excuse me? You wake me up in the middle of the night to call me a moron? You can do that during the day, thank you very much." Eaton's voice settles back into its normal tones. "But it sounded like you were dying, anyways." Darryl hears Eaton take a breath, let it out. "Okay, so what's this all about?"

Darryl bites his lip. What can he say? "You - do you remember what I said the last time we talked? That I couldn't imagine how anything could hurt more than what I was feeling last week?"
"Yeah?" Eaton's voice is quiet.

Darryl exhales. "Let's just call that a failure of imagination."

After a moment, Eaton replies, cautious. "Is it the girl again? I thought - I thought you weren't in touch with her anymore."

Darryl runs a hand over his face, the sweat burning his eyes. "It is the girl, and I'm not in touch with her," he says, keeping his voice under control with effort. "But I - I found out that she actually cared about me all along, she still - " his voice falters.

"Whoa, whoa, back up." Eaton says, alarmed. "One, how did you find this out, and two, have you been watching too many soaps?"

Darryl lets his head thunk back against the wall in exasperation. "Bugsy - "

"Hey, I'm not gonna judge, I know how boring road trips can get. Don't watch *As the World Turns*, that's trash, *General Hosp- "

"*Ryan - " Darryl grates out.

"Look, I get punchy when I'm sleep-deprived," Eaton protests. "Just please tell me you haven't been stalking this girl, please, please tell me that isn't how you found out."

"No, she - " Darryl inhales. "She told someone I know," he says. "I ended up hearing about it."

"Oooookay?" Eaton says slowly. "And you're sure? It isn't just gossip or rumors?"

It's hard not to be sure when it's broadcast live on national television.

"Yeah," Darryl says. "I am."

Darryl can almost hear Eaton scratching his head. "All right," he says, sounding baffled. "So why the fuck are you calling me? Why aren't you calling her and having a conversation where she cries and then you cry and then - "

"Because it's not that simple!" Darryl snaps. "She wouldn't answer if I called right now, and besides, there are other reasons why I - why I ended things," he says, his voice cracking.

"Wait a minute," Eaton says. "The last time we talked, you said the reason why you broke up with her was because you thought she was never going to care for you the way you cared for her. Obviously she did care for you, so what's the problem? Groveling solves a lot, trust me."

Darryl pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to remember what he'd been thinking the night Deadspin posted. Had he been thinking at all?

"I thought," he says, "that being around her was making me act out of character. I felt that - that she was making me lose any kind of judgment, like I couldn't tell what was right or wrong anymore, and I - " he swallows. "In hindsight, I thought that there were things I, I did because of her that weren't - weren't right."

"What?" Eaton says sharply. "What did she make you do?"

"No, no, nothing illegal or anything like that, she - " Darryl stops, wracking his brain. "She made me go clubbing," he says finally, defeated. He can't say anything else without giving himself away.

"You know what, fuck you," Darryl bites out, surging to his feet. "Seriously, you can just fuck off."

"Darryl - Darryl, calm down," Eaton says firmly. "I promise, I'm taking you seriously, okay? You hear me?"

Darryl makes himself breathe. "Yeah, okay," he says, swallowing. "Sorry, I just - "

"It's okay," Eaton says. "All right, so - you felt like you being around her was making you act out of character, and that it was compromising your judgement. You think that you may have done some questionable things because of her, but you're having trouble telling. Anything else?"

Darryl looks away, his jaw tightening. "I just - Ryan, this whole thing is so impossible, you don't understand," he grates out. "What, I fall in love with the first person I have sex with, she magically falls in love with me, we live happily ever after? Get a dog, have kids, house with a white picket fence - yeah, right," he says bitterly, the utter futility stinging him. "I know things don't work like that in real life, nobody gets a fairytale ending."

"Oh, uh, whoa, okay - that's, um, kind of TMI, and yet you've actually given me no real information at all, so - " Eaton stammers. "And - wait, that's one of your reasons for not calling her?" he says, his voice rising.

"No, I said it before - she wouldn't pick up if I called, she's not taking calls from anybody right now, remember?" Darryl snaps.

"What?" Eaton sounds completely bewildered. "I'm sorry, seriously, what the fuck is going on?"

Darryl lets his head fall forward, closing his eyes in resignation. This is it, then; there's no help for it.

"Look, people in her professional life found out that she was involved with me, and - and it got her into a lot of trouble," Darryl says dully, waiting for Eaton to put two and two together.

"You? How could being involved with you get her in trouble?" Eaton sounds taken aback. Darryl grimaces; he can almost see the sword hanging over his head.

"Hold on," Eaton says slowly. "You said that she was Russian, right?"

"Yeah," Darryl says.

"Is she... does she work for their, I don't know what they call it, Russia's national department of sport or ministry of sport or whatever? I mean - " Eaton sounds tentative. "I guess I can see how one of their employees getting involved with you would raise some eyebrows, but it wouldn't cause a scandal, would it?"

"I..." Darryl bites his tongue for a moment. "You could say that she works for the Russian Ice Hockey Federation," he says eventually. Sort of. Kind of. At least when Alex was playing for the national team, but maybe that wasn't ever going to happen again. Darryl ignores the jab of pain that goes through him at the thought; is he really going to get away with this? He can't believe Eaton hasn't figured it out, it's has to be because it's 3 AM, the other man isn't thinking clearly.

"Oh, them." Eaton makes a disgusted sound. "They really are a bunch of shitholes over there, aren't they? First Kuznetsov, now you."
Darryl sags against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. No sword there after all; apparently two and two add up to five. He can't tell whether he's relieved or disappointed.

"Okay, look," Eaton says. "There's still a lot I don't understand about all of this, but it really sounds like you're having trouble with just the basics, so we're going to go back to the beginning," he says. "Number one: no means no."

Darryl throws his arm up in exasperation. "Ryan!"

"No, I don't even care, you obviously need the review, and I'm still suspicious about that first time you slept with her," Eaton says, merciless. "Anyways, no means no. A lot of the time, silence means no. Sometimes, yes means no. You know what, just to make things easy on you, let's assume that unless she's yelling, 'take me, stud, take me hard and fast right now!' then she actually means no. Got it?"

"Yeah," Darryl grinds out. "Thanks."

"No problem," Eaton says cheerfully. "Okay, number two." He hesitates. "Darryl, if you really, truly don't like the person you are when you're around this girl," he says, his voice becoming serious, "for example, if being around her makes you cruel, or abusive - it's just an example, I'm not accusing you of anything," he says quickly, in response to Darryl's sharp intake of breath. "What I meant is that if that's what you mean by acting out of character, then yeah, you're right, that would be a good reason to stay away from her," he says. "Is that what you meant?"

Darryl exhaled. "No," he says, staring down at the floor.

"I mean, do you - do you actually like spending time around her, or are you mostly miserable? Do you like the person you are around her? And okay, I'm really not trying to mock you, but when you say that being around her compromises your judgment, that you can't tell right from wrong, uh, how wrong are we talking about? Like, on a scale of one to ten, ten means you think that murder is perfectly okay, and one is you think Justin Bieber is the best singer ever - "

"Eaton," Darryl grinds out.

"Darryl, I am honestly trying to help you out here," Eaton says firmly. "But you have to give me something to work with."

Darryl chews the inside of his cheek, trying to figure out what to say. "I thought," he says finally, "that she was making me act unprofessionally. I thought that - that my feelings for her were, were interfering with responsibilities to the team, to my teammates."

Eaton is silent for a while.

"Okay, so I'm trying to think back through this season to see if I can remember anything where you acted unprofessionally," he says finally, "but the closest thing I can think of is when you got dead drunk back in October at Kuznetsov's house - "

Darryl flinches involuntarily.

"And that doesn't even count, most guys in the league go on benders every other week, the only reason why it was weird is because it was you, you're usually so uptight about that sort of thing," Eaton continues. "Have Prescott or Lemieux called you out for anything?"

Darryl bites his lip. "No," he admits. "Well - no, not really."
"Okay," Eaton says. "Well, I hate to break it to you, but falling in love really does make you a little crazy, just like in the movies. I'm not going to lie - sometimes it can drive people crazy in a bad way, sometimes people do have trouble realizing when they should back off. But I don't think that's what's actually happening here, Darryl. I think you're overreacting." His voice takes on a matter-of-fact tone.

"Here's what I think is going on with you. You're a control freak; you like to have everything in your life completely under your control, no surprises. But you can't control your feelings for this girl, and you can't control your reactions to her, and that scares the shit out of you. Better to get rid of these feelings before you do something completely insane, right?"

Darryl swallows hard. As oblivious as Eaton is being to some parts of Darryl's story, he's uncannily accurate in others.

"At first," Darryl says finally. "Yeah. When I talked to you in December, that was pretty much what I was thinking, but - I mean, I know now that I do - " he draws in a shuddering breath, "I am in love with her, I get it, I can't help it," Darryl says, his voice cracking. "But it still doesn't - "

"Yeah," Eaton says. "Yeah, now we get to your other hang-up. Colton, do you know why people keep buying lotto tickets?"

Darryl frowns, thrown by the abrupt change in topic. "Lottery tickets?" His frown deepens. "Because they're irrational and want to throw their money away?"

"Because they haven't won it yet, idiot," Eaton yells. "Do you know what people don't do once they've won the lottery? They stop buying goddamn lottery tickets!"

Darryl massages his temple. "What's your point?"

"My point is that most people spend years trying to find the right person," Eaton snaps. "Okay, sure, there are guys out there who like chasing girls more than catching them, but if you are seriously going to throw away your chance with this girl - who you're in love with, who you think is an amazing person, who makes you laugh - just because, oh my god, she's the first person you've ever had a relationship with," his voice goes up an octave in mock-horror.

Darryl turns his head away. "Eaton - "

"No, seriously, it's like buying a winning lottery ticket on your first try and then tearing it up because, oops, that one doesn't count," the other man continues ranting.

"Okay, okay, all right, I get it, but I - " Darryl's voice thickens. "I don't know if I do still have a chance," he says, a lump forming in his throat. "I think that I really hurt her."

Eaton is silent for a moment. When he speaks again, his voice is softer.

"Why didn't you talk to her before, then?"

"Because I didn't know!" Darryl says wildly, grabbing at his hair. "It seemed - she seemed like she was doing fine, it seemed like she didn't miss me at all, I just - I didn't think that - " he lets out a breath. "One of the things that I always admired about her was how open she is," he says quietly. "She never - at least, it never seemed like she was hiding what she was feeling, what she was thinking. So when she said that it was better that we weren't involved..." Darryl puts his hand over his face, trying to make himself breathe past the cracking sensation in his chest.

Eaton makes a noise of understanding. "Okay," he says slowly, "But even if she won't forgive you,
it still sounds like you at least owe her an apology."

Darryl closes his eyes briefly. "I do," he says, his voice breaking. "But she's not really talking to anybody these days," he says. "She's, she's kind of under a lot of pressure at work, she wouldn't answer right now even if - " he takes a breath, "even if I did try to call her."

"Hmm." Eaton sounds skeptical. "This is out of character for you, I've never known you to be a coward. But fine," he says. "I guess you have the playoffs to worry about anyways. But you can't put it off forever, you know."

Darryl lets out a bitter laugh. "Trust me, if I could fix this right this moment, I would," he says, shifting a little; he can feel all the muscles in his body starting to become sore. "I just - I don't know if I can fix it at all," he admits, low.

"You won't know until you try," Eaton says, his voice gentle but implacable.

Darryl blows out a breath. "Yeah," he says, looking down.

"Okay," Eaton says, "Is there anything else you wanted to talk about? It's not that I don't enjoy talking to you, Colton, but I'd like to get some more sleep in tonight, if possible," he says, a touch sarcastic.

Darryl looks at his watch. Shit. "Bugsy, I'm so sorry, I - " he says, scrambling to his feet. Big mistake - he has to catch himself on the wall to stop from falling on his face.

"It's fine, it's fine, don't worry about it," Eaton says. "But you okay now? You gonna stop freaking out?"

Darryl straightens gingerly, gritting his teeth at the way all his joints are protesting. "Yeah, I - I'll be okay," he says. "Ryan, thank you," he says. "I mean it, I'm really grateful, I - "

"Oh, it's nothing," Eaton dismisses. "Seriously, it's just so adooooorable, I fully expect you to call me next week to figure out how to ask her to prom, what kind of corsage to buy for her -"

"Oh, fuck you," Darryl says, laughing a little.

"Hey, I'm just calling it like I see it! And -"

"Good night, Eaton," Darryl says, still smiling as he hangs up.

"You mean good morni -"

Darryl puts his phone back in his pocket, the smile fading as he goes over to pick up his wallet, his jacket. He turns, lost in thought as he leaves the room.

He does have to talk to Alex. But he can't right now, not when Alex has made it clear that the only thing he wants to concentrate on is hockey.

It's funny; a few hours ago Darryl felt exactly the same way. Now he can't remember a time when hockey has ever seemed less important.
Chapter 17

The Hawks are seeded fifth for the playoffs, set to play the Riders who are seeded fourth. The Bulldogs run away with the Atlantic Division by putting together a run of wins during the time Darryl was sick with the flu, and they end up capturing the President's Trophy by the last week of March. The Riders somehow vaulted over the Hawks at the very end of the regular season, Darryl still isn't quite sure how that happened. It doesn't really matter, though; only difference is home ice advantage, and Darryl has no doubts that his team is fully capable of beating the Riders four times out of seven no matter where they play.

The Bears end up seeded second, and not just by virtue of winning the Southeast. They somehow squeak past the Titans out west for the second-best regular season record, although only by a couple of points. The Bears are scheduled to play the Rattlers, but when Darryl finds himself looking up the schedule for that series he makes himself stop. He can't do this, he can't let himself become distracted.

After his conversation with Eaton, Darryl had gone home and gotten some sleep. When he'd woken up he'd felt - not exactly better, but like his head was clear for the first time in weeks. He might not be able to fix the problem right away, but at least now he could see the problem distinctly.

After thinking about it, Darryl realizes that even if Alex hadn't made it abundantly clear that he wasn't talking to anybody except his family and the Bears for the duration of the playoffs, it still probably wouldn't have been a great idea for him to just pick up the phone and call. For one thing, this is a conversation that Darryl has to have in person, and for another thing, it would be completely unfair to upset Alex's equilibrium right before the playoff games start. Darryl saw what the Petrov trade did to Alex's head, what it did to his play on the ice; he can't risk hurting Alex like that, not after everything Darryl's done already.

And the thing is, Darryl still isn't completely sure what it is that he does want to say to Alex. He needs to figure out what he wants for himself, and he needs to make sure he's not going to do anything he regrets. It was impulse and assumption that got him into this dilemma in the first place, and he's not going to fall into that trap again.

During the flight to New York, Darryl stares out the window, thinking.

There are two problems here, and he has to resolve them separately. First, there's the issue of whether Alex cares for him; well, at least Darryl knows now that Alex did care for him, although the question of whether or not Alex still does is going to have to remain unanswered until June. Darryl is probably going to have to call Eaton yet again for groveling tips.

But the other question is whether or not Darryl is willing to commit to a serious long-term relationship, whether he could even make it work. Okay, so maybe he's putting the cart before the horse to try and figure out this question before getting the first answered, but these are personal issues that he needs to work these out for himself. He definitely has to apologize to Alex no matter what, he realizes that now; but if he's going to ask for Alex's forgiveness and another shot at making this crazy thing work, then he has to be ready to offer all of himself wholeheartedly.

The Hawks go to Madison Square Garden, lose the first game to the Riders 3-1, win the second 2-0. It's decent; getting a split in the away games is good, if not great. Even better, the Hawks score their two goals in the second game in the third period, which leaves Farstad looking more than a little rattled - whereas Moreau has a little swagger in his step coming back into the locker-room, a touch cocky over the shutout.
But what Darryl realizes from the games, personally, is that he's become a lot better at compartmentalizing. Throughout each of the games, he ended up focusing wholly on the game itself, the world narrowing down to what he could do at that moment to beat the Riders. It's substantial progress, considering how only four months ago it seemed like he got distracted at every turn by thoughts of Alex.

Okay, he has to be honest. Away from the rink, part of his mind is still continually preoccupied thinking about Alex, but it's not consuming. For the most part, Darryl's able to act normally, think normally, concentrate the way he always does whenever the playoffs come around. Maybe it's because he's had so much practice at hiding his feelings for Alex by now; maybe it's because the playoffs have always had a way of sharpening his focus.

And maybe - maybe it's because of what Alex said about the integrity of the game. The truth is, Darryl has continually underestimated Alex this entire year; underestimated his courage, his kindness, his character. The least he can do is try to live up to Alex's example, and right now that means playing the best hockey he's capable of.

But Darryl still feels uneasy; it can't be this simple, to just dismiss all his previous concerns without a second thought.

No, he can't trust himself to be objective about judging his own behavior anymore. He's going to have to ask somebody else for help. Darryl sighs and runs a hand over his face, looks toward the part of the plane where Vince is talking to Janssen. He can't talk to Vince right now, he'll have to wait until they all get back to Pittsburgh.

Prescott gives the team a day off after beating the Riders, but then next day it's back to the Kia Center like usual.

Since the flight from New York is so short, Prescott has the team go straight from the airport to the Kia Center for a short practice. Prescott always holds mandatory practices during the playoffs, but they're never very intense. So after Darryl's done getting back into his street clothes, he leaves the locker room and, after a moment of indecision, goes upstairs to Vince's office.

The door's closed, but Darryl can hear Vince typing. He bites his lip, and makes himself knock.

"Come in!"

Darryl goes in, shutting the door behind him. Vince looks up, grins when he sees who it is.

"Darryl, just the person I wanted to see. Congratulations!"

"Um… what?"

"Oh, I guess you've been stuck in practice. You've been nominated for the Hart again this year, they just announced it."

"Oh," Darryl says. "Great."

Vince looks at him strangely. "Yes, I thought so."

Darryl coughs, tries to inject more enthusiasm into his voice. "No, I mean, that's great! Uh, who else got nominated?"

"Kuznetsov and Halvorsen," Vince says.
Darryl's stomach does a small somersault at Alex's name. Something must show in his face, because Vince pins Darryl with a keen look. "Is there something wrong, Darryl?"

Darryl lets out a breath. "Yeah, actually," he says. "Uh, you have a minute to talk?"

"Yeah, of course, sit down," Vince says, gesturing.

Darryl sits down in the chair in front of the desk. "Um..." he hesitates, then plunges in. "Vince, have you, have you noticed whether I've been acting strangely this season?"

Vince stills, raising his eyebrows. "Strangely?" he repeats, surprised. "What do you mean by strangely?"

Darryl swallows. "I mean, have I - in your opinion, have I conducted myself unprofessionally at all this year?"

Vince's eyebrows go up even further. After a moment he leans back in his seat, regarding Darryl thoughtfully; Darryl resists the urge to squirm.

"The only two things that I can possibly think of," Vince says finally, "is you driving down to DC in the middle of the night back in October and getting dead drunk at Kuznetsov's house, and then you not getting a flu shot in November, or whenever the flu season starts. And I know the trainers and Dr. Hall already ripped you a new one for that second one back in December, so I'm not going to beat a dead horse. But other than that," he says, looking Darryl in the eye, "you've been a credit to the Hawks this season, just like always."

"Oh." Darryl can feel his face heat in a rush of embarrassed gratitude. He could just leave it at that, he should just leave it at that, but - "You're not just saying that to make me feel better?" he blurts out.

Vince shakes his head emphatically. "Darryl, trust me. If I had any problems with your behavior, you would definitely know." He studies Darryl. "What's this really about? Is there something you want to tell me?"

Darryl tries to figure out what he can say. Shit, he can't imagine how Alex managed to dance around the truth so long. "There's been something that's been distracting me since December," he says slowly. "And I was worried that it was affecting my play," he says. "I was afraid that I wasn't, um, living up to my responsibilities. I didn't - I felt like, it just," Darryl stammers, "I couldn't tell if I was handling it okay or not, so I - I wanted to ask you."

Vince's eyebrows draw together; he looks completely baffled. After a moment, he says, cautious, "Darryl, is - " he pauses. "Have you been feeling burned out? Because - "

"What?" Darryl says. "No, it's - " he stops. "It's not anything like that, don't worry," he ends awkwardly.

"Because," Vince continues, still looking at Darryl intently, "What I was going to say is that if you are, then it's okay to talk to me about it." Vince sits forward in his chair again. "Darryl, I - " he glances to the side briefly, then back. "I know that technically, you work for me," he says. "But I would hope that you consider me a friend, first and foremost. If you want to talk to me about anything - and I mean anything, Darryl, I promise I'll do my best to help you any way I can," he says, every word weighted. "Whether it's in the best interest of the Hawks or not."

Darryl sits there, stunned. "Wow," he says, saying the first thing that comes to mind. "I must really be freaking you out."
Vince snorts. "Yeah, well, you wait until you're in my shoes and your star player comes into your office talking like he's got cancer or something, see if you freak out or not. I mean, of course you have to balance your professional and personal lives, but when push comes to shove, personal takes priority. Personal's always more important, Darryl, remember that."

Darryl bites the inside of his of his cheek. Personal is always more important. Okay, then. "No, it's not cancer, I promise," Darryl says, trying to smile a little. He takes a careful breath. "But, uh - what if I, um, hypothetically did something that would cause a huge controversy," he says, tentative. "Like, it would be a huge pain for the team, for everybody to deal with."

Vince furrows his brow. "Is this hypothetical something immoral? Illegal?"

"No, neither - well, there're people who think it's immoral, but - " he trails off, chewing his lip.

"Hm." Vince cocks his head. "What, so something like what the Bears are going through with Kuznetsov right now?"

Darryl's heart leaps up in his throat, but Vince's expression is clear, unsuspecting.

"Yeah," Darryl croaks out. He clears his throat, tries to get his heart to settle back into place. "Something - something like that." He thinks about it. "Uh, except maybe even worse." As much as the media has pounced on the entire unknown lover angle of Alex's story, Darryl's probably the one guy who would blow the story even more out of proportion when the truth comes out, instead of massively disappointing everybody who's been gossiping nonstop about it.

"Even - " Vince breaks off, looking at him perplexed.

Darryl feels his heart rate ratcheting up again.

"Vince?"

"What? No, of course I - and the team, and the entire organization - would support you, don't be stupid," Vince says impatiently. "I'm just trying to figure out what the hell could be bigger than Kuznetsov's story." He squints at Darryl. "If you were secretly born in America and don't actually have Canadian citizenship, you know the entire country's going to revolt if the International Olympic Committee disqualifies the gold medal from Vancouver."

That does succeed in startling a laugh out of Darryl. "No, it's not that either," he says.

"Hm." Vince studies him for a moment longer. "Well, Darryl, like I told you," he says, "You can tell me anything, but I'm not going to push. You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to. Although in that case, the only thing I would ask is that you tell me when you're going public with your hypothetical secret, so I can warn Paul and the PR staff. Although I guess I could just have them talk to the Bears' PR people, ask them for advice."

Darryl's stomach twists. "You - " he takes a breath. "You approve of how they're handling everything with him, then?" It's not the question he wants to ask, but it's the closest he can come to it.

Vince looks surprised again. "Yeah, of course. They've done an extraordinary job of dealing with the fallout - I just wish it wasn't necessary, it's a goddamn disgrace that a handful of bigoted psychos can make life so difficult for him," he says, scowling.

Darryl's knees suddenly feel shaky, even though he's still sitting down. He - he had an idea about how Vince felt about all of this, but he wasn't completely sure. "Yeah," he says. He stands up,
trying not to fall over. "Um, I should probably go," he says. "But thanks. And I will, I'll make sure to give you a heads up before I, uh, say anything. It won't be until after the playoffs are over, anyways."

Vince nods. "Okay. But my door's always open, playoffs or no playoffs."

Darryl raises his eyebrows, looks deliberately back at the closed door.

"Oh, get out of here, smartass," Vince says, his mouth quirking upward. "Go beat the Riders three more times."

And so they do. It takes them four more games, but they end up taking the series four games to two a little more than a week later, at home. Darryl feels the familiar burst of satisfaction when the game ends, Adidas erupting in cheers. Handshakes, then back to the locker room, and back to facing the press.

"Darryl, now that you've gotten past the first round, how are you going to prepare for your next opponent?"

"Well, we don't know yet who we're playing next," Darryl points out. "None of the other series have finished yet, I don't think." He usually doesn't pay much attention to other series except his own during the playoffs anyways, but this year willful ignorance is more important than ever, otherwise he'd be obsessing over every scrap of news from the Bears-Rattlers series.

"Not true," the journalist chimes in. "The Bears won their series against the Rattlers a half an hour ago."

Darryl's heart skips a beat. "Oh," he says. "Good for them."

Darryl answers the rest of the questions mechanically, the possibilities for the semifinals flashing through his head. Could he be playing against Alex in a few days? It's not likely, but crazy things happen during the playoffs. And how is he going to handle it, if he is?

Someone nudges his shoulder, not very gently. Darryl looks up, startled. The reporters are gone, the dressing room is empty except for Moreau, who's standing next to Darryl with an expression that indicates he's been trying to get Darryl's attention for a while.

"Wow, you really zoned out there, didn't you?" Moreau says, eying him. "So I know you can handle the media in your sleep, Colton, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea to, you know, actually fall asleep."

"Right," Darryl says. He shakes his head. "Sorry, I'll - get going," he says.

Moreau's right, he can handle the media in his sleep, Darryl thinks as he drives home. He's suddenly filled with intense self-loathing; it's true, even though he hates dealing with the media, he's certainly able to do it, he's done it since he was a kid. And sure, there would be a shitstorm of coverage if - when - if he came out of the closet, but it would still be easier for him than it has been for Alex. Alex hasn't had as many years dealing with the North American media, Alex has to do this speaking a foreign language, and yet he's responded to all of it with patience, sincerity, humor. It puts Darryl to shame. When has Darryl ever let the media control what he does with his life? When did he become such a coward?

Darryl stifles that line of thought; he can't afford to do this, not right now.

In the end, the other two series turn out fairly predictably. The Wolves beat the Vipers in six, the
Bulldogs need all seven games to beat the Cyclones, which means the Bears are set to play the Wolves and the Hawks are set to play the Bulldogs. Well, at least the Bulldogs are a team that Darryl has absolutely no second thoughts about trying to beat; Prescott's not going to have to tell the team to to kick the Bulldogs' asses, no extra motivation is needed.

Darryl lets himself read one - just one - article on the Bears. It's mostly fluff, but there's a picture of Alex at the top; a candid shot from the side of the rink during a game, catching him in profile. He looks well, at least from what the photo captures. The quote from him is terse. Maybe Alex meant it literally when he said he'd only speak to the media when he had to. When asked what his goals are for the series against the Rattlers, Kuznetsov's answer is short and to the point. "Just win," he says. "Keep playing."

Darryl closes the browser window, closes his computer. It's a good goal. Darryl intends to follow it himself.

He gets a text from Eaton the night before the series against the Bulldogs starts.

You doing ok? beat philly!

Darryl smiles, texts back: don't worry, we will. im ok, sry about bruins

The reply comes seconds later. win some lose some. at least now i can root for bears 2 win w/o feeling guilty!

Darryl swallows, puts away his phone.

The Hawks go and beat the Bulldogs twice at Broad Street, which is awesome. Seriously, there's almost nothing better than the feeling of shutting up thousands of Bulldogs fans and watching them stream out of the arena early; it doesn't happen with the first game, which goes to overtime before Leskov scores the winner, but it does happen with the second. That game, the score is 5-1 in favor of the Hawks by the end of the second period, the seats empty out all throughout the third, only Hawks fans left at the end.

And then it's back to Pittsburgh again. If beating the Bulldogs in their own barn is one of the best feelings ever, then getting beat by them at home is one of the worst, and that's what happens in game 3. They get beat 4-2; Darryl goes home with a sour taste in his mouth.

Brynn texts him as he's getting out of the car.

u around to skype big brother?

yeah, ill call in couple minutes, Darryl texts back as he lets himself into the house. He grabs his laptop from the counter, opens it and brings up skype. Double-click on Brynn's name, a couple rings, and then her face shows up on the screen.

"Hey," Brynn says, her voice a little sleepy; she's in pajamas, already in bed. "So that was a bummer of a game."

Darryl blows out a breath. "Yeah, I know." The game had been tight almost the entire time, two all late into the third; but then Briere had poked one past Moreau, and in the final minute Giroux got the empty netter.

The thing that's nice about having a sibling who's a hockey player too is that Brynn doesn't try to comfort him by saying, well, at least he scored a goal, or at least the team played well. Instead she says:

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The thing that's nice about having a sibling who's a hockey player too is that Brynn doesn't try to comfort him by saying, well, at least he scored a goal, or at least the team played well. Instead she says:
"It's okay, you'll just kick their asses even more in a couple days," she says. "Seriously, you need to win these next two games so I don't have to look at those butt-ugly orange uniforms anymore, not to mention Pronger's face." She shudders.

Darryl snorts. "Yeah, well -"

"No, don't you dare say anything mean about Alex," Brynn says, sitting straight up and glaring at him.

Darryl clutches at his head; seriously, what the hell is this?

"I wasn't going to say anything about Alex!" he protests. Seriously, if people could just stop mentioning Alex then Darryl would really appreciate it.

"He's not ugly, he's - he's distinctive-looking, okay?" Brynn snaps, looking ready to breathe fire.

Darryl squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Yes, Brynn, thank you," he grinds out. "I agree." He looks at her, pained. "Wasn't the point of this call to cheer me up?"

Brynn settles down a little. "Sorry, it's just that there've been a couple people around here who've been talking shit about Alex, I'm just - " she takes a breath. "I'm just a little defensive, that's all."

Darryl's stomach flip-flops. "What - what've they been saying about him?"

Brynn grimaces. "You know, like, no way a fag's ever going to win the Cup, stupid stuff like that." Her mouth flattens. "Alex says I can't punch any of them, it doesn't matter to him at all, but seriously, people saying stuff like that does matter, especially when they make a point of saying it around Simon -"

"Wait, what? You've been in touch with Alex?"

Brynn suddenly looks guilty. "Uh, yes?" She coughs. "I mean, of course I wanted to e-mail him after Deadspin posted, and so we've e-mailed back and forth a few times. Just, you know, I wanted to make sure he's doing okay. And I'm still rooting for the Hawks, of course!"

That is - so completely not the part that's making Darryl's head hurt. "I - " he takes a breath. He is not going to pump his little sister for information about Alex, he's in the middle of a playoff series. "Who's Simon?"

Brynn looks taken aback. "Wait, didn't I tell you about this already?"

"No," Darryl says, trying not to grind his teeth.

"Oh." She looks nonplussed. "Really?"

"Brynn!" Darryl snaps.

"Okay, okay," she says. "You remember the last episode of Alex's show, Tracy showed all of the schools and everywhere that Alex went and talked at? So he didn't actually come visit Shattuck St. Mary's, I guess the Bears didn't have a game scheduled against the Wild here this year, but he did do a sort of video-conferencing thing where he talked to the entire school, they got us all in the gym and projected him against the wall."

"What - when was this?"
"Um, the first week of April? Right before the end of the regular season, which I guess is why Tracy didn't try to film anybody here, too late or something. Anyways, so Alex talked for, like, a half-hour, about how being bi didn't have anything to do with how he played hockey - although this guy sitting behind me made a crack about how of course it did, 'That's why Kuznetsov's such a choker, I bet he's always gagging for it,'" Brynn imitates, pitching her voice lower. "Seriously, I would have kicked that kid in the balls, if Kelly hadn't stopped me," she mutters, her face contorting in disgust.

Darryl feels his blood run cold. "Brynn -"

Brynn takes one look at Darryl's expression and shakes her head. "No, okay, sorry for freaking you out, I'm making it sound a lot worse than it is," she says. "Seriously, ninety-nine percent of Shattuck St. Mary basically idolizes Alex now, and they're all super-cool about him being gay, bi, straight, whatever. And so a week after Alex talked to all of us, Simon Gaillard - he's a sophomore here, plays right wing on the Midget team - he came out as gay."

Darryl inhales sharply. "He -"

"Yeah," Brynn says. "Yeah, I know, crazy, right?" She sighs. "Like I said, almost everybody here has been really supportive of him, and he and his boyfriend are suuuuuper cute together, it's just that there's still a couple fuckers who still have their heads up their asses," she says, scowling.

"Watch your language, Brynn," Darryl says, halfhearted.

Brynn makes a dismissive noise. "I just honestly don't understand what they're thinking," she says, clearly exasperated. "Well, of course I don't get what they're thinking because I'm not a bigoted asshole, but do they seriously think the world's going to spin backwards? Now that Alex has come out, what, everybody else in hockey who's gay is going to stay inside the closet?" Brynn snorts. "I bet by next season, it's not even going to be a big deal anymore."

Darryl bites the inside of his lip, tells himself not to squirm. "I hope you're right," he says quietly. "But - really? The other jocks haven't been giving this kid a hard time?"

"Yeah, I mean, the coaches got all of the hockey teams - girls too - together and gave us this big lecture, but it wasn't like we needed it," Brynn says. "Simon's one of the coolest guys around, he's really popular."

"Well, if he needs somebody to talk to, he can - " Darryl stops short.

"No, I know, I already e-mailed Alex about it, he said Simon could call him any time after the playoffs are over, if he wanted," Brynn continues blithely.

"That - " wasn't what Darryl meant.

Brynn cocks her head, waiting for Darryl to continue. When he doesn't say anything, she cracks a yawn and stretches. "Well, sorry for getting sidetracked," she says. "But you know what you have to do, anyways."

"What?" Darryl says, startled.

Brynn looks at him, eyebrows raised. "You know, beat the Bulldogs?" she says slowly. "You have to win two more, because you've already won two and you're in the middle of a four out of seven series - " she says, holding up her fingers.

"Okay, wise guy, thanks, I get the idea," Darryl retorts, his pulse slowing back down. "Don't go
into motivational speaking, I guarantee it wouldn't work out."

Brynn grins wickedly. "Well, I have to talk at the level of my audience, right?" Her expression becomes serious again. "But Darryl?"

"Yeah?"

"Go kick their asses," she says gravely.

Darryl smiles a little. "Got it," he says. "I guess I can listen to you, just this once."

Brynn sniffs. "You should always listen to me, and you know it." She pulls the covers up over her shoulders. "Love you, big brother," she says, reaching out to cut off the call.

"Love you too," Darryl says, closing skype and turning off his computer. He goes upstairs, changes into his pajamas, thinking.

The fact that student on the hockey team at Shattuck St. Mary came out - it's not trivial. Shattuck St. Mary is a boarding school in Minnesota with one of the most prestigious prep hockey programs in North America, which is why Darryl went there for a year when he was fifteen, it's why Brynn's attending now. A lot of alumni from Shattuck St. Mary's go on to play in the NHL; Eaton went there, a few years before Colton. All the outreach work Alex has been doing - what if the next generation of hockey players grows up accepting gay players, what if they grow up playing with gay teammates from the very beginning? They're not going to give a damn about any of this, they probably won't even be able to understand why it was ever a big deal. It's not going to happen overnight - Brynn is being way too optimistic there - but she's right, it is going to happen.

And so he can't, he cannot use fear as an excuse. If Darryl is going to be honest with himself, then he has to acknowledge that yes, he's gay. And he has to acknowledge that the right thing for him to do is to be honest with his family, his friends, his teammates, the fans. He's going to have to come clean; he's going to have to come out.

Darryl gets into bed and stares up the ceiling, says the words to himself. He is gay. He is sexually attracted only to men.

Only to men, right? Darryl tries picturing Angelina Jolie in a swimsuit - she was splashed all over the covers of the tabloids the last time he went grocery shopping. All right, he can do this; generous curves, pouty lips, hourglass figure.

Nope, nothing. Maybe this would be just the start of a jerk-off session for most guys, but the only thing Darryl's left wondering about is how the hell do her lips get so puffy? Seriously, that one picture it looked like she injected them with silicone, and that cannot be healthy.

All right, so, guys. Darryl tries picturing the models he's seen in Calvin Klein ads, languid poses and lowered eyelids, washboard abs and broad shoulders.

No, nothing's happening with this either. Now he's irritated even thinking about them; okay, so he knows that he plays a game for a living, but he can't imagine pouting and lounging around posing for photos and then expecting to get paid for it. Jesus, he'd go crazy within a week - even that one shoot he did for GQ all those years ago was more than enough.

Maybe it's just that he can't get excited about random people he doesn't know. Maybe - maybe one of his teammates? But the moment even the vaguest outline forms in his head Darryl curls over on his side, almost retching. Jesus fucking Christ, it feels like incest even thinking about it. He'd never be able to keep a straight face in the locker room, no, nonononono, he is not doing this.
So - what does this mean? Basically, he never realized he was gay because he has a low libido? Because he was so uninterested in getting some that he never figured out what kind of 'some' he'd like?

Well, it wasn't that he was completely uninterested, he knows he's not asexual, he's jerked off too many times for that to be true. It just - it always felt like there were more important things than sex, which Darryl knows places him in an extremely tiny minority among young men; hell, his teammates would find that opinion way more disturbing than him coming out as gay, he just knows it. Crawford would probably insist on medical testing.

All right, then. Darryl swallows, and this time he tries to remember Alex reaching out to run his thumb along Darryl's lip, his eyes bright with mischief and desire -

Aaaaand, there it goes, Darryl can feel arousal curling hot and insistent around his groin. Darryl squeezes his eyes shut, this is not useful, this is -

Except now the memories are flooding over him: Alex biting at the corner of his jaw, Alex kissing his way down Darryl's back, Alex curling his hand around Darryl's cock and jerking him off, agonizingly slow -

Great, and now Darryl's got a full-blown erection. He flips over and buries his face in his pillow and lets out a groan of utter frustration. Definitely not asexual, nope, Darryl's just that special that he's only aroused by the person he's in love with, which would theoretically be wonderful - except it means that he'd better make things up with Alex, otherwise he's never having sex again.

Godfuckingdammit.

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Maybe it's the sexual frustration, maybe it's his conversation with Brynn (although Darryl would never admit it to her), but the next two games against the Bulldogs Darryl records two goals and three assists, although of course the more important thing is that his points help the Hawks beat the Bulldogs decisively twice in a row and end the series, 5-3 for the fourth game and 4-1 for the fifth.

Darryl gets through the media questions after the fifth game on autopilot, except then a reporter thrusts a microphone in his face and asks, "The Bears are up 3-1 in their series against the Wolves, they have the chance to clinch it tomorrow night D.C. Are you rooting for the Wolves to win so that you'll be playing a more tired opponent for the Eastern Conference Finals, whoever it is?"

Darryl opens his mouth, then shuts it for a moment. He knows what he should says; he should say yes, of course, it's in the Hawks' best interest to play against a tired team, he should say that he hopes the Bears-Wolves series goes all seven games, except -

Except he can't say it. He can't bring himself to say that he hopes the Bears will lose.

"I - " he clears his throat. "It doesn't, it won't make any difference whether I root for anybody," he says, which is true, "and either way, we'll be ready to play whoever the winner of that series is," he finishes, except that's not true at all. Well, his teammates might be ready to play either the Wolves or the Bears, but he's not.

Darryl goes home feeling jittery, wakes up feeling jittery, gets through practice the next day feeling jittery.

"Dude, what's wrong with you?" Moreau says. "You look like you're on meth or something." He squints at Darryl. "You aren't, are you?"
"No," Darryl snaps. "Look, it's just - " he exhales. "Do you think you could, um, text me who wins the game tonight? I don't think I can watch it, it's - " he gestures vaguely.

Moreau shrugs, looking nonplussed. "All right, sure."

Darryl ends up alone in the video room watching film of the last few games, just to distract himself; he wants to hit the gym and work out until he can't think anymore, but Prescott will kill him if he gets wrecked during the playoffs, and he would run into other people who would want to talk, and he can't deal with that right now.

The video room doesn't have any windows, and Darryl took off his watch after the first half-hour of watching film because he kept checking it - even though it was fully nine hours before the Bears-Wolves game would end. And so he's taken off guard when his phone vibrates, he's actually managed to lose track of time.

Darryl takes a deep breath, takes a look at the screen.

*Bears won, we're playing them in ECF!*

Darryl swallows. He puts his phone in his pocket, turns off the projector, the computer, the lights. Okay, Darryl thinks as he turns off the light and leaves the room; okay, he can handle this.

***

Of course the media is all over it, swarming the Hawks the next day. Seriously, it's been incredible year for the hockey media. Alex has managed to succeed where glowing pucks and the lockout rule changes have all failed; he's managed to pull the NHL into the mainstream.

So of course the number of people crammed in asking questions is insane, although Darryl's a little taken aback when he realizes that they're not asking about Alex at all, and all their questions about the Bears are of the garden variety.

When he remarks on it to Davies after the media is finally gone, the other man raises an eyebrow. "Kuznetsov chewed 'em all out during their first series for bothering the Rattlers too much about him, told them they'd better quit it or else he wasn't going to talk to them at all. That shut them up pretty quick, I guess."

"Oh," Darryl says, caught off-guard. Well, at least he's not going to have to deal with reporters pestering him about how he's going to handle playing Alex - which is good, because right now he has no idea.

And he continues to have no idea right up until the pregame warmups for game one at Sprint; well, at least if he faints or vomits when he sees Alex, it won't be a full arena that sees him, Darryl thinks morbidly. It won't be broadcast on national television.

Darryl steps out onto the ice, following Janssen. He can't help it, his eyes automatically go to the other end of the rink where the Bears are warming up. He spots him quickly, the shaggy hair catching his eye - and in the next instant Alex turns and meets his gaze.

It feels like a physical jolt. But Alex looks at him for a brief moment, his expression opaque; and then he deliberately turns away.

Darryl lets out a deep breath. Okay, then. If Alex wants to ignore him, then fine. It's probably for the best, he tells himself, not thinking about the way his stomach is twisting.
It takes him a little while to stop feeling off-balance every time he looks at Alex, but by the end of
the first period it seems like he has it under control. Neither team scores during the first twenty
minutes, but then in the first minute of the second period Ehrenstrom pokes the puck past Moreau
on a rebound and the crowd goes wild, the whole arena reverberating with noise. Darryl grits his
teeth, and his next shift he checks Cantrell into the boards; now this he can do - there is no way
that he's going to let his team go down without a fight.

The Bears end up winning the first game 2-0, and then they take the second 6-5 after a wild
comeback that has the Bears fans screaming themselves hoarse at the end, the din loud enough that
Darryl's ears are still ringing in the locker room.

"Do you feel like the Bears have captured the momentum of the series so far?" a reporter asks
Darryl after the second loss.

"Well, of course we would've liked to win one here in DC, but now we're going back home and we
fully expect to win there," Darryl says. "It's like tennis, until one player breaks the other's serve, it's
an even game. They've held serve so far, and now that's what we have to do for the next two
games."

And they do. The Hawks win the next two games at Adidas, the first 4-2 and the second 3-2. The
reception Alex receives when he steps onto the ice for the first pre-game warmup is… mixed, to
say the least. There's a smattering of hearty booing, but for the most part it seems like the crowd
isn't sure how to react to him; there's an increase in chatter, certainly, but more as if the fans are
trying to decide how to react than anything else.

But Alex isn't having any of it. The rest of his teammates zooming around behind him, Alex stands
and looks up at the arena and pulls a disappointed face, pouting exaggeratedly. The people already
booing boo even louder, and Alex nods and puts a hand up to his ear, waving his other arm wildly
to get the rest of the crowd to join in. It only takes a few moments before the entire arena is booing
Alex wholeheartedly, and Alex eats up every bit of it, grinning widely and waving one last time
before joining his teammates in warming up.

"Dude, what's he doing?" Crawford says, confused.

"I think he's trying to tell everybody not to treat him with kid gloves," Janssen says, looking over at
the Bears. "Which we aren't going to, anyways."

No, the Hawks certainly don't go easy on Alex - they can't afford to. Alex is looking as dangerous
as ever, scoring a goal in the first game at Adidas and getting assists on both Bears goals in the
second, and he's hitting everything and everybody with a joyously bloodthirsty expression on his
face.

That energy and vigor pays off for the Bears back at Sprint for Game 5. Alex scores a hat trick,
helping the Bears beat the Hawks 6-3. Each team is still holding serve, and so it's back to
Pittsburgh they go.

"Hey, what's with the long face?" Moreau says, nudging Darryl in the Adidas locker room. "We
can take them out in seven, we've done it before."

"What?" Darryl says, startled. "Oh, no, yeah, I know." What he's thinking about is what Eaton said
to him a few weeks ago about Alex: He must be really good at hiding things. From what Darryl's
seen during this series, it seems like Alex doesn't have the slightest problem playing against Darryl,
as if it hasn't caused him the slightest twinge. If not for the last episode of the reality show, Darryl
wouldn't have thought Alex had missed him at all. It's honestly disconcerting how it seems like he
can't read Alex at all.

But Darryl doesn't have time to worry about it too much, because it seems like in the blink of an eye he's standing at the center circle for the starting face-off of Game 6. Darryl wins the puck, and away they go.

It's a tight, hard-fought game. The scoreboard stays empty at the end of the first period despite how aggressive both teams are playing, Moreau and Svoboda each looking sharp. But the second period opens with a goal by McNeil, sniped at a sharp angle and setting off a roar of approval from the crowd. But they quiet down a couple minutes later when Grayson pokes the puck past Moreau in a goal-mouth scramble that has bodies everywhere, and at the end of the second period they're still tied at one all.

Third period, both the Bears and Hawks come out desperate - there's suddenly a lot more hitting, a lot more checking from both of them; Erskine slams Darryl into the boards so hard Darryl can feel his helmet rattle around his head. Nothing doing, though - the clock ticks on inexorably, and it looks like they're headed to overtime when a fluky shot from Cantrell gets tipped by Kirk to make it past Moreau, and suddenly the Hawks are three minutes away from elimination from the playoffs.

"Fuck," Darryl swears to himself as he swings over the boards for his shift. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

But now that the Bears have the lead, they're going to do everything to hang on to it. They clog up the middle of the ice so much that the only way they could play more defensively would be to stand shoulder to shoulder in front of the goal. Two minutes left, and Prescott pulls Moreau, but now the Bears won't budge, they're blocking shots like crazy, Svoboda making saves left and right. Darryl can feel the game starting to slip away, and then Nilsson dekes around Leskov and sends the puck cleanly into the empty goal, and that's the dagger. Thirty seconds left, twenty, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two. One.

The Hawks have lost. The Bears are going to the Stanley Cup Finals.

The crowd is mostly quiet, except for the smattering of red-clad Bears fans who are celebrating deliriously around the arena. Darryl takes off his helmet and blows out a breath, the knowledge of defeat raking at the inside of his chest, stinging the back of his eyelids. It never gets easier. It always, always hurts.

He looks over to where the Bears are mobbing Svoboda, and it's like he can feel his heart tearing precisely down the middle. Some part of him can't help but be glad that Alex won, and it's an utterly alien feeling - the rest of him is recoiling even at the thought. Darryl's played against friends at every level of hockey; teammates come and go with enough frequency that it happens a lot. Even though Darryl's felt a little sorry when he's beaten good friends before, he's never actually felt genuinely happy whenever a friend's team has beaten his.

But he can't help it now; it feels like the two halves of his heart are tying themselves around each other, tightening into confused knot. Darryl swallows, skates over where the rest of his team is lining up for handshakes. As he shakes hands with Svoboda, Allsworth, Cantrell, he can feel his chest pounding harder and harder as he gets closer to Alex.

Darryl glances ahead, and - and Alex doesn't look like somebody headed to the Stanley Cup Finals for the first time. Oh, on the surface he looks happy, but the lines around his eyes and the corners of his mouth tell a different story. He looks tired; he looks like someone who's been weary in body and in spirit for long, long time.
And then Darryl's shaking hands with Alex, and the feel of Alex's hand against his is enough to make him feel like the ice is trembling beneath him. Except now Alex won't even meet his eyes, he's looking away, looking past Darryl, and now Darryl's stomach feels like it's in free fall - he's ruined this so badly that Alex can't even stand to look at him -

But then at the last instant, just when Darryl's starting to let go, Alex's hand tightens around his. He turns, looking Darryl in the eye.

"Darryl," Alex says, his voice low, intense. "You okay?"

For a moment, it seems like time freezes. Darryl looks at Alex, takes in every detail; the flecks of darker blue radiating outward against the sky blue of his eyes, the silver hairs threaded through the scruff of his beard, the small red nick across the left side of his nose. The drops of dried sweat at his temples, his hair rumpled and matted. The way his mouth is drawn thin with anxiety.

Darryl feels his throat close over. When he finally manages to speak, the distance between what he wants to say and what he actually says has never been greater.

"Yeah," he rasps out. "I'm fine."

Alex looks at him searchingly for another second. Then he lets go, and moves on.

And at that moment, Darryl knows that he has to fix this. He wants so badly to turn around and sling an arm around Alex, tell him good luck, tell him that Darryl's proud and happy for him and that Alex should savor every moment of the ride, he shouldn't be sad, he shouldn't be sad at all -

But Darryl can't say anything. He doesn't have the right to say anything at all.

Darryl finishes shaking hands, gets off the ice. His mind feels like it's going a thousand different directions, but then there's media to deal with again. There's all the usual questions about what went wrong, how does he feel now that the season's over - the types of questions that he always hates answering, it's like rubbing salt in an open wound. Except then a few minutes in, one of the reporters pipes up, "What did you say to Kuznetsov in the handshake line? It looked like the two of you had a moment."

"I - " Darryl's voice sounds like it's been shredded. He clears his throat. "Nothing much," he says. "Although I do wish him and the Bears luck."

"Are you planning to stay and watch the finals?"

"Excuse me?" Darryl isn't sure he's heard correctly.

"A few players from other teams have said that they plan on attending the finals to support Kuznetsov," the journalist says. "Are you planning on going too?"

Darryl swallows. He - he's not certain how he feels about watching Alex play in the Stanley Cup Finals, but he's sure that him being there would be a greater distraction than a help for Alex. "Um, no," he says. "No, I'm not planning on going."

The journalists eventually lose interest in questioning Darryl, and after a while it's just Darryl and a few of his teammates who are left in the locker room.

"Well," Davies says, blowing a breath out. "I guess I'll get to practice my golf swing, now." He raises an eyebrow at Darryl. "You gonna head back up to Nova Scotia for the summer?"
"Yeah," Darryl says, after a moment. "Yeah, I think it's time to go home."
Darryl's family is waiting for him once he gets out of the locker room. His dad took off work at the beginning of the Bulldogs series, and his mom waited until the school year ended for Brynn so she could pick her up in Minnesota, the two of them flying in together to attend the last couple games against the Bears. The three of them have been staying at his house in Pittsburgh for the past week; any other time, Darryl would be concerned that his mom or Brynn would try to find out what was bothering him, but neither of them have said anything - probably writing it off to him concentrating on the playoffs. Well, he doesn't have that excuse anymore.

"I'm sorry, son," his dad says, clapping a consolatory hand on Darryl's shoulder. "It was a good series."

"Thanks," Darryl says.

"It was," his mom agrees, giving him a hug. "You played well, you should be proud of yourself."

Darryl grimaces a bit, but then he looks at Brynn and can't help grinning; he's never seen her look so conflicted. "Don't strain yourself, your face will get stuck that way," he says dryly. "Were you even rooting for the Hawks?"

"Oh, shut up," she retorts. "Of course I was rooting for you guys, what kind of sister do you think I am? But c'mon, aren't you a liiiiiittle happy that Alex is moving on? Seriously, at least it isn't the Bulldogs, right?" she wheedles.

"No," Darryl says quietly. "It's all right, Brynn, I am happy for him." He hesitates for a moment. "If - if you want, we can try to go and find him," he offers.

Brynn looks torn, but after a moment she shakes her head. "No, I bet he's super busy with other stuff, he's probably still talking to reporters," she sighs. "I'll just e-mail him when we go home."

"Um, yeah, about that - " Darryl clears his throat. "Uh, do you guys mind if I come home with you guys? To Cole Harbor?" he says, awkward.

"What? Not to Halifax?" his dad asks, looking surprised.

Darryl bites his lip, looking down for a moment. The idea of moping around alone in his house at Halifax is deeply unappealing; he'll probably drive himself insane waiting until the finals are over and he can finally talk to Alex. "No, I just, um - " he flounders.

"Darryl, you know you're always welcome to come home with us," his mom says reassuringly. "As long as you do your own laundry, that is," she adds as an afterthought.

"Mine too!" Brynn pipes up. "And you can do the dishes, and take out the trash, and take care of all my chores, and - "

Darryl glares at her. "You know what, maybe - "

"No, this'll be great, you can drive me around everywhere all summer," she says brightly, taking Darryl by the arm and dragging him along.

Darryl and his family don't fly back immediately; Darryl has to go through exit interviews with the coaches, and Vince holds his end-of-the-season barbecue at his house for the entire team, the way
he does every year.

"You're not going to go to the finals?" Vince asks, sounding surprised. "I mean, it's been hard as hell trying to get tickets, but I'm pretty sure you can afford them. Geno's had some luck, you could ask him how he got them."

"No, I don't - " Darryl stammers. "I just, if I go, Ale - it - people might think that I was butting in."

"Oh, hm," Vince says. "I guess the Bears might see it like you trying to steal the spotlight, if the media kicks up a fuss about you going." He grimaces.

"Wait," Darryl says. "You're going?"

Vince raises his eyebrows. "I seem to remember telling you before that I'm not just a Hawks fan, I'm also a hockey fan," he says mildly. "And this is going to be one damn important series for the sport, let me tell you that."

Darryl debates asking Vince what he means by that, but the conversation is already making him uncomfortable enough as it is. Vince misreads his expression, flashes a quick smile. "Yeah, I know, I'm going to have to get used to cheering for the Bears." He makes a face. "Ugh, I can't believe I just said that, geez," he says, shuddering.

Darryl and his family fly back to Nova Scotia a few days after the Hawks' last game against the Bears, one day day before game 1 of the Stanley Cup Finals. The games for the Western Conference Finals were staggered a day later than the Eastern Conference Finals, and also it takes the Titans all seven games to put away the Sharks, which is the reason for the lag time for the Bears.

Darryl manages to distract himself with unpacking and settling in the first day home, but the next evening Brynn plucks herself down on the couch in the living room and turns on the TV.

"- And we're excited to welcome you to NBC's coverage of the first game of the Stanley Cup Finals, the Washington Bears playing against the Vancouver Titans - "

Darryl blanches. "Brynn, you - " he stops.

"What?" she yells, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"Brynn, keep your voice down," his mom admonishes. "And you might ask whether Darryl feels comfortable watching what you want to watch."

Brynn does turn around now, her expression half-guilty, half-defiant. Darryl never watches the playoffs after the Hawks have been knocked out; it's too irritating for him, and Brynn knows this - but it's not exactly fair for Darryl to stop Brynn from watching, either.

"No, it's fine," Darryl says. "I think I'm going to go for a run, anyways."

After a while, Darryl slows to a stop, his t-shirt drenched with sweat. He looks at his watch; only an hour has gone by, they're probably still in intermission after the first period. Shit, at this rate he's going to run a marathon by the time the game's over and he can go home. And running isn't helping clear his mind the way it normally does; no, his mind is going in circles, wondering how the game is going, wondering how Alex is playing, wondering how the media is covering the series, around and around again.

By the time Darryl drags himself back into the house, his legs feel like jelly, and still the first thing
he asks when he see Brynn is: "Did they win?"

"Yeah!" Brynn is beaming, bouncing around a little. "4-2, it was awesome!" She wrinkles her nose when she takes another look at him. "Oh my god, go take a shower, you stink," she says, making shooing motions.

After that, Darryl gives in; when game 2 rolls around, he sits next to Brynn on the couch, swallowing hard when he sees a shot of the crowd at Verizon Center come on screen.

"So you gonna watch?" Brynn says, looking at him.

"Yeah," Darryl says, taking a deep breath. "I'll just go crazy thinking about it, so I might as well."

Brynn pouts a little. "I wish you'd decided that earlier, so we could've gotten tickets to watch in person," she says. "We could be hanging out with Vince and Lady Gaga, and maybe even President Obama!"

"I - what?" Darryl says.

It turns out that this is what Vince was talking about, when he said that this was going to be an important series. During the pregame, the broadcasters talk about all the famous people that have showed up to support Kuznetsov: loads of current players, almost all the Russians in the NHL, not just Leskov, but Belyakov, Zhdanov flying over from the KHL; Kepner, Farstad, Sorensen, on and on and on. Darryl's starting to get the uncomfortable feeling that his absence might be causing a bigger stir than him attending.

"Oh my god, get over yourself," Brynn says, rolling her eyes when he says as much. "Seriously, people are going to pay attention more to who is there already, okay?"

Because it isn't just current players who've showed up - basically everybody who's ever been anybody in the sport of hockey has decided to attend; not just Vince, but also Gretzky, Orr, Dryden, Hasek, Esposito, Roy - it's like a roll call of all the living members of the Hockey Hall of Fame. And then there are the assorted celebrities from all over who are also in attendance - Tom Hanks, Serena and Venus Williams, the current mayor of D.C., several U.S. senators, and yes, they do show a shot of Lady Gaga sitting in one of the luxury boxes, wearing an outfit that looks like an iridescent pink sea monster draped over her. A stoned, blissed-out sea monster.

"I don't see the president, though." Darryl raises an eyebrow at Brynn, after NBC is finally done with their celebrity roll call. Brynn shakes her head, determined.

"Well, maybe he couldn't make it out for this one, but I bet he will for the fifth game," she says. "It's been all over twitter, people have been complaining about what security is going to be like."

Darryl rolls his eyes. "Right, because if it's on the internet it must be true," he says snidely.

"Whatever," she says. "They're about to start!"

By the time the first period is over - tied at 2 all, neither Koskela nor Svoboda look sharp - Darryl feels like his stomach has been tied in a thousand knots.

His mom looks at him as he gets up for his tenth glass of water, compulsively pacing the kitchen floor as he keeps an eye on the TV through the living room doorway, even though there are only commercials playing.

"It's difficult when you care so much about the outcome, isn't it?" she says, sympathetic.
"Is this what it's like for you and Dad, watching me?" Darryl demands. "How do you even stand it, this is terrible!"

His mom gets a strange look on her face, but the next moment Brynn's yelling at him.

"Come on, Darryl, it's starting again!"

Darryl just about chews through his nails and his lower lip by the time the game ends, and it doesn't end well for the Bears; the second period is scoreless, but in the first half of the third Kingsley manages to put one past Svoboda, top shelf. The Titans win it 3-2, and so Darryl has a sinking, sour feeling in the pit of his stomach to go along with his ragged nails and bloody lip.

"Wow," Brynn says, squinting at him. "Is Mom gonna have to buy you that stuff they paint on kids' nails to stop them from biting them? Otherwise you're going to bite off your fingers at this rate."

"Oh, shut up," Darryl snaps.

He very consciously keeps his hands in his lap while watching the third game, although he can't help worrying his lip - the taste of blood is on his tongue the entire three hours, but it's okay because the Bears beat the Titans 5-4.

But then he's back to being a nervous wreck two days later, when the Titans take the second game at Rineheart Arena, and now the series is tied at two games each.

"Darryl," his mom says gently. "Why don't you go outside and trim the hedges?"

Darryl looks at her, confused. "Didn't Dad just trim them last week?"

"Doesn't matter," she says, her serene expression becoming a little fixed. "Go and trim them again."

So Darryl goes and trims the hedges. Then he weeds the garden. Then he mows the lawn. Then he mows the neighbors' lawn. Then he mows the other neighbors' lawn.

"Wow," Brynn says, coming outside to look admiringly at Darryl's handiwork. "You know, if this hockey thing doesn't work out for you, I think you've got a real future in yard work."

Darryl wipes the sweat from his eyes so he can glare at her properly. "Thanks," he says, sarcasm dripping.

"No problem," Brynn says sunnily. "Anyways, I just came out to tell you the game's starting, so - " she has to flatten herself in the doorway as Darryl barrels back inside.

And this time, President Obama does show up for Game 5; the NBC broadcasters make sure to show him and mention it oh, only about a billion times. They spend more time talking about Obama than the game, or at least that's what it feels like - all Darryl wants to concentrate on is the game, not whether or not some random politician is watching it; who cares if that politician happens to be the most powerful man in the world?

"Oh my god, calm down," Brynn finally yells at him during a commercial break. "Why are you even spazzing out this much? The Bears are up 4-1 and it's the third period, seriously!"

"I know, I know, I just - " Darryl bites his tongue. "Okay, sorry, I'll try to stay still," he mutters, but he doesn't draw an easy breath until the buzzer sounds, the score remaining the same and the Bears taking a 3-2 series lead.
His parents haven't been watching any of the games with Darryl and Brynn - his dad because he never likes watching playoff hockey that doesn't involve Darryl, his mom probably because it would be insufferable to try and watch with Darryl, Darryl's honest enough to admit that he's been kind of crazy for the past week. But when Brynn switches on the broadcast for Game 6, his parents join them in front of the TV. His mom takes a seat on the armchair to the left, his dad dropping into his easy chair on the right, a slight grimace on his face.

"So I guess we're rooting for the Bears, are we?" he says, sounding disgruntled. The three of them - Brynn, Darryl, and his mom - all send varying looks of reproach at him. His dad snorts. "Well, they've been trading games back and forth, I bet the Titans win this one and it goes to Game 7," he says, settling back in his chair.

"Dad!" Brynn chastises. "Now you've gone and jinxed them!"

It turns out exactly as his dad predicts; Pierson scores in the first period, Mueller in the second, but then Chaikoff scores what turns out to be the game-winner in the third, sending Rogers Arena into paroxysms of delight. Darryl takes one look at Alex's grim, determined face and swallows hard; if the first six games of this series were difficult enough to watch, Game 7 is going to be crazy.

His mom looks over, and her expression changes so it looks like she can't decide between laughing at Darryl and being sympathetic.

"So," she says, her mouth wry. "How do you feel about washing and re-staining the deck?"

Darryl opens his mouth, then closes it. "Okay," he says meekly, after a moment.

Two days and a fully cleaned, stained and sealed deck later -

("Good job, Darryl," his mom says appreciatively, coming out to take a look. "If you ever quit hockey, you could definitely go into contrac -"

"Nobody in this family appreciates me!" Darryl throws his arms up and stalks back into the house.)

- Darryl finds himself sitting on the couch again, staring at the TV as the broadcast for Game 7 starts.

"Darryl, are you - " Brynn's looking at him funny. "Are you okay? Because we don't have to watch this, if you're not. We can go out and watch a movie or something," she says, and geez, Darryl must look terrible if even Brynn's worried about him.

"No," Darryl says. "I'm fine." He notices that his hands are trembling, so he stuffs them underneath his thighs to stop her from noticing.

The thing is, he can honestly say that he's never felt this bad about a hockey game. Oh, of course he's been nervous and anxious before games before; he thought he was going to vomit in the minutes before the gold medal game in Vancouver started.

But the difference is that in all those other games, he always knew that he would be playing soon, that once he stepped out onto the ice and got into a rhythm, then everything else would fade away.

But now? Now he's stuck on a couch hundreds of miles away from where the game is being played, his hands shaking and his stomach queasy and his vision actually starting to blur a little around the edges, and this is what happens when you want something for somebody so, so badly, but you have absolutely no control over it at all.
"Darryl," Brynn actually reaches out and squeezes his hand briefly, still looking concerned. "Breathe, okay?"

Darryl takes a deep breath. "Okay," he says.

On screen, the ref holds the puck out, the crowd already roaring around him. A heartbeat, and then he drops the puck. The game begins.

It's clear from the very start that both teams are playing desperate, laying hits all over the ice. It's a bit sloppy, and the ice seems to be rough; the puck is jumping and skittering. Watching this game is a really strange experience. Normally when he watches a hockey game that doesn't involve the Hawks, he finds himself analyzing each team's game plan, evaluating how well they're executing; a detached, clinical viewpoint - like an architect inspecting another's building, a writer reading another's novel.

But this time Darryl feels like he's a million miles away, the sense of helplessness, of being removed from the action is so strong. And yet he's intensely aware of the sensation of sitting on the couch; everything seeming too harsh, too irritating - his jeans rasping against his legs, his lip starting to bleed sluggishly again because he's bitten through the scab, his pulse pounding in his ears so that every sound has a tinny quality. His mind feels like a faulty cogwheel, catching for a moment - that was a nice move there by Allsworth to cut off the passing lane, he notes distantly - and then slipping again - he realizes that he's started gnawing at his fingernails again, he's breaking skin. Clicking, slipping, stuttering again and again.

"Okay," Brynn says after the first period ends; the scoreboard is still empty, although there was a flurry at the Bears goalmouth in the closing minutes that had Darryl's heart jumping around in his throat until Svoboda finally covered the puck. "Okay, Darryl, this is ridiculous, you're seriously going to pass out - " she reaches out and mutes the television, keeps the remote out of reach when Darryl protests. "No, look, it's just on mute, once the game starts again we'll turn it on again, but right now we need to talk about something that isn't hockey-related at all, otherwise you're going to have an aneurysm." She hesitates for a moment, then turns. "Uh, Mom, what can we talk that isn't hockey-related?" she asks, obviously stumped.

Darryl's mom is looking over at both of them with a slight smile on her face. "Well, I have a whole list of chores around the house you guys can start on, we could discuss those," she says, a twinkle in her eye.

"Mom!" Both Brynn and Darryl protest.

Brynn and his parents manage to distract Darryl with patchwork small talk about Brynn's classes this past year, about his dad's job. It's not very interesting, but then the second period starts and Darryl can feel himself dissolving into a wreck all over again.

"Darryl, you need to breathe," Brynn says, poking him. "In, out. In, out."

But it's a little hypocritical of her to nag him about that, since there are a couple times during the period that Darryl can tell that she stops breathing; Venger must've said something extraordinary to pump his team up, because the Titans come out like their collective hair is on fire. It seems like the ice is tilted heavily in the Titan's favor, but outstanding goaltending by Svoboda means that it's still zero-all going into the second intermission.

"Wow," his dad says when the broadcast goes to commercial again. "Hell of a game, but what do you wanna bet that it's still scoreless at the end of regulation? I bet this goes to overtime."
"Dad!" Brynn claws at her face in despair, and Darryl feels exactly the same. "Come on, seriously?"

And so Darryl's dad is basically the most successful person ever at placing jinxes, because even though in the third period it's the Bears who come out roaring, Koskela doesn't give an inch, making save after save. In the fourteenth minute of the third, Bradshaw tips a shot from Cantrell that looks like a sure thing, but at the last moment Koskela kicks it out with his skate. That's the best scoring chance either team has for the rest of regulation, even though the crowd at Verizon is on their feet clamoring wildly as the clock ticks down, trying to somehow cheer the Bears on to a win. But their efforts are unsuccessful, and the camera focuses in on Alex as the Bears come off the ice.

Alex's face is tense, almost harsh. And Darryl can't help it, he opens his mouth - as if he could just say the right thing, then maybe Alex would hear him, maybe Darryl can make everything okay, for Alex and for himself, he just - he just has to find the right words -

Except then the moment passes, the camera cuts away, and Darryl sinks back in his seat. For the entire game, it's felt like someone wrapped his chest in rope, but seeing Alex felt like somebody grabbing hold of the rope and giving a mighty haul, leaving him breathless.

The next goal. He just has to survive until the next goal.

Unless, god, what if this turns into one of those epic six-overtime games? What happens if this turns into the game that breaks the record for longest NHL game? Darryl knows his hockey history, in 1936 the Detroit Red Wings played the Montreal Maroons for almost two hours of overtime, but he really doesn't think he can stand much more of this, much less hours more. Brynn is right, he's going to have a heart attack or stroke out or something. Darryl makes a disgruntled noise and falls over, buries his face in one of the couch pillows.

"Hey," Brynn says. "Hey, come on, get up, it'll be okay," she says, patting his back. The fact that she's patting and not poking him shows how freaked out she must be by now. Darryl blows out a deep breath and pulls himself upright, tries to ignore the tightness in his chest.

If watching the game in regulation made him feel like his brain was a motor that wouldn't start, then watching the game in overtime is like sitting in the first row of a 3D movie - every detail pops out at him, leaving him feeling queasy and dizzy. Every shot from the Bears sends his stomach soaring upwards, every shot from the Titans sends it plunging downwards; it's like the worst roller coaster ever.

The Bears and Titans battle back and forth, but the clock ticks on relentlessly without a goal from either team; sixteen minutes in, the puck gets flipped up into the netting and out of play.

"Well, three minutes to go," Darryl's dad observes. "I bet -"

"Dad," Brynn breaks in, motioning frantically. "Please be quiet, just for a little bit, okay? Please? Pleease?

Darryl's dad does quiet down after another moment or two of grumbling, but even without him saying anything, it still seems like one overtime period isn't going to be enough to settle things. The pounding in Darryl's ears has diminished, but now what he hears is a thin, continuous ringing instead; his brain is trying to peal an alarm, but there's no way to turn it off, to stop the noise, to -

Then Darryl can see the play unfurl in front of him, as if in slow motion. Kesler turns over the puck in the neutral zone to Grayson, who skates it up past the blue line and takes a shot. It pings off the
crossbar and rebounds straight back to Scalero on the other side, who looks startled and takes a shot almost out of reflex. The puck soars towards goal, deflects off skates and sticks and the tip of Koskela's glove, and -

And it goes in.

The camera immediately swings around to zoom in on Alex. And Darryl can tell already that this is the image that's going to be splashed across every article about the Bears tomorrow, the picture that's going on the cover of the Washington Post.

Alex is just standing there at the half-wall, his mouth agape and his eyes wide with shock, as if he literally cannot believe what he's just seen. His stillness contrasts starkly with the chaos erupting from the fans on the other side of the glass, people already jumping out of their seats, screaming, crying.

And then in a blink of an eye, that moment of stillness is over - the rest of the Bears jump on Alex in a huge mob, completely burying him from view. The entire arena is exploding in pandemonium. Even over the broadcast, the noise coming from the TV is incredibly loud, loud enough to blow out the speakers.

"Aaaaaahhhhh!!! Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!" Brynn jumps off the couch and starts running around like crazy, then comes over and grabs hold of Darryl's arm, bouncing up and down. "Did you see that? Did you see that, Darryl?" she stops suddenly, peering at him. "Are - are you crying?"

Darryl swallows and hastily wipes at his eyes. "No," he croaks. He's not crying, although he'll admit that his eyes are getting a little wet.

On the television, the Bears have finally stopped mobbing around Alex so tightly. They go through handshakes with the Titans, and nearly every Titan takes the time to say something to Alex personally; Alex looks more overwhelmed and more grateful with each person.

And then Darryl watches as the Cup gets brought out onto the ice, and the noise in the arena redoubles, making it completely impossible to hear what Bettman or anybody else says during the ceremony. But the noise somehow becomes even louder when Alex approaches the Cup. He reaches out, tentative, and lifts it up. It looks like he's expecting the Cup to vanish from his grasp at any moment. He stares at it for a long moment, then turns back towards his teammates.

Alex's teammates are all yelling and gesturing at him, since he's supposed to take the first victory lap as captain of the team. But Alex skates over to them and starts arguing with them vehemently; from the way he's motioning, it looks as if he wants the team to skate with him - never mind that twenty-three people trying to skate around with the Cup would be ridiculous, not to mention completely breaking tradition.

But no, it doesn't look like Alex is changing his mind, and so after some more squabbling Bradley breaks away from the group and skates over to the side of the rink; he comes back with skate guards in hand, which he gets Alex to put on. After some commotion, the rest of the team hoists Alex up on their shoulders, Alex still clutching the Cup. And like that, the Bears begin skating around the length of the rink, the roar of the crowd coming in waves and waves.

And Alex finally gets into the spirit of the thing, raising the Cup above his head, brandishing it like a weapon. The camera zooms in on him, and he doesn't look happy, or thrilled, or anything like that. No; he looks as if he's caught between anger and agony, his expression fierce and blazing as he yells back at the crowd.
The camera zooms in on him, and even though Alex's voice isn't audible over the clamor of the crowd, Darryl can just make out what he's saying by reading his lips.

"They think we can't do it, but we did it! We did it!" Alex shouts, over and over again. "We show them we can do it!"

Darryl feels like he can't catch his breath, a thousand different emotions unfurling relentlessly in his chest; pride, exhilaration, affection - a thorny bramble of guilt, regret, yearning, a prickle of jealousy. But above all of that there's the overwhelming desire to be with Alex right now, to be able to celebrate with him.

"Darryl?" Brynn's peering at him worriedly. "Are you all right? You realize they won, right?" Her face furrows further, then her jaw drops in horror. "You weren't rooting for the Titans because they're Canadian, were you?"

That's enough to jolt Darryl out of it. "No, of course not!" Darryl retorts. "I just - I just need some air," he says, getting up and going out onto the deck.

The night air is like a splash of cold water; after a few moments, Darryl can feel his head clearing, the knots in his chest untangling.

There are no excuses any more. Alex is done coming out of the closet, the Bears have won the Cup, and now it's Darryl's turn. He's going to have to tell the truth.

Darryl takes a deep breath; as difficult as it's going to be, there's a certain comfort in knowing what he has to do. Now all that's left is for him to go and do it.

***

The next morning, Darryl comes down to the kitchen to find that his mom and Brynn have gone all out in cooking breakfast; French toast, pancakes, bacon, fresh fruit with granola.

"Wow, any special reason for all of this?" Darryl's dad asks.

"Yeah, the Bears won!" Brynn says cheerfully, twirling around the kitchen. Darryl's dad rolls his eyes a little, but starts eating with gusto anyways.

"Darryl?" his mom looks at him in concern. "Honey, are you not hungry? Are you feeling okay?"

"I - yeah," Darryl says, sitting down at the table. "I'm fine," he says, but the truth is that he's feeling slightly queasy. There's a platter of scrambled eggs in front of him, and he realizes suddenly that for the rest of his life, scrambled eggs are going to remind him of coming out to his family. Great.

"Actually, um, could I - could I talk to you guys about something?" His dad looks at him curiously, still chewing, but his mom glances at him sharply, then takes hold of Brynn and makes her sit down. Once they're all seated and looking at him, Darryl takes a deep breath and looks up.

"Um, I wanted to tell you guys that I'm gay," he says. His voice doesn't waver, though it's a near thing.

His dad is gaping at him, half-chewed food visible in his mouth. His sister looks similarly surprised, her eyes wide open. But his mom - his mom is looking at him with a half-worried, half-affectionate expression.

"Oh, Darryl," she says, reaching out and taking his hand. "Sweetheart, you know that we love you
and we're proud of you, no matter what," she says. "Right, Troy?" she says, turning to Darryl's dad. When he doesn't respond, she elbows him sharply.

"Ow!" his dad hastily swallows. "I mean, yes, of course," he says, coughing. "That absolutely is true, Darryl, your mother's right," he says, his gaze frank; Darryl can feel the tension between his shoulders loosen. He glances at his sister, trying to see if she's broken out of her uncharacteristic silence.

"Brynn?" he says, hesitant.

Brynn blinks a few times, but then in an instant she's up and out of her chair, her arms slung around Darryl's neck in a chokehold hug.

"Oh my god, don't be an idiot," she says. "You're my big brother, of course I'll always love you." She pops up suddenly, looking at him with an excited expression. "Wait, this is going to be awesome!" she says, bouncing up and down. "We can totally go shopping together, and boy-watching together, and -"

"Jesus, go sit down and eat your breakfast," Darryl says, trying to scowl, but he can't help the wide grin spreading across his face, his insides going wobbly with relief. Except then his dad looks at him and asks, "Darryl, I'm not - I don't mean to…" he rubs the back of his neck, his brow furrowed. "But are you sure?"

"Troy," Darryl's mom says warningly, but Darryl shakes his head. He has to tell them this part anyways.

"It's okay," he says. "I am sure, I - " he takes a deep breath. "There's somebody," he says in a rush. "Or, there was - there was somebody, we were, um, sort of in a relationship, kind of, but - I - " Darryl can feel his face turning bright red even as he becomes more and more tongue-tied. "But the point is, uh, I - I am sure that I'm attracted to guys, not girls," he gets out, forcing himself to look his dad in the eye.

His dad clears his throat, looking even more embarrassed than Darryl, but he nods once. "Okay. Okay, but you know your mother still expects grandchildren from you, right?"

Darryl laughs weakly and looks over at his mom, but she's looking at him narrowly, a shrewd expression on her face.

"Darryl, this somebody that you were in a relationship with," she says slowly. "Do we know him?"

Brynn snorts, grabbing another piece of French toast. "Yeah, right, because all the gay hockey players hang out together all the time, they've got a secret bat signal," she says, taking a huge bite. "In fact, Darryl's actually been hooking up with Alex right under everybody's noses, it's totally tragic."

Darryl freezes, his blood turning to ice.

This time, the bite of toast actually falls out of Brynn's mouth as she gapes at him.

"No. Way," she says. "Holy shit!"

"Brynn," his mom turns to her in warning.
"Holy fucking shit," his dad says.

"Erik!" his mom turns to his dad.

Darryl swallows; yep, he's right back to feeling queasy again.

"No, it's true," he says quietly, barely able to get the words out. "It didn't - things got complicated, but - " Darryl takes a quick breath in, his chest shuddering for a moment. "We were involved for a little while," he says. He looks at his mom, who seems to be taking this way too calmly. "Mom, you don't, you don't seem very surprised?" he hazards.

That snaps Brynn out of her shock. "Wait! Mom, you knew about this? And you didn't say anything?" she cries, clutching at her head.

His mom sighs, her mouth pressed thin for a moment. "I didn't know," she says. "But I have to admit that I'm not entirely surprised. You never seemed very interested in girls, and - well, I wondered. And then if you - I thought that if you were interested in boys, you would... it seemed likely that you would feel most comfortable with a hockey player, if you could find somebody like that. Somebody like you, that you liked."

She looks at Darryl for a moment, studying him intently. "Darryl, did you - " she bites her lip. "Did you wait to tell us about being gay, about being involved with Alex, because you were afraid of how we would react?" she asks tightly.

Darryl stares at her. "What?" After a moment, what she really means sinks in. "No! I mean, no, I - I was nervous about telling you guys," he says. "But I didn't - I never thought you guys were going to disown me or anything, that wasn't - I wasn't afraid of that."

His mom lets out a gusty breath, her shoulders slumping with relief. "Thank god," she says. "Darryl, the idea of you torturing yourself about this, it - " she glances away for a moment. "Darryl, there is nothing wrong with being gay, you understand?"

"Yeah, I do know that," Darryl says, reaching out and squeezing his mom's hand. "Mom, I promise I'm okay, really." He hesitates for a moment. "I didn't tell you guys about being gay because I didn't really figure it out for myself until recently," he says slowly. "And then with Alex, I didn't - it didn't seem like it was going to turn into anything serious, and I - " his voice catches.

His mom looks at him closely. "All right," she says. "I think you'd better start at the beginning."

And so Darryl ends up telling his family the entire story, or at least the bare bones of it. He leaves out all the mushy emotional stuff. It's already difficult enough to tell his parents about any part of his love life, although he can already tell from the gleam in Brynn's eye that she's going to drag all the juicy details out of him later, even if she has to find a herd of wild horses to do it.

When he's finally finished, though, it's his dad of all people who breaks the silence.

"Darryl - " he says. "How you treated Kuznetsov, that wasn't well done." He looks at Darryl, his brows drawn together. "You do realize that, don't you?"

Darryl feels like his throat is closing over. He stares down at the plate in front of him, trying to ignore the stone in his chest which is currently sinking down into his stomach. Seriously, he's never going to be able to eat scrambled eggs ever again. "Yeah, I know," he says. "I'm going to fix it, I swear, I just - it didn't seem fair to distract him while the Bears were in the playoffs, and - and there are other people I need to talk to about this too," he says, looking up.
"Who are you planning on talking to?" his mom asks.

"Well, I need to talk to Vince," Darryl says. "And I should tell Coach, and the team, and - oh, geez, I should tell Eaton first," he realizes. "I've been asking him for advice about this all year, even though he doesn't know any of the specifics." He grimaces as another thought hits him. "And then I'll probably have to sit down with the PR team and figure out what I'm going to say to the public, that should be - really great."

"So you're definitely going to tell everybody?" Brynn says, eyebrows raised.

"I have to, Alex - Alex came clean even though he knew it was going to be bad for him, even though he's had it way worse than I will - " his voice breaks.

Brynn gets up and hugs Darryl tightly from behind. "Darryl, it's okay," she says. "He's going to forgive you, I know he will."

Darryl closes his eyes for a moment. "Thanks, Brynn," he says scratchily, curling his hand over hers. "But whether he decides to forgive me or not, this is still something I need to do."

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And so after Darryl's parents are done asking questions and he's done eating breakfast - he manages a few bites of toast, but the eggs really are beyond him - he goes upstairs to his room and calls Eaton.

Eaton picks up after a few rings.

"Colton, what's up?" he says. "See, this is an appropriate time to call, eleven o'clock and I swear I am a much more coherent person to talk to."

Darryl gnaws at his lip. "Uh, good," he says. "Because I have something to tell you." He takes a deep breath. "So, you remember the girl I've, um, I've been talking to you about all season?"

"No," Eaton says promptly. "No, I completely forget every single conversation we've had this year where you've been secretly revealing yourself to be a teenage girl and I've been laughing my ass off at you."

Darryl glares. "You can't see me right now, but I'm glaring at you," he informs Eaton.

"Ooh, I'm shaking with fear," Eaton says, laughing. "Anyways, what'd you want to tell me? You finally asked her to prom?"

"No," Darryl snaps. "So you know how I've been talking with you as if she's a girl?" He takes a breath. "Well, she's actually a guy."

There's a moment of silence at the other end, and then a clattering sound. Darryl strains trying to hear; the other man must've dropped the phone.

"Eaton? ... Bugsy?" Darryl frowns. "Ryan? Hey, can you hear me?" Nothing. "Are you okay over there?" he says, louder. And then, there's a distant sound like a hyena.

A hysterical hyena. A hysterical hyena on helium.

Finally, just when Darryl's about to give up on Eaton actually talking to him again, he hears the sound of the phone getting picked up again.
"Oh. Em. Eff. Gee." Eaton says, sounding breathless. "You sly dog, Colton, you've been hooking up with Kuznetsov this entire time, I - " he makes a strangled noise.

Darryl raises his eyebrows. "Really? OMFG? Did you turn into a teenage girl?" he says, skeptical.

"There are small children in the house," Eaton says primly. "My niece is visiting, I have to speak her language if I want to talk to her. But, Jesus, I've been such a flipping idiot," he says. "Although - wow, you've definitely been a bigger idiot than me."

Darryl swallows hard. "I know," he says, his throat tight. "But, um, you don't - you don't have any problem with the fact that I like guys, though?"

"Uhhh, yeah, whatever, I'm still stuck on the fact that you like AJ," Eaton says. "Christ, you gave me about a billion clues, I seriously can't believe I didn't get it, that's completely pathetic, I - " he sucks in a breath, cutting himself off. "Okay, okay, if you let me I'm just going to keep rambling - "

"I thought you said you'd be coherent this ti - " Darryl starts.

"Oh, shut it," Eaton says good-naturedly. "Right, so I'm assuming that there's a reason you decided to tell me now? Are you - " he hesitates, his voice becoming more serious. "Um, do you need any advice or support or anything? I mean, of course I'll support whatever you want to do, but is there anything specific I can do to help?"

Darryl has to sit down, the insides of his chest twisting in painful gratitude. "I… Ryan, thank you," he says after a moment. "There isn't really anything in, um, in particular, I - " he bites his lip. "I've already told my family, and I am - I am planning on going public with this," he says carefully. "But I thought I owed it to you to tell you first, after listening to me whine this entire year."

"Darryl, you don't owe me or anybody else a damn thing," Eaton says firmly. "But if you really think this is the best decision for you, you know I'll back you 100%, right?" He pauses. "Oh my god, you're going to tell Vince next, aren't you?" he says, suddenly sounding delighted. "Wait, I take it back, you totally owe me pictures of his expression when you tell him, it'll - "

Darryl glares at the air in front of him again. "Yeah, no."

***

The expression on Vince's face after Darryl tells him the entire story isn't so much funny as it is unnerving; the other man looks like he's carved out of stone.

Darryl coughs nervously, eyeing the screen. He would've thought that doing this over Skype would be easier than talking to Vince in person, but at least if he were there in person, he'd be able to tell whether Vince was still breathing. Or maybe the video feed froze, Darryl thinks hopefully; maybe that blank stare Vince's directing at him isn't due to him having an aneurysm from shock.

"Uh... Vince?" Darryl finally ventures, tentative. "Did you, um, hear what I said?"

After a moment, the other man blinks, visibly snapping back.

"Yes," he says. "Yes, I heard every word. Darryl, I - you - " he stops, words apparently failing him. "Actually, some things are becoming much clearer," he says slowly. "When you said you might be causing a huge controversy, you meant..." he pauses briefly, his expression changing again. "So really, when you said it was going to be worse than what Kuznetsov is going through with the Bears - "
"I didn't - " Darryl swallows. "What I meant is that even though it is the same thing, it's *still* going to be a bigger story in the media, what with - the delay, and how it's going to add to Alex's story, and - all of that," he says quietly.

Vince opens his mouth, then closes it slowly, wincing. "Oh," he says, blowing out a breath. "I see." He's silent for another moment, then his gaze sharpens. "So you intend to come out publicly?"

Darryl bites his lip, nods. "Yeah, I do," he says. "I..." he glances down, trying to figure out what to say. "I know that this probably makes me sound stupid, but I didn't really figure out that I was gay until this year," he says, looking squarely back at Vince. "But now that I do have it figured out, I think - I know it's the right thing to do," he says. "And so, so I am going to go public, even though it is going to cause all sorts of trouble for the team, I'm sor -"

Vince's waving him off before Darryl can even get the words out. "Oh, please, don't insult me by saying that," he says dismissively. "It's good to see that you've got more faith in me and the team than Kuznetsov had in Calhoun and the Bears," he says with a glimmer of humor. "But just to make it crystal clear, in case you were at all worried," he says, his voice deliberate. "We - me, Prescott, the entire Hawks organization - we are all going to support you one hundred percent, however you want to handle this," he says, leaning forward. "You are still the heart of this franchise, and more importantly I still do and will always consider it a great privilege to call myself your friend. Are we clear?"

Darryl has to look away for a moment, clenching his jaw against the lump in his throat. When he's sure that he's not going to embarrass himself, he looks back up. "Thank you," he says roughly. "I - I was pretty sure, but it's still good to hear it."

Vince nods briskly. "Okay. Obviously you'll have to talk to Paul and the PR team soon, although - well, actually, you should talk to Prescott and the rest of the team first, probably."

Darryl nods, taking a breath. "I know, I've been thinking about it. I'm going to try to get everybody on one conference call, just get it over with," he says. He hesitates. "You aren't - you haven't asked me about Alex - about Kuznetsov at all."

"Nope, and I don't intend to," Vince says promptly. "That's your personal life, how you handle it is your own business. Besides, I would bet good money that Brynn has some very strong words for you on that particular subject," he says, grinning.

Darryl makes a strangled noise. "Don't remind me, my mom's managed to stop her from bothering me so far, but I don't know how long it's going to last," he says, morose. "But you're not - you're not going to, um, tell me it's not a good idea to get involved with him or, or anything like that?" he says, cautious.

Vince snorts. "What, do I look like a therapist or something?" he says. "I'm not going anywhere near that, you need to figure it out for yourself. Since, you know, you've been doing such a bang-up job of it so far," he says, a slight smirk playing around his mouth.

"Yeah, I'm really feeling the friendship here, thanks Vince," Darryl says, scowling.

"Well, I will say a couple things," Vince continues, imperturbable. "Have you talked to Kuznetsov yet?"

Darryl looks down. "No, not yet."

"Hm." Vince raises an eyebrow. "I wouldn't mention your relationship with him to Dan or the rest
of the team until you've talked to him first, I don't think - "

"Yeah, I know," Darryl says, wincing involuntarily. "I was just going to tell them about - about being gay, I know I need to, um, clear things up with Alex before, uh, going public with that, if he even - um, wants to," he fumbles.

Vince's gaze softens. "The other thing I wanted to say to you, Darryl, is that I know you're always going to do what's right. That's the kind of person you are," he says. "But you should also remember to do what will make you happy. If that means being boyfriends with Alex Kuznetsov - " he makes an odd face, not of disgust but more as if he can't believe what he's saying - "then that means being boyfriends with Alex Kuznetsov, screw what everybody else thinks, and that includes me." His mouth twists, like he's trying not to laugh. "Although now that I'm picturing it, I think the two of you would make a - very interesting couple. All that unresolved tension between you guys before - "

"Oh my god, can we not talk about this anymore?" Darryl says, twitching.

"Yeah, okay," Vince says, and now he's openly laughing at Darryl. "I'm done giving advice, and I think you're done with listening to it. Now go fix everything you fucked up."

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Darryl debates talking to Prescott separately before talking the rest of the team, but it's probably easier just to talk to as many people at once. Besides, considering how Prescott reacted to Alex coming out, Darryl's pretty sure that his coach is going to be in his corner for this one.

Even arranging for everybody to get on the same call takes a lot of e-mailing and texting and calling, but in the end Darryl gets almost the entire team on the same line on Sunday afternoon.

"Okay, Darryl," Davies says, sounding curious. "What's so important that you couldn't wait to tell us in August?"

Darryl takes a deep breath; well, here goes everything.

"Uh, yeah, I did feel that what I wanted to say to you couldn't wait," he says; he can feel his palms starting to sweat. "It's something that I should've probably told you guys before, but - but I didn't really have it all figured out until now, so - " he clears his throat. "I'm gay."

There's a moment of complete silence. Then -

"Wait, what?" Janssen sounds flummoxed. "You - Darryl, are you - you're not joking with us, are you?"

Somebody makes a sharp, cautionary sound. "Janssen, I don't think that's an entirely appropriate question," Prescott says, an edge to his voice.

"No, it's okay, Coach," Darryl says quickly. "I know it's, um, surprising, and I want everybody to feel comfortable asking me any questions they want, I'll do my best to answer." He swallows. "Jordan, I'm not joking. Some - some stuff happened this past season that made me learn more about who I am," he says slowly. "I don't - I haven't been intentionally hiding this part of me from you guys for years or anything, I promise, I - " he clears his throat. "It's just that I didn't really even know this about myself until recently, but now that I do, I feel like I need to be honest about it."

"Honest with - just us? With fans? With everybody?" Fleury asks. "You know if you tell everybody, it's gonna be completely crazy, right?"
"Yeah, I know," Darryl says quietly. "I've already talked to Vince about it, I'll be talking to Paul and the rest of the PR staff about how, um, we're going to handle it."

It's quiet for a little while. Darryl bites his lip, trying to imagine how everybody is taking the news; it's hard, not being able to look each of them in the face and see what they think.

"Actually, this explains so much," Crawford says suddenly.

Darryl blinks. "Um, really?"

"Yeah," Crawford says. "Like, why you can be so bitchy sometimes!"

There's a stunned silence for a few seconds.

"Okay, now that was inappropriate," Janssen says. "Seriously, how can you be this stupid and still be alive? I don't get it!" His voice abruptly changes to concerned. "Darryl, are you all right? You sound like you're choking," he says.

Darryl isn't choking, he's laughing so hard that his stomach hurts.

"Oh, wow," he gasps out. "That - that's amazing, Max. Never change, okay?" He wipes his eyes.

After that, the tension is broken. A few of his teammates do end up asking Darryl some questions - when did he know he was gay, was there anything that they could do to help, whether this has anything to do with Kuznetsov coming out - that last question Darryl dodges a bit, but he tries to be as truthful as possible. Eventually, though, the conversation turns into all of them catching up with each other, talking about their summer vacations. After a while, Prescott and a few other players drop off the call, and Darryl ends up chatting with everybody who stays on the line. The conversation goes on long enough that Brynn ends up poking her head in to tell him to come down to dinner.

"Hey, you ready to eat?" Brynn says, peering in.

"Oh, right," Darryl says, glancing at his watch. "Yeah, I'll be down in a minute."

Brynn ends up lingering outside the door until Darryl finally gets off the call, bouncing back into the room as soon as he hangs up. She looks at him, then looks pointedly at his cell phone on his desk, then back at him.

"What?" Darryl demands. "I thought we were going to eat dinner."

Brynn crosses her arms. "Sure," she says. "But you've talked to just about everybody in the world except the one person you really need to talk to. Why haven't you called Alex yet?"

Darryl winces. "Um - how do you know I haven't already?" he tries stalling.

Brynn throws up her hands in exasperation. "Look, I'll step out as soon as he picks up, I don't care, but you need to talk to him!"

"I - " But she's right, and Darryl knows it, so under her withering glare he takes a deep breath and dials.
Darryl has seen enough of Vegas over the past few years that the city itself no longer holds even the slightest thrill for him, the glitter and glitz more annoying than anything else. No, the twisting and turning sensation in the pit of his stomach has nothing to do with where he is, but rather who he's going to see.

"Can I help you?" The concierge at the front desk of the Palms smiles at him.

"Um, I was wondering - do you think you could call Alex Kuznetsov's room and, and let him know that Darryl would like to talk to him?" he says. His stomach has started springing into somersaults.

"Of course, just a moment." She picks up the phone and dials, then listens for a few moments before putting a hand over the mouthpiece. "I'm afraid that Mr. Kuznetsov isn't answering. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Yeah, I - could you just tell him that Darryl would like to talk to him as soon as possible, and that I'm staying at Room 832?" he says, biting his lip. "I guess there's no way you could give me his room number, is there?" he asks resignedly.

The woman hesitates. "No, but…" she leans forward conspiratorially. "You're Darryl Colton, aren't you?"

Oh god, not one of those fans. Darryl pastes on a smile and prepares to edge away. "Yeah, that's me."

"Well, I'll just say that even if you were to somehow to get his room number, it wouldn't do you any good," she says. "I heard from one of my coworkers that the entire Bears team left on a trip to the Grand Canyon as soon as they checked in, to get away from all the media bothering them. I don't think they're coming back until right before the Awards Ceremony." She smiles sympathetically at him. "I'm sorry, I don't think that they even have any cell phone signal out there."

"Oh," Darryl says after a moment. "Um, thanks for telling me," he says, before turning away.

Well, wonderful. He blows out a breath as he heads back up to his room. Brynn looks up from her magazine as Darryl lets himself into the suite that he and his family are staying in.

"Well? Did you find him?" she says, putting the magazine down and getting up.
"No, apparently he's gone out to the Grand Canyon with the rest of the Bears," Darryl says glumly. Brynn glares at him. "What? I can't help where he goes!" he says defensively.

"Yeah, well - all I'm saying is that you'd better find a way to talk to him before we leave Las Vegas, or else - " Brynn starts.

Darryl grinds the palm of his hand into his left eyelid. "Look, Brynn, I swear I will, but I really think you're getting overly invested in all this," he says. "And I don't need you to make me feel worse about - about it than I already do," he says, his voice hitching momentarily.

Brynn's expression softens, and she comes forward to put an arm around Darryl's waist. "Hey," she says, her voice muffled against his shirt. "I just want you to be happy, okay?"

Darryl rubs her shoulder a little, swallowing. "I know," he says, "but talking to him isn't necessarily going to make me happier, you know."

Brynn shakes her head. "I think you're underestimating Alex again," she says. "But as long as you talk to him and clear things up for good, I'll stop bugging you." She lets go of him. "All right, so, what do you want to do now? Can we go play craps?" she says, brightening.

Darryl lets out a groan. "But - " he protests, except it's already too late because Brynn's already dragging him out the door.

***

The league usually asks players who've been nominated for awards to do some promo work in the days before the awards ceremony, so Darryl does get to escape shopping with Brynn after a couple hours. But he can't help but notice that Alex is very conspicuously absent; the other nominees notice it as well.

"Hey, why isn't Kuznetsov here? Why isn't he stuck doing this too?" Halvorsen says in the middle of a shoot.

The director snorts. "What, you want to give him even more publicity? Seriously, this is your guys' turn to get back into the spotlight too. Now turn a little more that way - " he comes over to push Keith around to his liking.

There's really nothing for it; Darryl tries asking around a bit to see if there's any way he can contact Alex, but no luck. Apparently he and his teammates have literally disappeared into the desert, which is understandable given how much the media keeps harping on Alex even in his absence. Alex is here as a Hart nominee, so there's at least some justification for their clamoring, but it's still seriously irritating.

And so what with one thing and another, Darryl finds himself getting dressed in his tux about an hour before the ceremony, still without having glimpsed neither hide nor hair of the one person he really came here to see.

"Okay," Brynn says, as his mom fusses with the knot of Darryl's tie. "Alex is contractually
"obligated to be there tonight, so you have to talk to him, got it?"

"Yes, Brynn, I get it," Darryl says, his stomach already feeling queasy.

Brynn squints at him. "Do you? Because I swear, if I have to get up on national television and haul you over there, I will - "

"Oh god," Darryl moans, nightmares already starting to bloom in his mind. "Mom, can I lock her in the bathroom until it's over? Please? Seriously, this much embarrassment is hazardous to my health!"

Brynn sniffs, unimpressed. "All I'm saying is that you need to stop being a coward, you have to step up and fix this," she says. "If that takes doing something crazy, well - " she hops down from her perch on top of the sofa. "Then do something crazy!"

Fortunately for both Darryl's sanity and her own health, Brynn shuts up about it once they're out the door. The red carpet is stressful enough without her nagging him as well. Darryl smiles mechanically at the crowd, waves and signs autographs without really seeing any of the details of what's in front of him; that's partly due to the fact that there are about ten billion cameras going off in his face, and also partly because he keeps looking out of the corner of his eye for any sign of Alex. The red carpet isn't that long, this shouldn't be that difficult - but there are so many people milling around that Darryl doesn't have any luck.

Not until, that is, the ceremony is about to start and there's a general rush towards the doors of the auditorium. Darryl catches a glimpse of Alex's profile ahead of him, and that's enough to set his pulse pounding in his ears, every nerve tingling. But there's no time to get to him, both of them get swept along by the crowd and before Darryl knows it he's being directed gently but firmly to his seat by an impeccably suited usher.

He doesn't manage to see where Alex is sitting, although he knows it must be fairly near his own seat, they always have the nominees sit the first few rows. But no matter how he cranes his neck - as discreetly as he can, although people are still shooting him funny looks - he can't see Alex at all. After a while he settles back in his seat, resigned; he tells himself that it's better this way, since the camera won't be able to catch him moping after the back of Alex's head... not that he would ever mope, of course. Not that he is moping.

No, because now he's too busy being twitchy and antsy; his mind has started running very tiny circles in his head, around around, wondering whether Alex can see him, whether Alex is looking at him at all, whether Alex can see him, whether Alex will want to talk to him, whether Alex can even stand being near him anymore.

Two hours of this. Seriously, he's going to go insane.

Darryl doesn't object to awards ceremonies in principle, although he knows that a lot of fans consider this one pretty much a waste of time. It's a nice excuse to have a party and get everybody dressed up, which isn't necessarily a bad idea in a sport where by the end of playoffs the champions end up looking like feral lumberjacks. And - well, okay, Darryl isn't going to lie and say that he hadn't gotten a thrill out of receiving the Hart a few years ago. But right now he's got more important things to worry about than trophies, he needs to -

Kepner's wife raises an eyebrow at him, not quite a dirty look but she looks very pointedly at Darryl's jiggling leg. Darryl swallows and stops, sending her a sheepish look back. Okay, what he needs to do is not drive the people next to him crazy.
So Darryl endures, sitting as quietly as he can for as long as he can, although during the commercial breaks he can't help but try to sneak looks back at Alex. But there's too many people in the way, he can't see Alex at all.

Vezina, Norris, Lady Byng, on and on. Jesus, why the hell are there so many awards, anyways? But Darryl can't honestly say that he doesn't care about them at all, because here comes Brynn Swift to announce the Lindsay Award, and Darryl's stomach starts jumping up and down as she comes to the podium.

"The Ted Lindsay Award is given to the year's most outstanding player in the National Hockey League, as voted on by the players themselves," she says. "The nominees for this honor have each exhibited - "

Darryl can barely stop himself from throwing his hands up in exasperation at all the small talk. Yes, okay, get a move on.

"And the nominees this year are..." she finally trails off, turning to the life-size screen on stage. Darryl fidgets all through Belyakov's highlight reel, then Halvorsen's highlight reel, then his own. Alex hadn't been nominated, which, well. Darryl doesn't want to think about what that says.

"The winner of the 2011 Lindsay Award is..." Swift stands by while Esposito opens the envelope.

"Andrei Belyakov," he says, applause breaking out. Darryl looks down for a moment, then back up. He starts clapping, but then his hands still when the screen on stage switches to show Belyakov still standing in the aisle, still shaking hands with wellwishers - except the wellwisher who has Belyakov by the shoulder is Alex, Darryl realizes with a start. Alex is leaning over to speak into Belyakov's ear, his face half-hidden from the camera, but when he releases Belyakov after a few moments his expression is one of genuine happiness. Maybe - maybe because Alex is glad that Belyakov won it, and not - Darryl pushes that half-formed thought aside and starts clapping harder than ever.

Belyakov finally makes his way onto the stage, accepting the trophy from Swift with a curt nod. His expression is surprisingly serious, almost severe. He's silent for a moment, even though the auditorium has already gone quiet.

"I wish I can feel better about winning this," he finally says, looking up again. "Is one of best trophies to win, I think, because it mean - it mean that you guys think that I'm good hockey player, and that - " he stops. "Some other year, that make me really happy. But this year, I think you guys make mistake."

He pauses, looking out at the audience, but then he sees something - or somebody - in particular that makes his face split into a grin, half-wry, half-sheepish. "Except the guy I think is right guy to win look like he gonna kill me if I say anything else, um, so," he ducks his head, clearing his throat. "I want to say thank you to my family, to..."

Belyakov goes on to give a fairly standard thank-you speech, but the damage is already done. The moment he leaves the podium, the audience starts murmuring excitedly, some voices raised in anger.

"Well, that was in poor taste," a voice says in a tone of disgust.

"I know, right?" somebody else replies. "It's bad enough that Kuznetsov flaunts it in front of everybody, we shouldn't have to put up with his friends scolding all of us."
"Yeah," the other replies. "You don't think he's gonna win the Hart, is he? Jesus, he'd better not - he'd better just shut up and keep his head down, he should be damn grateful that people are putting up with him as it is."

Rage makes the world flood red, his vision going blurry momentarily. Darryl sucks in a breath, his hands balling into fists - just keeping still takes considerable effort. But the anger builds rather than subsiding, fury battering at the seams.

The next few minutes pass in haze; the next thing he knows, Tricia Helfer is up at the podium standing next to Bobby Orr, envelope in hand.

"And so it is my honor to announce the nominees for the most prestigious individual award in hockey, the Hart Memorial Trophy," Helfer says. "This year, the nominees are Daniel Halvorsen," she says, the highlight reel playing next to her.

"Darryl Colton," she says, and Darryl forces himself to look at the screen, tries to unclench his jaw.

"And Alex Kuznetsov," she finishes, and the audience starts muttering restlessly. if Darryl's stomach had been jumping up and down earlier, it's decided to move on to full-blown somersaults.

He'd better just shut up and keep his head down, he should be damn well grateful for all of us putting up with him as it is.

Darryl breathes out through his nose, nostrils flaring. He just has to get through this next bit, and then he can go find the bigoted idiot who said that and punch him in the nose. And then he can go find Alex. He just has to get through the next couple minutes.

"And the winner is..." Orr opens the envelope. "Darryl Colton," he says, looking up as applause breaks out.

Wait, wait, what? Darryl blinks a few times, struck dumb. It isn't until Kepner reaches over and jostles his arm that he snaps out of it. He gets out of his seat, picks his way past the row of legs until he gets to the aisle, and slowly walks up the steps onto the stage.

It's difficult to tell for sure, but it seems like the cheering is particularly raucous, louder than he remembers it in 2007. Are they - are they cheering because he won, or are they cheering because Alex lost? The thought slices at him like a blade, and anger rises up again in a rush.

The trophy is all heavy metal and cold weight in his hands; it feels like a weapon, and that's how Darryl intends to use it.

"I wish I could accept this award," he starts, his fingers clenching. "But -"

A clinking sound behind him; Darryl startles. But no, it's nothing more than Helfer dropping her bracelet, she's bending down to pick it up again. But it's enough to jolt Darryl back to reality.

He looks out at the audience in front of him. Their faces are shadowed, distant enough that they are all indistinct. These are the people he's going to have to face if he goes ahead with this. This is what he's going to have to live with.

Darryl looks down at the trophy. It gleams golden under the stage lights, the luster of it soft and shining.

But no. No. He needs to stop this. He has to be brave.
"I wish I could accept this award," he says again, slowly. "But I can't. Not when there is another nominee who is - who is so clearly more deserving. The Hart is meant to go to the player who's been the most valuable to his team during the year, but the truth is that what Alex Kuznetsov has done not just for his team, but for the sport of hockey is - genuinely historic. I - " Darryl puts the Hart down, his palms suddenly sweaty.

"We all knew, already, that he's capable of extraordinary things on the ice, but the courage that he's shown off it is - is what's really humbling." Now here goes everything. "And - I have to say it puts me to shame in particular, because - " Darryl swallows hard. "Because where he chose honesty, I chose cowardice. I chose to stay hidden."

The auditorium is as silent as a tomb. Darryl can't see the audience at all by now, his vision going blurry and distorted around the edges. He turns his face away for a moment, his jaw working. He's still sidestepping the issue. He needs to just say it.

Darryl looks up. "For those of you who voted for me because you believed that I deserved it for what I've done on the ice this year, I thank you, but I'm sorry to say that you voted for the wrong man. Alex has achieved more this year under worse conditions than any other player in the league, and that should be recognized." His voice hardens. "But for those of you who voted out of bigotry and hatred, out of prejudice and fear - you who voted for me because you couldn't stand the thought of somebody different getting up here and accepting this honor, well. To you, I am not sorry to say that you also picked the wrong man, because I'm gay."

And now a low buzz starts going around the room. Darryl picks up the trophy, takes a deep breath. "So as I said, I wish I could accept this award, but I can't. This award should go to Aleksey Kuznetsov, and I intend to give it to him."

The noise in the room starts picking up in volume and intensity as Darryl comes off stage; he's distantly aware that people are gawking at him from all angles, but right now he has to focus all his attention on putting one foot in front of the other. The aisle feels like it's rolling beneath him.

Finally, Darryl reaches the row where Alex is sitting. As luck would have it, he's sitting in the end seat, which means that there's nothing between Alex and him and his impending heart attack.

"Um, I - " his mind goes temporarily blank. Then he remembers the trophy in his hands, and thrusts it towards Alex. "You - uh, you should have this," he says, stuttering. He was wrong to think of it as a weapon; what he's really offering here is an apology, an atonement, his own beating bloody broken -

"Would you - could you just take it," he says, his voice cracking desperately, and Darryl finally forces himself to look directly at Alex.

Alex is just sitting there, looking up at him, mouth slightly open in shock. His eyes are impossibly wide - vivid with intense, unreadable emotion. Darryl feels his heart pounding like a kick drum inside his chest. His hands, he notices, have started to tremble.

"Please?" he rasps, his voice like sandpaper.

After an eternity, Alex finally brings his hands up, covering Darryl's grasp of the Hart. The touch of his skin against Darryl's is like an electric shock, sending a violent shudder through Darryl's body.

"Darryl," Alex says, his voice low. "You not have to do this. You can go back to stage, say is just
joke, ha ha, everybody laugh, nobody take serious, okay? And then you can be good guy again without pretend to - without pretending. Is not... this not necessary, Darryl."

Darryl feels like he's been cut off at the knees. He's too late, he's missed his chance, he left his apologies and explanations too long and now he's left with nothing.

"Is that what you want me to do?" he forces out.

Alex flinches, his expression cracking.

And then Darryl knows. He *knows*.

He pulls his right hand free and puts it on the back of Alex's seat, leans over and says in his ear, "Alex, unless you tell me no, I'm going to kiss you in front of everybody right now." His heart is soaring out of his chest.

Darryl feels rather than sees the smile slowly spread across Alex's face, that same old gap-toothed mischievous grin.

"Yeah? Bring it, Colton."

Darryl lets go of the trophy, grabs Alex by his jacket and hauls him to his feet.

It's not a great kiss. It's not even really a kiss, their lips mash together for a couple seconds before Alex starts laughing; Darryl can't even yell at him because he's smiling too hard, wide enough that his cheeks are starting to hurt.

An ear-splitting wolf-whistle pierces his giddy daze. Darryl looks round and abruptly realizes that the entire auditorium has erupted into complete pandemonium. Every member of the audience is on their feet, there are people shoving each other to see, other people yelling god-knows-what, the whole place is in a full-blown uproar.

"Dude, AJ, get a room!" Somebody hollers. Darryl tenses momentarily, but Alex's grin turns even more wolfish.

"Good idea Grayson, see you later!" he yells back, grabbing hold of Darryl's hand and pulling him headlong through the fray. But he skids to halt after a couple steps, turning sharply to thrust the trophy still in his other hand at an astonished Daniel Halvorsen. "Here, you can have this year," he says. "Now you tie with your brother!" Then he proceeds to haul Darryl through the mob and out of the hall.

They almost trip a couple of times in their hurry to get away and get to the elevators, although his sense of balance is still unsteady anyways. An elevator opens the moment Alex stabs the button, but once they tumble into it Darryl finds that he can hardly breathe for looking at Alex.

"Alex - " but then Darryl comes to a sudden stop by Alex leans away, his blood freezing at the gesture.

"No, no, is not - " Alex says hastily, tightening his grip on Darryl's hand. "Is just - if we start here, I'm not gonna stop, and - " he coughs, reddening. "And I'm really, really sick of camera," he says, jerking his head towards the ceiling of the elevator.

Oh. Well - okay, that's understandable. Darryl swallows and tries to get himself under control, although it's almost impossible when Alex is looking at him like that, his eyes very blue and very dark.
As soon as the elevator doors ping open, they're off racing down the hallway. Alex fumbles with the card key for a moment, and then the door bangs open and Darryl finds himself pinned against the wall, Alex tearing wildly at his clothes.

"Alex, Alex - " Darryl says breathlessly, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I love you, I never meant for - "

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Alex says impatiently, yanking Darryl's jacket off. "Why you still have clothes on? I not have sex for months!" And then Alex is tumbling him onto the bed, pinning Darryl's hands above his head and straddling his hips.

"Oh I see, you just want to get laid." Darryl gasps out, bucking his hips up against Alex.

Alex lets out a pained groan, grinding down. "Duh," he says, a predatory gleam in his eye. "Now shut up," he says, bending down to capture Darryl's mouth.

Neither of them last long; they're both too keyed up, too frantic, too desperate. The heat, the friction overwhelm Darryl with pleasure, but the physical sensations pale next the staggering relief and giddiness that this is really happening, that everything he thought that he'd lost for good is now here, is now his -

Darryl comes with a shout, shuddering so hard he feels like he's going to shake apart. Alex follows a moment after, spilling hot and wet all across Darryl's stomach before collapsing on top of him.

Darryl tries to catch his breath, his pulse gradually slowing. But trying to breathe is probably a losing proposition with Alex sprawled all over him, and so he starts trying to nudge Alex off.

"Come on, get off, I can't breathe," he says as sharply as he can manage, which is to say not at all. He can feel himself grinning like an idiot, unable to stop the absurd smile on his face.

Alex makes a grumbling noise at the back of his throat, but he shifts down a little so he can nuzzle his face against Darryl's collarbone. Darryl drops a hand on the back of Alex's neck, uses a finger to trace around the bony bump at the base of his neck. After a moment, Alex lifts up his head to splay his hands flat on Darryl's chest, propping his chin on the back of his fingers.

"Hey," he says quietly, his eyes intent. "Darryl, I love you too."

Darryl's breath catches in his throat; then he sucks in a huge breath, air whooshing into his lungs. His chest feels like it's ten sizes too small, his heart suddenly overflowing.

"Alex, I - " he stops, looking up at the ceiling. He blinks furiously against the stinging in his eyes, but to no avail. Alex moves off of Darryl's chest, although he leaves a hand resting on Darryl's breastbone, an anchor amid the wild flood of emotion.

"Darryl," Alex says, his brow puckering. "Darryl, is okay, everything is okay."

Darryl takes a couple more shuddering breaths, trying to get himself under control.

"No, I know," he says. "It's just - " Darryl closes his eyes for a moment, then looks Alex in the eye. "I honestly thought," he says, his voice hoarse, "that I would never hear you say that."

Alex's expression eases into one of understanding; then he ducks his head a little.

"Well, if you ask me any time after - um, after end of February, I tell you," he says, biting his lip. Darryl blinks at him a couple times, his mind flying back. "But - " The image of Alex standing in
the gym, looking at Darryl as if he's done something extraordinary, something astonishing. "You -
" Alex acting skittish, almost shy for days afterward. "I - " Alex brushing a kiss over Darryl's
shoulder, Alex asking him to take care, Alex protecting and defending Darryl for months on end,
without expectation of any gratitude or affection in return.

Darryl lets his head thunk back on the bed. "Wow," he says. "I'm an idiot."

Alex hums agreeably. "Is okay, at least you're pretty," he says, then ducks the swat Darryl aims at
his head. "Um, so - " his expression turns serious. "So when did you, um, when did you know how
you feel about me?" he asks, hesitant.

Darryl threads his fingers through Alex's hair. "When did I fall in love with you, or when did I
know that I'd fallen in love with you?" The corner of his mouth quirks up. "I don't - I don't really
know how or when it happened, but I realized it when you came and pranked me in Pittsburgh,
when I was sick."

Alex stills, then rears back.

"You realize in December? What - why you not tell me?" he demands, stricken. "Why you let me
be asshole like that to you?"

Darryl looks back at Alex, his chest aching and tender. "Why did you?" he asks, quiet. "Why did
you let me hurt you even worse in February, and never say a thing?"

"But - I - " Alex flails. "But - you - is not - "

Darryl lets Alex sputter on; after a while he finally settles down, looking grumpy.

"Okay, fine," he says. "I guess is good thing that we're both pretty." A beat, and then Alex raises an
eyebrow. "Wow, you must be really sorry if you not gonna jump on that," he says.

"I am," Darryl says in a rush, his heart clenching all over again. "Alex, I am sorry, I'm sorry I
didn't tell you earlier, that I didn't say anything until tonight, I - and you should've won the Hart, I
meant everything I said up there, I'm sorry that - "

"Hey, hey, why sorry?" Alex demands, rolling over to straddle Darryl again. "I'm not sorry about
where we end up, we have happy ending so who care how we get here?" he says, framing Darryl's
face with his hands. "And I win the prize I want most in the world, anyway," he says, bending
down for another kiss.

Epilogue
The next morning:

"Hey, wait a minute, when you said you won the prize you wanted most, you didn't mean the Cup,
did you?" Darryl demands suspiciously, poking at Alex.

Alex snuffles protestingly among the pillows for a moment, then turns his head and opens an eye.

"Uh, maaaaaybe?" he says, then yelps in laughter as Darryl pounces on him.

End Notes
Thank you to opheliarising here on AO3, who wrote my Yuletide 2009 gift-fic that helped plant the seed that eventually grew into this monster story.

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P.S. AND FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO WERE WONDERING, YES THE TITLE IS A PUN. NO I AM NOT ASHAMED. \o/

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!