The Future Just Happened

by pr_scatterbrain

Summary

Alex is meant to be a Capital. Things change though.

The au where Alex is drafted by the Penguins and falls for his best friends.

Notes

This would not have been possible without the help and support of Rae (masterpenguin82) and Lexi (pikasafire). They basically are the reason I finished this. Lexi was the best cheerleader, and Rae volunteered to beta this back before I even started writing it. She generously gave her time to wrangle it into shape, and I cannot thank her enough for her help, especially over the last few days. Thank you so much for patiently letting me ramble and bounce ideas off you, for putting up with my awful spelling and grammar and for catching all my mistakes. I owe you one. *hugs and hearts*

I would also like to thank pineapplechild/madecunningly who made a really gorgeous cover art to accompany this. Thank you so much for making such a wonderful art. It really sets the scene for the story.

Warning: scenes featuring voyeurism with implied consent.

See the end of the work for more notes.
the future just happened

by pr_scatterbrain

[2004]
Not that it matters, but Alex isn’t meant to be a Penguin. He’s meant to be a Capital. This is what
Alex knows. This is what he is told. Things change though.

"Change?"

"The Penguins want you," his mother says.

Alex is confused. Didn’t the Capitals have the first draft pick? They said they want him. It doesn’t
matter if any other teams want him. Things are settled.

But things aren’t settled.

Alex should have known better than to think they were. Nothing is settled until it is settled. The
Capitals won the lottery, but then they had internal issues and roster problems and at the very last
minute before the draft there are behind the scenes talks and trades and it’s a fine balance.
Apparently. Or at least that’s what his mother tells him. She deals with the team. She deals with
everything and makes it work. She always has.

Alex doesn’t particularly care which team he ends up with. He grins when the Penguins announce
him as the first draft pick. Their first draft pick in the 2004 NHL draft.

So Alex is a Pen. Okay. Cool. Alex can work with that.

And that is that.

Then there is a lockout and Alex isn’t a Penguin, at least not for a while yet.

[2004-2005]

Back home, he plays with Dynamo Moscow. When Metallurg Magnitogorsk fly out to play against
them, Alex takes Zhenya out for drinks after the game (and a Dynamo win) and then tries to take him
home.

“No, no,” Zhenya says, shaking his head. He’s smiling though, which makes Alex smile too.

“Next time?” Alex asks, because why not?

Zhenya laughs. “Next time we might be in America.”

“Still opposing teams,” Alex comments. Because where he will be a Penguin, Zhenya is to be a
Capital.
“Friends, though.”

And yes, still friends. Always friends. That is Zhenya. Kind heart. Stupid heart, really. But kind. It is a comfort really to know that will not change.

Laying his head on Zhenya’s shoulder, Alex pretends to be drunker than he is. Around him, their teammates are drinking and shouting to be heard over the music. There are girls and guys and through the thin cotton of Zhenya’s shirt, Alex can feel the heat of Zhenya’s body against his cheek. Zhenya smells of sweat and too much cologne. Such a boy really. Being around Zhenya makes Alex feel old. Or older. Not that that matters. Not really.

The season is going well. Only a few weeks into it and Dynamo has started strong. Metallurg Magnitogorsk too. It’s too early to really tell, but Alex feels good. This year will be a good year. It isn’t their NHL rookie year, but it will be a good year nonetheless. He knows it and when Zhenya pushes Alex away, Alex lets him.

Grinning, Alex steals the last sip of Zhenya’s drink. “To the victor.”

“Not for long.”

“We’ll see.”

And they will, Alex knows. Zhenya makes a face though, clearly thinking about the overtime loss his team suffered. He does not like to lose, never has. When they were children, he used to go red with rage. A few times it looked like his fist shook so much that Alex was certain Zhenya would hit someone. He is better now than he was, but against Alex’s side, he feels as Zhenya’s body tenses and when he dislodges Alex from his shoulder, Alex grins and laughs and it isn’t a joke (things like that are never jokes), but Alex knows how to make it seem like one.

When Zhenya doesn’t laugh, Alex pushes himself to his feet. “Dance?”

Zhenya shakes his head.

Alex rolls his eyes and heads off to find someone else who will come home with him.

It comes as no surprise when the two of them are selected for the World Junior Championships. They are the best. It is good to wear the colours of their country, to represent them at international level. Great, even. On the flight to North America, Alex sits next to Zhenya and talks at him until Zhenya rolls his eyes and leans across Alex to speak to Dmitry Pestunov. Pestunov rolls his eyes too.

Pestunov doesn’t really have time for either of them. Probably best. Alex can hardly stay still. He bites at his lip but he can’t stop himself from annoying Zhenya.

“We are going to Canada,” Alex tells him.

Zhenya nods. “I know.”

Alex twitches and twists in his seat. He can’t wait. He really, really can’t.

Zhenya shakes his head. “You are going to keep the entire team awake.”

Alex probably is. He doesn’t care too much.
He can’t wait.

They lose their first game against the American team. 4-5.

Two days later they win 4-1 against the Czech Republic. Then they keep winning until they lose.

Canada gets gold.

Alex doesn’t remember losing. Later, all he remembers is Zhenya holding him up. Holding him close.

In their hotel room, with his injured shoulder aching despite the copious amount of medication the team doctor had given him, Alex presses his face into the crook of Zhenya’s neck and Alex knows how he can be too much, take too much. He’s always been selfish. The youngest child; always (over) indulged. But when he kisses Zhenya, Zhenya moans and it’s like Alex can breathe again.

There is a reason people don’t talk about international games.

[2005-2006]

In 2005, there is talk. There is a lot of talk.

“More than there was about me?” Alex asks his mother.

She ignores him.

Probably wise.

(To be fair, people have been talking for a long time and it’s all about one person: Sidney Crosby. Alex has just never really bothered to listen).

The Penguins get Crosby.
No one expects it – least of all the Penguins. But they do. They win the lottery. They get Crosby.

“Two for two,” Alex says, when they first meet.

Or he gets his translator to say it. He hopes it translates. He isn’t sure if it does. Crosby wrinkles his nose and looks to Mario, as in Mario Lemieux, as in they are having dinner at Mario Lemieux’s house with his family and they will be playing in his team, for him and with him. Alex grins, because really. How could anything be better?

He gets his translator to say that too, and it makes Mario laugh and slap him on the back.

The translator appears to be a nice guy. But in all honestly, Alex isn’t sure he needs a translator as much as everyone seems to think. His English isn’t fluent, but it’s more or less passable. Sure there are things he misses, but he usually understands the main points. If he doesn’t, he can always smile. That usually works. He thinks later he will tell someone that. Now though, it feels important to say things right, to not be accidentally misunderstood.

Sergei Gonchar seems to pick up on that first. They played against each other during the lockout. Then, Sergei wore Metallurg Magnitogorsk’s colours and scored them goals. Zhenya liked him. Zhenya likes almost everyone though. Now Sergei and Alex are to be teammates and right now, Sergei – Gonch – eyes Alex as Alex helps himself to a second glass of champagne.

“You’re going to give yourself indigestion,” he tells Alex after Alex takes his first gulp. “Or hiccups.”

Alex grins at him.

Gonch rolls his eyes.

According to the Pen’s, Alex is going to stay with Gonch and his family until he gets his feet. Alex is pretty sure he’s already found them. He’s always been the type to hit the ground running. He doesn’t really think entering the NHL is going to be any different. Certainly it is a different league, but he is the same.

Over dinner, Alex sits next to Mario at the head of the table. They talk about the Stanley Cup Mario won in ‘91 and ‘92, and how Alex plans to win one. Or a few, just like Mario. They talk too, about other things, but Alex makes sure Mario knows the end game.

On the other side of the table, Crosby’s nose wrinkles a little.

Alex played against Crosby growing up. There were tournaments and international meet ups, but even if there wasn’t, Crosby is good enough that everybody knows about him.

Everyone knows about Alex too.

“You and me,” Alex nods, gesturing at the two of them with a forkful of spinach. “We’re golden.”

It takes the translator a moment to translate, but then the strangest thing happens. Crosby nods. “I know.”

And okay. Alex sits back in his seat and grins.

“We’re going to win the Stanley Cup,” Crosby agrees.

His eyes are wide and dark and Alex doesn’t need his translator, not really, not when he understands
the words ‘Stanley Cup’ and knows the look in Crosby’s eyes.

Alex nods. Yes. They will. They’re going to win everything.

Because Alex can and because he likes to start things on the right foot, he hugs Crosby hello at their first day of training camp. Crosby freezes.

Alex grins against Crosby’s neck and holds on tight just because he can.

This is going to be good. He can tell already.

In the locker room, away from the ice, it quickly becomes apparent that Sidney is hilarious. All startled expressions and confusion and his hands stuffed in his pockets and Alex thinks okay, fantastic, they will be good friends. He can tell. Because Gonch is there, Alex gets Sergei to tell Sidney that.

Gonch gives Alex a look but he does. Or he says something that makes Sidney blush.

But on the ice, Crosby is taller and more imposing than Alex remembered from when they had dinner with Mario and his family to celebrate Alex’s arrives in Pittsburgh. It’s more than the added height of the skates or the bulk of his padding. Standing in the middle of the line up with their new teammates, Alex watches Crosby skate. Fast and clever, he moves like he isn’t touching the ice.

Towards the end of practice, their coach, Ed Olczyk, puts them together when he breaks the team up for scrimmages. Crosby isn’t like any of the centres Alex’s has ever played with – smaller and sharper. Alex highly doubts Crosby has played with any one like him either. But they’re both good. This is what Alex knows already. They’re good together. That becomes quickly apparent to everyone else who sees them.

Alex tells Gonch. Gonch eyes him a little.

“You try your luck,” Gonch says.

Alex grins. He tries everything. That’s the point.

Gonch rolls his eyes and flicks a spare puck in Alex’s general direction. “Rookies clean up.”

“I haven’t been a rookie since I was sixteen.”

“I can tell,” Gonch nods. “So lazy.”

“Lazy?” Alex repeats, making a face.

Gonch nods.

Alex is not lazy. He is a Superleague Champion. He tells Gonch that.

Gonch smiles. “Prove it.”

And – okay, maybe Alex only realises what Gonch did after Alex had collected the first dozen pucks, but then he notices Crosby collecting pucks on the other end of the rink. He’s talking to someone, a trainer maybe, and absently gathering pucks as if it’s nothing. It’s never nothing. At that
point, Alex thinks he can be excused for being distracted. Alex isn’t about to be shown up by a real rookie. It isn’t until later when Alex finally finishes and gets to go into the locker room and clean up, that he gets to confront Gonch about his trickery.

“Very funny,” Alex tells Gonch.

“I thought so too,” Gonch agrees.

Gonch is a good guy.

But even good guys do horrible things to their good friends so on the drive home after practice, Alex fusses with the radio and fiddles with the air conditioner and watches Gonch twitch. It’s clear that Gonch knows what Alex is doing, just as it’s clear that Alex knows that Gonch knows. It’s childish. But fun.

Yes, Alex likes Gonch.

At dinner they sit next to each other and talk about practice, then when Gonch starts to give Alex advice on how to be welcoming to Crosby, Alex ignores Gonch and talks to Gonch’s wife, Ksenia, instead. She is far more interesting than a Canadian who tucks his t-shirt into his jeans and always applies sunscreen when the team work out outdoors even if it’s overcast. When he tells her that, she nods.

“But that is not hard,” she tells him.

Gonch eyes her. “Don’t encourage him.”

“Of course not,” she smiles, before holding out her wine glass for him to refill.

For the first road trip of the season, Alex is offered to room with Gonch, and sure, Alex likes Gonch, but Alex is sure he will like most of the team. So he asks to room with one of the North Americans and lets Gonch stay with his usual road roommate.

Alex ends up rooming with Maxime Talbot who is very loud and Canadian and likes to talk to girls who don’t seem to like talking to him. Alex understands that. He also likes a challenge. Life is no fun without a challenge.

Maxime – Max, speaks no Russian. Alex doesn’t mind too much. Alex’s English is improving by leaps and bounds every day. Together they piece together conversations and when they get stuck, Alex smiles and points at things. The two of the fight over who gets which bed and always try to steal the first shower. But Max is funny and Alex doesn’t mind taking the second shower every once and a while.

It works more than it doesn’t.

On the ice, Crosby acts almost like a veteran. He can predict plays and read players as if it’s second nature. They debut in the same game and together Sidney registers his and the Pen’s first assist of the
season, and Alex scores his and the Penguins first goal off it. It’s – Alex can’t think of anything better and then, a little later in the game Alex scores his second goal.

The Newark New Jersey crowd hiss and boo, but Alex can’t hear them over his teammates yelling things he doesn’t understand against his ear.

It’s the best. It’s better than that. But it’s fleeting.

The Pens lose the game 3-5.

As they file into the visitors’ locker room, the elation Alex felt on the ice feels very far away. Still laced tightly into his skates, he feels clumsy and graceless. There are press waiting for them, but Alex isn’t sure if he can talk to them. In the corner of his eye, he catches sight of his translator hovering near the doors. Feeling his age, Alex sticks close to Gonch.

Mario though, comes over and claps Alex on the shoulder. “Good job.”

It doesn’t feel like one though.

The press feel like gnats as they descend on him. They speak very quickly and he feels a step out of pace with them. Alex’s English isn’t great, but he is learning. The Penguin’s management team set him up with a translator early on, and that helps. He watches a lot of TV too, and he knows that’s to blame for a lot of the things he says. But it’s in the locker room and on the road with his team, that Alex picks up words and phrases and gets the chance to try them out.

Sometimes he gets it right, sometimes he doesn’t. His teammates seem to mostly understand him.

The press are another matter.

He wanted to do well, he tells them through his translator and then when his translator doesn’t translate quickly enough, Alex says it again, in English. He wanted to win.

“But you didn’t,” one journalist comments.

“No,” Alex answers. That is one word he does know.

On the bus, he thinks about calling his family. His parents stayed up, so did his brother Mikhael. But he isn’t sure what he would tell them if he did speak to them. In the end he closes his eyes and tries to rest a little. In a few days they will be playing the Hurricanes, and then they will have their home opener of the season. He concentrates on the thought of winning both.

(They lose both. But Sidney scores his first goal in the home opener game. It’s a tight game. They lose in overtime. The following two games end the same way).

Alex is in this his third year at RGUFK (Russian State University of Physical Education). But it’s difficult to think of his assignments when the Penguins demand so much of his time. He should be used to it, he knows. Technically, it might be his rookie season, but Alex isn’t a rookie. He’s been playing professional hockey for years now.
In the evenings he tries to study. It seems rude to spread his books out on the Gonchar’s dining room table, so he tends to go in his room. Gonch’s girls sometimes like to sit outside his door and tap out rhythms. Sometimes he taps back, and they giggle. Ksenia shoos them away whenever she finds them.


He shrugs. “My books aren’t that interesting. No mermaids or wizards.”

She smiles at him.

To his knowledge, he doesn’t know any other NHL players studying. Some play in college, but they leave to play in the NHL. Alex’s not embarrassed to spend his free time doing homework, but he doesn’t go out of his way to talk about it. There are other things to talk about, other things that people are more interested in. It is upsetting though, when he misses deadlines and has to get extensions after extension. He tries not to let it show, but it must because Ksenia asks him to help prepare dinner.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” she says while he helps make a salad. “You’ll catch up.”

Alex nods. That’s what his teachers say. But it is hard. The team has another road trip coming up. There are team events too that he has to attend and casual invitations that he wants to accept. He knows he goes out too much.

Ksenia shushes him. “It’s good to know your teammates.”

“Better to get good grades.”

She sighs fondly. “Sanja, you do get good grades.”

“When I hand in assignments.”

It’s embarrassing to admit that. Immediately after he does, he looks away from her.

Ksenia is quiet for a moment. “It’s okay to ask for help.”

Alex is good at asking for what he wants. But he isn’t that great at asking for help.

So far away from home, Alex didn’t expect to find himself feeling at home but he does. He likes Gonch’s family, likes how Ksenia expects him to wash dishes, and how her children are equally nosy and noisy. It’s comforting to come home to them each night. It’s a comfort too, to return to a house with people he can talk to without struggling for words – liking living with a family even if it isn’t his own. His English is always passable. Not great, but good enough. But he wasn’t prepared for how tiring it is speaking English each day, all day.

He knows he is not the only person in the team who is getting used to new routines and a new home. He’s okay. He is. He hasn’t been in Pittsburgh long, but he already has guys on the team he likes to talk to and ones who invite him out for drinks. But at night, he finds himself weary.

There as such high expectations – for him, for the Penguins, for the season.

He can handle it. He can. It’s just a lot at the end of the day, a lot to carry before games and after them and in the early hours of the morning when he knows he has to get up and go to training but he can hardly open his eyes from exhaustion. This is what he’s spent his life working towards. He doesn’t need anyone to remind him of that.
Even before either Alex or Sidney were signed to the Pens, people were writing articles about them playing together. Now, with them actually playing together and playing on the same line, it doesn’t take too long for the media begin to pay attention to the Penguins. Or to Alex and Sidney.

Alex is – well, he isn’t sure if he’s used to it, but he doesn’t mind it. Of course people are interested in him. He’s just been named Rookie of the Month for December. He’d be surprised if people didn’t want to talk to him.

Sidney however, doesn’t particularly want to talk to anyone. But in general Sidney doesn’t particularly want to talk to people. He has to, though. They all have to. But he doesn’t enjoy it. His agent has long since managed to polish him into someone that can speak to journalists without saying anything too revealing, but it’s clear that although he knows how to say the right things, he’s not particularly good at saying them the right way. Alex doesn’t speak English fluently, but even he can pick up subtleties that Sidney misses.

Simply put, Sidney is awkward. Reserved and painfully shy, it’s like he is slightly out of step with everyone. But Alex can deal with that.

Alex laughs a lot and interrupts him and talks over both Sidney and the translator that Alex only half uses.

“You’re so annoying,” Sidney says afterwards in that blunt way of his.

Alex is. But so is Sidney.

Away from the ice and the media, Sidney is objectively pretty awful. He’s petty and holds grudges and likes to act morally superior just because he sticks to his nutrition plan. But Alex is all of those things too. (But he doesn’t stick to his nutrition plan).

They aren’t really friends.

Sidney tends to spend his time with Colby Armstrong and sometimes with Marc-André Fleury. They devote most of their time annoying Sidney and pranking him, but Sidney seems content enough with their presence. Or at least, content enough to put up with them. As a general rule, Alex gets the impression that Sidney doesn’t like people. They’re confusing and fickle and stand far too close to him. But Colby and Marc manage to wear him down enough to get him to go out and do things that aren’t hockey. It’s a pretty remarkable feet, and one Alex is yet to achieve personally. He doesn’t get what’s in it for them, but Alex supposes Sidney must have a few redeeming qualities. He isn’t sure what they could be, but he’s sure they’re there, somewhere.

Sidney frowns when Alex pairs up with him in practice.

“You can talk to Colby later,” Alex tells him.

And Sidney can.

They get distracted though. The Penguin’s head coach, Ed Olczyk, wants Alex to work on his reactions and Sidney always likes working on his speed, so they end up down the end of the rink doing two-on-two drills against Žigmund Pálffy and Lasse Pirjeta. Where Ziggy and Pirjetä are tested, Alex and Sid are still learning each other. Without a veteran there to steady them and fill out the spaces between them, it shows. It’s probably why Ed has them doing two-on-two drills instead of
three-on-three drills. Sidney is clever, and Alex is strong, but they’ve only been playing together for a little while. Sometimes Alex’s passes go wide, and sometimes Sidney looks for Alex but doesn’t quite know where to find him.

They’re better, Alex knows, than this.

Later, Olczyk breaks the groups down further, and Alex might not get the opportunity to prove it, but he does laugh a lot when he and Sidney battle over the puck. He uses his height against Sidney, pushing him into the ugly parts of the rink, against the boards and into corners. They play dirty; knees and sticks connecting. Sidney swears; red faced and bitter. Alex likes it, likes being in control. Sometimes though, Sidney uses his lower centre of gravity against Alex, setting Alex up to over balance. His uniform is a mess, wet from the ice and twisted by the time Olczyk blows his whistle and gathers them for shoot outs.

“Next time, maybe you win,” Alex tells Sidney, feeling supremely buoyant with his own success.

Sidney’s lips narrow. “Fleury says your slapshot needs work.”

Alex bristles. Fleury can’t manage Alex’s slapshot on his best day. He tells Sidney that.

“Prove it,” Sidney says.

And oh, Alex can do that.

Whenever Alex isn’t with Gonch and his family, he tends to hang out with Max and Ryan Malone. They’re around the same age and they tend to laugh at Alex’s jokes more often than not. Together the three of them go and see fantastic American movies filled with explosions and girls with glossy mouths and dark eye make-up. They go to bars too, and help Alex buy a sports car even though they try hard to convince him to by a SUV.

“It’s so tiny,” Max says at the Mercedes’s dealership.

“It’s so fast,” Alex corrects, eyeing the black Mercedes SL65 AMG with naked appreciation. Because it is. “Much better.”

“So lame,” Ryan comments. “I bet you can’t even fit into it.”

Alex smirks and holds his hand up for a high five. “That’s what all the girls say!”

Ryan groans and leaves Alex hanging. “So, so lame.”

Alex likes Max and Ryan. They’re good guys. Much, much more fun than Sidney. But then again, almost everyone is more fun than Sidney.

It’s annoying really, that Alex somehow always ends up hanging out Sidney. Max and Ryan are cool. Sidney’s really not. But whenever Alex finds himself aimlessly killing time, he finds himself knocking on Sidney’s guesthouse door and getting into an argument about the fibre content of cereal or how Sidney totally did not press more weight than him at the gym at practice.

It’s embarrassing really.

Sometimes Sidney even goes and complains to Mario. Alex thinks it isn’t fair.
Over dinner (which Alex invites himself to), Alex sits between Lauren and Stephanie and makes them tell him all about school and the boys that are chasing them and ignores Sidney, even when he goes red in the face.

“You’re so embarrassing,” Sidney complains afterwards.

Alex thinks Sidney needs a mirror.

The Penguins aren’t winning. Occasional they do, but in general, they are losing more games than they win. As such it doesn’t come as a surprise to anyone when, part way through December, there is a coaching reshuffle. The change from Ed Olczyk to Michel Therrien unsettles Alex more than he expects. He finds himself standing near to Gonch during practice, and struggling to find the right words in the locker room.

Olczyk was one of the first to welcome Alex to Pittsburgh. Alex knows that they sometimes didn’t get along – Alex knows he is loud and sometimes he can be reckless – but he is a good coach. It’s sad to see him go.

For the most part Therrien seems to like how Alex plays – seems to like him. But Alex struggles. Lately change seems to affect him more. Here, away from so much, he finds himself reacting more intensely to things and having to work harder to overcome challenges. It makes him feel more like a rookie than he ever was when he first started playing professionally for Dynamo at sixteen.

This isn’t the first coaching change he’s witnessed. It probably won’t be the last. Personally, Alex is having a good season – he and Sidney are neck to neck in points – but for the Penguins, they are towards the bottom of the conference rankings and only falling further down each week.

After practice he calls his parents and they talk about nothing really. How traffic is bad and fuel prices are worse and Alex knows they’re coming to see him as soon as they can. But now more than ever he feels the distance between them.

Pittsburgh is Alex’s home now. He shouldn’t feel homesick. He does though.

(It passes. In his experience, most things do).

One of the very first things, if not the very first thing, Therrien does when he takes charge of the Pens, is make Sidney an alternate captain.

It isn’t really surprising. Olczyk tried to make Sidney an alternate captain a few weeks previously. Then Sidney declined, but now he does not. The press has mixed opinions about it. Don Cherry is one of the loudest critics. Alex is new to this particular style of journalism. Russian press is worse in some ways, better in others. But either way, he thinks people take Cherry too seriously.
“Armchair coaching,” Max comments.

Alex likes that metaphor. It sounds about right.

Sidney makes a good alternate captain though – not that Alex will ever tell him.

When Sidney’s alternate captaincy was first announced to Alex and the team, Alex clapped and cheered loudly. But since then, Alex has made sure to get in Sidney’s way on the ice, cutting in front of him when they line up for drills and not sharing the puck when they scrimmage.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” Sidney hisses.

“Doing what?” Alex asks, skating lazy circles around him, tapping the puck to and fro but never letting Sidney touch it.

Being an alternate captain is a big responsibility. Alex thinks he will tell Sidney that. But maybe not now. Later. Now it is more fun to tell the coach that Sidney’s back check is rusty and watch Sidney’s face go bright red and spit that it’s Alex’s everything that is rusty.

Hockey isn’t about the puck, but about the players. Alex learnt that when he was a child.

Alex lives with Gonch for longer than he probably should. He only leaves when Ksenia announces her pregnancy and even then Alex finds himself back on their doorstep every second night for dinner.

His new house is in a good neighbourhood, only a short drive away from the arena. It’s big and expensive and Alex likes both of those things. His parents are meant to be coming over to visit him soon. But not soon enough, he thinks. That’s the problem with having a nice big house. All that space echoes no matter how loud he turns up his TV and how much gear he fills it with.

As time passes he finds himself inviting himself over to Sidney’s place. Or Mario’s, since unlike Alex, Sidney hasn’t moved out. Despite all the fun made of him to his face and behind his back, Sidney is still living in the Lemieux’s guesthouse; eating at their dining table and having Nathalie do his laundry.

“Don’t,” Sidney says, whenever Alex brings it up.

Alex doesn’t know why he says that.

Alex thinks Sidney is smart. Lucky too.

The Lemieux kids mostly agree. The four of them are bright and laugh loudly and seem to always be in Sidney’s space. Alex likes all of them. He especially likes how they like him. Good taste. It becomes habit to text them whenever Alex is over at Sidney’s place. Alex’s English still is a work in progress, but it’s good enough to annoy Sidney into playing a game of street hockey with them.

Sidney is ridiculously competitive. Alex is too, he supposes.

The kids always make them play on opposing teams, to make it fair. Which, Alex thinks is fair, only whenever they face off against each other Sidney gets that look on his face and Alex knows better than to respond to it, he knows he is. It’s only street hockey. But that doesn’t mean anything, because
hockey is hockey, and Sidney is Sidney and Alex is Alex.

“Tripping!” Sidney shouts, his grazed knees bleeding.

“Diving!” Alex shouts back at him.

“Are you calling me a cheater?”

“You cheat.”

Stephanie pushes Sidney and Austin takes the opportunity to steal an empty net goal but that isn’t the point. The point is Sidney cheats and Alex doesn’t. Full stop. Only it never ended when it came to the two of them. They count goals and points and bag skates and reps and now that Sidney is an alternate captain they compete against each other at that too. Where Sidney stays late picking up pucks and talking with the trainers and management and helping whoever needs him, Alex goes out with the team and makes them laugh and dance.

“I’m your favourite, right Gonch?” He asks Gonch.

Gonch pushes a shot into his hand. “Not even close.”

“So mean,” Alex tells him, because it is.

Then he turns to Brooks Orpik. Brooks is solid and remarkably immune to Alex’s everything. On the whole, it’s a little disheartening. But after a few drinks he relaxes enough to laugh when Alex asks who he prefers out of Alex and Sidney.

“I’m not answering that,” he says, shaking his head.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to,” Brooks answers simply, before winking at Alex. “But you could buy the next round, if you want to try your chances.”

Alex doesn’t understand everything Brooks said, but Alex gets the gist of it and he thinks about it for a beat. Brooks makes a good offer. But on his way to the bar Alex gets distracted by a brunette and then by a really great song.

He decides to call this round a draw.

The thing about Sidney and Alex is, Alex knows, is it’s not about who is the best between the two of them, but being the best which is difficult really, to explain to people because they do compete. Constantly.

Alex’s never really had anyone like Sidney to measure himself against before.

There was Zhenya, but Zhenya was Zhenya. He didn’t count. Not like Sidney does.

When Sidney reaches a hundred points faster than any other rookie, ever (at least according to the NHL statisticians), he is modest in a way that Alex sees right through. Modesty is a strange thing for professional athletes. They’re expected to be modest, but not really because they’re also expected to be the best and always working on becoming better. Maybe Sidney might be modest, but he
recognises his accomplishment. The contradiction of it is ignored though.

The Penguins organise a media blitz to publicly celebrate Sidney’s achievement.

“Teach me how to curse,” Ryan demands when the two of them get stuck doing an interview together. Or waiting for Sidney to finish being interviewed which is how it always seems to be apart from when Sidney and Ryan are waiting for Alex.

Ryan is a good friend. A good player too. For a while Alex and Sidney had Mark Recchi on their line. A skilled veteran, he was able to steady both of them. When he left for the Carolina Hurricanes, Ryan replaced him. He’s a good winger and maybe he can’t quite keep up with Sidney on the ice, but that’s okay because Alex always can.

Grinning, Alex nods. He can teach Ryan all kinds of things.

PR has been trying to teach Alex to know better than that, but their lessons haven’t quite stuck yet, much to the delight of the local and national press who, since Sidney and Alex joined the team, have started to play attention to the Pens for the first time in years. With a ready-made story to tell, they turn up by the dozen. During practice Alex watches them huddle at the side of the rink and when practice is over, Alex gets pulled into the thick of it when they start to pepper the team with softball questions.

“It’s a pretty big achievement,” Alex overhears one journalist tells Sidney.

Sidney scratches his neck and says something suitable bland.

Alex can’t help himself; he goes over and hooks an arm around Sidney’s shoulder.

“I’m catching up,” Alex warns, because he is a good person and Sidney deserves a chance to try and match Alex. “Slow and steady.”

The journalists perk up.

Sidney mouth narrows. “We’ll see.”

Therrien laughs and claps them both on the back. “A little competition is healthy.”

Alex nods in agreement. It is.

“But only a little?” The journalist presses.

Sidney eyes Alex, but he nods and laughs. “Yeah. And only between friends.”

Hockey’s a team sport. They might be on the same team, but why would a thing like that stop them?

A month or so after moving into his own home, Alex’s parents finally visit. His mother sighs when she sees the state of the house.
“You live like this?” she asks.

Alex shrugs.

He is all alone. He cannot be blamed for such things.

“But now,” Alex says, spreading his arms wide, “You are here, so all will be well.”

His mother sighs. Alex gives in and ducks down to kiss her cheek. He is hungry and his parents are here to look after him. All is well. Or will be, after dinner.

And it is.

In the morning they eat breakfast together and the following day, the three of them drive to the Mellon Arena together. Unable to keep still, he finds himself restless as he bounces around the locker room. In the afternoon he had to make himself nap, now he has to stop himself from annoying his teammates.

“Man, calm down,” Ryan laughs. “You’ve still got a game to play.”

Alex has a game to win. He tells everyone in the locker room this. Loudly.

He makes Mario and the other veterans laugh and laugh.

Sidney scowls. All the jostling and noise is interrupting his routine. Alex has never been great with routines. Or Sidney, really. But Alex grins at him nonetheless. The two of them are going to light it up tonight. Alex knows it. No one will be able to tear their eyes off them – no one will be able to come anywhere close to touching them tonight.

As they line up, ready to take the ice, Alex briefly meets Sidney’s eyes and winks.

Tonight is going to be good.

And it is.

Every day is good with his family there. Watching and cheering and just – being together once more. They plan to stay for a month, but Alex thinks he might be able to convince them to stay longer. One month out of twelve isn’t nearly enough.

While they are there, Alex invites Sidney over. (His mother insisted).

Sidney wrinkles his nose when Alex asks before practice while they are getting changed. “Why?”

Alex makes a face. “Why not?”

This seems to only confuse Sidney more. But he nods and says okay eventually.

When he drops over after practice, Sidney eyes the empty rooms. “How long have you been living here?”

And okay, Alex bought the house three months ago so far Alex has only bought a TV, two mattresses and a desk lamp, but he knows that tone of Sidney’s.

“Hey, not nice.”

Sidney steps into the ‘living’ room and wrinkles his nose. “Where am I going to even sit?”
“You sound like my mother.”

For the record, Alex’s mother likes Sidney. Whenever she visits, she likes to invite Sidney out for dinner and talk to him about Alex. They both think he needs to work harder. Sidney talks about Alex’s stats and she talks about his goals and they both talk about how he needs to not let people get to him and like that they can fill an entire evening.

Alex isn’t sure how he feels about it.

His mother is amazing. So is Sidney. But watching them together makes Alex nervous.

“He’s good for you,” she tells him after Sidney has left.

Paying the bill, Alex makes a face. Eating more fibre is good for him.

His mother swats his arm.

“I didn’t say anything!”

She gives him a look. “Sidney helps you focus.”

Alex wrinkles his nose. But it’s true. Sidney does. His legs are still aching from trying to outrun Sidney on the treadmills earlier in the day.

The season so far hasn’t been great. It isn’t bad either. Since the coaching change, the Penguins have managed to string together a few wins and pull themselves up from the bottom of the conference rankings. But it is awful when Mario retires for a second time. After his final game, Alex starts to cry when Mario drops him at home.

“Hey, hey,” Mario says, pulling him into a tight hug.

Alex feels a lot. Feels everything at once.

It isn’t fair. Burying his face into Mario’s shoulder, Alex sobs and sobs and Mario holds him until he finishes.

In the morning Sidney drops by.

He leans on the doorbell until Alex opens it and then shifts his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. Fragile and still half asleep, Alex waits for Sidney to say something.

“Going to let me in?”

Alex shrugs.

Sidney wrinkles his nose.

Sidney isn’t great with things like this. Or things that aren’t hockey.
Alex thinks about not inviting him in. But not seriously. In the end, they sit in front of his TV and play video games until Sidney gets hungry and starts complaining about how Alex never has anything healthy in his kitchen.

It isn’t comforting, but by the time Sidney disappears without saying goodbye Alex is feeling marginally better.

At the next game, Mario is missed. But he was always going to be.

They play though and it isn’t really a memorable game but it starts and it finishes and afterwards Alex falls asleep in his bed and it is what it is.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

(Zhenya doesn’t play in the 2005-2006 season.

“He’s staying with Metallurg Magnitogorsk,” Alex’s mother says.

Alex doesn’t understand. The NHL was Zhenya’s dream.

(Later, Alex will understand. But later he will not be speaking to Zhenya and Zhenya will not be speaking to him.))

The season ends. The Penguins don’t qualify for the playoffs. Alex and Sidney win various awards and a month later they both play at Worlds. Or they play against each other. Or on different teams in different groups. Whatever. The sports journalists can define it however they want.

Neither of their teams medal.

Russia gets to the quarter finals.

Canada gets to the semi-finals. Sidney manages to lead the scoring board and net himself another record, this time the youngest player to ever to win a World Championship scoring title.

*Good for him,* Alex thinks. Good for him.

Afterwards, Sidney goes quiet and Alex goes home. Back in Moscow, he goes out with his friends and takes girls home and gets photographed and gets in trouble.

Sidney texts on and off. He’s still weird and awkward. But he’s Alex’s friend, Alex supposes. More or less.
At the end of summer, Alex returns to Pittsburgh.

[2006-2007]

Alex hears things. Murmurs turn into mutters and then, almost overnight, Zhenya disappears from the airport in Helsinki and reappears in America.

Gonch is quiet when Alex waits with him on the ice before practice begins.

“Have you?” He asks.

Has Alex what? Heard? Spoken to Zhenya? Alex shakes his head. He is as clueless as anyone.

From Pittsburgh Alex watches and waits. No. From Pittsburgh Alex practices and plays. This year is going to be better. He can tell that already. He focuses on that instead of the photographs of Zhenya lacing up with the Washington Capitals.

Once, he tries to call Zhenya, but his call goes through to his voice mail.

“Russian mobile,” Gonch says reasonable. “No coverage here.”

Alex nods. It’s probably just that. Only when he tries again, the number is disconnected.

When Zhenya debuts for the Capitals, Alex watches the game from a hotel room states away. Zhenya is still good. Better maybe, than Alex remembered. There is something sharper about him now. More determined.

He scores six goals. One in each of the first six games he plays.

“We’ll have to keep an eye out for him,” Sidney comments as he and Alex review the tapes.

Alex nods.

When the rest of the Penguins find out about Alex’s cross-team friendship, he is widely scorned.

“They’re the enemy,” Max hisses. “The enemy, Ovie.”

Alex shakes his head. Zhenya might have boarded Alex the last time they played against each other and left him covered in mottled black and purple bruises, but Zhenya is also scared of his team’s nutritionist who keeps insisting that he needs more protein in his diet and less sugar. Eventually, there will come a day Zhenya won’t be able to pretend to not speak English, but for now he uses the excuse far too liberally. Alex used to tell him as much when before they were drafted, but Zhenya
didn’t listen then and he doesn’t seem to have changed his mind since then.

“You shouldn’t’ have told him anything,” Max exclaims. “Not then and certainly not now.”

Alex makes a face. “I wasn’t always a Penguin.”

“You weren’t always a Penguin?” Max’s echoes, sounding horrified. “Are you trying to ostracize yourself?”

Alex isn’t sure what ‘ostracize’ means, so he shrugs.

Jordan Staal leans close. “Do you know any secret way to beat him?”

Jordan is new this year. Alex only knows the older Staal brothers in passing, but so far Jordan has proved to be much louder than them. Far more fun. He likes to be in the thick of things, which in consequence means he likes to hang out with Alex. Alex can’t argue with that.

So far Jordan has proved to be an excellent addition to the team. He’s fast and powerful, albeit a little star struck by Sidney. Still. Which Alex doesn’t understand at all. Sidney likes to spend his Saturday nights recycling. But ignoring that, Alex doesn’t know how Jordan can ignore the true super star player on the team. If Jordan’s going to be star struck, by anyone, it should rightfully be Alex.

“Why not me?” Alex asks once. (They’ve all been drinking a little).

Jordan wrinkles his nose, embarrassed. “It’s a Canadian thing.”


The entire table hisses. Alex has awful taste in friends.

Now Alex is more settled in Pittsburgh and has more friends, he doesn’t go over and spend time with Sidney so much. It takes Alex a while to notice. He sees Sidney nearly every day. During practice Alex still marks his progress against Sidney, and during games, there is no one that can provoke Alex into greatness like Sidney can.

Alex the Great and Sid the Kid – that’s them.

But Alex doesn’t realise how long it has been since he saw Sidney outside of hockey until Austin calls Alex, whining about how Lauren and Stephanie keep beating him when they play street hockey after school and how Sidney won’t let up about the no contact rule and how if he did, then Austin would totally be winning.

“They’re beating me,” he tells Alex. “It’s unfair,”

Alex feels like laughing. “You sound like Sid.”

“Really?” Austin asks, like he’s not sure if that’s a comparison he is pleased with or one that insults him deeply.

“Yes.”

Austin makes an indignant sound.
Alex smiles to himself. “Maybe you need to lose? Teach humility. Sid tells me it’s important.”

“Sid doesn’t know anything. He totally let Lauren score two goals last night.”

“Let?” Alex asks, because that does not sound like Sidney.

“Alex,” Austin says, dragging Alex’s name out. “Come and play with us. Sid will listen to you.”

Now Alex does laugh. “Sid doesn’t listen to me.”

Austin huffs.

“Okay, okay,” Alex says. “I come over.”

“When?” Austin asks. “Now?”

Alex actually planned on calling up a girl Tanger’s girlfriend was friends with and seeing if she was free for dinner, but he supposes that can wait a day.

“Tonight,” Alex agrees. “Tell Sid, I pick teams.”

“He won’t like that,” Austin warns.

Spoiler alert: Austin is right.

Sidney doesn’t like it.

He doesn’t like it either when Alex sneaks a goal when he isn’t looking.

“Too slow, too slow!” Alex crows. “You’re rusty.”

Sidney makes a face. “I’ll show you who is rusty.”

As things tend to do between them, they rapidly spiral downwards.

The game ends half an hour later when Alex gets hit by the ball and ends up with a bloody nose. The sight of blood makes the Lemieux kids raise their voices, drawing Nathalie out of the house. Her face falls at the sight of all of them.

“God,” she mutters, pursing her lips.

“It’s not my fault,” Alex says pre-emptively.

Sidney snorts. “I told you that you need to work on your reflexes.”

Nathalie rolls her eyes. Bringing Alex inside, she sits him down, gives him a cold compress and cleans his face.

“Maybe not tell Mario?” Alex says, trying to smile charmingly at her.

She eyes him.

Alex drops the smile. It was worth a try.
(As it turns out, Mario isn’t particularly impressed. When he gets home, he asks Alex to remove the cold compress and touches the crooked bones of Alex’s nose with careful fingertips.

“Good as new,” Alex tells him with a smile. “Promise.”

Mario laughs. “Yeah, yeah.”)

What everyone is talking about but no one is willing to officially comment on, is that the Penguins organisation as a whole, isn’t doing well. Ticket sales are up, but only comparatively to previous years. In reality they’re still low. Revenue is down and returns are marginal. Alex might have started the Penguin’s season with a hat trick, but off the ice and behind closed doors there is talk of selling the team or relocating them. Places like Houston, Kansas City, Oklahoma City and Hamilton Ontario keep cropping up.

It’s – Alex has just gotten settled. He likes Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh likes him.

He doesn’t know what is being said or offered. No one on the team quite knows what’s going on. The uncertainty of it all disquiets Alex. He keeps finds himself turning to Sidney and opening his mouth to ask Sidney if he knows anything, but Sidney refuses to talk about it.

Sidney focuses on the ice – on improving his game.

He doesn’t seem to have time for anything else.

During warm ups Max and Alex push and shove at each other and annoy Flower who is trying to listen to Therrien. Standing either side of Flower, the two of them grin brightly before turning on him.

Eventually Flower starts to go red. “I hate you guys,”

“No, no, no,” Max croons. “You love us. We’re your favourites.”

Well, Max is. Flower can take or leave Alex. Alex is well aware of this. But he smiles bright and big. This of course is when Therrien turns his attention to the three of them.

“Coach?” Alex asks.

“Bag skate. Both of you.”

Alex makes a face. He scored in the last game. And gave Sidney two assists (not that Sidney did anything much with them apart from score the game winning goal).

“Now,” Therrien adds.
And okay. Therrien is a good coach. But hard.

“You think that because he makes you work,” Mario says, when he sees Alex.

“Not true,” Alex says, even though it mostly is.

Mario gives Alex a look. Alex chooses to ignore it.

Lately Therrien has started to separate Alex and Sidney during practice; setting them different drills and working them in different groups, partnering Alex with a veteran and rotating Sidney through various members of the team. They’re still on the same line, but from different ends of the ice, sometimes Alex wonders what it looks like to an outsider.

The press, of course, does not hesitate to comment.

With Sidney being placed in numerous line combinations during training, and Alex being bossed around by the veterans, the story of the day is how Therrien is preparing the team for the day when Alex is no longer a Penguin. With Alex’s rookie contract due to run out at the end of next season, the local and national sports media are having a field day with it. In the last few months, his agent has begun to renegotiate the contract that will replace his rookie one. It is true that a few teams have already contacted him. From articles in various publications, he reads speculations that other teams are interested in him too. But what does that mean? Alex does not know.

He was never meant to be a Penguin. Or maybe that is not true. Maybe he always was meant to be one. Either is true. Both make a good headline.

When Alex speaks to his agent, he mainly tells Alex not to worry.

Alex doesn’t like platitudes and he doesn’t trust his agent. Or maybe that isn’t right.

He has an agent, but he isn’t sure if he’ll retain one.

For a while, that is the narrative of the season: the uncertainty of the Penguins staying in Pittsburgh and if these are the last days of Alex playing for the Penguins.

Sidney’s own entry level contract is up for renewal in two years. Sooner or later people will talk about that, and sooner or later comparisons between the two of them will be made.

Sometimes it is all so predictable.

In the end, Alex decides he will release his agent. Some things he must do himself and renegotiating his new contract feels like one of them. It’s problematic though, because without an agent acting as an intermediary, Alex is negotiating directly with the Penguins management, which affects the team. He doesn’t want it to. No one does. But it spills over into the locker room, making it awkward at times.

Alex finds himself becoming another thing that no one is willing to talk about.
The division between team interests and personal ones is impossibly difficult to navigate. But the team is one thing, his own future is another. With the future of the Penguins in limbo, Alex must think of himself. He knows what he is worth. He hopes Sidney knows what he’s worth too when the Penguins decide to begin negotiating his new contract too.

A few times after games, Alex overhears Sidney being pressed for his opinion on the subject. Like in practice, Sidney does not say anything. Working his way around giving an answer, he somehow avoids commenting. Alex does not have half of Sidney’s skill. A few times Alex ends up says too much, and each time he does, it sets back the talks which already began on the wrong foot.

His personal relationship with Mario makes it difficult too.

Mario understands where Alex is coming from – understands the position of the Pittsburgh Penguins ownership group too. They seem to be in flux. Profits continue to go down and behind closed doors there are offers being made and talks going on with potential buyers. No one knows what is going to happen.

Alex feels vulnerable. He feels a little like a bargaining chip too.

He and Sidney are key selling points. Alex would have to be blind not to see that. They’re the ones being advertised really, and they’re the ones attracting buyers. The two greatest players of their generation, available now for the right price; it’s perturbing really.

When he gets home at night, he finds himself goggling each of the cities that people are speculating the Penguins might end up – where he might end up if he stays with the Penguins. He looks at the images of streets and sights in his search results and tries to imagine himself in the different cities.

Back before the NHL draft, he remembered a foreign journalist asking him where he would like to play. Perhaps more naïve that his mother would have approved of, Alex said Pittsburgh. He grew up watching Mario play; grew up idolising Mario. If Alex could go anywhere, Pittsburgh seemed like a good place to go.

Zhenya wanted to go to Detroit. But all Russian boys grow up wanting to be a Red Wing.

Alex wonders what Washington is like. Zhenya hasn’t said anything really. But then, Alex hears that Zhenya isn’t talking to many people.

That is where they were always different.

When Sidney is first offered the captaincy, he refuses which Alex does not understand at all when he finds out (he finds out mostly because he annoys the coach into telling him why he asked Sidney to stay late).

“I’m not ready,” Sidney says after Alex badgers him about it.

Alex wrinkles his nose. “I’m ready.”

And Alex is. He tells that to Mario over Sunday dinner with the family in the main house.

“Make me captain,” he says, because if Sidney can say what he wants then so can Alex.
Sidney though, makes a face. “It doesn’t work like that.”

Alex thinks it does. He thinks if you want something you have to ask for it.

Mario eyes them both. “I’ll think about it,” he says finally.

Sidney lets out an indignant sound.

(When they ask Sidney again, less than a month later, Sidney says yes.

“Ready now?” Alex asks.

“Shut up,” Sidney tells him.

“No way for captain to talk to star player,” Alex teases.)

It’s a shitty beginning for Sidney’s captancy.

The Penguins have been without a captain for a while, and without a win for what feels like even longer.

As captain, Sidney now has to carry that too. The weight of it is his burden and no one else’s. Each press scrum reminds Sidney of that, and the team too. From the outside, Alex answers his own set of questions about his performance and Sidney’s and can help very little.

Everyone has an opinion.

In early December the Penguins go on a three game road trip.

During their game against the Boston Bruins, Sidney scores his first Gordie Howe hat trick, which, is equally fantastic and hilarious.

Afterward the team take Sidney out and buy him drinks and Max is kind enough to explain what a ‘Gordie Howe’ hat trick is.

“A goal, an assist and a fight, fuck yeah,” Max crows.

“Against Andrew Ference!” Jordan laughs, which is right and perhaps the best thing about it.

“Did he insult Death Cab for Cutie?” Colby asks. “Or did you tell him that Thom Yorke is over rated?”

Sidney lets out a huff. “I hate you all.”

“No you don’t,” Alex tells him, because Sidney does not. “You love us. Me most of all.”
Sidney rolls his eyes but towards the end of the night he lets Alex hold him close and press a kiss to his sweaty hair and make him swallow a neon colour shot of foul alcohol to celebrate. Alex steals a few of those shots for himself.

“Don’t worry, we can share,” he tells Sidney, his lips brushing the hot skin of Sidney’s neck.

Sidney sways a little and Alex holds him tighter.

Alex likes Sidney like this, Alex decides.

“You should score a hat trick every game,” he tells Sidney, because Sidney should.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Sidney nods.

“It doesn’t have to be a Goldie Howe one.”

“No,” Sidney agrees.

And Alex thinks of how Ference swung the first punch and how Sidney threw one back and somehow the two of them end up in the bathroom with Sidney propped up against the wall and Alex on his knees pulling at Sidney’s clothes to see the bruises Ference left.

“Let me kiss it better,” he murmurs into curve of Sidney’s hip as he tugs at his jeans.

“Fuck you,” Sidney tells him, snottily. “Go bother someone else for a change.”

“So, so cruel,” Alex mutters, pushing Sidney’s shirt up to his armpits so he can nose at the angry black and purple bruises on Sidney’s ribcage. “All I want to do is help.”

“Fuck your help.”

“You need to drink more,” Alex decides, because Sidney does if it makes him sloppy and hilarious and swearing like a fifteen year old boy in from of his friends for the first time.

In response, Sidney slides another inch down the wall.

And of course this is when Colby barges in. “Oh shit.”

Alex takes his eyes off Sidney and this is when Sidney topples over. Between the two of them, they manage to catch Sidney and stumble out the bars back exit and into a waiting car. Sidney, of course, is indignant.

“Can’t take him anywhere nice,” Alex complains.

Colby laughs and laughs and laughs like the asshole he is.

(Sidney pointedly ignores them).

The next day Sidney is hung over, has a bruise across his cheekbone and is in a foul mood.

“Small price to pay,” Alex tells Colby.

Colby nods in agreement.
The last game of the road trip is against the Capitals. It’s a tough game. The Penguins win, but not by all that much.

Zhenya is quiet when they meet afterwards. Metallurg Magnitogorsk are suing him. They are saying he is still under contract with them. They want damages. *They want him to come back.* Despite what the Caps and his agents are doing to protect him, it is clear that Zhenya is frightened. Where Alex left Russia in a blaze of glory, still half-drunk from winning the Russian Superleague Championship, Zhenya ducked out of the bathroom in a Helsinki airport bathroom. Though he is now answering Alex’s calls, Alex isn’t naïve enough to think Zhenya is accepting many of his other old friends’ calls. Or that many of his old friends are on speaking terms with him.

Zhenya’s teammate, Alexander Semin, also got stuck in Russia after the lockout ended and held there an additional year in order to complete his mandatory military service. The Capitals launched unsuccessful lawsuits to retrieve him too. Alex only hopes that the ones the Capitals have instigated on Zhenya’s behalf are more successful than the ones filed in Semin’s name.

It’s pretty fucked up.

Dynamo is talking too, about compensation. But the Penguins have been proactively working on insuring that it does not become an issue for Alex. For the most part Alex has been able to put it aside and not worry. Of course Dynamo want him, but he is a Penguin now. For Zhenya, it is more difficult. Alex doesn’t know what to say to him. When the three of them meet up for drinks he ends up talking to Semin. Not that Semin isn’t really interested in talking to Alex. But he doesn’t seem to mind when Alex buys him a drink or when Alex flirts with his girlfriend.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Semin tells Alex later.

“No?”

“She’s my cousin.”

Alex pauses and looks at him.

Semin looks back at him.

“Bullshit.”

Semin shrugs. “I almost had you.”

“No. Not at all,” Alex shakes his head.

Semin nods. “Yes, I did.”

“No you didn’t. And that is an awful trick to play with your girlfriend.”

Semin grins.

Alex narrows his eyes. “She wasn’t your girlfriend or your cousin, was she?”

“No.”

“Who was she?”
Semin shrugs. “I don’t know.”

And Alex can’t help but laugh. Fuck.

Semin is awful really. Worse than almost everybody else Alex has meet so far.

Bar none, he is the most uncouth influence on Zhenya. Neither of them can really speak English, and neither of them makes much effort to try. Together they share one translator, live together, and spend most of their time with Semin’s parents who Semin moved to Washington with him. The two of them are spoilt. They want for nothing; Semin's mother to cook for them and Semin's father to drive them to practice in the morning when they are half asleep and cranky about being woken up before six am. It’s an unfairly good life.

“Jealous,” Semin says when he calls Alex, as he’s started to do for reasons that escape Alex’s understanding.

Alex kind of is. His mother is too busy to stay with him in Pittsburgh. She comes by during the basketball off season, but never stays nearly long enough.

“What are you having for dinner?” Alex asks, because deep down he does hate himself.

“My mother’s making Ossetrina pod Syrom. My favourite.”

Alex swears.

“I would invite you if you lived in Washington,” Semin comments idly. “Well, I might have. Probably not, now I think about it.”

“You are a terrible person, Sasha.”

Semin makes a sound of agreement. “Probably.”

In the New Year, Alex and Sidney end up being chosen for the All-Star game.

Their team loses, but the game and the opportunity to have a long weekend is nice. At least Alex thinks it is. He spends most of it following Nicklas Lidstrom around and getting Eric Staal to share embarrassing stories about Jordan. On the flight back to Pittsburgh, he falls asleep next to Sidney and only wakes when he feels Sidney reach across to buckle his seat belt for him.

Blinking awake, Alex doesn’t quite understand what's going on.

“We’re about to land,” Sidney says quietly.

It takes a moment for Alex to piece the meaning of the words together, but when he does, he nods.

Sidney doesn’t like to lose. Alex knows this. The All-Star game didn’t really count to Alex. Not in the grander scheme of things. For him, it was a chance to have fun. But Sidney doesn’t really work like that.
“Next year we beat them,” he promises Sidney. “Whoever they may be.”

Sidney rolls his eyes. “Focus on our next game first.”

Alex grins. “Ok captain.”

Sidney rolls his eyes.

(Sidney is Alex’s friend, but Alex knows that he isn’t necessarily Sidney’s friend).

A few days after they get back to Pittsburgh, Mario pulls Alex aside and makes him alternate captain.

Alex says yes. That is that.

He does not need to be convinced.

Alex likes being an alternate captain. He liked being an alternate captain when he played for Dynamo, and he likes being an alternate captain for the Penguins. He thinks he would like being captain more, but there is time for that.

“Maybe we can swap sometime?”

Sidney eyes him dubiously.

Alex grins. “I can make a roster.”

And Alex could. But almost overnight the season suddenly seems to pick up pace. Each game is harder. Every win is hard fought and every loss is bitter. Sidney takes things personally. He always does. On the ice he is the loudest voice and the first to speak to the refs. The press step up on their campaign to paint Sidney as a whiner. A baby. A bad sport. A diver.

“Deep diver,” Alex says without thinking.

“Excuse me?” Sidney asks, a sharp edge to his voice.

“Like the song?”

For a beat, Alex thinks Sidney might snap. He doesn’t, in general. That’s something Olczyk and now Therrien has worked on with both of them. Sidney has picked up on it (it being ‘anger management techniques’) quicker than Alex. He’s still too reactive. Or, at least that’s what Therrien thinks. Alex has always felt a lot. He is always going to be louder and nosier and messier than Sidney. Sidney is good. Sidney is neat. Alex isn’t either of those things. Sometimes it feels like he is bursting at the seams.

Now Alex smiles in a hopefully charming manner, because that is one thing Alex is better at than Sidney.

Sidney’s shoulders slump.
He’s tired. Alex knows this. Sidney tries not to show it to them, but Alex is good at seeing. He’s
good at listening too.

“You tell the worst jokes,” Sidney sighs, rubbing his eyes.

“I do not!”

Alex is hilarious. This is a fact. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar. He tells Sidney as much.

Sidney snorts.

On the third of January, 2007, Mario and high up team officials fly out to visit Kansas City,
Missouri, to discuss potentials of relocating the team there. The official information is that no
decision has been made. But it means something that they’re there.

In the past month, two sale offers have fallen through.

Now people are making comments behind closed doors and whispering in hallways. But they aren’t
saying anything publicly. Nothing is decided, but things are happening.

It makes Alex feel restless.

During games, he plays hard. He takes charge and makes things happen.

Yet again, he and Sidney are neck to neck in everything thing that matters.

Alex isn’t counting, though.

People can’t take their eyes off him. The opposition can’t keep up. From Moscow, his parent’s watch
every game and towards the end of the month they fly out and attend all the home games. Sitting in
the family box, they are indulgent with Pens TV; His father smiles and his mother, when asked if she
is proud, comments that she is but Alex needs to work on his cardio more.

It makes the guys snigger.

“You’re as bad as Sid,” Jordan says at one point. “Only Sid says he needs more work not his
mother.”

Alex is indignant. Like Sidney?

“Do you have Olympic gold medal?” He asks. “No?”

Jordan makes a face. “It’s not like you have one,” he mutters under his breath.

“My mother has two,” Alex tells him, because he mother does and Alex thinks Jordan needs to be
reminded.

“Your mother thinks you need work.”

As far as Alex is concerned his mother can say what she likes – she’s right. Of course. Alex does
need to work on his cardio (in the weight room he sometimes catches sight of Sidney scoffing when
Alex arrives a little late).
The uncertainty about the future of the Penguins hangs over the team for nearly the entire season. It is only towards the middle of March, just a little less than a month before the playoffs, that the Penguins publicly announce they will be staying in Pittsburgh.

A new arena is going to be built – the Penguins aren’t going anywhere for decades.

Mario too, announces that the Lemieux group have decided to retain ownership of the team. This more than anything, makes Alex finally relax. It isn’t until the official announcement is made, that he realises how much stress the ambiguity about the future of the team added to the strain of the season.

The Penguins make the play offs this year.

They’re knocked out early on, but after finishing last in their conference the previous year, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Or so Alex is told. But not by Sidney – but then again, Sidney doesn’t say anything when they are knocked out by the Ottawa Senators. In public, he answers questions put to him in a burnt out voice, but in private the absence of Sidney’s voice makes Alex go to Mario.

“It was his first playoff run,” Mario says when Alex drops by before he leaves.

“Not last,” Alex replies, because it won’t be. Not for either of them.

Mario nods. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“Next season,” Alex says.

“Yes,” Mario agrees. “Next season.”

During the summer, Sidney texts more.

“He’s captain now,” Sasha comments dismissively.

Alex wriggles his eyebrows. “I’m an alternate.”

“One of them,” Sasha snorts.

“The best one,” Alex corrects.

Sasha rolls his eyes.

Sasha’s only in Moscow for a little while to meet with sponsors about a new advertising campaign. However Alex is fairly confident he can get Sasha to stay longer. Zhenya’s meant to be coming up to Moscow too. Alex isn’t sure why he stays in Magnitogorsk for so much of the offseason. His family is there, and his girlfriend Oksana, but according to Sasha, Zhenya and Oksana broke up back at the beginning of the season. So really, there isn’t much keeping Zhenya in his small hometown.
“He could be up here, having fun,” Alex tells Sasha.

Sasha laughs. “We’re having fun?”

Alex makes a face. It’s just after one in the afternoon and they’re still hangover and dressed in day old underwear.

“Well,” Alex allows. “Not currently. But you have to admit last night was fun.”

In principle, Sasha refuses to admit anything. But Alex never truly expected he would.

Sasha disappears a week or so later around the time Alex takes his fourth year exams. R.G.U.F.K worked with him to help facilitate continuing his degree while in America playing in the NHL and Alex is grateful for all the help and assistance they gave him.

Education is important to him.

It’s the one thing that cannot be taken away from him.

Although his grades are not perfect, they feel like an achievement he can be proud of.

In July Sidney signs a new contract with the Penguins. It does not come as a surprise, but it does give Alex a bar against which to measure the following offers the Penguins make him.

He formally contacts the Penguin ownership group shortly after he calls Sidney to congratulate him.

It is time for Alex to get down to business.

A month later, in August, Alex organises to do some of his pre-season training in St. Petersburg with Zhenya, Gonch, Sasha, Alexei Semenov, Viktor Kozlov and Andrei Nikolishin. They meet up with Dmitry Kapitonov, the famous marathon runner, who prepared a program for them.

It’s good to get together with everyone.

Alex enjoys the offseason, but after so many text messages from Sidney, it is clear that not everyone knows what to do with an excess of free time. Apart from Gonch, all of Alex’s friends appear to go to seed without the structure hockey provides. Sasha, in particular, does not watch his mouth.

“Look at your belt,” Sasha comments. “The buckle is on the last hole.”

Alex swears when Sasha reaches out and viciously pokes Alex in the stomach.

“I am a machine!” Alex tells him, swatting his hands away.

Sasha raises one brow. (Everyone else unkindly laughs).
On one of their last nights in St. Petersburg, they all go out together.

When Alex sees Zhenya’s agent, Alex leans into his space to try to hear him over the music and things all go wrong from there.

[2007-2008]

In Alex’s third season in the NHL, Zhenya becomes Geno. Geno is someone who isn’t talking to Alex.

Alex and Geno have friends in common. As a rule, Russian players stick together. Maybe they wouldn’t necessarily be friends, or even friendly at home, but away from home, they are both.

Apart from Alex and Geno.

Semin rolls his eyes whenever they start.

Gonch tries to talk to Alex, but Alex doesn’t want to listen.

Instead, Alex starts inviting Sidney out with them. Alex is better friends with some of his other teammates, but Alex can rely on Sidney not to go weak on him. He isn’t good company. He spends most of the night alternating between complaining about the volume of the music or the price of the drinks, and pretends not to notice the girls who come and sit in their booth next to him. Even Gonch gets annoyed by Sidney’s behaviour.

But Alex keeps inviting Sidney.

Where Max or Ryan or even Jordan, the one time he tagged along, eventually get embarrassed by Alex, or try and make him talk about what’s going on between him and Geno, which, Alex personally thinks should embarrass them, Sidney sits with Alex and pointedly laughs at his jokes even though Alex knows that Sidney doesn’t find them funny and agrees with him and when Alex glares at Geno or snaps or whatever, Sidney doesn’t chide him or glare or anything.

Alex can count on Sidney. Alex can count the number of people he can say the same thing about on one hand and have fingers left over.

“Malkin plays dirty,” Sidney even says one time.

Alex nods. (Alex plays dirty too, sometimes, but that isn’t the point.) “Yes. He does. He takes stupid penalties.”
Geno does take stupid penalties. So does Alex, if he’s honest. But lately Geno’s form has alternated between brilliant and sloppy. When he’s on fire, it’s like he controls play, but other times he’s careless and sometimes appears purposefully stupid. At the Caps last game against the Rangers, he got into a tussle with Marc Staal after Geno tripped him. Jordan was still talking about that, a week later. Alex doubted Sidney would stop.

In January, Alex finally irons out the final details in his contract.

Thirteen years for one hundred and twenty four million dollars.

It’s a record, apparently.

The following month, just before the trade deadline, Colby Armstrong is traded to the Thrashers. Sidney doesn’t seem to react.

“He’s the captain,” Kris Letang says but Alex doesn’t know what that means until he catches Sidney talking to the media, his expression even and unremarkable.

“It’s not personal,” Mario tells Alex when he finds Alex loitering outside the guesthouse.

Alex nods. “Yeah. I know.”

And it isn’t. Everyone knows that.

But Colby is Sidney’s closest friend on the team. Closest friend in general.

Alex doesn’t quite know what to say. Sidney doesn’t like affection. An offer of such, Alex knows by now, would irritate him.

“Want to be my roommate?” Alex finds himself offering before the next road trip.

Sidney snorts.

“It wasn’t a joke,” Alex tries to tell Max later.

Max just smirks and claps Alex on the back. “Classic.”

(Alex thinks he and Sidney would have been good roommates.

Okay. They would have been horrible roommates. But Sidney is Alex’s friend. Alex would have been Sidney’s roommate if Sidney wanted).
The press play Sidney against everyone. Even Alex. Especially Alex, sometimes.

Alex isn’t sure he gets that, isn’t sure if he is as loyal as Sidney. He tries, but sometimes he says the wrong things. The press like to talk about how they are rivals on the same team, fighting for the puck – how they cannot share the spotlight.

Alex does like the spotlight; likes people watching him, likes them seeing how good he is because he is good. He is the best.

Does this mean there is truth to what people say? Alex isn’t sure. Can’t be sure.

Alex knows they do compete. Alex always wants to be best – he is the best. But with Sidney, Alex finds himself wanting to be better. During games, and sometimes even during practice this comes across in the wrong ways. He shouts and argues on the bench and he makes Sidney work for the puck on the ice.

But Sidney makes Alex work for the puck too. He make Alex shout and argue too. Sidney is reasonable except when he isn’t.

Maybe there is truth in the words that the press print.

From the Russians in the league, Alex hears that Geno struggles with the press. Struggles with the expectations placed on his shoulders. But Geno was never good with attention. He likes to play. That is it. Alex likes almost everything. He always has.

In Russia, Alex is Sasha and Sanja and Sanya; but he is Alex too. He was Alex long before he was drafted.

He always knew where he was going. He always knew he was going to get there too.

From Pittsburgh where he is their Alex the Great, it is difficult to imagine wanting to be anything else. Sometimes it is different to what he expected. But never once does he want something different. Geno grew up in a small town. When they first meet, they were playing against each other. Over the following years they faced off more times than Alex can remember. They played on the same team too. But Alex doesn’t think until the draft, that Geno really thought he could do more than play on his home town team.

They are different, the two of them.

But Geno is Alex’s friend. Was. Was his friend.

That’s the kicker, Alex supposes. That’s something Max says sometimes. He’s right. It is.

While playing the Tampa Bay Lightning in January, Sidney sprains his ankle. The prognosis has him out for six to eight weeks.

With Sidney gone, Jordan is pushed up to Alex and Ryan’s line.

Jordan is good. Not as fast as Sidney, but strong. Strong and determined. He’s young though, and can be as reckless as Alex. More, maybe. The three of them alternate from being very, very good, or acting as if they’d never played together before.
After a spectacular loss to the Atlanta Thrashers, Therrien changes at the line-ups, trying to work out new combinations. Jordan gets shifted back down, and Max gets pushed up. That too, doesn’t quite work despite how well Alex and Ryan know Max.

Gonch has no good words of advice to give. “Therrien knows what he is doing.”

That is true, Alex hopes. But Alex doesn’t.

They’re still winning without Sidney, but it doesn’t seem to be enough.

“It’ll pass,” Gonch says.

And it will.

It will just take time.

(It takes too long).

In the end, Therrien moves Ryan off the line, and replaces him with Petr Sýkora. Sýkora has little time for Alex. During the lockout he, like Gonch, played for Metallurg Magnitogorsk. He’s far too professional to take sides, but it’s clear that he finds the feud between Alex and Geno distasteful.

The two of them work well together though. Together, with Max, they are a powerful line. They don’t play like they do with Sidney, but they are able to move through skaters and get the puck where they need it. Two way hockey, journalists call it. Alex thinks they just make things happen. Without Sidney and his uncanny ability to predict play, they have to.

Maybe they are hammers making the opposition into nails. But a good defence isn’t a bad thing.

With Sidney out, Alex’s behaviour admittedly gets out of hand.

From home, he hears whispers about things Geno is saying and rumours that he is spreading.

Geno was never good at watching his mouth.

It makes Alex furious.

“You act like children,” Sýkora says.

“Fuck you,” Alex swears, because what business is it of Sýkora’s?
In Washington, with Sidney back in Pittsburgh, Alex finds himself going after Geno despite being expressly told not to. Playing harder. Pushing. Shoving. Checking him whenever Geno comes close to touching the puck.

“What are you doing?” Max asks between periods.

Alex doesn’t have an answer.

Fuck Geno. Fuck him and his mouth and his rumours.

In the middle of the season, Alex’s older brother, Mikhael, moves to Washington after getting a job on the Mystics media team. After being so far away from his family, it is exciting to have Mikhael close. Closer. They don’t see each other often though.

When the Penguin’s play an away game with the Capital’s, Alex organises tickets for Mikhael and his girlfriend, Micha. Afterwards they go out for dinner. Mikhael is quiet and calm presence, and as always Alex finds himself unwinding around him. They go to a good restaurant and speak their first language and it so nice. Alex used to do that with Geno. But Alex still isn’t talking to Geno. During the game, they had sworn and hissed at each other on the ice and ignored each other off it.

Sidney tries, but he does not understand.

For Sidney, hating Geno is about team rivalry. There is something simple and enjoyable about disliking someone wearing a different jersey. It isn’t serious. None of the things he says under his breath about Geno are personal. To Sidney they might be, but in reality being a bad skater or taking bad shots when a teammate is open isn’t unforgivable. Those things only say so much about someone.

Alex knows Geno. They have been friends for as long as Alex can remember.

He has other friends, but no one he is as close to as Geno. Sidney cannot understand that either. Mikhael does. When Micha, gets up and goes to the bathroom, he quietly brings up Geno.

“You are still fighting?”

Alex nods.

“It will pass,” he tells Alex.

“I’m not so sure,” Alex disagrees, because that is the hard thing. He knows Geno better than almost anyone. Geno is stubborn and wilful and rarely offers apologies.

“Maybe you should offer one first?”

Alex snorts. If he had anything to apologise for he would.

Mikhael smiles a little. “You still act like a child.”

The comment should insult Alex, but it is said in a kind way. Mikhael takes after their father. Alex looks down at his plate. It is strange, being around family after so long being alone. When Mikhael’s girlfriend returns, Alex watches his brother smile softly at her. That is perhaps the nicest thing about the entire evening.
At the end of the night, Mikhael and Micha drive Alex back to the hotel the Penguins are staying. But when they say goodbye to each other, Alex finds himself almost in tears.

“Sanja,” Mikhael murmurs.

Alex has friends. He has so much. It’s childish to act this way.

Mikhael pats his back. “It’s okay.”

Alex laughs a little and releases his brother. “Yeah, yeah.”

Mikhael shakes his head. He is a good brother. Too good to Alex, really, all things considered.

On the curb, Micha is waiting patiently. She’s a nice woman. American, with Russian parents. From what Mikhael has told Alex, they met at work and have been dating for the last few months. While they were having dinner she had laughed at Alex’s jokes and afterwards, when they had walked to the car, she had held Mikhael’s hand.

Alex has never seen his brother so happy.

Alex tries to be happy for him.

(Alex tries to be a lot of things).

Towards the end of January, the Penguins and the Capitals play each other. It feels like the hardest game of the season so far. The two teams are so evenly matched. Without Sidney, Alex – Alex doesn’t even have the time to think about Sidney not being on the ice beside him. From up in the press box, Alex knows Sidney is watching, but down on the ice Alex is concentrating on winning.

Or he would be, if Geno wasn’t constantly in the way.

Bruce Boudreau, the Caps coach, keeps sending him out whenever Alex is on the ice. Together, Gen, and his line mates Brooks Laich and Nicklas Backstrom, are brutally effective. They target Alex with single minded intensity. The three of them surround Alex, pushing and shoving and stealing the puck from him. Together they tear through the Penguins defence during the first period, scoring the first and then second goal.

Between periods, Therrien makes his displeasure known.

Alex is told to be more aggressive, to make his presence felt.

But when he faces off against Geno, Geno grins. “Not so great, Sanja” he says, like that is a chirp. Alex scowls. “Is that what you are telling people now?”

“Fuck you,” Geno spits.

And now Alex is grinning.
It isn’t a surprise when he wins the face off. Or the next one.

Within one period, the Penguins regain the lead.

But it doesn’t last for long. In the third period, the lead the Penguins had, gets chipped away from them. One goal at a time, the Caps narrow the score until they are even.

The worst part is when Geno scores. He laughs bright and loud and at Alex. Alex hates it. Hates everything.

“Better luck next time,” Geno mocks, as he skates by.

And Alex has had enough. Had enough of Geno’s gossip and his lies and his fucking victorious smirk. The two teams face off against each other and Jordan gets the puck. He passes it to Sýkora, but Laich intercepts it and passes it to Geno and then Alex isn’t thinking about the puck or about winning or even about the Penguins.

He sees Geno with the puck, and as he comes around the back of the goals Alex takes a run at him. At the last moment, Geno ducks his shoulders a little and Alex goes over his head, soaring into the boards. Alex gets back up straight away, and then it’s gloves off. Geno is swearing and Alex is trying to get at him because he’s had enough of Geno and his talk but the refs are pulling them apart and their teammates are swarming around them and. And then Alex is off the ice and so is Geno. The game ends in a draw.

Afterwards, Alex is chewed out by Therrien, the press, and finally by Mario.

“That was the stupidest thing I’ve seen in a long time,” Mario says.

Mario is dressed impeccably in dark, well cut suit. Alex wet hair drips onto his collar and his gear bag digs into his shoulder. All Alex wants is to go home, but Mario’s gaze alone stills Alex.

Alex doesn’t have an excuse. He shrugs and Mario’s expression goes tight.

“You’re no use to anyone in a penalty box.”

And fuck that. Alex has been leading the team with Sidney injured.

In the morning, Alex skips practice.

Sidney comes over around lunchtime. “You can’t do that again,” he says when Alex lets him in.

Sidney is a horrible guest, Alex thinks as he makes Sidney a cup of tea. No manners.

Sidney is serious though. “Don’t be that player.”

“I was doing what I had to in order to win.”

“We didn’t win,” Sidney says, simply.

And Alex hates that. Hates how Sidney says it like that.
“We?” He asks, feeling petty and cruel. “Not you.”

Sidney sets his mug of tea onto the counter. “I’m always the captain whether or not I’m playing.”

And, Alex feels the fight go out of him. Yes, Sidney is always their captain.

He tries to apologise, but Sidney waves it away. Feeling worn and stupid, Alex sits down next to Sidney.

“What did I miss at practice?” He asks; his voice small.

“One hell of a bag skate.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry,” Sidney smiles. “You can make it up to Therrien next practice.”

(And Alex does. Afterwards he can hardly walk to the locker room he is that exhausted).

With Sidney out, Alex ends up going to the All Star Game alone. (By alone, Alex actually means he goes with Gonch, but Gonch is an old man. He does not count).

“I’ll miss you,” Alex tells Sidney before he leaves.

“No you won’t. You’ll drink too much and embarrass yourself in front of Rick Nash.”

“Gonch will keep me out of trouble.”

Sidney laughs. Bright and loud and incredulous. “No one can keep you out of trouble. Not even your mom.”

Sidney is partly right. Alex grins though. “True.”

The All Star Game is different the second time around.

Geno is there, so is Ilya, Andrei Markov, Pavel Datsyuk, and Evgeni Nabokov. The six of them end up crashing Gonch’s hotel room and drinking his entire mini bar before heading out together.

It good. Only it isn’t because Geno still won’t talk to or look at Alex.

At the end of the night they fight. Loud and roaring and drunk, Geno pushes Alex and Alex pushes back and then they’re being separated and taken back to the hotel.

“It isn’t fair,” Alex tells Gonch in the cab ride back.
“Stop acting like a child,” Gonch retorts.

Alex had never felt less like a child. He hates this. Hates fighting with Geno, hates that Geno is spreading such awful rumours about him, hates that everything he told Geno in confidence is now being used against him. Alex hates himself too, hates how this awful feud brings out the worst parts of him. He has said the most callous things, and acted like a thug on the ice.

Geno was Alex’s best friend. They grew up together.

They played against and with each other for as long as Alex can remember. As teenagers they kissed, sloppy and drunk on victory (or losses) in hotel bathrooms and smoked outside arenas after team practices. Alex laughed at Geno clumsily falling for Oksana and Geno got red in the face whenever Alex brought it up when they hooked up during Geno and Oksana’s many off periods during their infamously on/off relationship.

Alex has friends.

Alex has good friends.

He has Max and Ryan who are hilarious and Mario who Alex still can’t believe he gets to call a friend, and Gonch and Ksenia and Semin (though he would deny it) and Flower (though he’d probably deny it too) and Jordy too. Alex has Sidney too, strange as that may have once sounded. Alex isn’t alone. He isn’t. But Geno was always different. Always.

Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe that’s why it’s gotten so bad. Or maybe it’s Alex.

Alex was the one who punched Geno’s agent. Alex started it. So much has happened since then. So many things have been said and so many awful things have been done. But Alex was the one who started it.

Back in his hotel room, Gonch makes Alex take a long shower and drink a bottle of water. Tomorrow is the fantasy draft. Alex must smile and be bright and loud. He does not feel bright or loud or like smiling now. He does not feel like all that much now. He swallows two aspirins and gets into bed under Gonch’s watchful eye.

“Just like old times,” Alex tries to joke.

“No, Sanja,” Gonch tells him. “It isn’t.”

And he’s right. Alex knows he is.

When Alex gets back to Pittsburgh, he is exhausted. But the thought of returning to an empty house is too much. Pretending it doesn’t mean anything he drives to Sidney’s place instead of his own and gets Austin and Alexa to let him in. They are happy too. The three of them set up shop on Sidney couch and order pizza. When Sidney gets home, they’re halfway through dinner and have just started watching Night Watch which Alex is shocked that neither Austin or Alexa has ever heard of before.

For once, Sidney doesn’t make a big deal out of it.

Sitting down next to them, he helps himself to a slice of the vegetarian pizza.
“Don’t tell anyone,” Sidney says like Alex ever would.

“Cross my heart,” Alex says and in unison, Austin and Alexa nod.

And like that, the four of them spend the night.

At around ten, Nathalie comes and fetches Austin and Alexa. With Sidney fast asleep and the Lemieux children curled up and snoring softly against his side, Alex helps her take them back up to the main house. Austin is perhaps too old to be carried, back he feels light in Alex’s arms as he walks up the long driveway.

“Thank you,” Nathalie says softly.

Alex shakes his head. “It’s okay.”

It is. It’s good to be back; good to be with the Lemieux family. It feels almost like being at home.

When he gets back to the guesthouse the next film has already started and Sidney has slumped over the arm of the couch. His t-shirt is wrinkled and his hair is squashed out of shape. Alex feels his heart do stupid things inside his chest.

Sidney grumbles when Alex wakes him. Irritated, he blinks awake slowly.

“You’re still here,” he mumbles.

Alex nods, helping Sidney to his feet.

“I’ll crash on the couch,” he tells him.

Sidney wrinkles his nose. Alex smiles. At this point, he can’t help it.

(In the morning, they drive to practice together. Or, more accurately, Alex makes Sidney so late, Mario ends up having to drive them to practice).

This season, more than any of the previous ones, pushes Alex.

They are winning. They are almost there.

Sidney is a little wild around the eyes. With his ankle healed, he’s back. But since returning, his superstitions seem to become more and more complex and involved as each day passes. The team – even Mario – give him space.

Sidney has always been a good captain, but this year, he is truly becoming a good leader. Now he is demanding with them, not just himself. He wants the best from all of them, and seems intent of doing anything to get it. He sees potential in all of them. Alex often finds himself pinned by Sidney dark eyes at each practice.

“This year,” Alex finds himself saying afterwards in the parking lot.
Sidney opens his mouth, then shuts it.

He’s too afraid to speak – too afraid to jinx them. Alex steps close to Sidney and touches his hand.

It’s okay. He tells Sidney that.

Sidney has Alex. Alex can say those things for him.

The Penguins make the play offs.

They win and win and win and –

They get so close. So close Alex can taste it.

But that’s it.

The Red Wings win. They don’t.

Sometimes it doesn’t matter how fast or how good or how hard you play. Sometimes it isn’t enough.

Later Sidney says the right things and when he pulls Alex aside, Alex finds himself wondering how Sidney can stand to look at any of them. Alex can barely look Sidney in the eye from the shame of it all.

“You played well,” Sidney tells him, but Alex shakes his head.

“No,” Alex says, because he didn’t.

Sidney shakes his head. “You played well.”

Alex - at the end of his talk, Sidney slaps Alex on the back. It’s so out of character; Alex doesn’t understand at all.

That summer, Alex tries not to think about it. ‘It’ being anything.

[2008-2009]
Alex returns from Moscow, feeling restless.

*This year,* he thinks. But he can’t say it. Not now. Not yet.

Working on the wrong time, he drives over to Sidney’s because if he’s thinking that, he wants to know what Sidney is thinking.

Sidney grins, sharp and like he was waiting for Alex to say it.

“Good,” Alex tells him.

“Great,” Sidney says, handing Alex a beer and putting on an old game to review.

And normally Alex wouldn’t stay – he leaves homework for his actual coursework, especially when training camp hasn’t even begun – but he does. Together they camp out in front of Sidney’s TV and watch footage of themselves from a year ago. Getting a head start - that’s what Sidney calls it. But he would.

In the morning Alex wakes up on Sidney’s couch with his belt buckle digging into the soft skin of his stomach and the morning sun streaming into the room. Jet lag. God. Alex feels wretched. From the kitchen he hears Sidney moving around.

“Make me breakfast,” he groans.

“I’m not your mother,” Sidney snipes.

Alex snorts. Home again.

And he is. Slipping back into old behaviour, Alex hangs around. Showering in Sidney’s bathroom, he puts his old clothes back on and there are worse habits to have than following Sidney up Mario’s drive way to help themselves to lunch. After months away, it is a comfort to return to Lauren hogging the potato salad and Stephanie wanting Alex to tell her all about her junior team while Austin fails to get a word in edgewise.

They are family. Maybe not in the same way they are to Sidney, but Alex can’t begrudge Sidney that.

Summers are harder on Sidney than they are for Alex. Sidney never speaks about it, but Alex can tell. Mario too. From Moscow, Alex doesn’t hear everything. Sidney is insular during the season. The off season might be filled with advertising campaigns and interviews and events, but without being there on a day to day basis Alex knows there is much that he misses. Text messages and the occasional phone call keep them in contact, but it’s watching Mario pull Sidney aside that makes Alex wonder how long Sidney was waiting for him to come home.

Alex spent his summer forgetting. But he thinks Sidney wasn’t allowed too.

The tapes they had watched the previous evening weigh on Alex mind. He doesn’t work like Sidney. That is clear now. But then again, Sidney doesn’t work like him. In the past, that’s what made them so great together. There has always been pressure, but there has always been the two of them to share it. The thought that Alex can’t carry some of the weight Sidney bears, isn’t one Alex likes entertaining.

“Hey,” Alex says as they’re walking back down to Sidney’s guesthouse. “The season hasn’t started.”
Sidney gives Alex a look. “Yet.”

No. Not yet. Sidney is right about that. But it does start soon and when it does, the Penguins are one of four teams that fly out to Europe to open the season abroad. In Sweden the plan is for the Penguins to play the Ottawa Senators, in the Stockholm Globe Arena. Though it is technically a road trip, of sorts, it feels more akin to a training camp.

With ten days scheduled in Sweden before returning to the States, strangely it is Sidney who is the most excited to go sightseeing. The NHL in association with the Swedish tourism office have organised special visits to various museums and sights. More like children than grown men, they file onto buses and are taken for a tour of the city. Although Alex feels particularly jet lagged, he makes sure to snag a seat next to Sidney before Flower does.

Sidney, because he is Sidney, makes a face when Alex sits next to him.

“Bad captain,” Alex tells him. “Awful friend.”

But when they get to the Vasa Museum, Flower is worse. He volunteers Sidney for everything, trying to get pictures of Sidney on the ancient warship – but although Sidney might have been a recipient of the Order of Nova Scotia during the summer, according to the less than amused guide, only royalty or Presidents are allowed inside the ancient ships.

“Sidney is Canadian royalty,” Max tries for good measure and Alex nods in agreement.

Sidney goes bright, bright red.

“Shut up,” he hisses.

It is fun.

The following day they are sent on a scavenger hunt around the city. Although Alex is sure much research and planning went into the team outings that were organised by Frank Buonomo, the team’s senior director of team services and communications, breaking up into small groups and being sent out into an unfamiliar city is an awful idea in practice. Jordan quickly gets his team irrevocably lost, if Max’s hilarious text messages are any indication, while Alex manages to escape from under the watchful eye of the team veterans to hang out with Paul Bissonnette, who is a newcomer to the team but hilarious, Kris Letang who is neither new to the team or hilarious and Sidney. Together they form a super team.

“We’re going to win,” Alex tells them when they set off together.

Tanger frowns. “It isn’t a race.”

Alex always figured there was a reason Tanger and Sidney got on so well. Now he knows it; Tanger is boring. If he wasn’t so excellent at reading maps, Alex would suggest they swap him swap him for someone more fun. As it is, Alex is forced to make do.

Over the course of one very overcast Stockholm day, the four of them wind their way around the city, going to museums and to the zoo and on a ferry and drinking far too much alcohol to warm them up at lunch. The Pen’s TV crew trail after them, and more than once Alex and Biz have to loop back around them to hurry them along.

“Don’t slow us down, man,” Biz tells them.

Biz is a good man. He takes almost as much pleasure as Alex does when they find out that they are
the first to return. To celebrate, Biz suggests pranking the team. Unfortunately Sidney is within earshot and vetos the idea before Biz and Alex can even begin to brainstorm.

“Later,” Biz says, tapping his nose.

Alex nods in agreement.

All in all, a good start the week. It’s better though when Alex’s family and around a dozen of his friends fly out to watch him play. From the ice, Alex finds them and points them out to his team.

“Can’t take you anywhere,” Max drawls.

Alex grins. He doesn’t care if he is embarrassing. The last time he had so many people in the stands for him, was back in Moscow. Now, in a different uniform and with Therrien telling him to keep his head down, Alex can’t skate enough minutes. Right in the second period Sidney passes Alex the most beautiful assist and in one smooth flick, Alex pushes it past Alex Auld and into the goals.

Crashing into Sidney, Alex screams into his ear because it’s the first goal of the season and it’s theirs.

And from there out, it doesn’t stop.

The following day, the win again.

When they get home they keep winning.

Now cautious, Sidney doesn’t want to jinx anything. But Alex knows. He just knows.

And then –

Alex’s grandfather has been unwell for a while now. But when his health suddenly takes a bad turn, there isn’t a choice.

“Go,” Sidney says, when he finds Alex at his door.

Alex has already asked for and received compassionate leave, but. Alex doesn’t not know. He rubs the back of his hand over his eyes. He does not know why he went to Sidney of all people. Sidney doesn’t even like to get emotional about winning games.

But still. But still.

“Do you need a lift to the airport?” Sidney asks in that awkward way of his that means he doesn’t quite know what to do but he gets that he should be doing something.

It makes Alex want to laugh. God. Why are they even friends? Sidney is the worst person in the world.

Giving in, Alex wraps his arms around Sidney’s shoulders and hugs him until Sidney gives into it.
Tucking Sidney under his chin, Alex exhales slowly.

“Come back when you’re ready,” Sidney says into the collar of Alex’s coat.

The words are like hens teeth.

Alex closes his eyes. “I’ll see you soon.”

Home is. Alex doesn’t know.

He flies in with Mikhael and they stay together in their childhood home. Like he supposes his parents do when they aren’t in Pittsburgh with him, he watches the televised Penguins games at odd times. But his concentration comes and goes. Sometimes he can’t take his eyes off the play, but then he blinks and the lines have changed.

Mikhael is a quiet, steady presence. He always is. Alex finds himself spending much of his free time with him. During the summer, there is always something to do and someone around. But now, all his friends are either in the middle of their season or working. Their lives feel a world away from his. Mikhael smiles softly when Alex tells him though. It makes Alex feel a little like a child.

“You are a child,” Mikhael tells him. “You are still so young.”

Alex makes a face.

In the evening when they get back from the hospital, Alex listens when Mikhael calls Micha. There is a kindness to how he speaks. When they were growing up, Mikhael was a distant thought. But when Alex was growing up, he was moving towards only one place. Here, now, so far away from the NHL it’s hard to feel like a Penguin when hockey isn’t what’s on his mind.

On the weekend, drained, he goes out with his friends. At the end of a working week, they’ve drunk their first round and have ordered the second before Alex even arrives. At the end of the night he goes home with one of his ex’s. They went out for a while before he was drafted and at this point Dania is more of a friend than anything else but not everything has to be complicated. He kisses her in the cab and presses her against her apartment door when they are alone. They end up fucking right there. He pushes her skirt up around her waist and she unbuckles his belt with one hand and it’s a bit of a mess. They rush and he comes far too quickly. Dropping down to his knee, he licks her clit and slips his fingers inside her and makes her come without fanfare.

He doesn’t want to stay the night, but she tugs him into her bedroom and it isn’t difficult to sleep. Exhaustion catches up to him all at once. He wakes late to the sound of Dania’s alarm. Slapping the off button, she mumbles an apology as she rolls out of bed and stumbles into the bathroom. Closing his eyes, Alex lets himself fall back asleep. When he awakes again, Dania is dressed and reading the newspaper in front of the television.

It’s been a while since he spent the night with anyone, longer since he slept with someone who knows him so well. All of a sudden, he feels so homesick. But for what, he doesn’t quite understand. He is home. Only it doesn’t quite feel like home. Not like it used to.

“Hey,” Dania says. “Are you okay?”

Alex isn’t sure. He lies to her anyway because he doesn’t want her to worry, but she shakes her head
and when he leaves she calls him a cab and walks him out. In the lobby of her building she kisses him goodbye briefly. It is a kindness, Alex recognises, that she does not press him for things he cannot give. He probably doesn’t deserve it.

In the cab, he fiddles with his cell phone. Scrolling through his contact list, he debates the sense in calling someone. He isn’t sure what he’d say. The traffic is horrible. It stops and starts and it takes Alex over an hour to get home.

It’s been a long time since he felt helpless. Maybe that’s it. Or maybe that’s why he can’t stay.

When he flies out, he returns to a losing streak and Don Cherry criticism.

Alex is putting up points and winning games and the game before last he scored a hat trick, but people write articles about him being selfish. Sports commentators talk about how he isn’t a team player. Apparently Alex acts like a soccer player when he celebrates a goal. Apparently, Alex is a bad influence on good Canadian children. It’s nothing new. From Alex’s rookie year, he’s been criticized for his on ice behaviour. Or that’s how it is delicately put. Usually he’d brush it off, but instead it gets to him more than it should.

Around that time, Sidney starts to stands near to Alex when they do press.

Alex likes that, likes that he can turn and joke with Sidney. It is only later, when his mother comments on how clever Sidney is, that Alex realises that Sidney does it on purpose. He stands close to Alex, so they are seen standing together – seen standing united.

PR is another game in and of itself. Alex doesn’t know how Sidney knows all the rules. Alex thought he did. Thought his mother prepared him for this like she did for everything else.

But – Alex loves his team. Loves being a Pen. He doesn’t understand how people can’t see that.

His mother sounds weary when he asks her.

“Keep performing,” she says. “Maintain your momentum.”

He makes a sound of agreement.

It’s good advice. He knows this. People can criticise him, but if he’s racking up the points and scoring goals they can only say so much.

In January it all falls apart completely.

They begin the month with a bad loss against the Rangers and end it unable to shake off a losing streak that completely ruins their rankings. From second in the Eastern conference, they fall to tenth. Alex doesn’t know what’s going on – what’s going wrong. Each game is horrible. The most appalling, perhaps of all of them, is when they lose to the Panthers five to zero. Five to zero. It’s brutal and so is the reaction from the media and fans.

For the first time since Therrien took over the head coaching position, Alex starts to see him visibly worry. At the beginning of the season, his contract was extended to 2010-2011 season, but that seems so long ago. In practice he has them doing bag skates until their legs ache and then pounds them with drill after drill. They go back to basics, right back, but none of their work shows when it matters. They’re a good team – a great team but their timing feels completely off. Unable to right themselves, it’s like they’re constantly scrabbling to keep up.

At night Alex is tired enough to fall into bed, but with the Penguin’s struggling to hold on, Alex feels
restless. Impulsively, the next day he rallies around the locker room and manages to get around half the team to agree to go out with him.

“Tonight is on Ovie,” Max announces when they arrive at the bar and why not?

Five hours later, Alex is drunk and his credit card is paying off a grand or so of liquor. He isn’t sure if he feels better. He isn’t sure if he feels anything. Stumbling into a cab with Max and Duper, Alex pulls at the collar of his shirt to loosen it, and rests his head against the glass.

They’re half way through the season. Alex knows it’s a long season. There is still time to turn it around. Alex knows this. Therrien has spent a long time working with Alex. He isn’t the same player he was when Therrien first took over, but it’s difficult not to fall into old habits. Bad habits.

When he turns up the practice in the morning, he and half the team are wrecked from the night before. Therrien is furious. He sends Alex home without a word. Alex hasn’t been sent home from practice in… Alex doesn’t even know. It gets out, of course, because it would and right at the worst possible time. According to Deadspin, Therrien has lost control of him – lost control of the whole team. According to ESPN, Alex is the bad boy of hockey. According to the local Pittsburgh press, Alex needs to start to earn his pay check.

But it falls to Sidney cover Alex.

Alex knows Sidney is loyal; loyal to his friends, his team, even to Alex. But it’s a kind of blind loyalty takes Alex aback, which is stupid because when people Alex is called a showboat, called bad for the team, bad for the sport, Sidney’s eyes always go hard and he says that they don’t know Alex, don’t understand. Sidney does.

It used to take Alex off guard, because away from the media Sidney is the first one to tell Alex when he could have done more, and to point out things he needs to work harder on.

But – Sidney is Sidney. Of course he would take Alex’s side when it matters.

No one takes Therrien’s side when it matters.

Everyone knows being a coach is the hardest job in sport. When things don’t go well, they’re the first to go and in February, Penguin’s management replace him with Dan Bylsma, the coach of the Penguins’ AHL affiliate Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. Bylsma is made head coach on an interim basis, which basically means if he can’t get the Penguin’s back into the playoffs this season, next season another coach will be given the task.

With twenty five games left in the season, Bylsma doesn’t have time to waste.

No one on the team really knows him apart from a few of the rookies. But then again, no one on the team is really sure who will still be on the team after the trade deadline. The uncertainty makes Alex’s play unpredictable – makes Alex unpredictable.

They win and lose and it isn’t always graceful. It isn’t always close either. They’re fighting though, every single period in every single game. Around them, the team is shifting and changing. People are leaving and arriving. Alex feels off balance right up until they play the Flyers in Philadelphia. The Penguins managed to pull off two wins in the previous games prior to the one against the Flyers, but each one is close and the one against the Islanders of all teams, is won at the last minute in overtime.
“I need your help tonight,” Sidney says, as they get ready in the visitors’ locker room.

Alex looks over at him. Sidney doesn’t talk to people before games. Sidney doesn’t see outside of his tunnel vision before games.

Alex blinks. “Okay?”

Sidney nods. “Okay.”

And it’s like something clicks.

Sidney is going to lead the Penguins and Alex is going to be right there to back him up.

They win. Sidney scores a hat trick and gives Alex’s some of the leanest, sharpest assists Alex has ever received. Two of them, Alex turns into neat goals that feel so easy when he slips them into the net.

Sidney isn’t always a graceful player. But he makes every second on the ice count. Suddenly, the Penguins are setting the pace.

When they play the Caps the following night, it’s like all their hard work is finally paying off.

Sidney is in the thick of it every single shift; going after the puck and fighting people to keep it. Right by his side, Alex pushes through the Caps defences like they aren’t even there. Geno is on Sidney’s back, constantly one moment away from stealing the puck. But tonight, for the first time in the Capital’s season, it isn’t enough. They aren’t enough.

The Penguins pull out their fifth win in the row and it’s better than almost anything.

They’re still alive. They’re still in there with a chance.

Last year wasn’t a fluke.

When they return from their road trip, they return to a sold out arena.

With each game, they slowly climb back up the rankings and into the playoff picture. Eventually they reach fourth place in the Eastern conference ranks. It isn’t as good a finish as last season, but honestly Alex doesn’t care. Conference titles are one thing, the Stanley Cup is another. They have a chance. A strong chance.

The feeling he had in the beginning returns.

This year. This year.

Each game feels important. More important than any other game Alex has ever played. He finds himself becoming quiet in practice, and staying late to study tapes with Sidney. What coursework Alex does have, gets set aside. His teachers are understanding, thankfully. But it comes to a point, where Alex ends up dropping two classes.

Anticipation builds inside Alex. As the season draws to a close, there is no doubt where the Penguins are going. Team practices are getting shorter and shorter and Bylsma is starting to talk about scratching Alex or Sidney for some of the upcoming games.
“Got to save your legs,” he says when it comes up in conversation.

Alex sees the logic. He does. But he doesn’t quite know how he is meant to sit in a press box and watch. The first night he is scratched, he ends up following Sidney home to review the game tape with Mario. Mario though, turns them away.

“Tomorrow,” he tells them.

Sidney makes a pained face. “But—”

Mario shakes his head and sends them back to the guesthouse. Because Mario is one of the few people Sidney does listen to, he puts the tapes aside, but he does turn on ESPN and together they watch highlights from the game. Alex ends up falling asleep at some point and when he wakes up it’s the middle of the night and his phone is buzzing with a call from Sasha. Ignoring it, Alex goes back to sleep. In the morning he listens to Sasha drunken message. The Capitals have made the playoffs too, and according to Sasha, Alex is going to get his ass kicked and Sidney is going to get his ‘overrated’ ass kicked too.

“You know what they say about counting eggs before they have hatched?” Alex tells Sasha as he waits for Sidney’s kettle to boil.

Sasha laughs. “I count on Zhenya. Mike and Nicky too.”

Alex smiles.

“Where are you?” Sasha asks.

“Sid’s.”

“Crosby?”

“Yes?”

Sasha whistles.

Alex rolls his eyes.

Playoffs this year, feel weighted with expectation.

They got so far last year, only to be beaten at the finals. This year feels like a second chance.

The first round is against the Flyers. Each game is bitter and brutal.

Four games into the series, Alex’s skin feels too tight. Restless, he can’t sleep, can’t stay still. He should be better than this – Therrien and now Bylsma have worked with Alex, each of them focusing on mental preparation. Half the game is in his head, that’s what they say. They’re right, he knows. But it’s so hard to be focused.

“We have to win,” he tells Flower, because goalies understand.

They do have to win.
At night he rattles around his empty house and during the day he drives his car too fast, works too hard in practice and takes too many girls home during away games. He kisses and drinks and fucks and it’s not enough.

Everyone is watching and waiting. They have to bring the Stanley Cup home to Pittsburgh. Fuck. Alex has to bring it home to Moscow/his mother. He has to.

The entire team is on tender hooks. When it counts, the Penguins pull though triumphant. The second round against the Capitals is somehow worse than the Eastern Conference quarterfinals against the Flyers. With few breaks between games, they are played in quick succession over eleven days. Three years ago they were the two worst teams in the Eastern Conference. Now, in less than a fortnight one of them will go onto the conference semi-finals.

The Stanley Cup finals aren’t for a month, but by the tone of the articles appearing in the press, it’s this series being billed as the great showdown of the NHL. Sidney and Geno, and Alex (of course). Sasha too, Alex supposes, if he’s feeling generous. There seems to be no end to the stream of articles hyping the games and predictions of who will win and who will lose. Stats are compared; scandalous quotes are garnered from every party but Sidney (his are bratty and unbecoming) but Alex only cares about winning.

The first two games are played in Washington and the home town advantage is clear. Geno is in fine form, playing maybe the best he ever has. On the ice he is fast and brutal and seems to always be skating in and out and between Alex and Sidney. His English is still pathetic, but he’s become a two way forward and it shows when he manages to steal the puck from Sidney when they battle in the thick of players.

They’re completely different players, but no one seems to be as well matched to Sidney as Geno.

Alex is a different matter – he and Geno are another matter.

Bylsma warned Alex before they left Pittsburgh not to let Geno provoke him.

“You’re not any use if you’re in the penalty box,” Bylsma reminds Alex in the brief interval between the first and second periods.

Alex nods.

They’re in the lead, one up, but that can be taken from them. Alex knows this. The Caps new goalie, Semyon Varlamov, is difficult to predict. He’s debut was only a few weeks ago in the second game of the Caps first round series. He’s good though and in the second period they manage a second goal before they are shut out and the Capitals take advantage, winning the game by one.

With the second game of the series scheduled for the following day, Alex crashes on the bus back to the hotel, only waking up when Sidney touches his shoulder after they arrive. He almost had Varlamov in the second period. Varlamov only just managed a save.

“Tomorrow,” Alex tells Sidney.

Sidney nods a little.

The rest of the team seems to be giving them space. Alex’s has never really needed it like he knows Sidney does. But now, in the empty bus, Alex is grateful. Taking a deep breath, he gets to his feet. He wants a stiff drink, but needs a long shower and sleep. Sidney smiles a little when Alex tells him.

“I vote for the latter.”
“Captain’s orders?”

Sidney snorts. “Like anyone can order you around.”

True. But it makes Alex grin.

If Alex has bad habits, he also has this with Sidney.

Outside the bus, there is press and fans and –

“I had them drive to the back entrance,” Sidney says.

“Through the laundry room?”

Sidney shrugs. Where nothing else is easy, this is. Squaring his shoulders, Alex follows Sidney off the bus and though the hotels back of house. Sidney is used to back entrances. He seeks them out, unwilling to deal with unwanted attention any more than he has too. On more than one occasion Alex has acted as a distraction – drawing people away from Sidney with boasts and laughter, leaving clubs through the front exit with a girl on each arm while Sidney steals away out the back exit. Alex has never minded attention; he’s spent most of his life seeking it out. But after such a hard game, it’s a relief not to have to gather the energy to face the outside world. Maybe this is how Sidney feels all the time. Alex doesn’t know. Sometimes Sidney is difficult to read. Off the ice he is often ill at ease. Self-contained and reserved, it takes him a beat to get jokes and sometimes, he misses them all together.

He is a good person though; a great friend. A great captain too.

It feels like it’s up to the two of them.

Tomorrow they’re going to face off against the Capitals for the second time and this time, they’ll be the ones shutting the Caps out.

Tomorrow they’ll be setting the pace.

In the Central division, the Red Wings are making their presence felt and it feels like every second question Alex is asked, is about them. Pavel, when Alex speaks to him, says it’s the same for him and his guys.

“Maybe we will meet again?” Pavel comments.

Alex doesn’t think in maybe’s.

“This year, my name will be on Stanley Cup,” he tells Pavel.

Pavel laughs. “Yes, yes. Why not?”

Pavel may be able to laugh, but it is difficult for Alex to think of anything else.

He thought last year was difficult. It feels like nothing compared to this year.

Sidney goes crazy.
Most of the team follows his example. Jordy grows a truly awful beard and Max grows a worse one.

“It’s tradition,” Max hisses, when Alex tries to talk sense into him.

A lot of stupid things seem to be tradition.

When they play the Capitals at home in Pittsburgh, the entire arena seems to buzz with energy.

Alex restlessness has passed and in its place, is the shadows of exhaustion. It hasn’t caught up to him yet and he doesn’t plan to let it.

Geno is quiet and intense. He and Semin are fast, efficient, and make things happen. But Alex knows he is better. Knows that he and Sidney will be the better.

Everyone wants to win. But only one team can win. In the end, it’s the Penguins.

Alex doesn’t look back once.

It shows.

They beat the Caps and then sweep the Hurricanes and from there it’s onto the finals.

This time around, the finals are just as overwhelming, but Alex refuses to be swayed by the pressure. He finds himself looking to Sidney.

Where last year Sidney wore the C on his jersey, this year he is their captain in every way.

When Alex wavers, it is Sidney who stands tall and strong.

“We’re going to do this,” Sidney says, when they’re two games down.

Alex looks at him, and – Alex believes him.

“Good,” Sidney says.

And Sidney is right.

They do.

They win the Stanley cup.

Alex cries when he raises the Stanley Cup above his head. He cries and he feels untouchable and when he hands the cup to Duper, his mother and his father are there to embrace him. Alex falls into their arms.

Time slips and slides away from him after that.

He remembers Mikhael kissing him and Micha snapping photographs and then Mario congratulating him. There is press and the fans cheering so loudly Alex can’t hardly hear a thing. Then there is a
weeklong celebration where Alex drinks and doesn’t sleep and interrupts Sidney during interviews to remind him how they won. That they are Stanley Cup champions just like Mario.

The press pick up on that. Sidney and Alex become Mario and Jaromir Jagr part two and Alex can’t think of anything better.

In the midst of it all, they almost have sex once.

It’s right after they win the Stanley Cup and Alex is so happy, so very happy and Sidney is there and they’re both drunk and they’ve won. Sidney’s grinning and Alex is finishing off the last of the champagne and when they kiss, it tastes of bubbles and Sidney is grinning and Alex is crowding into his space and they get as far as Alex fumbling with Sidney’s belt before they realise what they’re doing.

Sidney is half hard under Alex’s hand, and Alex is rolling his hips, but it’s – the moment Alex touches Sidney’s belt, it’s like coming back to their senses. Sidney huffs out an awkward laugh, which makes Alex’s laugh, because really, Sidney Crosby, of all people.

“So funny,” Alex tells him.

Sidney makes a face. “A lapse in judgement.”

It sounds like a correction. But Alex thinks he is right.

And that’s about it.

The next morning there are more interviews and city wide celebrations and Alex ends up crying when his mother kisses him congratulations.

(It becomes something that Alex doesn’t talk about and something that never happened to Sidney).

[2009-2010]

Time seems to move quickly. One day it is training camp, the next the team is taking the ice for their first pre-season game. Then almost overnight, the season begins.

Alex doesn’t have time to look backwards. Alex doesn’t have time to do anything but play.

There is a moment though, at the ceremonial banner raising that Alex stops. He did that. They did that.

And they can do it again. Alex knows it.
The Penguins win the first game of the season against the Rangers. A win is always a great way to start a season and afterwards, Alex demands the team go out to celebrate.

“This year,” he says. “This year.”

“You said that last year,” Sidney reminds Alex.

Alex grins. “I did.”

And he did. He did say that and it was their year.

“Don’t jinx us,” Sidney whines, but not seriously.

Around Alex, everything feels so very vivid. He orders the first round of drinks, and feeling overly generous, he hands over his credit card and tells the waitress to start a tab; he is the alternate captain. It is his duty to make sure his team has a good night. They earned it. But Sidney shakes his head when the waitress returns.

“Sid,” Alex tells him very seriously. “You must start the season as you wish to finish it.”

“We’re playing the Islanders tomorrow.”

“We are going to beat them tomorrow,” Alex corrects. Because they are.

Sidney looks pained.

Superstitious Sidney; Alex doesn’t know how even Sidney manages to keep track of all of them. Slinging an arm around his shoulder, Alex draws Sidney close. Sidney grumbles, but doesn’t make much of an effort to get away from Alex. In the booth, surrounded by their team, Alex feels like it is his duty to make sure his captain – their captain – has a good time.

“Game tomorrow. Celebrate tonight,” Alex orders him.

Sidney makes a face. But he can’t deny the logic.

“One drink,” he says finally.

Alex grins. “One drink.”

Max laughs. Alex shushes him. “Don’t be cruel.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Max retorts.

Alex didn’t miss Max at all. (A lie, of course).

Max laughs. (He always knows better).

This year is different, feels like more, with the Winter Olympics on the horizon.

In the middle of November Sidney carries the Olympic torch in Nova Scotia. For all that the guys in the locker room tease him, it’s kind of glorious to see photographs of Sidney running with the torch
in him hometown. Sidney doesn’t often look happy – he’s far too guarded and reserved for that, but he does with the torch.

When he gets back, Alex drops by his place and grills him about the experience until Sidney gets a pinched expression on his face.

“Alex,” he whines. “Come on.”

Alex grins. “I must know everything. I will need to know when I carry the torch in Sochi.”

Sidney snorts. “Yeah. Of course.”

This, makes Alex snort. Sidney doubts it? Truly?

“Of course I will carry the torch!”

“I’m saying you won’t,” Sidney backtracks.

“I might even light the cauldron,” Alex tells him, because he may. Sidney doesn’t know.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sidney mumbles under his breath, like he thinks Alex can’t understand. (Alex’s English is now tremendous. He rarely has need of the translator the Pens have on staff).

Over dinner with the Lemieux’s, Alex gets Mario’s opinion because Mario would know.

“Everyone but me carried the torch,” Alex starts, because that is a good way to start. (Nathalie coughs. Alex carries on, unperturbed).

Mario smiles. “You’ll get your day.”

Alex nods. Of this, he is sure. But, “Sid does not think Russia will pick me to light cauldron at Sochi.”

“I didn’t say that,” Sidney snipes.

Alex turns and gives him a look. “You did.”

“Did not.”

Alex sighs. Always, Sidney does this in front of Mario. It’s so embarrassing.

At the last winter Olympics, Mario carried the torch. At this one, people are saying maybe he might light the cauldron. When Alex brings it up, Mario shakes his head.

“I don’t think so.”

Alex sets his knife and fork down. “I think so,” he tells Mario, because who could be better? Mario is an Olympic Gold medallist, a multiple Stanley Cup and World Champion. Mario is Alex’s hero.

Turning, Alex looks at Sidney. Sidney is nodding in agreement.

Nathalie shakes her head. “You boys are as bad as each other.”

That, is probably true. But there are worse things. Exchanging a grin with Sidney, Alex picks up his cutlery and takes a big bite of steak. Yes, there are worse things than being as bad as Sidney.
The build-up to the Winter Olympics starts early and casts a long shadow over the NHL season. Sidney and Alex are both chosen to play on their respective national teams for the Winter Olympics, as are Gonch, Brooks Orpik and Marc-Andre Fleury. The Penguins PR organises a photo shoot to celebrate it, as do other teams who have one or more of their players chosen.

Alex supposes it is something to celebrate. But for the most part, Alex tries to focus all of his attention on the NHL season. It’s Alex’s second Olympics, but it is Sidney’s first. As such, Alex figures it is up to him to keep his head. It isn’t until Team Canada and Team Russia announce that Sidney and Alex have been chosen as respective team alternate captains, that the press start to actively begin to pit them against each other.

“Are you starting to feel competitive?” One journalist asks Alex.

“I am always competitive. Always,” Alex laughs.

But other reporters, asks questions about if he is spying on Sidney. Those questions, Alex doesn’t find so funny. He laughs, yes, but that aren’t so funny. Sure, Alex knows Sidney; knows how he is on the ice. They have played against each other many times before, recently too, at Worlds a few years previously. But this is something different. Something more. The thought of using his hard won familiarity with Sidney against him, even in jest, doesn’t seem fair or right. It makes a good story though, and there are many of those being written. Alex tries not to read any of them. He knows Sidney too, is avoiding them to the best of his ability. His agent and his father make it difficult. They have always been protective of him. Cynically, Alex thinks they would. Sidney is grown now, but he is their golden goose. The pressure they put on him, Alex thinks, is too much especially after last season.

Usually the off season is a break for everyone. For Sidney, he didn’t seem to stop. Every time they spoke, Sidney was on his way to an event or just finishing an interview or about to do a photo call. Many times too, Alex’s calls and texts when unanswered. He was busy too. But he had time for fun; time to seek out the sun and drink too much and dance with girls and sometimes be taken home by them.

Now, back in Pittsburgh, even Sidney’s free days seem to be filled in advance.

“It’s a big year,” Sidney says, which is different to what Alex said after that first game against the Rangers.

Increasingly, this year doesn’t feel like theirs, but like it belongs to someone else.

The pressure too, is felt when he speaks with other players selected for the Russian team.

“You must stop this with Zhenya” Pavel Datsyuk says when he calls Alex ahead of the Winter Classic they’ve both been selected to play in.

It has been a long time since Geno was Zhenya for Alex.

Pavel shakes his head. “This is not good. Not for you. Not for him. Not for team.”

Alex feels uncomfortable.

“You must fix it.”
Alex knows he does. The feud has gone on for far too long.

At one point, Geno was Alex’s best friend.

At the previous NHL awards, they spoke briefly. But it was almost like talking to a stranger. Once Alex knew Geno better than anyone. It feels difficult to remember now.

They have to fix it. Alex knows it.

As the Olympics draw closer and closer, the pressure to do so, mounts. Gonch brings it to a head. When he invites Alex over for dinner with he and Ksenia, he makes Alex set the table and then when they sit down to eat he confronts Alex.

“This cannot go on,” Gonch tells Alex without fanfare.

Alex – Alex nods.

Gonch eyes him, as if trying to decipher if Alex is serious. “Good,” he says, eventually.

But it is not that simple. It never is. Geno holds grudges. That is what he does. He is wilful and Alex knows better than to think he will allow the concerns of their friends to sway him. They are no longer children, but on occasion Geno acts very much like one.

Gonch though, looks determined. He sounds determined too, when he says, “I will organise it.”

Alex nods.

He cannot be this person any more. Cannot fight and spit insults and hurt Geno. He just can’t.

“Good,” Gonch nods.

Gonch speaks to Ilya, and together they organise a breakfast. But it isn’t until the Penguins play the Capitals in late January, that Geno and Alex finally speak to each other.

Over cereal and juice, Gonch makes Alex and Geno resolve their differences.

They only speak briefly and only to establish that they no longer hold anything against the other.

It isn’t particular enjoyable and neither of them willingly give up much ground. They agree to forgive each other though. Alex supposes that is enough. Afterwards, Sidney is strangely proud of Alex.

“Did you forget which team Geno is on?” Jordan snickers, because he too finds it laughable.

Sidney scowls.

Alex tuts at Jordan. “Don’t question our captain.”

Jordan rolls his eyes. (As does Sidney).
So Geno is once more Alex’s friend. Or, at the least, they are not fighting. That will have to be enough. Alex isn’t sure if he can give more.

At the Vancouver Olympics, Alex stands very tall at the opening ceremony. Even Sasha, who cannot muster enthusiasm for many things, walks into the arena with his shoulders back and his head held high.

Ahead of them, their team captain Aleksey Morozov carries the Russian flag.

It is glorious. But it is the calm before the storm.

There is little time for such frivolities once the competition begins.

Alex divides his time into practices, games, press, and sleep. Eating too, but far too often, that feels rushed. Or perhaps, it is just him, feeling like he has more important places to be. During the time between games, he finds himself impatient. He attends some of the other events his country is participating in, watches women’s hockey, skating, snowboarding; all kinds of things. But all the time, he feels distracted. His mind is always on hockey.

His teammates are no different. The veterans, the players who have seen it all before, are better able to compartmentalise. In practice they are the ones who tie the team together. They work alongside Alex, and younger players like Geno and Sasha, helping them learn each other’s style of play and way of approaching the game – making them a team instead of players from many different teams wearing the same uniform.

Their coaches this year are Igor Zakharkin and Vyacheslav Bykov. Alex grew up watching Bykov play for CSKA Moscow and for HC Fribourg-Gottéron. As a coach, he is demanding and honest. When he speaks, he speaks his mind. In practice, Alex listens, when doing press, it is perhaps more difficult as then he is asked to comment. Placed on the first line, he has no space to make mistakes. All he can do is his best. But it does not seem like enough.

In the midst of it all, he manages to talk to Sidney just as his team is finishing their practice. Geno tags along, too agitated to stay in the team apartment. They are all wearing red and white uniforms, but that is all they share in common. Sidney grins a little when Alex points it out.

“Jealous?” Sidney asks.

Alex snorts. He can’t help it.

Sidney grins brightly.

On the ice, a few members of team Canada are glaring in Alex and Geno’s direction.

Months ago, sports journalist joked about Alex knowing his enemy. Now, journalists are not joking when they write that the Canadian and Russian rivalry is like the clash of the Titans. Alex isn’t sure if they are right or wrong. His entire morning was devoted to studying Sidney and the other players on the Canadian team; learning their strengths and weakness, and devising plays and plans for beating them. The pressure too, from Russian media and fans, feels like such a weight on his shoulders. But even then, Alex cannot begin to imagine what it must be like for Sidney here in Vancouver where his name is on everyone’s lips.
While the ice is being cleared, Alex teases Sidney, because he knows none of his teammates would dare too. There is not nearly enough time though, and before Alex can get started telling Sidney about how he overheard two Canadian snowboarders comparing their Crosby sighting experiences, he is pulled away by Geno.

“Lunch,” he tells Alex, tapping his watch.

Alex nods.

Sidney, it is clear, has little time too.

In Canada, it seems like everyone is talking about him. Talking about what he can do, what he must do, and what he has done.

He can tell that Geno finds it deplorable to hear Alex provoke Sidney in such a manner, especially given the presence of press that seem intent on recording Sidney’s every moment. But there is nothing about the way Alex speaks to Sidney that will affect him negatively. Honestly, Alex doesn’t think it will affect Sidney at all. Sidney is far better at ignoring distractions – even if it’s Alex – than anyone.

“I wouldn’t dare taunt Crosby,” Geno tells Alex later.

Alex laughs. “No. But you are still star struck by him.”

Geno scowls.

He is though. At the last time they all went out drinking, Geno spent half the night pretending not to stare at Sidney and this was after the Penguins soundly beat the Capitals.

Alex bumps his shoulders into Geno’s. “Keep your eyes on the gold, not on Crosby.”

Geno swears at him.

Russia’s first game they beat Latvia soundly, 8-2.

In their second game, against Slovakia, it is far tougher. They fight for the win. But not hard enough. Afterwards, Alex feels like he didn’t give enough. At home, people seem to agree.

They pull out a win in their third game against the Czech Republic, but it all comes apart in the quarterfinals.

In the team apartments, Alex feels numb after – after.

He remembers being on the ice, and remembers Geno pulling him close and then holding him up when Alex’s knees collapsed under him. Then nothing. Then he is back in the team apartment, in his room with Geno.

Alex feels numb. He feels Geno undressing him; tugging his shirt over his head and pulling his shoes
off his feet. Swaying a little, he looks at Geno’s tear stained face.

They hadn’t spoken for months, years.

Geno is Alex’s friend and Alex hadn’t spoken to him.

Alex gulps in a mouthful of air. A half sob, half whimper and it cuts Geno right to the bone. Alex sees him flinch, his dark eyes closing.

And then they are kissing. Then Alex is pulling Geno close and pushing him down into his bed. It’s a mess. Alex crowds Geno, uses his hands to pull off his pants and boxers in one go, Geno rips off his shirt and his skin is cold to the touch. Still cold from the ice in the arena and the cold shower he took in the locker room afterwards to punish himself. He shakes under Alex’s hands. He shakes and he rolls his hips desperately against Alex’s, bearing down on Alex’s spit slick fingers when Alex presses one and then two into him in quick succession and –

Alex can’t do it. He can’t. He breaks. He weeps.

He doesn’t hear Sidney – doesn’t hear the knock on the door. Later, he just remembers the way Geno shifts from underneath him, gently rolling away. Maybe he says something. Maybe he just can’t stay in the same room as Alex.

But then there is Sidney talking awkwardly with Geno when Alex stumbles out of his room. Sidney’s shoulders turned inward and his hands deep in his tracksuit pockets and Sidney is Alex’s friend. Even now, Sidney is Alex’s friend. Maybe especially now, when they are wearing the same colours but for different countries.

Alex knows Sidney doesn’t like to be touched, doesn’t like people in his space, but Alex goes to him and Sidney wraps his arms around Alex.

The three of them end up on the couch. Without waiting for an invitation, Alex lays his head on Sidney’s lap and closes his eyes. Above him, he hears Sidney and Geno speak softly to each other. It takes Sidney a while to warm up to people – longer apparently, if they’re on another team – but Geno is good with people. Vaguely, Alex hears Geno draw Sidney into conversation. After a while, Alex feels Sidney stroke his hair. It’s nice. So nice, really. And like that they stay.

(When they get back to Pittsburgh, Sidney doesn’t mention anything about that day or the gold medal Canada wins to Alex. Not even once).

After the Olympics Alex and Geno are friends. Friends again. Actually, not just officially.

But whenever the Caps are in town, Alex still finds himself dragging Sidney along when he meets up with Sasha and Geno. It’s tradition at this point. But what Alex isn’t prepared for, is how now, Geno likes Sidney too. When Alex bullies Sidney into buying the first round for the night, Geno goes and helps him with the drinks and then again with the next round. It’s strange.

“You’re just as bad as Crosby.”

Alex makes a face. “No one is as bad as Sid.”

“You are very close.”

As the captain, Sidney is generally meant to be the voice of reason. Or in theory he is meant to be. In reality Sidney takes great pleasure in disliking the opposition. In many ways, Alex thinks Sidney likes disliking teams more than he likes liking people. There is something clear cut about disliking the opposition. Professional even, rather than anything personal. Or at least expected, which in turn makes it something Sidney is able to do. Sidney is rather good at not showing that though, except when it’s just him and his teammates. Then Sidney can relax and be as awful as he wants without feeling self-conscious.

On the team bus and in the charter plane, sometimes Alex sits in the seat in front of Sidney, just so he can turn around and witness Sidney’s vicious character assassination of whichever team they are facing next. Although Sidney’s opinion of Geno may have softened in light of the Olympics, Geno remains a particular target of scorn.

“Did you see that penalty in the Caps last game?” Sidney asks.

Alex had. It was nasty. Geno had knocked Dan Girardi down and kept him down with a sharp right hook to the jaw and a brutal punch to the gut after Girardi hit Sasha from behind.

“I know you’re friends now,” Sidney says once, like the words are a personal insult.

“Oh yes,” Alex nods. “Best friends. BFF’s.”

(Ryan taught Alex that abbreviation before he was traded. It’s very fitting, Alex thinks).

“But you’re a Penguin first.”

“I have known Geno since I was a child.”

Sidney makes a frustrated sound.

Alex tries to hide a grin. Sidney of course, sees.

“Screw you,”

“Hey, now,” Alex says, holding up his hand. “I am totally Pen first, friend second.”

Sidney’s eye twitches.

“Totally,” Alex promises, crossing his heart.

(Okay, they might not agree about Geno, but they do agree when it comes to any and all Flyers.)
Screw them and the horse they rode in on).

After the Olympics, Alex focuses all his energy on the NHL season.

From home, he hears all kinds of things. He carries the disappointment with him, but tries not to let it define him. For the most part, it doesn’t. He skates and the Penguins win and keep winning. Each game, Alex feels like he is untouchable. Even Sidney has to work to keep up with the pace Alex sets.

While playing the Tampa Bay Lightning, he scores his 50th goal.

As the puck slides into the goal net, Alex can’t breathe for a moment. It is just that good. He laughs and he drops his stick and pretends it’s too hot to pick up, because it is. None of the Lightning can even come close to how on Alex is tonight.

But afterwards, Rick Tocchet, the coach of the Lighting bluntly says that Alex’s actions made him – well, Tocchet’s words were Alex ‘went down a notch in my books.’

Alex doesn’t even know what that is supposed to mean. All he knows is instead of having finally proved himself, Tocchet’s comments give other people the freedom to say what they want about Alex. Again. On the whole, what they say mainly seems to be rehashes of the same things people have been saying for years. He is too flamboyant. Too loud. Too egotistical. Too Russian, which isn’t what anyone actually says, but Alex can read between the lines.

Bylsma publicly speaks in Alex’s defence.

What he says doesn’t matter. It was always going to be taken out of context and it is.

Quickly, what was meant to be a celebration turns into an exercise in PR.

Mario, though, takes the time to come over to Alex’s place with a bottle of champagne after the team return from the road trip.

They drink it outside in Alex’s garden while watching Alex’s new puppy Ghera race through the grass.

“Don’t listen,” Mario tells Alex.

Alex nods. He doesn’t. Or he tries not to. Which isn’t the same thing, he knows but sometimes it can’t be helped.

Mario shakes his head.

Sometimes it is still amazing to think that Alex knows Mario Lemieux. This feels like one of those times. Cradling his glass of champagne in his hands, Mario smiles fondly at Alex.

“People will find something else to talk about soon,” Mario says before he leaves.

Alex nods. He knows that. But that’s what he was told the first time. He wishes he didn’t, but he knows that people seem to take any excuse to talk about him. They seem to find any excuse to compare him against Sidney too. Where Alex is an embarrassment, Sidney is a role model. Sidney is
a hard worker. Sidney earns every point, makes every assist count, uses his team. Sidney is a team player; he doesn’t play for personal glory.

Neither Alex or Sidney are in any way involved in the discussion. But that isn’t new.

There are times when it feels like Alex is the only one who knows Sidney and that Sidney is the only person who truly knows him.

They’re both as awful as each other. Alex is still as competitive as he was when he first arrived, still as emotional and still as reactive. He’s selfish too, with the puck and with people. Sidney is worse. He’s difficult and demanding and completely single minded. He has a handful of friends and Alex doesn’t know if he or Mario would qualify as Sidney’s best friend and he doesn’t know which would be worse.

But that’s them.

Sidney is awful and Alex has no excuse.

(Probably the more awful thing about Sidney, is he isn’t really awful. Well, not all the time. When he’s out in public – not with the press, but just day to day – he is generous with his time. He doesn’t turn people away if they come up to him for an autograph or make excuses if they want to talk to him. He isn’t good with people. Sometimes he can’t even manage a facsimile of natural behaviour. But he is always willing to try.

Pittsburgh loves him. They love Alex too. But they love Sidney in a true and unselfconscious way.

Alex doesn’t tend to go out with Sidney much, but when they do, it always takes Alex aback).

When Alex stops by Sidney’s place (which is still Mario’s guest house) the following day, he catches Sidney on the phone with his family. Alex has only meet Sidney’s parents briefly, once when they were rookies and again after they won the Stanley Cup. In many ways, Alex thinks they are similar to his parents. They are both proud of them, and they both are demanding. But Sidney’s relationship often appears strained. When he speaks to his father, his voice becomes clipped, and his answers short.

“It’s nothing,” he says, before Alex can say anything.

Alex doesn’t think it is, but sometimes it’s best not to push Sidney.

Instead, he invites Sidney out for drinks with Max and the guys.

Sidney shakes his head.

“Yeah,” Alex finds himself agreeing. He can’t say he feels like celebrating either.

They end up eating bland food and drinking beer in front of the TV with Ghera curled up between them. It’s pretty pathetic, especially when Alex falls asleep during a *Gilmore Girls* marathon. When
he wakes, Sidney is in the kitchen with Ghera.

Ghera is still all paws and soft puppy fur. He picked her up from a local breeder only a week ago. She was the runt of the litter, but Alex likes her huge ears and bow legs. Likes the sound of her collar jangling around his house and she follows him from room to room. Timid and shy, she doesn’t take to strangers. She does like Sidney though. From the couch Alex watches her push her nose against the back of Sidney’s knees to get his attention. Sighing, Sidney makes her sit – which she doesn’t tend to do for Alex – before giving her a bit of tomato left over from his salad.

“You training my dog?” Alex asks, his English feeling fluid, as he pushes himself to his feet.

Sidney raises one brow. “Are you?”

Well, to be honest, Alex isn’t. But he’s had dogs before. It isn’t that difficult. He tells Sidney that.

“I suppose,” Sidney allows.

“Anyway,” Alex tells him. “I’m going to teach her in Russian. Too much English will confuse her.”

Sidney wrinkles his nose and Ghera lies down next to Sidney.

Alex looks at her but she stares adoringly up at Sidney.

Traitor.

In the end the Penguins make the playoffs, but not the finals.

It’s been a good year, Alex knows. A great run. But it could have been better.

In contrast, the off season is beyond boring. With his exams out of the way and nothing on the horizon, Alex calls Sasha to see what he is up too.

“I’m busy,” he tells Alex before hanging up.

So ungrateful.

On a whim Alex calls Sidney.

“What are you doing?” He asks when Sidney picks up.

“Sleeping.”

“That’s a lie,” Alex tells him, because it is. Alex checked before he called. It’s afternoon in Pittsburgh.

“I’m in Nova Scotia.”

“So?” Alex asks. There can’t really be all that much of a difference in time zones.

Sidney sighs. “Okay. I was taking a nap. But I’m going to the gym this afternoon with Matt.”

And that makes Alex sigh. Oh Sidney. Taking a nap, in the middle of the summer after making the playoffs and adding a gold medal to his trophy cabinet. It’s like all Alex’s effort with him is wasted.
“What are doing this week?” Alex asks.

Sidney huffs. “Why do you want to know?”

With a few clicks of the mouse, Alex buys Sidney a ticket and after some whining and some guilt tripping, he manages to get Sidney onto the plane.

“I’m only visiting for a few days,” Sidney says when Alex picks him up at the airport.

“Yes, yes,” Alex says. “Of course.”

Alex insists Sidney stays with him.

“You’re my best friend,” he tells Sidney, because why would Alex make Sidney stay in a hotel. “My home is your home.”

Sidney looks confused though.

Alex sighs. What kind of person does Sidney think Alex is?

In the afternoon, Sidney falls asleep in the guest bedroom and doesn’t wake up until the early evening. Sleepy and soft, he pads out of the bedroom into the living room and sits down next to Alex and Ghera.

“What are we watching?” Sidney asks, scratching behind Ghera’s ear.

Unable to help himself, Alex pulls Sidney close. Still half asleep, Sidney goes easily.

“Great show,” he tells Sidney.

Sidney wrinkles his nose.

He’s not great company, Alex knows, but Sidney is amusing in his own way. He falls back asleep after a while. It’s not great for resetting his internal clock, but Alex lets Sidney sleep. Gently laying her head on Sidney’s lap, Ghera closes her eyes and drifts off too.

Killing time, Alex updates his twitter feed. Snapping a picture of Sidney, Alex is tempted to post it. He only just manages to restrain himself. Sidney doesn’t give Alex enough credit. He could be much worse than he is. Snorting to himself, Alex sends it to Geno and Sasha instead. Within moments Sasha calls him.

“Another stray?” He asks. “What’s your mother going to say when you bring this one home?”

Alex grins. “Better than a cat.”

“I’d prefer a cat.”

“You would,” Alex laughs.

Sasha snorts. He has so far refused to visit Alex. Instead he is visiting his family. Alex though, doubts that there really are as many Semin’s in Krasnoyarsk as Sasha says there are.
“Come to Moscow,” Alex tells him.

“No,” Sasha tells him.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to,” Sasha says simply.

Alex is pretty sure he can get Sasha to change his mind. He tells Sasha so. Sasha just laughs and laughs.

“I’d like to see you try,” he tells Alex.

“I don’t ‘try,’ I succeed.”

“Promises, promises.”

Despite having only been in Russia for a few days, all the press seems to already know Sidney is in Moscow. While out for lunch, Alex notices paparazzi following them around. He notices people watching them too. Moscow might be a big city, filled with many celebrities, but this is different. Russians may not, generally speaking, like Sidney but they do like that Canada’s Golden Child is spending him summer in Russia training with Alex the Great.

Half ways through Sidney’s first week in Moscow, Geno appears.

This, of course, doesn’t help. But it doesn’t really hurt either.

Geno has never been particularly great with the press either – North American or Russian – and hasn’t become any better with them since being drafted by the Capitals. Where in Washington Geno distances himself through his various translators and Russian teammates, in Moscow Geno uses Alex, and sometimes Sasha when he’s in town.

Now Geno’s presence is distracting. It makes for a better story – better photographs – but he is distracting enough that no one digs deeper or is more invasive than normal which in turn, gives the three of them a certain type of freedom.

“Hiding in plain sight,” Mario says, when he calls to check in on them.

“Yes,” Alex nods. “Exactly.”

Thankfully, Sidney is oblivious to this. Too busy acclimatising and complaining about Alex’s linen to bother trying to figure out what is being written about him this week, he is not the best company but certainly the most amusing. At least he is to Alex. It’s harder to know when it comes to Geno.

Geno’s English is still shocking, but each month over the last year it slowly has been improving. Now away from the NHL and with more time, Geno carefully asked Sidney all kind of questions about the other teams in the league. It is always general and never about the Caps or the Pens. Probably too, it’s practiced. But each time the three of them meet up, he asks Sidney’s opinion and listens and occasional nods every now and then when Sidney says something particularly insightful. Over the summer, Geno’s comprehension of English develops to the point where he hesitates less, and speaks more, asking why Sidney thinks this or that, and eventually, as his confidence grows, he
sometimes offers his own opinion.

Hockey isn’t a game. It’s a language.

Geno uses it.

It takes time, but as much as Sidney likes disliking the opposition, no one can really manage to dislike Geno indefinitely. The press can try to play Sidney and Geno as the great feud of the franchise, but the reality is that’s just something they created to sell papers. Geno is kind. Alex always knew this. It takes Sidney a while to get that, to separate the way Geno is on ice, to the way he is off it, but over time Geno stops becoming someone Sidney studies tapes on how to beat, but someone who makes Sidney laugh at stupid jokes. Every time he does, it is almost like it catches both of them off guard. Geno isn’t funny, not really. But for some reason, Sidney finds him hilarious.

“He is funny,” Sidney says, when Alex can’t stand it anymore.

“I’m funny,” Alex reminds him, because he is.

Sidney makes a face.

“I am,” Alex insists.

Sidney shrugs. “Sure.”

People have always been interested in Sidney – as they have been in Alex. But Sidney has rarely returned the sentiment.

After a while, it’s becomes something normal to see Sidney turning to Geno when the three of them are meant to be out enjoying the best of Moscow’s night life, wanting to know about his opinion on the Boston Bruins’s defence strategies and then, following him to the bar to help with drinks.

Sidney doesn’t do that. Ever. Except, now he does.

It’s strange.

Sidney is Alex’s friend. But not like Geno or Max or Sasha or anyone else is Alex’s friend. Not really.

Sidney is a good guy. He’s honest and kind in his own way. But he is – there is a distance too him. Often physical, but more like he’s a step out of pace with everyone around him. Alex supposes he sometimes is too. Coloured outside the lines, Alex feels like he his body is too small for him. He loves and hates and laughs and shouts and fights and feels so vividly.

He and Sidney move around in each other’s space and have done for years now.

They understand each other.

But Geno?

It’s strange. Alex likes Sidney, he does. Alex gets too, that other people like Sidney. Colby and Flower and Tanger and even Max who tells stories of them getting into trouble as teenagers at the LA Kings training camp they were both invited to attend as juniors. But Geno – Alex isn’t sure why Geno likes Sidney.

Sasha shrugs when Alex skypes him to get his opinion on the whole thing.
Alex presses. It makes Sasha roll his eyes. “You are a horrible person.”

“How so?”

“It should be obvious.”

Maybe it is. But it isn’t to Alex.

Sidney doesn’t like anyone. Beneath his good manners and bland demeanour, Sidney doesn’t have time for people. People are complicated and capricious and Sidney has other more pressing things to do with his time rather than try to work what makes them tick.

Generally, he doesn’t do friends. There are exceptions. Sometimes, if people know him for long enough, they become people Sidney will accept dinner invitations from and will be halfway willing to talk to about things like where to buy the best organic vegetables and things that Alex assumes bore Sidney as much as they bore him.

Geno doesn’t seem interested in becoming one of those people.

All he really seems interested in, is being around Sidney.

It takes Alex a while to notice, to realise. Geno is kind to everyone – likes almost everyone. Almost everyone Alex knows, would call Geno a friend. But when Sidney’s around, it’s like Geno only sees him.

“Geno likes Sid,” he says.

Semin rolls his eyes. “Yes?”

But – Alex leans close. “No. Geno likes Sid.”

“And?” Semin says, bored.

“Hey!” Alex exclaims.

Semin looks decidedly unimpressed. “Everyone knows.”

“I didn’t.”

“You never know anything.”

It’s cruel. But true, as Semin often is.

Now that Alex has noticed, he doesn’t how he failed to see before.

Geno is tender-hearted and foolish and doesn’t know better and in the corner of Alex’s eye, he sees Geno falling for Sidney.

Alex knows what it looks like. He’s seen it firsthand. Experienced it too, to a certain extent.
Geno falls for everyone though. He falls for people with kind hands and gentle voices, people who are kind to his dog and people who tell bad jokes. His heart is open, and he gives it freely. For so many years, he was in love with Oksana. As far as Alex knows, Geno is still loves with her. But somewhere along the line, Oksana drifted out of Geno’s mind and Sidney became all Geno could talk about and all he could look at when Sidney was in the same room as him.

Alex understands attraction. But Sidney with his awkward angles and abstract off ice physicality isn’t typically attractive. From a distance maybe, on the cover of a magazine, maybe he might be written up as one. In person though, he – Alex does not know how to articulate it. To Alex, Sidney is the person who argues over icing penalties in practice and who as of yet shows no sign of leaving the Lemieux family (last summer, he holidayed with them too). In Alex’s experience, Sidney’s never shown any interest in anyone before. He’s never shown much interest in anything other than hockey before.

He’s awful really.

He’s demanding of himself and stubborn and picky and prickly and oblivious and Alex is okay with that. Alex has known Sidney for years. Alex knows what Sidney is like. But Geno? Alex doesn’t know.

Fuck.

It’s strange.

[2010-2011]

Sidney ends up staying in Moscow for close to three weeks. During that time he postpones five events, and does around a dozen phone interviews locked away in Alex’s bathroom like a teenager trying to avoid being overheard by his parents. There are probably other things that Alex manages to get Sidney to cancel too, but Sidney doesn’t mention them, at least not to Alex. When they meet up again, it’s at the pre-season Penguin conference.

Sleep deprived and on the verge of catching a cold, Alex hugs Sidney hello. Sidney lets him, which is pretty typical at this point but it still makes Alex grin.

“Good summer?”

Sidney shrugs. “It was okay.”

“Liar,” Alex tells him.

The press seem to agree. Although Alex didn’t show Sidney too wild a time in Moscow, the gathered journalists seem to uniformly have overactive imaginations. It makes Max shake with laughter when he and Alex catch up afterwards. During Max’s summer, he missed Alex. Alex can tell.

Alex smiles widely. “It’s okay,” he comforts Max. “I understand that you are jealous.”

Max makes an incredulous sound. “Of you and Sid getting the early bird special and a full eight hours of sleep each night? Please.”

Alex thinks Max is jealous. But that’s okay. Alex understands. Anyone would be envious. Slinging his arm around Max’s shoulder, Alex decides to take pity on Max and offer to let him host the annual start of season party.

“Very generous of you,” Max says.

“I know.”

Alex loves parties. Loves an excuse to fill his house with people. But Max can host this one. Before the day is out, Alex has insured that all the team know.

It’s good to be back.

For all that Max complains, he does throw a good party. However half way through the night, Alex finds Sidney hiding away in the guest bedroom Max is using as the coat room. It’s a sad sight. Alex tells him so.

Looking up from his ancient cell phone, Sidney frowns. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

And Alex supposes he is. Alex has lost count of the number of times Sidney has left parties and events and even casual drinks with the guys. The team are used to it now, so is Alex, he guesses. But that doesn’t make it excusable.

Stepping into the room, Alex taps Sidney’s cell with his bottle of beer.

“Your father?” He asks, because Sidney’s father likes to keep close contact with Sidney during the lead up to the commencement of the season.

Sidney shakes his head. “Geno.”

And that is new.

Sidney rolls his eyes. “We’re friends.”

Alex snorts. That’s a good one.

When training camp begins, Alex doesn’t have much time to think about anything. When Sidney had visited, they’d trained together with Geno, and after Sidney and then Geno left, Alex continued. Camp is relentless, though. Each day, Alex works until his body is almost ready to give way under him. At night he crashes, completely exhausted.

On the weekend, he only just manages to drag himself and Ghera over to Mario’s for family lunch. When Alex arrives it’s clear that Sidney isn’t in a much better state. Yawning, he ignores Alex to
bends down to greet Ghera. Wagging her tail, she circles joyfully around his legs. Almost fully grown, she still acts like a puppy around Sidney. So do Mario’s dogs, now that Alex thinks about it.

Shaking his head, Alex leaves Sidney to it.

During the summer Stephanie and Austin attended hockey camp. Finding them out on the lawn, Alex gets them to tell him all about it. Bright and happy, they tell him all the stories Alex knows they wouldn’t dare to tell Sidney and act out their new moves and all of the stunning plays he missed while he was gone.

This year, Stephanie is off to boarding school with Lauren. The same one, as Stephanie likes to tell him, as Sidney attended.

“Only for one year,” Austin reminds her, butting into the conversation and making her punch his shoulder in annoyance.

Alex knows him too well and sees right through his bored whine. For all he fights and battles with his older sisters, he adores them. Sidney nods, when Alex mentions it as they are setting the table.

“It’s hard to be left out.”

Alex knows that. As the youngest he grew up with his siblings distanced from him, already living their lives. Austin is a good kid. During the summer, he sent Alex stupid emails filled with cat memes and mocked Alex about his very cool appearance in a very cool rap video.

Sidney grins when Alex tells him. “Yeah, yeah. Very cool.”

Alex makes a face. Sidney is a terrible person. Terrible.

After lunch, while they’re all watching a film in the theatre room, Sidney gets a phone call and steps outside. He doesn’t come back in. As the credits are rolling, Alex steps out to stretch his legs and finds Sidney sitting in Mario’s den.

Ghera, as Alex is now used to seeing, is sitting next to Sidney.

“All okay?” Alex asks Sidney when he ends the call and hangs up.

“Yeah. Just Geno.”

“Geno?” Alex asks, curious.

“Yeah,” Sidney nods absently, already distracted by the sound of Stephanie and Austin arguing about what film to watch next.

As training camp gives way to the pre-season, Sidney seems to spend more and more time speaking to Geno. In the locker room, Alex catches Sidney smiling as he checks his text messages and a few times when Alex drops by over practice, Geno is on skype, telling Sidney stupid stories about Mike Green and how he insists on driving his bright orange Vespa to practice despite the weather.

Alex, snorts. “Does he give Sasha lifts?” He asks, because this he has to know.

Geno grins. “Not yet.”
Sasha is a contradictory creature, but against all odds, he unselfconsciously adores Mike Green. It’s quite funny to witness.

“I bet if Greenie asked, Sasha would.”

Geno laughs. “Yeah. Me too.”

When the Penguins play the Capitals for the first time of the season, he catches up with Alex and Sidney afterwards. Smiling brightly at them, he takes them out with Sasha and some of the guys. It a close game, but in the end, the Caps pulled out the win breaking the Penguins season opening winning streak. Normally this would put Sidney into a particularly sour mood. But tonight, it doesn’t take Geno long to engage Sidney in conversation.

Sidney doesn’t generally like people, but Geno seems to be an exception to Sidney’s rules in every respect.

Towards the end of the year, Alex drops over to find Sidney downloading Rosetta Stone on his laptop.

“Flower making fun of your French again?” Alex teases.

Sidney blushes though. “No.”

And looking closer, Alex sees that Sidney bought the Russian version.

“You want to learn Russian?” Alex asks, strangely touched.

Sure, the guys in the locker room got him to teach them swear words and occasional Max or Jordan will mangle one, but it never went beyond that. Sidney ducks his head.

“I want to talk to Geno.”

And oh. Oh.

Sidney is blushing deep red now, but he voice is steady when he says, “He talks to me. I want to talk to him.”

Alex feels something deep inside him shift unexpectedly.

“I can help,” he finds himself offering. “Then you can talk to me too.”

It takes Alex a while to realise Sidney and Geno are basically doing the long distance dating thing.

It takes them far longer to realise.

For all the effort Geno put into getting Sidney to like him, he doesn’t quite figure out what’s happening between them. Perhaps too caught up in it, he misses the way Sidney gravitates towards him and the way Sidney lets him close.

Sidney never lets anyone close.

Until Geno, Alex was the only exception to that rule; the only one Sidney allowed into his space.
Alex didn’t even realise he was an exception to his rule, until now. Looking back, he can see he was the only person who pulled Sidney close, touched his arm to get his attention, and bumped his shoulders against Sidney’s whenever Sidney said something particularly snarky.

Sidney is oblivious though. Maybe he doesn’t see the difference between Alex and Geno, only that he actually likes spending time with Geno when Sidney doesn’t like spending time with anyone if he can help it.

The two of them drift together, in this slow slide.

Each time the Pens and the Caps are in the same place, Sidney and Geno circle each other. From outside, Alex watches. There isn’t any tension between them. It’s more that it’s going to happen eventually.

And it does.

There is a warm glow to Sidney when he and Geno finally get together. He holds it close, hardly letting anyone see. But Alex can. He knows Sidney too well not to see it. Alex knows Geno too well. When they catch up, Geno cannot even begin to contain his happiness. His wide smiles and bright eyes are so open and honest; Alex can’t help but feel happy too.

“Sickening,” Sasha comments, between shots.

Alex grins. “Yes. Very.”

Sasha narrows his eyes. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“Me?” Alex asks. “Never.”

It’s routine now, for Alex and Sidney to go out with the Russian Caps when they play each other. But this time, when the teams next play against each other in Washington, half of both teams come out with them too. It’s been a long road trip for the Pens and it’s turning into a long season for the Caps. Geno is playing well, but not extraordinary. His stats are still enviable, but he isn’t so much setting the pace as matching it. He’s happy though to see Sidney; lighting up when Sidney slides into the booth and sits next to him.

For a little while Alex loses track of time.

He does shots down by the bar with Max, and gets into an argument with Sasha and swaps stories with Nicklas Backstrom. By the time night is drawing to a close, Geno is hanging off Sidney. One of Geno’s arms is around Sidney’s waist, and his face is pressed into the curve of Sidney’s neck. Sighing, Alex finishes his drink and steps in. Untangling Geno from Sidney, Alex helps Geno to his feet, and together he and Sidney take Geno home.

They stay overnight.

In the morning Alex wakes up to see Sidney making coffee. Geno is still hung over. Leaning against Sidney’s back with his arms around Sidney’s waist, Geno rests his head on Sidney’s shoulders.

It’s all terribly domestic. Alex has never thought of Sidney as domestic though. He’s like a stray cat that eyes people dubiously. But he is – for Sidney anyway – comfortable in Geno’s home.

It’s nice. Nice to witness.

Alex knows Geno and Sidney don’t see each other than often. Not nearly enough for Geno. Alex
isn’t sure how they make it work. But they do.

Stretching his arms above his head, Alex gets up and sits at the kitchen counter. Helping himself to Sidney’s toast, Alex grins as he watches them.

Everything kind of goes to shit after Sidney gets hurt.

One moment he is fine. One moment they’re all at the Winter Classic playing the Capitals who are having a very good night, and then Dave Steckel lays a shoulder check on Sidney and it’s – after the game Geno and Alex and Sasha wait for the medical team to finish with Sidney and they don’t think about it.

Of course Sidney is okay. They’ve all taken hits.

And he is.

He finishes the game and then, later, in Sasha’s car on the way to this new bar that Sasha has found, Geno is grinning and Alex turns in his seat to tell him that it’s Sidney’s turn to buy the first round of drinks and they aren’t thinking about it.

They drink and Alex ends up crashing on Sidney’s couch. He wakes up to the sound of Sidney in the shower and the sight of Geno scratching his stomach, flushed and grinning like an idiot, and Alex knows that stupid soft grin. They hooked up while Alex was sleeping off all of the consolations drinks he was forced to buy himself?

Alex is half impressed by Geno’s skills of persuasion, and half disappointed he missed it.

“Really?” He asks

“You’re a heavy sleeper,” Geno comments, stretching his long, long legs.

Even later, when Alex and Sidney fight over the last slice of toast, Alex isn’t thinking at all.

Sidney is fine.

He’s loose limbed and his lips are bruised from kisses and Alex spends most of the morning teasing him. But Sidney is fine.

Then at the next game against Tampa Bay Victor Hedman checks Sidney and Sidney isn’t fine.

Alex doesn’t know what to do. No one knows what to do.

Mario takes Sidney home and – Alex drives over and it’s late and dark and when Nathalie opens the front door she looks worn and fragile.

“Now isn’t a good time, Alex,” she tells him.

“Please,” Alex says.
She bites her lip and Alex can’t. He can’t not see Sidney. Something must show – maybe everything does. He was never good at hiding things. He was never good at not getting his way, either.

She sighs. “Five minutes.”

Five minutes isn’t long, but it’s enough to see Sidney. Medicated and weary, he’s half asleep. Sitting next to him, Mario is on his mobile. His brow is wrinkled and his voice is low. He nods at Alex, when Alex pauses in the doorway.

Sidney has never been small to Alex. Sidney is fast and clever and odd and obstinate, but never small.

Diminutive and pale, there are dark shadows under his eyes. He blinks slowly when Alex sits on the edge of his bed. Alex doesn’t know what to say, but when Sidney’s eyes start to close, Alex reaches for Sidney’s hand. It’s clammy, but Alex squeezes it.

Geno is a wreck when he calls.

He’s on a ten day road trip, and over the phone his voice sounds raw.

“I can’t –” he starts to say.

Alex doesn’t know what to tell him.

Time is what will mend Sidney. Or at least that’s what the doctors say.

But time seems to drag slower than ever. Days get broken up into hours and the team is making do but without Sidney they are anchorless. Alex, Brooks and Jordan all try to step up in their own way. They practice and play and life goes on around them.

It doesn’t take long for Geno to fall into the habit of calling Alex in the evenings.

That becomes part of Alex’s routine too.

Geno calls, sometimes after calling Sidney, other times not being able to when Sidney’s headaches are too intense.

Mario now knows about him and Sidney. Alex doesn’t know if Mario knew before, if Sidney told the Lemieux’s before he was concussed. But either way, Mario knows. He is the one who answers Sidney’s landline and looks after him.

On the line, Geno sounds tired. Always tired. He sounds so far away too.

Washington isn’t far away, not really, but over the phone Geno voice ebbs and wanes. Alex tells Geno the same things each time. There has been no change. No improvement. No word on when he will recover.

When Geno has a rare day off, he flies down late after the Caps game. He arrives in the early hours of the morning, and spends the day laying in the dark with Sidney, his hand holding Sidney’s. Before he flies out, he comes over to Alex’s place.

“It’s not good, is it?” Geno says.
Alex looks at his friend, and no, it isn’t good. It’s been weeks now. Concussions aren’t normally this severe.

Geno takes a sip of beer and closes his eyes. “Keep an eye on Sid, okay.”

Alex nod. “Yeah.”

Alex always keeps an eye on Sidney.

Geno rubs his eyes with the back of his hand. He’s always been easy to read. Sidney is confusing. But Geno is easy. It’s clear that now, all Geno wants to be with Sidney, to stay with him. But he can’t. Stepping close, Alex wraps his arms around Geno’s shoulders. They stay like that for a while.

Closing his eyes, Alex presses a kiss to Geno’s temple.


There are good days and bad days.

Neither Alex or Geno are patient people. Not really. Not now. Not with this.

Together they circle around Sidney, their focus becoming smaller and centred on Sidney. In the evenings Alex finds himself shrugging off more and more invitations and instead taking his books over to Sidney’s. In the low light, Alex reads through his notes and works his way through his masters coursework while Ghera curls up beside Sidney.

“Good girl,” Sidney murmurs to her.

She nestles closer. Her tail tucked against her body. Fully grown, she’s perhaps too big to sleep on Sidney’s bed, but she’s gentle with him, especially now when he is so unwell. Quiet and calm, she stays with Sidney during road trips. Normally Alex has a dog sitter he uses, but Ghera’s more comfortable around Sidney. Maybe it’s just Alex’s imagination, but Sidney seems to relax around her too.

“She’s good company,” Sidney says. “Better company than you.”

Alex brings a hand to his heart. “So cruel.”

Sidney shakes his head fondly.

Alex likes Sidney like this.

On bad days, Sidney is angry and irritable; lost without hockey to define him. He hates the weakness the concussion has wrought on his body, hates how vulnerable he is. Those days are the hardest for Geno. Stuck in Washington, he never seems to have enough time. The Capitals are struggling to break from the pack. They’re playing well, but other teams are playing better. Geno’s focus is split between the responsibilities he carries as his team’s new alternate captain, and Sidney. When Geno is in Pittsburgh, he comes over before and after games. Sometimes he makes Sidney lunch, and other times Geno sleeps in Sidney’s bed, his exhaustion catching up to him all at once. Sometimes Alex catches Sidney talking to him softly, comforting him.
Geno is one of Alex’s oldest friends, but it isn’t until Sidney’s concussion that Alex realises how Sidney has become part of how they relate to each other. Sidney connects them. Their love for him is what carries them though the bad days.

Geno has always fallen for people easily. But he’s gone on Sidney. Completely and utterly. Alex knows it, can see it so clearly.

Alex knows he should feel like a third wheel. But he doesn’t.

When the three of them are together, Alex is able to relax. Being around them, holds Alex together. Sometimes it feels like they’re the only thing that does.

Without Sidney centring the first line, Alex’s numbers start to drop.

He enters a slump.

The press say that Alex is too emotional. That his ups are untouchable, but he always comes down because everything that goes up must come down. They say that Sidney makes Alex better, but Alex doesn’t make Sidney better.

Alex listens to Bylsma and trusts his judgment.

Sidney though, he wants more. He comes over after practice with tapes and wants to talk about Alex’s reactions and how he can help improve the line and it’s a lot.

Alex takes to not being at home.

Pittsburgh at night isn’t Moscow, but there are good bars and people love him here. He goes out late and stays out late. He sits at VIP tables and drinks and smokes and talks to women and brings them home.

“You’re getting a bad reputation,” Max comments.

“I always have one,” Alex shrugs.

And that is true.

But people treat it as if it is something new, something he should be ashamed of. Alex just likes to have fun.

Stress, worry – he needs release.

“Are you going to say it too?” Alex asks Sidney, feeling petty and cruel.

Sidney expression goes hard.

He doesn’t say anything.

The worst thing is, for all the crap the press write, it’s true.

Alex doesn’t know how to play without Sidney by his side; pushing them both to be their best, to be faster, to be more aggressive, to control the flow of the game. To set the pace.
The press too, write about the locker room. The articles aren’t true. But Sidney reads them, because he reads everything now.

“I have been thinking,” Sidney says, out of the blue.

Alex looks up from his coursework.

“I think you should be made captain.”

And – Alex looks at Sidney. Today has been a bad day; that’s what Nathalie said when Alex arrived. Sidney is shaky and pale. Alex looks down. Of course those are the articles Sidney believes.

Sidney closes his eyes. “The team needs a captain. I talked to Mario and – ”

Alex makes himself say it before Sidney says something he can’t take back. “If you make me captain, I won’t ever give it back.”

Alex is selfish. He wants and if he was given the C, he won’t want to give it back, not even to Sidney who is a good captain, the best Alex has ever played under.

“You’re our captain. No one else,” he tells Sidney strong and sure because Alex knows that.

In February, just when Alex thinks things can’t get any worse, Geno gets hurt. Alex doesn’t see the game, but ESPN run footage of Geno’s hit over and over again.

When Alex checks his phone, he has half a dozen missed calls from Sidney.

“I can’t get through to Geno,” Sidney says.

And it feels like it’s happening all over again, only this time Alex is still in the middle but unable see or touch Geno. All he can do, is call Sasha and hope that he answers.

“It’s bad,” Sasha confirms when Alex gets a hold of him.

“His knee?”

“ACL and MCL.”

“Fuck,” Alex swears.

“Yeah,” Sasha says. “He’s going to require surgery.”

“They say that?”

“No. But you can tell.”

Alex winces. “Let me know if anything changes.”

“Of course.”
It isn’t until eight hours later, they finally get through to Geno, and even then Geno’s voice is slurred from the pain medication he is on. All he asks for is Sidney, and all he does when Sidney gets on the line is apologise. It’s upsetting for Sidney to hear Geno like this – to be so far away from Geno when he’s like this. Alex can hardly cope either.

“He’s going to be okay,” Sidney says after they end the call, but Alex knows Sidney is only saying that because Alex can’t.

Geno is going to be okay. He has to be okay.

From Pittsburgh, Alex divides his time between Sidney and the team. Sasha sends updates, but it’s not enough. It isn’t even close to enough. The worst moment comes when Geno calls to say he’s going back to Russia to recuperate with his family. Afterwards Sidney is quiet for a long time.

“She should be here with us.”

And he should be. Fuck. He should be.

Geno belongs with them, where they can look after him and help him recover.

Sidney’s month thins. “He could never come here, Alex. You know this.”

Alex does. He does. It’s one thing for Sidney to come to Russia and for Alex to play it off as him hanging with his best Canadian friend and his best Russian friend. It’s another for Geno to come down and recover in Mario Lemieux’s guesthouse.

Rubbing the back of his hand against his eyes, Alex makes himself take a deep breath and exhale slowly.

“Fuck,” he swears.

Sidney doesn’t say anything. Setting his phone aside, he touches Alex’s shoulder as he passes.

It’s later, Alex realises that he can’t stay either.

At home – his huge, echoing home – he has to stop for a moment.

Sidney knew. Sidney’s always been better at playing the PR game.

Alex would bet that Mario knew too.

And in the end, Alex does leave, and sooner than anyone expects. For the first time since the 2005-2006, the Penguins don’t make the playoffs, missing out by only a handful of points.
It’s perhaps the lowest moment of Alex’s career.

[2011-2012]

For all that Alex likes to think he and Geno grew up together, truthfully, Alex has far more in common with Sidney than Geno. Unlike Sidney and Alex, Geno got himself to the NHL almost entirely by himself. He did not have a personal trainer or specialised one on one coaching like Sidney and Alex did, or go to expensive private boarding school. He made it to the KHL on his own.

To say Geno is determined is an understatement.

The surgery is successful and over the summer, Geno rehabilitates his knee with the help of a team of trainers and medical personnel. For part of the summer, when Geno’s fitness is almost back to a hundred percent, he joins Alex for strength and fitness training with Mike Kadar. Together they work out six days a week in a basic gym.

Mike is good for Geno. Good with him.

They’ve never worked together before, but they seem to click. Initially Geno only planned on spending a week or so training with Alex to change up his routine, but Mike is a firm, careful presence and each day Geno seems to become stronger and stronger. He gives Mike his trust and in return Mike pushes Geno and challenges him, but is vigilant of his limits.

Geno was always good, but under Mike’s guidance, Geno becomes great. The partnership is so successful, Geno ends up extending his stay for a month.

“Watch out this season,” Geno grins.

Alex laughs. “Of you? You must be confused. I’m Alex the Great. I don’t need to watch out for anyone, let alone a Cap.”

Geno shakes his head.

Cheeks red and hair sticking to the back of his neck, he has never looked more alive. Gregarious and charming, he seems to fill the corners of Alex’s life. There is good news too, coming from Nova Scotia. Sidney is recovering and by the time Alex and Geno return to America, just as the season is about to commence, Sidney is cleared to play and returns to the ice.

He comes over to Alex’s the day after Alex gets back, vibrating with energy. He makes Alex laugh. Placing his hands on Sidney’s shoulder, Alex stills him.

“Breathe,” he tells Sidney, unable to stop smiling either.

“I’m excited,” Sidney says.

Alex shakes his head fondly. That is clear. Grabbing Sidney a bottle of water, Alex sets out a second plate. It’s always good to return to Pittsburgh. The promise of a new season, a fresh chance to win the Stanley Cup, is always galvanising. But this, having Sidney buzzing around, happy and healthy
and whole is something else. Even Ghera, who normally like to hide away in quiet of Alex’s bedroom after the stress of the flight, is entertained by Sidney. Wagging her tail, she presses close to Sidney.

As Sidney gets distracted by Ghera, Alex takes the opportunity to have a proper look at Sidney.

He’s a little leaner than he was this time last year, but he’ll quickly bulk back up. He looks good. He looks like he’s ready to remind people why he’s the best player out there.

Alex’s is ready too and for a short time it feels like everything is back to normal. No. Better. Sidney is electric. No one comes close to him.

It doesn’t last.

After merely seven games, Sidney’s concussion symptoms return and he is put back on IR.

It’s devastating.

The entire locker room is quiet when Bylsma announces it. Practice is a wash. Alex doesn’t remember half of it. On autopilot, he completes drills and exercises. Afterwards, he drives over to Sidney’s place. When he arrives, Mario pulls Alex aside.

“We’re going to do whatever it takes to get Sid back to 100%.”

Alex closes his eyes. It was meant to be over. Sidney was meant to be okay. Now it feels like they’re all back to square one. But worse off, somehow. He tries to tell Mario that. Alex isn’t sure what exactly he says.

“I know,” Mario says softly.

Alex has known Mario for a while now. He’s always been strong and sure. Alex looks to him now, needs to see those same qualities in him now. But there is something about the way that Mario is holding himself that makes Alex want to look away.

Mario is human. He can’t fix Sidney.

Time – that’s what everyone said last year.

Time passed. They’re here now and Sidney isn’t better.

When Alex goes to see Sidney, he is quiet. The lines of his body are tense and again, Alex wants to look away. Sidney is Alex’s friend, his best friend.

“I hate this,” Sidney says, his voice small and sharp.

“Me too,” Alex tells him.

Sidney closes his eyes.

Alex wants to touch him, but for the first time since Alex met Sidney, Alex doesn’t dare. Sidney is so tightly coiled, so turned inward on himself. One touch, and it feels like Sidney could shatter.
They’re going to do this. They’re going to get past this.

It is awful to fall back into old habits, but that is what Alex does. In the evenings, he brings his books over to Mario’s guesthouse and studies quietly. Now doing his Masters part time, Alex works on assignments and essays. Sometimes, on good days, he works with Sidney on his Russian. It’s still objectively awful. But Alex doesn’t mind persisting.

At practice, he asks Flower about Sidney’s French.

Flower nods. “Oh yeah. Sidney sucks. His pronunciation is rubbish.”

Alex isn’t sure if that’s a joke or not.

Flower grins. It’s clear he knows exactly what he’s doing.

Sometimes Flower comes over; Tanger too. They’re good guys. Good with Sidney, able to draw him out of his moods and make him laugh. Alex likes those days, likes how Flower and Tanger can make it all feel easy, if only for an afternoon.

Sidney’s concussion is unpredictable though. Symptoms hit him out of the blue. A few times Alex drops by to find Sidney curled up in his bedroom in the dark suffering from vertigo and headaches. Fragile and shaken, there are times when Alex can tell Sidney resents Alex seeing him like this. This isn’t how Sidney wants to be seen. But Alex can’t stand the thought of Sidney being alone.

Once, he wakes up to hear Sid and Geno on skype with each other.

Sidney’s voice is soft, and his skin washed out from the light of his laptop.

Geno looks like a wreck. But on the ice, he is having one of his best seasons to date, maybe his best ever. He’s breaking records up in Washington. All people are talking about is him. Though he missed half a dozen games due to lingering problems with his knee, now he’s back and he seems to be scoring goals every game. Even at this point in the season, people are talking about Geno being awarded the Art Ross Trophy.

Half way through his second season without Sidney, Alex is struggling to maintain form.

“I don’t know how to play without Sid,” Alex finds himself telling Mario.

Mario sighs. “It’ll come.”

Alex doesn’t know.

He feels like he is barely keeping his head above water.

In practice, Bylsma cycles Alex through different line combinations. Before, when he was a rookie, Alex always knew he would end up back with Sidney. In retrospect it’s easy to see what Therrien was doing. All those different combinations Therrien tried back then were to help ground Alex via the steadying influence of the team veterans as well as to familiarise Sidney with the different members of the team in order to ultimately prepare him for a leadership role.

Now though, it’s clear that Bylsma is trying to find something to do with him.
But nothing seems to work. All the old lines which used to work, don’t or can’t anymore. Ryan is gone, so are Gonch, and Sýkora. Alex is still a Penguin, if only by the grace of his thirteen year contract. At a loss, Bylsma swaps Alex from left to right wing. That too, doesn’t seem to help.

“Give it time,” Bylsma tells him. “Keep trying.”

Alex has and is. He doesn’t see what Bylsma’s aiming to achieve.

It all comes to a head nine games later. Nine games when Alex hasn’t scored a thing.

“A slump is a slump,” Sidney says. “You’re still one of the best guys on the ice. Fuck, Alex, you’re always one of the best guys on the ice.”

Alex shakes his head.

It isn’t enough. He isn’t enough.

His best days are behind him. He can’t deny it any longer. But when he says that to Sidney, Sidney’s eyes go hard.

“Fuck that,” he says. “And fuck you.”

Alex rears back, equally stunned and stung. Sidney has never spoken to him like that. Ever.

Sidney leans close, leans right into Alex’s space which Sidney has never, ever done before either. “That isn’t true. You’re twenty seven. You’re in your prime. You’ll bounce back because you always do.”

And – and Alex forgot.

That’s what Sidney does. When Alex stumbles, Sidney always has his back and just like Alex always has Sidney’s.

That’s what Sidney does. That’s what they do.

Without Sidney around, Alex finds himself making an effort to train the gym with some of the older guys. It isn’t so much about fitness, but being around them. There is a stability to how the veterans approach hockey, something measured and tested.

Sidney has it too. He’s a young guy. Younger than Alex, but he has a steadiness to him.

Alex has never been great with change. That’s no excuse though. Not really, not when so many people are counting on him.

The A on his jersey is there for a reason. Without Sidney, he, Jordan and Brooks have to lead the Pens. Missing the playoffs last season was a hit to the teams confidence. In a leadership vacuum, Alex knows it’s up to them to step in. He always trusted Sidney to have his back. Alex always relied on Sidney to be there when Alex needed him. Maybe Alex can’t lead the scoring board at the moment. But he can look after his team.

Alex spent most of his rookie and sophomore year asking for a leadership role in the team.
It feels like it is time he starts to act like he deserves it.

During practice, he tries to turn his focus outwards onto his teammates. Instead of concentrating on his own performance, his own line and his own concerns, Alex watches the younger guys and the new guys who have been recently traded. In the locker room and team bus he’s joked around with most of them. But now, he tries to learn their play; figure out what they’re best at and what they’re struggling with.

After practice, Alex sets aside some time to go to lunch with Brooks, and tries to get his opinion.

Brooks is happy to oblige. He talks about the potential of the Pens first draft pick, Beau Bennett, and the easy way James Neal has settled into the locker room. The Pens are doing ok this season. Good, but maybe not great. With Sidney out, Ray Shero has been altering the team roster, making trades and doing deals to build the team up.

“It’s working,” Brooks concludes.

“You think?” Alex asks.

Brooks nods simply.

Brooks is always thoughtful about his opinions. He never says anything lightly. If he thinks the roster is coming together, it is. Alex sits back in his seat.

“And you?” Brooks asks.

Alex shrugs.

He is working on being a better alternate captain, but it’s too soon to see any results from his efforts. He’s performance hasn’t improved, but it hasn’t gotten worse either. His minutes have stayed the same and he’s done more or less a good enough job with them.

Brooks shakes his head. “That’s not what I meant. You’re spending a lot of time with Crosby.”

“I always spend time with Sid.”

Brooks gives Alex a look. “Seeing a friend suffer takes a toll on you.”

Alex takes a bite of his lunch. It is exhausting, sometimes. But it is Sidney. It’s always been the two of them.

“Alex,” Brooks says.

And Alex knows Brooks. They’ve played on the same team for years. They’ve been friends for years. Alex trusts him. Sidney trusts him.

“No one knows what’s wrong with him,” Alex finds himself telling Brooks.

Last year, Sidney was out for months. This time no one quite knows how long it will take for Sidney to recover. Over the course of the last few months, Sidney’s life has becomes a series of doctors’ appointments, referrals to specialists and a battery of tests.

Brooks sets down his knife and fork. “Is that what the doctors are saying?”

The doctors aren’t saying much. They keep sending Sidney to get second and third and fourth opinions.
It makes Alex feel helpless. He knows he has been lucky thus far in his career. Far luckier than most of the hockey players he knows. He’s never suffered any serious injury. He’s missed a few weeks here and there with shoulder issues, and broken a few bones. But he’s never gone through anything as serious as Sidney is right now.

There is little Brooks can say. They both know this.

During the All Star Weekend, Geno flies down and spends the weekend with Sidney. Although Alex is meant to fly out a day ahead of the event, he books a later flight so that he can be there to greet Geno when he arrives.

Geno is weary and exhausted when his taxi drops him off. Alex hugs him tightly and feels Geno’s body sag against his.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Alex says, holding Geno tight.

Geno takes a beat to respond. “Me too.”

Behind them, Alex hears Sidney padding to the door and the jingle of Ghera’s collar signifying that she’s following him. Releasing Geno, Alex pulls him inside, and pushes him towards Sidney.

“Hey,” Sidney smiles.

Geno gathers Sidney close and presses a kiss against the corner of his mouth.

It’s easy and affectionate and Alex watches Sidney’s eyes flutter closed.

What is perhaps the most unexpected part of Sidney and Geno’s relationship is how Sidney brings out a kindness in Geno that Alex has never seen before. Geno has always been one of the more considerate people Alex knows. Certainly on the ice he can be selfish. Like Alex, he always thinks he can do the best with the puck and rarely gives it up if he believes he has the chance to do something with it. All of the other teams in the league, the Penguins included, recognise that Geno is a force to be reckoned with.

Sidney though, makes Geno so happy. Even now, it is clear that Geno wants for nothing.

Over dinner, he sits with his ankles hooked around Sidney’s and grins brightly when Sidney tries out his Russian.

Alex grins too, as he listens to Sidney ask about Geno’s flight.

“What have you been teaching him?” Geno asks, turning to Alex.

Alex shrugs. “He tries.”

And that is true.

When Alex arrives at Ottawa for the All Star Game, most of the other guys have already arrived. As
he’s checking in, he’s tackled by Gonch’s two girls. Feigning a stumble, Alex looks down at their laughing faces.

“Sorry,” Ksenia says, as she untangles them from Alex’s legs.

Alex shakes his head. He has never minded the Gonchar girls. Kissing Ksenia on both cheeks, he tells her that.

“You’re too soft,” she tells him.

That is probably true. But there are worse things. Over breakfast they catch up on all that has happened in each other’s lives since Gonch joined the Ottawa Senators. The girls have grown so much since Alex first arrived in Pittsburgh. They climb all over him, demanding his attention, and wanting him to listen to their stories of horse riding lessons and their ongoing campaign to get their parents to buy them a dog.

Alex had forgotten what it was like to live in a house where he could speak freely and easily. His English is good – better than Geno’s by far. But something inside Alex uncoils each moment he spends with Gonch and Ksenia and their girls.

Alex knows Ksenia and Gonch are always there for him too. They might be on different teams now, but they are good friends. They are family, almost. Alex will never forget the kindness Gonch and his family showed him when they opened their home to him. Alex never wants to give Gonch a cause for concern.

At the end of breakfast, Ksenia hugs him goodbye.

“Thank you,” he tells her.

“Anytime.”

Slowly, Alex starts to regain his footing.

During the day, he practices and trains and in the evening he plays games the best he can. When he stumbles, he looks to his team, and tries to do the same when he sees them struggle. As the season progresses, Tanger comes into his own. He’s always been one of the best defensemen in the league, but this season his performance reaches a new level. Alex can’t always score hat tricks and skate through the opposition like they are not there, but he can use his team. Some of Tanger’s best goals come from assists from Alex.

In the evenings, he still brings his books over to Sidney’s, but now, he tries to see outside the commitments of his coursework. Plucking medical books and print outs from Sidney’s hands, Alex makes Sidney take a break from his efforts to become the most well-read patient.

“I need to understand,” Sidney hisses, reaching for the print outs in Alex’s hand.

“You’ve already read it,” Alex tells him, waving the highlighted pages in Sidney’s face.

Alex doesn’t know much about head injuries, but he doesn’t like the idea of Sidney’s life narrowing to academic papers and neurology text books.
For all that Alex knows Sidney, Alex isn’t sure if even Sidney has many interests outside of hockey. Geno too, when Alex calls and asks for his opinion, it at a loss. It is that thought that makes Alex borrow books from Nathalie’s library in the main house. Making a face at the titles, Sidney flips through the first few pages of one book making deeply unimpressed sounds at Alex.

“Why would anyone want to read a book about bird watching?” Sidney asks in a particularly snotty voice.

Alex finds himself grinning. “Why not?”

It might be interesting. Alex doesn’t know. Neither does Sidney.

Flower, of course, finds it hilarious when he finds out.

“You started a book club?” He asks when they are on the treadmills together.

Sipping from his water bottle, Tanger grins like he is in on the joke.

Alex doesn’t mind. Smiling widely, he lets them tease him and in the evening he follows them and some of the other guys from the team out. It’s been a while since Alex went out drinking with them. He didn’t know he missed it until he and Duper are working on Neal to buy everyone drinks.

“It’s your responsibility,” Neal tries to tell them. “I’m new. You’re meant to welcome me to the team through liquor and spirited locker room shenanigans!”

Alex snorts. “Is that what your old team taught you?”

“Your Dallas Stars side is showing!” Duper laughs.

Neal shakes his head.

Occasionally, when Sidney is able to, he joins them.

His recovery is a way off being complete, but he’s their captain and everyone likes having him there with them. Whenever he’s in the press box with Mario during their games, the effect on the team is evident. They don’t always win, but the energy they take to the ice is evident for all to see.

It isn’t always easy.

There are many bad days.

There are times too, when Sidney leaves Pittsburgh to fly interstate to see specialists and he’s gone for days at a time. A few times he flies back via Washington and stays with Geno. Alex knows he shouldn’t feel jealous. Sidney and Geno should be together – even if the circumstances of Sidney’s visits aren’t what any of them would wish. Alex is though. He’s lonely too.

They’re his best friends. He should be happy for them.

While on the road he finds himself skyping them after games, good or bad, just to listen to Sidney complain about the organisational system of Geno’s house (aka why can’t he find anything), and watch Geno smiles contentedly.

When the Pens arrive in Washington at the end of a week long roadtrip, they collect Sidney and take him back to Pittsburgh with them. On the plane back, Alex sits in the row opposite Sidney and annoys him with locker room gossip while Flower irritates Sidney with endless questions about whether Sidney watched Flower’s awesome saves against the Lightning and his equally awesome
saves against the Hurricanes.

Slowly the season passes.

The Pens gradually climb the ladder. They aren’t untouchable, but they are solid and there is value in that, Alex learns. It doesn’t stop people from having opinions or writing articles criticising him, but he can see outside of that to what matters. When his mother visits, she even comments on it.

Eventually, Sidney reaches a point in his recovery where he is allowed back into the ice. He isn’t cleared for play, only practice and no contact at that. But it’s a milestone and afterwards the mood in the locker room is lighter.

It takes Alex a while to realise, but many of the newer members of the team have never been on the ice with Sidney.

Sidney blushes when Alex tells him about the awestruck rookies and newbies on the team.

It’s true though. People do respect Sidney. Alex does.

At practice, Alex looks forward to the drills where he and Sidney line up together and get a chance to catch up. Sidney’s understanding of the team – of the game itself – is still remarkable. It’s photographs of the two of them with their head bowed in conference with each other, that end up splashed across the sports pages.

It’s good. It’s not how it should be, but it’s getting there.

Alex has never been particular fussy. He likes girls who fit neatly against his side and aren’t shy to tell him what they want. He likes guys too. Mostly he likes guys like Geno who laugh easily and don’t take anything too seriously. Guys strong enough to hold him down, but don’t really bother. He’s never had much trouble finding them. That part of his life has never been difficult.

But it isn’t until the Penguins play the Flyers, when Ilya points it out, that Alex realises it’s been a while for him.

“Everyone has dry spells,” Ilya comments, grinning in a particularly sleazy way.

Alex punches his shoulder. “What would you know, old man?”

Ilya grins. “Probably not as much as you.”

And Alex has to grin.

But afterwards, Alex finds himself thinking about it.

Alex has always been good at knowing what he wants. Good at asking for it too.

And Sidney. Fuck. Alex doesn’t know. But that’s a lie, he knows it is. It’s been a lie for a long time.

He catches himself eying the sharp line of Sidney’s jaw and strength in his shoulders. It takes Alex aback. Sidney is Alex’s friend. Geno is Alex friend. Alex can’t. He can’t be that person. He just can’t.
When Geno visits, Alex tries to step back, tries to let them have space.

He hadn’t realised though, how comfortable they were around him – how comfortable he was around them. The sight of Geno fiddling with Sidney’s coffee maker, only dressed in a pair of Sidney’s ratty boxers, is so familiar to Alex. No one blinks when Sidney wraps his arm around Geno’s waist in front of Alex, or presses close to him. Through open doors, Alex catches glimpses of them kissing, of Sidney tugging Geno’s shirt over his head and pressing between Geno’s legs.

The lines between them seem to be so blurred.

Yet Alex cannot stop himself from further blurring them.

It’s always been the three of them.

It shouldn’t be though.

Some things should belong just to Geno and Sidney. It shouldn’t be normal for Alex to bang on Sidney’s bathroom door when he and Geno are showering together telling them not to use all the hot water, or to read to Sidney while Geno is asleep in Sidney’s bedroom, recovering from another red eye flight. It is though.

But he’s always been selfish.

The Penguins make the playoffs. They don’t get past round one, but Alex is proud. The Pens played hard and smart and they left it all on the ice. They have nothing to be ashamed of.

During the off season, Sidney chooses to stay in Pittsburgh.

“It’s close to all my doctors,” he says, quite reasonably.

Alex nods. He still isn’t sure what to do with what he feels. Sidney, of course, is oblivious. But he always is. Alex can’t decide if it’s a blessing or a curse. Maybe it’s both. Or maybe it’s neither.

Back in Moscow, he goes out with friends and attempts to get it out of his system.

He doesn’t succeed. But he never really thought he would.

In the midst of it all, the Capitals choose not to resign Sasha. Much is said about the decision. Between the lines, it is clear that there are many internal issues within the Capitals organisation.

Sasha has never been great at playing the PR game.

But it’s Geno, who Alex worries about. Sidney too.

Sasha’s home has been Geno’s home since he became a Cap. Sasha’s family too, was Geno’s family away from home. They cared for him.

Geno might be the Capitals star player. But Sasha was Geno’s support system and now he’s gone,
it’s difficult to judge what will happen and how Geno will adjust.

From Pittsburgh where Geno has decided to spend part of his summer – “training with Mike Kadar” – Alex hasn’t heard much. But then, Alex hasn’t gone out of his way to find out. Distancing himself from Sidney and Geno feels like the best idea. It’s the only idea Alex has that feels like a good one at this point.

They’ve called a few times, but Sidney’s never been great at keeping in contact with people and Geno’s too caught up in Sidney, so it’s never gone beyond that. It’s better this way.

Alex tries to keep it all in context, but then, out of the blue, Max’s contract renegotiations with the Penguins fall through.

Alex knew it hadn’t been going well, but he didn’t know how badly until Max calls to tell him that he signed with the Flyers.

Everything feels like it’s changing.

[2012-2013]

When the lockout begins, Alex isn’t particularly surprised.

After a little bit of back and forth between KHL teams, he signs with Dynamo again. Once he does, he calls Sidney.

“Come to Russia,” he says not bothering with a hello or even with double checking time zones to make sure he isn’t calling Sidney in the middle of the night.

“I have meetings.”

“NHLPA?”

“Yes.”

Before the KHL season begun, Alex attended a few of the NHLPA meetings with Sidney. They were uniformly long, complex and depressing. The thought of Sidney attending them alone isn’t appealing in the least.

Sidney is quiet when Alex tells him that.

“I have to go,” he says and Alex knows. He does. He just doesn’t like it.

Sidney sighs. “It’ll be over soon.”

Alex isn’t so sure. But he knows Sidney doesn’t need to hear that. Not now, and not from him. “Go to meeting, then come to Russia. Then we can play together.”

Sidney is quiet for a while. “If the lockout isn’t over by December I think I will.”
And Alex didn’t really expect that.

“Geno’s talked to some people at Metallurg,” Sidney adds after a beat.

Alex didn’t expect that either.

“Metallurg Magnitogorsk?” He asks, just to be sure.

Sidney – “Yeah, maybe.”

Geno and Sidney are serious. Alex knows this. He knew last summer when Geno talked not about coming home, but about how Pittsburgh was odd, but how he supposed he would like it in time. But the idea of Sidney playing for Metallurg Magnitogorsk of all teams in the KHL is ridiculous. Because Alex can, he calls and tells Geno this.

“Good team,” Geno huffs.

Dynamo is a good team. A great team. If Sidney is going to play in the KHL, he shouldn’t waste his time in a small town where the only attraction is Geno. At the very worst, Sidney should sign with SKA Saint Petersburg. They might not be a great team, but at least Sidney wouldn’t be stuck in a place that counts its numerous steel mills as a tourist attraction. However, if Geno is going to try to steal Alex’s centre, Alex figures he should poach Geno’s. Nicklas Backstrom would be a great addition to Dynamo’s top line. Alex tells Nicky this, and tells him about how wonderful Moscow is.

“Do you really want to go home?” Alex asks. “And miss what could be your only chance to play with me in the KHL.”

“I’ve played against you. It’s pretty much the same thing.”

“Same thing?”

Same thing? Alex snorts.

Nicky laughs and laughs.

(But by the end of the week, he’s Alex’s line mate).

For some reason Sasha decides to play for Sokol Krasnoyarsk of all teams. Alex really, really does not understand.

“What’s to understand?” Sasha ask when they get a chance to skype each other.

“It’s a minor’s team.”

“It’s my hometown team.”

Yes, yes. Alex has heard all about how Sasha’s grandparents and extended family have been filling the stands to watch him outskate every single person he plays against and with. It’s all very lovely. Such a good story. Heart warming and such. The Capitals PR team would be so happy with him if they had chosen to retain him rather than make him into their very convenient scapegoat. But there are actual, elite teams that Semin could be playing for. Most would be very happy to rent a bus to drive Semin’s entire family to come and see him.
Sasha shrugs.

“You could play with me!” Alex tells him, and now that Alex thinks about it, Sasha should be playing with him. “Why aren’t you playing with me?”

“Why would I want to? You’re such a showboat. You wouldn’t let me near the puck. Nicky will figure that out too.”

Alex gasps. “I am not and I would not do that.”

“Lies. Lies.”

And yes, Alex can’t deny that maybe there is a shade of untruth. But Sidney never complains about Alex’s style of play.

“Not all of us are Crosby.”

That, coming from Sasha, is one hell of an admission. It makes Alex suspicious. Sasha has never once thought himself less than anyone, particularly Crosby who Sasha still thinks is overrated no matter that he might claim to believe otherwise in the face of intrepid North American sports journalists.

Yawning, Sasha stretches his hands above his head. “I’m tired and you’re boring. We will talk later.”

And just like that, he switches off his webcam.

(When Sasha signs with Torpedo Nizhny Novgorod, he does not answer Alex’s calls. It’s awful. But Alex leaves a long message congratulating him for finally coming to his senses. And maybe laughing at him a little. Or a lot).

When Dynamo plays Metallurg Magnitogorsk they win. Of course. But afterwards Geno is pulled in a hundred directions.

It’s a hometown match for him, and he is their hometown hero.

Alex supposes he’s Moscow’s. Or Russia’s. But Geno looks worn when they meet up for drinks in the evening. Happy, certainly. But worn. Much has changed for Geno since he left Magnitogorsk. But although has returned triumphant, people have long memories. The cloud under which he left, still shadows him and his achievements. It is a burden that people do not wish to release him from and one that he carries not always lightly.

“Long day.”

“Good game,” Alex nods.

Geno’s lip curls. He isn’t sixteen and he probably won’t punch Alex. But he still takes everything to heart. His team might have lost tonight, but he has been playing better than ever. Like lightening on the ice. He is everywhere and can do almost anything. A few weeks ago he was made captain. The
C sits on his jersey like it belongs there. People here look at Geno in the same way.

“How is Sid?” Alex asks, because he figures that is better than asking Geno why he is playing so well but not scoring (or having Geno ask him the same question only without the ‘playing so well’ bit).

Geno rubs his neck and smiles softly. “Sid is well. He is working to bring us home.”

“Yes,” Alex nods. “That is what I have heard.”

“I don’t think he’s going to play here.”

Geno sounds soft. Like he has thought about Sidney playing on his team and living in the same place as him, and the idea has reached deep inside him and made him want more than he should. Geno has never been good at seeing the world as it is – not like Alex. Not like Sidney, either. But here, now, Geno finishes his drink and touches Alex’s shoulder when he gets up to go buy the next round.

Sidney is meant to be a Penguin, not a NHL refugee.

Alex leans back into the booth. The club is very loud. The bass line makes the floor under his feet vibrate and across the venue, he sees Geno amidst a group of people. He is laughing and joking and everyone is so happy that he is there with them.

He looks good. Healthy. But good too.

The white shirt he is wearing stretches across his shoulders and makes his skin look golden in the shifting club lights. The corners of his eyes crinkle and when one of his friends touches his hip, Alex finds himself following the curve of Geno’s neck and sharp line of his jaw as Geno turns and ducks his head down to speak to her.

It’s so long since they were boys.

Alex finishes his drink. He’ll need another.

During the off season, Alex is used to Sidney’s texts and occasional calls. But as the lockout stretched into its second month, Sidney starts to call Alex more regularly. Or Alex starts to call Sidney more regularly. Both.

They talk about the NHLPA. The work Sidney is doing with the NHLPA seems to become more and more involved each time Alex checks in with Sidney. There are events and campaigns and it all weighs on Sidney. Alex can hear it in his voice. But even then, Sidney will stay on the line to talk to Alex about politics and contracts and what people are saying.

Sidney is good. Sidney is healthy. But he is a voice on the other end of a phone.

Afterwards, Alex finds himself wondering what Sidney and Geno talk about when they call each other.

He knows he shouldn’t. But he does.

He thinks about all the calls and skype sessions he interrupted. It’s been so long since they were all together.
The distance he tried to create last season seems laughable now that they are all separated so completely by the lockout. Even Geno, who is playing the KHL with Alex, feels so much further away than he does when he is in Washington and Alex is in Pittsburgh. From friends, Alex heard the news of Geno being made Captain of his old team, and from Sidney Alex hears that Geno is uncomfortable with the attention he is receiving in his hometown.

Washington isn’t a hockey city. Geno lives more or less a quiet life. He rarely gets recognised and rarer still, gets stopped for autographs. It’s a city that suits him; suits his nature.

Alex could call him. Should call him too. But the longer they are apart, the harder it feels.

At night, Alex finds himself thinking of Sidney, thinking of the shadows under his eyes and the way he holds himself in front of the press. For so long it has been them against the world. Now Sidney is on one side of it, and Alex is on the other.

During the day, Alex trains and plays and smiles when people ask for his autograph.

This, Sidney finds funny, because of course he would. “I saw the pictures of you signing autographs,” he says when he calls, skipping the ‘hello’ and ‘how are you’ part of the conversation.

Alex feels a grin stretching across his features. “So you saw the hundreds and hundreds of fans line up and wait hours to see me.”

Sidney makes a hum haring noise of indifference. “I saw you and a whole heap of people. I think they were waiting to get to the concession stand during intermission.”

“Oh, Sid. Don’t feel jealous.”

“I’m not jealous. Why would I be jealous of you?” Sidney snipes.

And like that, it is on. Alex doesn’t miss a beat.

It’s only towards the end of the call, when his voice is starting to fail him, Sidney makes Alex express his concern.

“Big week,” Alex tells Sidney. “Big games. Lots of people. Lots of things to do.”

And it has been. But every week seems to be big here.

Sidney isn’t convinced, Alex can tell, but Sidney lets it go as much as he lets anything go.

But Alex’s voice doesn’t get better. He doesn’t get better. The trainers and team doctor diagnose it as a common cold.

“The weather,” they tell him.

They say too, that he is too busy, which Alex already knew. Everyday there are meetings and events. There are meetings and events in Pittsburgh, but in Pittsburgh there is Sidney. In Moscow there is only Alex and his Russian agent booking more and more things. Somehow his cold turns into acute exacerbation of bronchitis. When he is scratched and his condition is announced, Alex waits by his phone for Sidney to call.

Instead Sidney calls Alex’s mother. Alex only finds out when she takes time off work to come and attend his doctor’s appointment with him.

“He worries,” she says. “He’s a good boy.”
Alex should be used to his mother’s fondness for Sidney, he should. But really? Alex is sick and Sidney and his mother are phone buddies with each other. Alex hasn’t been teaching Sidney Russian for him to use it like this.

“His Russian is appalling though,” she comments.

“Yes,” Alex allows. “It is.”

“But he’s trying.”

And yeah, Sidney is. He always does.

The lockout ends about a fortnight into the New Year.

Alex plays one final game with Dynamo before flying home.

“Will you pick me up at the airport?” He asks Sidney in Russian.

“I didn’t understand a word of that,” Sidney tells him.

“You are getting sloppy,” Alex chides him. “All my hard work is ruined.”

“It’s not ruined!” Sidney exclaims, still as easy to provoke as ever.

“What will Geno say?” Alex waxes on and on, just to make Sidney huffy.

And the strange thing is, talking to Sidney does feel like home.

In the end, Sidney doesn’t pick Alex up, but he does come over to Alex’s house. Looking strong and healthy, he greets Ghera before saying hello to Alex which is typical of him, but Alex doesn’t mind. He’s used to it by now, as is Sidney, when Alex gathers him in a tight hug.

“Did you miss me?” He asks, pressing a kiss into Sidney’s dark hair.

“No,” Sidney says. “Not at all.”

“Lies,” Alex grins.

Sidney shakes his head. “Yeah, yeah.”

Alex’s time in the KHL hadn’t broken his slump. But it did reinvigorate his love for the game. Seeing Sidney on the ice again after so long an absence does too.

“This year,” Flower tells Alex as they are getting changed after practice.

He’s grinning slyly as he says it.

Fucking goalies.
But maybe it’s true. There is just something about the team this year, about the way they click on ice. When they play their first game, it feels like they’ve been playing together for much, much longer. No one misses a beat. Well, no one apart from Alex.

“It’ll come,” Sidney says.

But it doesn’t.

While Alex was in Moscow, it… it wasn’t easier to ignore, but his lack of form wasn’t as apparent as it is now. Sidney is on fire. Alex didn’t think it was possible, but Sidney is better than ever. He’s faster and smarter, and just better in every single way. Sidney was always the best, but now he is something else. It leaves Alex in awe.

Together, it feels like everything is coming together.

On the ice, Sidney seems to be able to predict play. He always knows where everyone else. Without fail, in Sidney’s hands the puck finds Alex again and again. The other guys too. Brendon Stutter gets a couple of nice ones which he makes the most of, winning the Penguins more than one game.

It feels like the start of something good. Maybe something great.

Flower grins at Alex. “Not going to say it?”

Alex holds up his hands. “Maybe I don’t want to jinx us.”

Flower laughs. Loudly.

And okay. Alex has never hesitated to say anything, ever. But this season has potential. Even this early, it feels like they’re going somewhere.

“Yeah, yeah,” Flower says.

From Carolina, Sasha is smug.

Since signing with the Hurricanes, he has somehow become a favourite not just of his new team, but of the fans too. It is most unexpected considering everything. (In this case, everything being everything he’s done and said to Alex). It is maybe why it takes Alex by surprise when instead of calling to brag about how he had dinner at Eric Staal’s home, again, Sasha calls asking about Geno.

“Have you spoken to Zhenya?” He asks.

“No?”

Sidney talks to Geno. Sidney is almost always talking to Geno. Sidney even finally bought a new cell phone so he can talk to Geno more often. When Alex dropped by while walking Ghera the previous evening, Sidney had his laptop set up in the kitchen so Geno could watch Sidney prepare roasted vegetables and wholegrain pasta.

Sasha sighs. “You should.”

Alex makes a face. “Why do I have to do everything?”
“You can. I can’t.”

And – Alex knows Geno holds grudges, but everyone knew Semin wasn’t happy with the Caps and that they had long since stopped being happy with him.

Sasha is quiet. “Zhenya’s contract ends soon.”

Alex pauses. He doesn’t quite know where Sasha is taking this.

“He’ll be a free agent soon.”

Alex – Alex knows that that means. But he needs Sasha to say it. Needs Sasha to say what no one else will dare to.

But Sasha has never coddled Alex. Not even once. Now is no exception.

“Are you saying he’s thinking of leaving the Caps?” Alex’s asks, not quite managing to say it either.

“I don’t know. I don’t think he knows either.”

Everyone in the league has heard stories about the Capitals. Alex has heard more than most, and seen more than most.

They threw Sasha under the bus a long time ago.

But Geno is the jewel in their crown. He’s perhaps the best player in the world, at the moment. But one player can’t win the Stanley Cup. A team with a few great players like Nicky and Mike, can’t win it either.

Alex knows what Geno can do when he feels like he’s trapped. He isn’t sure if the Caps do.

Being away from Sidney is hard for Geno. Alex has seen how Geno is when he and Sidney are together, seen the way Geno touches Sidney like he cannot get enough, like there can never be enough time with him.

They spend most of the year apart.

Sidney is different. Sidney works differently. But Alex thinks, for the first time in Sidney’s life, he has found himself wanting, preferring even, to be with someone rather than solely wanting hockey. He aches for Geno to.

When Alex goes over to Sidney’s to play some street hockey with the Lemieux kids, Alex finds himself thinking about Geno as a Pen. It’s completely unrealistic. The Pens finances are concentrated on Alex and Sidney. But – Alex thinks about having Geno in Pittsburgh. Not for a day or a weekend, but for good.

It’s stupid. It’s never going to happen.

Geno and Sidney are good to each other. Good for each other. Alex knows that too.

It feels a little like a cliché to be in love with his best Canadian friend and his best Canadian friend’s boyfriend who also happens to be Alex’s Russian best friend.

Sasha laughs when Alex tells him. “No, no. I’m taking this very seriously.”

Alex doubts that. Sasha never takes anything seriously. He is an awful, awful person and Alex has
Alex is on the ice when Sidney takes a puck to the mouth. It all happens so quickly. One moment Brooks has taken the shot, the next it is deflecting into Sidney.

Alex feels his stomach drop.

It’s a bad hit. There are teeth and blood on the ice, and Sidney needs to be lead off the ice. The game goes on, but as soon as it’s over, all Alex wants is to leave and get to Sidney. The press keep him though, wanting to get his opinion and to ask him questions. It’s too early to know exactly what the damage to Sidney is, but that doesn’t stop people from speculating.

When he does get away, he finds his cell phone filled with missed calls.

In the car park, he calls Geno.

“I’m on my way to Mario’s now,” he tells Geno.

“Let me know when you find out about him.”

“I will.”

When Alex arrives, Nathalie has put the kids to bed. In the kitchen, she makes him a cup of tea and together they wait. When Mario arrives home, he is exhausted.

“Broken jaw,” Mario says without fanfare.

Alex nods. It was a bad hit. Alex isn’t surprised by the diagnosis.

“His head?” Nathalie asks.

“Too soon to tell.”

Over the following days, Sidney undergoes oral surgery. When Alex sees him, he’s on heavy duty pain medication. Touching his wrist, Alex sits with him. Inside Alex’s chest, his heart is beating so loudly. Too loudly.

With his free hand, he calls Geno and puts him on speaker.

Sidney can’t talk so much as mumble, but that’s okay. Hearing him is enough for Geno.

When Sidney gets out of hospital, he spends a day or so sleeping. On pain medication, he’s slow and his eyes are dull. Alex brings over Ghera and she lays her head on Sidney’s lap. Sidney buries his fingers in her fur.

Sidney’s always been reserved, but the next few weeks he is unable to speak. The quiet is deafening. It’s not like before, with his concussions. There is an end in sight, and he’s healing. But it feels
unfair. Sidney came so far and waited so long. He’d been playing better than ever. Now he is back in the press box, watching games from a distance. With the shortened season, it isn’t even known if he will be back before the end of it.

During practice in an unfortunate accident with Nicky, Geno twists a muscle in his leg and subsequently ends up missing four games.

His absence is directly blamed for the Capitals following two out of three losses.

The shortened season is putting pressure on every team, but especially on one in the middle of the rankings. In Metallurg Magnitogorsk, Geno was playing some of the best hockey of his career. By the time the lockout was resolved, Metallurg Magnitogorsk was on their way to winning the Gagarin Cup. It’s something constantly mentioned in the press, as if his performance on one team should automatically carry over to another.

When he flies down to Pittsburgh, he is in a particularly bad mood.

Geno takes everything so personally.

He arrives on the day the Pens are scheduled to play the Flyers. When Alex goes out with Max, Ilya and a collection of Pens and Flyers after the game, Geno gets upset when Alex doesn’t drop by afterwards.

Alex isn’t sure if Geno’s really serious.

“We left the bar at three.”

“So?” Geno asks.

Alex looks at him; looks at the tense lines of Geno’s shoulders and his clenched jaw. Geno can’t seriously be upset.

“I would have just gotten in the way,” he tells Geno even though he shouldn’t have to. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Geno snaps.

Alex – Alex doesn’t know what Geno wants.

“You came to see your boyfriend,” he tells Geno. “Not me.”

And Geno – it’s like the fight goes out of him.

When Alex returns home from optional skate the following morning, he finds Geno waiting for him on his front steps. As Alex pulls his car into his drive way, Geno unfurls his long legs and stands to greet Alex.

“I’m sorry,” Geno says, before Alex can speak.

Alex nods. It’s a shitty apology. Geno doesn’t even sound like he means it. But he wouldn’t have said it if he didn’t.
“Can I come in?” Geno asks.

Alex nods.

Inside Ghera presses herself to Alex, welcoming him back. She’s lost a little weight since getting back to Pittsburgh which probably is Alex’s fault. She’s always been sensitive to his moods. Rubbing a hand over the soft fur of her back, Alex settles her.

When they were kids, Alex used to be so stupid with Geno. They’d hook up at tournaments, and give each other hickey’s at team meets. While they played together at the World Junior Championships, Alex remembers how had smuggled in a bottle of rum and they’d given each other drunken hand jobs the night after the first team practice, happy and careless and completely caught up in how brilliant they were.

When Alex had returned from his rookie NHL year, it started to go wrong. In retrospect it’s easy to see. Alex was so careless back then, and Geno was under so much pressure. They’d casually fucked around, like it didn’t mean anything at all. Geno had bossed Alex around and in return Alex had pressed dark bruises into Geno’s hips that he carried for days afterwards.

Then, after Geno’s delayed rookie season, Alex acted as if nothing had changed, as if they were the same.

Those years they didn’t speak, were some of the loneliest in his life. He had friends. He had Sidney, Max, and Ryan, but it wasn’t the same.

Alex can’t ruin their friendship again.

Geno nods when Alex tells him that.

When Geno returns to the Lemieux’s, Alex goes with him. He probably shouldn’t, but everything feels shaky. Being glared at by Sidney feels normal where little else does. Coming off pain medication, he is in a consistently bad mood. Alex gently hugs Sidney close, carefully cradling the back of Sidney’s head.

Alex doesn’t know if Sidney is aware of that part of Geno and Alex’s relationship. Maybe.

Sidney’s never mentioned anything, but Geno has always been honest. Alex wouldn’t be surprised if Sidney did know.

Not that it matters either way.

It’s been a long time since Geno was Zhenya to Alex. Longer still, since Alex was Sanja to Geno.

It’s stupid what Alex has gone and done. He knows it. It was one thing to fall for Sidney, but then for Geno?

They’re it for each other. Alex knows it.

There are worse things, Alex knows, to fall for someone taken. It’s just tough to remember what they are.

Geno stays until the end of the week. Before he leaves, he has dinner with the Lemieux’s. Geno too,
grew up idolising Mario. Alex thinks one of the few things Geno envies about Alex, is that he got to play on the same team as Mario during his final season.

It’s hard to know what Mario and Nathalie think of Geno.

They have always been particularly protective of Sidney – but most people in the Pens organisation are. Sidney is good and honest and perhaps one of the best people Alex knows. People have been interested in Sidney since he was a child. Alex too.

From what Alex understands, Sidney never told them he was seeing Geno. It came out when Sidney was concussed. Alex has always admired Mario, but the way they took the discovery made Alex appreciate him more. Nathalie too. They might not have found out in the manner Sidney would have wished, but they supported Sidney completely. Alex isn’t so sure about Sidney’s parents, but then, Alex doesn’t think they know.

Over dinner, Mario talks to Geno about his opinions on the KHL.

The KHL has grown substantially since Alex and Geno were drafted by the NHL. It’s reaching a huge European audience, and Alex wouldn’t be surprised if it becomes a serious rival for the NHL in the coming decades. Geno shares Alex’s opinion. Fiercely loyal to his hometown team, he talks up the talent on the team, and the junior programs that are training up the up and coming players.

The Pens haven’t been drafting a huge number of Russian players recently. It’s something that Alex finds particularly disappointing. But the next draft round looks good. There is a field of very good young players – some Alex got the chance to meet while he was in Moscow.

There are rumours that Pavel is thinking of returning to the KHL after his contract with the Red Wings concludes.

It feels more like a rumour than anything else. But when Geno mentions it, it makes Alex think.

Alex’s career is more or less settled. He will be a Penguin for many years to come, as will Sidney. But Geno’s future is up in the air. The Caps have successfully kept that under locks (Alex isn’t even sure if they know Geno leaving them is an option). But a few times in interviews, Geno has mentioned his desire to finish his career in the KHL. Alex enjoyed his time with Dynamo Moscow during the lockout, but he isn’t sure about the idea of returning to them.

Geno shrugs, when Mario brings it up. “I’m thinking about the Sochi Olympics first.”

Alex nods. He is too. The Russian Winter Olympic hockey team is yet to be announced, but Alex would be very surprised if they weren’t both on it.

Mario grins. “Hometown advantage this time.”

Alex laughs and nudges Sidney gently with his elbow. “Watch out Sid.”

Sidney scowls and takes a pointed sip of his soup.

It’s going to be good at Sochi. Alex can tell already.

“Third time lucky,” he tells Mario.

Mario smiles. “We’ll see.”
The season pushes on. The Penguins make the playoffs. So do the Capitals.

But there is only one winner in the end.

That is the tragedy and the triumph of it all.

[2013-2014]

The summer does Alex good.

With the Sochi Winter Olympics only months away, the excitement and pressure is building.

In the end, Alex returns to Pittsburgh early and starts training feeling strong and unbeatable. Jet lag completely forgotten, he skates circles around the rookies at camp, teasing and talking trash to them. Sidney disapproves, of course. But he would. As captain, Sidney is above things like that, which means the task of getting to know the new kids falls to Alex.

“It’s not professional,” Sidney says.

Alex smiles. “Only one of us knows their names without looking at their jerseys.”

Sidney makes a face.

But it’s true. It isn’t bad though. That is how they work. Sidney knows how people play, and Alex knows people. Between the two of them, they know their team.

The pre-season starts strong.

In the training camp and in early pre-season matches, the two of them sit on the bench together and watch their team play as much as they watch the opposition. Sidney is better at knowing what he’s looking at – better at knowing what to look for. But Alex is getting better. It shows too when the season begins. It starts slowly with a loss, a win, a loss, and a win, but before long they’re winning and they keep winning.

“Don’t,” Flower tells Alex.

“What?” Alex says, holding up his hands innocently.

“Don’t jinx it,”

Alex snorts. “When did you become Crosby? Should I worry?”

“Fuck you,” Flower swears, but Alex doesn’t care. No one does.

It might be too early, but Alex can already tell that this season is going to be good. Going to be better. Alex isn’t shy. He tells people that too. People like to listen to him and he wants people to
know that. Wants the other NHL teams to know that this year the Penguins are coming for them.

At the Sochi Olympics, Alex wakes up slowly. Jet lag always knocks him sideways for a bit. Eyes hazy, he doesn’t know what he’s seeing for a moment. The soft sounds, the bed creaking. Sidney and Geno. Sidney’s pale body is moving slowly. Geno is groaning; his knees drawn up and his fingers tangled in Sidney’s dark hair.

Sex, in Alex’s experience, is messy and all over the place. Sid and Geno aren’t really that.

Geno has Sidney cradled between his thighs. Sidney’s head is bowed into the crock of Geno’s neck; Alex watches the flex of the muscles in his back, the roll of his hips and the morning light playing against his skin.

Geno rolls his head to the side and meets Alex’s gaze.

“Pretend to sleep,” he mouths.

Alex makes a face.

Geno rolls his eyes.

Okay. Sure. Whatever. Alex closes his eyes. But he still hears the soft murmur of words, of groans, and feels his own cock thicken in response.

Inside his chest, his heart thumps but he keeps his eyes closed until after he hears Sid come, and Geno follow. Alex only flickers them open when he hears the shower turn on.

“When did you stop being such a heavy sleeper?” Geno asks idly.

Alex shrugs. “Jet lag.”

Scratching his stomach, Geno snorts. Naked and spent, Geno settles back into the covers but only for a moment.

Sighing, Geno sits up. “Don’t be a dick. You know how Sid is.”

And Alex does. He wouldn’t have made fun of Sidney. Private things like that – they’re meant to be private. Alex knows that too.

Running a hand through his knotted hair, Geno gets to his feet and lets himself into the bathroom. Alex catches a glimpse of dark hair and pale skin, but Geno closes the door behind him before Alex can see anything more.

It’s different this time around. It’s Alex and Geno’s third Winter Olympics and this year they are both alternate captains. Their captain this time around is Gonch and it’s good to play under him. On the whole it’s a good team; a robust team. Maybe it’s a team roster with more of a focus on offense than defence, but Alex can work with that.
The Canadian team too, is in fine form. Sidney is strong and healthy and his only real complaint is being placed in close quarters to Claude Giroux, Sidney’s most recent nemesis of choice since he started dating Geno. When Alex and Geno meet up with him in the mess hall, Sidney regales them with tales of Giroux’s passive aggressive behaviour and how everyone is taking his side instead of Sidney’s.

“Even Jonny,” Sidney finishes, as if Jonathan Toewes telling Sidney to rise above their petty differences for the good of their country is the final indignity.

Alex grins and knocks his elbow against Geno’s. “Once, Sid used to talk about you in this way.” Geno laughs. “I know.”

It’s a highly competitive field this year. Each country brings strong teams.

The assembled national and international press write all kinds of articles and opinion pieces. Some are flattering, many are not.

But in the end, games are won and lost and some teams medal while others do not.

Afterwards – after, Sidney comes over to Alex and Geno’s room.

Somehow it’s the same and completely different than last time.

Alex doesn’t pretend not to see when Geno kisses Sidney. It’s intimate and private and Alex doesn’t know what’s happening; doesn’t know what to feel. It’s over quickly. When Geno pulls back, Sidney takes a beat to open his eyes. Alex is used to seeing Sidney fragile, but not like this.

“Kiss Sidney goodbye,” Geno says softly.

Alex –

Geno repeats himself.

Sidney’s eyes are open now and Alex looks at him and of course Geno knows. Alex has never been able to hide anything from him.

Alex steps forward. Placing on hand on Sidney’s jaw, Alex exhales slowly.

Sidney looks up at him.

Leaning down, Alex kisses Sidney. His lips are soft and warm and slick from Geno’s kiss. Their kiss is chaste though and fleeting.

When they break away from each other, they turn to Geno.

He is very still and everything around them feels very quiet.

“Now me.”

And Alex feels fine tremors wreck though him.
Unable not to, he reaches for Geno. Touching his wrist, Alex pulls him close.

They’ve done this before, but not for a long time. Inside Alex’s chest, his heart beats and beats and beats and when Alex kisses Geno, Alex closes his eyes and keeps them closed for a beat afterwards. He feels Geno step back.

“Good.”

When the Winter Olympics are over and they are both back in Pittsburgh, Sidney drops by.

Alex feels tired and worn and there is still the rest of the season to play. He smiles though, when he answers the door to find Sidney shifting his weight from foot to foot. The sight is so familiar now.

“What’s up?”

“Geno says I should kiss you hello.”

And oh. Alex’s hands fall to his side. Geno.

Sidney doesn’t hesitate. He isn’t graceful or practiced, but he touches Alex’s hands and kisses him.

It’s just as chaste as their first kiss, just a brush of his lips against Alex’s really. But Alex’s heart pounds none the less. Sidney squeezes Alex’s hand, and Alex wonders what else Geno said to him.

Alex doesn’t quite understand what is happening between the three of them.

He thinks of asking Sidney, but what good would that do?

Geno calls Alex now. He always did, but now it’s far more often.

It’s nice. Geno is a warm presence on the other end of the line.

“How is Sid?” He asks sometimes.

Sidney is good. He’s playing better than ever and he seems to have an ease to him that is pleasant to see. He comes over sometimes and reads while Alex is studying.

Alex has other friends. There are teammates he hangs out with more. There are friends who he had more in common with. But somehow, when Alex is in need, he always ends up going to Sidney and Sidney always ends up with him.

Geno has always been part of Alex’s life.

Geno only has to look at Alex and Alex will try and take him home. Heck – he doesn’t have to look at Alex and Alex will try and take him home. Sidney is different. Sometimes they feel more like friends than anything more. Maybe without Geno, they would just be friends. But that doesn’t scare Alex. Sidney doesn’t like people, but he loves them in his own way.
In the evenings Alex brings Ghera over to Sidney’s place and listens to him talk to Geno over skype. Sidney new place is too large and too new for him. Alex doubts that Sidney will last an entire season before finding some reason to move back with the Lemieux’s. There’s a pool going on within the team.

In the kitchen, Sidney is bustling around, cooking.

Opening the porch doors, Alex’s lets Ghera out. She isn’t used to Sidney’s new place either. Padding outside, she sniffs at the over grown grass. Leaning against the doorframe, Alex watches her. The night air is sharp against his skin and when Sidney calls him over to talk to Geno, Alex goes easily. Over the internet, Geno looks washed out and the camera angle is bad. His voice is warm though, and when Alex makes Geno laugh, Alex can’t ever remember feeling more pleased with himself.

Maybe this isn’t all that different to anything else.

Alex is selfish. But what’s so wrong about that?

When he turns to share his smile with Sidney, Sidney is already looking at him.

Even after everything, sometimes Sidney can be so shy, so reticent. But now, there is something soft and gentle about him. Like Geno, Sidney has kind eyes.

Geno stays on skype and eats dinner with them. It’s good, but it’d be better if he was in Pittsburgh with them. But that goes unsaid.

Afterwards, Alex stays the night.

In the guest bedroom he lets Ghera jump up and curl into a ball at the end of the bed. Down the hall he listens for Sidney as he settles down for the night.

Inside Alex’s chest, his heart feels so light, so full. Placing a hand against it, he listens as it beats for Sidney who is still so reserved and so loyal, and for Geno, so far away and so stupid for letting Alex have this.

It takes time. It takes Sidney time.

Generally, Alex is impatient. Eager for everything; wanting it all at once. But Sidney doesn’t work like that.

They have been known each other for so long – have been friends for so long.

It doesn’t feel they’re waiting. It just feels like it will happen when it happens.

During the day, Alex does all the things he normally does. He goes to every practice and trains with his team. They work on their plays and try out new ideas, building on what they know to become better. During games, Alex plays with Sidney. They’re not always on the same line, but they’re on the same team.
Since the winter Olympics, Sidney’s focus has become sharper. Alex knows that look, knows what it means.

Sidney knows where he’s going. Where they’re going.

In the evening, Alex comes over every second day or so. They have dinner sometimes. Other times, they go out with their friends. Occasionally, after long road trips, they will kiss, sloppy and exhausted. Alex touches the small of Sidney’s back, the strong line of his spine, the curve of his ass, and they sleep curled around each other.

When Geno flies in early, Alex wakes to Geno pressing a kiss to his shoulder as he crawls into bed with them. His hands are cold but his lips are warm.

“Hey,” Geno whispers.

“Zhenya,” Alex mumbles, half asleep and stupid.

Geno smiles. “It’s been a while since you called me that.”

Alex knows. Leaning close, he kisses the corner of Geno’s mouth, and the pale skin of his throat. Geno inhales sharply and catches Alex’s mouth as he pulls away.

In the grey early morning light, with Sidney presses against Alex’s back, Alex and Geno kiss, slow and easy. When Sidney blinks awake, Geno breaks away from Alex to lean over and kiss Sidney hello. Against Alex’s chest, Sidney’s fingers twitch.

Rolling over a little, Alex lets Geno press closer to Sidney, nipping at his bottom lip and making him gasp.

Pulling away, Geno grins. “Good morning,” he teases.

Sidney laughs breathlessly, delighted. “That’s what you’re going to say?”

“It’s polite.”

“And you’re polite?” Sidney asks, his cheeks flushed and his hair a mess.

Geno tugs the collar of Sidney’s stretched out t-shirt. “Yes.”

Alex finds himself smiling at the exchange. They’re such idiots.

Bringing his hands up, Alex cradles Geno’s jaw and draws him into a kiss. It’s been a long time since they did this, but Alex still remembers how to make Geno moan. Alex isn’t totally sure where the lines are now. He and Sidney have been moving slowly. Here, now, Geno feels like a catalyst. The air around them feels heavy and Alex feels breathless when Geno breaks away from him.

Alex knows Geno and Geno knows him.

But Sidney is an unknown, at least to Alex.

Against him, Alex feels Sidney start to tremble a little and Alex can’t judge if it’s from anticipation or nerves. They haven’t talked about this. Not really. Now doesn’t feel like the right time to start.

Drawing Geno down to the bed, Alex pulls him close.

“It’s too early,” he tells Geno, kissing behind his ear. “Later.”
“Sometimes I wonder,” Geno murmurs when they’re having breakfast. “What if I wasn’t a Cap.”

This season hasn’t been fantastic for the Capitals, honestly speaking, they’re struggling. There are great players on the team, but some games, it is almost as if Geno is expected to play the entire game singlehandedly. With Geno’s contract coming up for review, his musings feel loaded. From the kitchen, Alex turns.

Sidney stills. “What if you weren’t?”

Geno shrugs.

It isn’t a secret that the Capitals management have been putting pressure on Geno and without Sasha there, Geno has been feeling the burden more keenly. It isn’t a secret either, that Geno misses Sidney, pines for him.

“You too,” Sidney says when they are cleaning up.

And –

Alex stills.

In the corner of his eye, he sees Geno watching him.

Alex has his opinions. It is clear how much happier Sasha is in North Carolina with the Hurricanes. But he doesn’t voice any of them. This is Geno’s decision in the end. Alex can’t make it for him. Either way, it’s going to have an effect, on Geno, on them, maybe even on the league as a whole if he chooses to move to another team.

Alex trusts that Geno will make the right choice.

Over the course of the season, Alex gets used to Geno flying in and out, and of fleeting visits when the Pens play an away game against the Caps. Alex has never done the long distance thing. But then, Sidney isn’t long distance. It’s better though, when they’re all together in the same place at the same time. He thinks now, that it was always meant to be the three of them, they just needed time to all realise it.

In Washington, Alex grows used to Geno’s house; gets used to being with Geno and Sidney.

At night, Geno waits until after they had finished dinner, to reach for Sidney as they’re getting ready to go to bed. Alex feels so full of everything. From the doorway, he watches Geno grin as Sidney slips his hands under the hem of Geno’s white henley and rub circles on his hips.

When Sidney reaches for Alex, Alex goes to him and Geno.

Sidney knows him and Alex knows him. And fuck, Alex has never wanted anything or anyone more than he wants Sidney and Geno.

“Hurry up,” Sidney complains.
Alex buries his face in the curve of Sidney’s neck.

“Yeah, yeah,” Geno quips, laughter evident in his tone.

Tugging Sidney’s shirt out of his jeans, Geno looks so pleased with himself as he pulls it up over Sidney’s head, mussing his hair. Sidney lets out a snort and when Geno pulls Sidney towards his bed, unable to stop himself, Alex follows, tugging at his own shirt and fumbling with his pants. A stray elbow catches Sidney’s side, making him yelp and Alex can’t help it, he crowds Sidney against Geno’s sheets and kisses Sidney until his mouth is red and slick and he’s twisting under Alex’s body.

“Fuck,” Alex swears.

Geno laughs. Pushing Alex over onto his back, Geno presses his mouth against Alex’s. It’s been a long time since Alex did anything like this with Geno, but Alex remembers how to make Geno gasp and groan and grind his hips down against Alex’s. Breathless, Geno breaks away. Against them, Sidney’s breath is shallow and when he palms Geno hard cock, Geno lets out a desperate sound.

Alex wants to blow Geno, wants to pin his hips to the bed and mouth the head of Geno’s cock until he cries. Alex wants to watch Sidney suck Geno, wants to see Sidney roll his hips down against Geno’s sheets, so turned on he can’t stop himself.

Alex wants everything.

“Fuck me, please,” Geno tells Sidney.

His voice is rough, raw drawl. It makes Alex close his eyes but not before he sees Sidney bite the corner of Geno’s jaw like Geno didn’t just leave him breathless to.

“Please,” Geno says and when Sidney looks at Alex like he wants to check if that’s okay with him too, Alex can’t help himself. The thought of it undoes him.

He’s seen flashes through doors left open, glimpses of pale skin and dark hair. But this; Geno’s hot skin and Sidney’s dark eyes and bruised mouth and they haven’t even started.

“Please,” Alex tells Sidney too. “I want to watch.”

And Alex does. Geno knows that, maybe even Sidney knew that back when the three of them were circling around each other in the lead up to the Sochi games. But Alex can’t stop himself from kissing the hollow of Geno’s throat as Sidney stretches him open. Sidney starts with two fingers and has Geno begging by three. When Sidney pushes in, Alex swallows Geno’s gasp.

“Come on,” Geno says, his lips brushing Alex’s as he speaks.

Pressing against Geno’s back, Sidney rolls his hips slowly. On their sides, it takes Sidney a while to get rhythm, as he does, Geno starts to rocks against Alex. His cock slipping against Alex’s, their legs tangled together.

“Shit,” Alex swears. “Sid.”

Twisting, Alex reaches for Sidney, his fingers scrabbling at Sidney’s slick skin. Pressing himself closer to Geno, Alex know he isn’t going to last. He doesn’t think Geno is either. Sidney is shaking now, his temple pressed against the back of Geno’s neck as he thrusts his hips and Geno is writhing against him – between Sidney and Alex.

“Sanja,” Geno moans against Alex’s throat.
The name, his name, makes Alex give in. Wrapping a hand around their cocks, he jerks them off together. Licking into Geno’s mouth, and Alex strokes them hard and fast and neither of them need too much at this point. Geno is so worked up, rocking back against Sidney cock and forward into Alex’s hand. A minute, maybe two later, Geno comes with a sob and Alex follows.

Sidney manages a half a dozen more thrusts, sharp and shallow, before he comes too.

Catching his breath, Alex hears Geno hiss as Sidney pulls out. Touching Geno’s hip, Alex holds him while Sidney gets rid of his condom and grabs a towel from Geno’s bathroom.

“You okay?” Geno ask.

Alex nods.

“Me too,” Geno smiles.

Afterwards, when Sidney settles back in bed, Geno talks to him quietly for a while before they all curl up together. Tomorrow Sidney and Alex will have to leave early to get back to the hotel in time to catch the team bus to the airport. Now though, Alex falls asleep curled around Geno, his nose tucked behind his ear and in the morning he wakes to Sidney’s hand touching his shoulder.

In the summer, Alex thinks about inviting Sidney to Moscow again. Maybe with Geno around, the two of them can convince Sidney to stay longer than two weeks.

Sidney blinks when Alex brings it up. They are in the locker room, cleaning out their stalls and Alex really thought Sidney would be more excited by Alex’s excellent planning and communication skills.

“I’m already coming over,” Sidney says. “ Didn’t Geno tell you?”

Geno never tells Alex anything. He just sends Alex’s pictures of his dog and text messages that don’t make all that much sense.

Sidney snorts. “No. You just don’t listen.”

That, Alex can’t accept. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“I do not believe you.”

Sidney rolls his eyes and in the shift of his shoulders, Alex sees him losing interest in the conversation already. It’s dreadful. It’s like Sidney doesn’t even try sometimes. Alex doesn’t know why he puts up with it.

“So, me, you, Geno,” Alex sums up.

Sidney nods absentely. “Mike too.”
“Kadar?”

“Yeah.”

And apparently as well as Geno inviting Sidney to stay with Alex, Geno and Sidney have also invited Mike to train the three of them.

For a moment, Alex thinks about saying something. But what’s the point? He can’t think of a thing he wants more.

End Notes

Find/follow me on tumblr if you want <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!