

Chapter 1

Face Off

“We made the playoffs. How do we party?” Peshan whispered. He was our hockey team’s left wingman. We were leaving the change room to grab our bus back to the hotel. All of the team was headed out to the parking lot.

The ride to the hotel was only ten minutes. That was nothing next to the more than two hours it took to get to Port Carling from Toronto.

I boarded the bus and got pushed along to the back by the stream of hockey players.

“You’re coming. Right, Coop?” Peshan asked. Everyone got a short nickname. I was Coop, even though I liked Cooper better. Peshan, we all called Pesh. He liked Pesh better.

“I’m behind in Math,” I said. “I’ve got to catch up.” Pesh and I were sharing a room at the hotel. Really, some time alone sounded better to me than a party.

“You can spare one night,” Pesh said. “You can’t suck at math that much.”

“I can try to get us some beer or something,” another player said. I was still new to this team and found it hard to tell the guys apart. It was even harder when they weren’t wearing their jerseys with their numbers. At least then I had a shot. “Coach Chug is a heavy sleeper. He’ll never find out.”

Really, I just didn’t want to hang out with the team. They were nice enough guys. But I barely knew them. And they barely knew me. I was only the new goalie. I was the six-foot-five beefy guy filling up the crease. I had transferred

onto the Great Blues mid-season because we didn't have enough players to keep my old team going. Not after my boyfriend moved away. These new guys and I might be a team now. We weren't buds yet.

The guy offering to score us beers threw his bag onto an empty seat. He dropped his phone on top. The screen flickered on. A topless woman appeared.

I looked away and could feel myself blush. Even though I didn't know his name, I now knew that the guy liked busty blondes.

"Coop's gone red," the guy laughed.

"Dude, get that off your phone," another player warned. "It's bad luck to jerk off during a winning streak. It throws off your game." He grabbed the phone. "Imagine if the Puck Bunnies looked like her!"

The Puck Bunnies were the girls that hung around us hockey guys. Normally, when talk like this started, I left. It was just the usual locker-room talk, but I didn't want any part of it. I also

didn't want to see if talk turned into anything else. I'd heard a lot of weird stories about guys and locker-room pranks.

The first guy wiggled his phone in front of my face.

I pushed it away.

"Relax," he said.

I couldn't relax. Not when these guys didn't know I was gay. My old team knew. They were cool with it. I didn't know how these guys would be. How could I? There hadn't been time for me to get to know them. So I hadn't said anything about it. It wasn't that I was in the closet. I just didn't need to tell them all about me. I wanted to play hockey. Being gay had nothing to do with the game. But every time I thought about it, I started to get a headache. I tried not to think about it.

I said, "I'm good. You guys have fun."

Pesh shrugged as we got off the bus at the hotel on the edge of Port Carling. "Sure," he said. "I think I saw a store that sells beer a few

blocks away. Let's try our luck there."

I nearly ran up the stairs to my room and into the shower. It felt great to take a real shower. I'd only rinsed off after the game. The showers in the arenas were another place I tried to avoid. There was something about being naked with a bunch of straight hockey players. What if they thought I was looking at them?

Not that I was too worried. I was taller and wider than any of the other guys. I rubbed my belly dry with the towel. Under the extra padding, I had muscle. If one of the guys started up, I could deck them without trying.

I pulled on my sweats. I flopped face down on the bed and opened my math book. I didn't understand this chapter. Not that I was stupid or anything. I just never got how the teacher explained stuff.

I was struggling through the practice questions when my phone pinged. The screen said my boyfriend — no, my ex-boyfriend — had a new post.

I should have been doing my homework. I shouldn't have been checking out my ex online. Still, I swiped open my screen. He looked good. Extra good. It was a topless selfie. Only his hockey pants on, and the laces on them were loose. I could see the line of hair below his belly button. He was a little sweaty.

I looked at other pics in his feed. We broke up because his family moved cities. We both knew we wouldn't be able to see each other. Not in real life. And we didn't lie and say we would try to make it work. We had one last night together. It was nice but sad. We were each other's first. I missed him.

I stopped on a photo of us. It showed us in the change room. He had his arm over my shoulders.

I heard the hotel room door opening. I shut off my phone.

"We brought the party to you!" Pesh called.

The rest of the team followed him into our room.

Chapter 2

He Scores

“I’ll mix drinks,” Pesh said. He took two six-packs from the guys. He dumped ice into plastic cups and poured. A cup was shoved into my hand.

I felt like all the other guys were watching me. Waiting to see if I’d join in with them or not. I took a tiny sip. I didn’t like it. I decided to pretend to drink it for the rest of the night.

“Hand me a T-shirt,” I said.

One of the guys grabbed my chest from behind.

“Don’t be shy. The Bunnies have bigger tits than you do.”

All the guys started laughing. Then they started drinking. Some of the guys were already acting like idiots. One guy grabbed my used towel and snapped it at other guys. He aimed for their butts.

“Stop acting like a homo,” said a guy who nearly got hit in the sack.

“That’s the most action you’ve seen all season!” the guy with the towel shot back.

There wasn’t enough beer shared between us to get anyone even a little buzzed. But I knew they’d all say they were drunk in the morning. It was cooler that way.

“You were killer, Coop. Not a shot could get by you.” Pesh clapped me on the shoulder.

“It’s easy when you’re built like a wall,” one of the other guys said.

I was built to be a goalie. Tall. Wide. Stocky. I blocked most of the net without trying.

Some of the guys horsed around. They hit each other or play fought. I sat on the bed and was quiet. I tried to figure out who was talking. And who was who. I would have left, but I had nowhere I could go. It was my room.

Soon, pairs of guys started to leave.

“We’ll get rid of the cans,” one of the last four guys said. “We’ll dump them in the trash outside the hotel.”

“Take the cups too,” Pesh said. He emptied the trash can into a plastic bag and handed it over. “We’ll be kicked out of the playoffs if we’re caught.”

Pesh locked our door after they left. He threw himself backward onto my bed and pulled me down beside him. I never did get a T-shirt to wear. I put my arms across my middle to cover up my belly.

“That was one of the best games of my life,” Pesh said. “You really were awesome, Coop.”

“Thanks,” I said. My size left no room on

the bed between Pesh and me. “You scored almost all the goals.”

“Too bad it was an away game. The Bunnies would have gone wild. Imagine all the bouncing.” Pesh cupped his hands in front of his chest and made a jiggling motion.

“I guess.” I knew the girls even less than I knew the guys on my new team.

“Some of the girls like you.”

“I don’t think so.” I felt my cheeks go warm. It was strange thinking about a girl liking me. I wouldn’t even know where to start. Or what to do. Not that I was interested.

“Do you want me to introduce you? You can get pretty far with some of them. If you’re not picky.”

Would picking no one be thought of as being picky?

“I’m sort of with one,” he said. “We’re keeping things casual. No strings. She’s cool like that.”

Pesh's long, lean body stretched out beside mine. His cheeks, nose and brows shone in the lamp's light. I looked away. I didn't want Pesh to catch me checking him out.

"Tiana is hot. Don't you think?" Pesh asked.

"Which one is she?"

"The one with the boobs."

They all had boobs. That didn't help me at all.

"The big boobs," Pesh said. "She's curvy."

I snuck a glance at Pesh again. I peeked at the area of skin showing above his jeans. He opened his eyes.

I glanced away fast. I thought he saw me looking. I moved to put more room between us. I didn't know what to do or how to suggest Pesh go lie on his own bed. I felt like I needed to get out and couldn't think of a way to.

"You're not into girls. It's cool," he whispered.

I gulped. I think I began to nod.

Pesh rolled onto his side. He bit his

bottom lip. Slowly he reached out. He placed his hand on my chest.

I stared down at his hand on me. I'd only ever been with one guy. My boyfriend. And we'd been dating. Pesh was my teammate. He was with a girl. We weren't dating. We didn't even know each other well. And still, here he was with his hand on my chest, only inches away. I could feel my heart beating behind my ears.

When I didn't answer, Pesh started to pull his hand away.

I grabbed it and held it. He leaned in closer. He held his breath.

I knew this was dangerous. I knew there were lots of reasons not to. And I knew we were alone and he was giving me the go-ahead. And we both wanted me to take it. He dug his fingers into my chest hair. I knew we shouldn't.

Screw it. I pushed against him and kissed him. He jumped back and pulled his hand away.

I began to blurt I was sorry. I never got it

out because Pesh kissed me. A bit too hard. A bit too clumsy. Our teeth bumped. Our noses smashed into one another. But it didn't stop us.

After we were done, he went back to his bed. And we fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Delay

I woke up thirsty in the morning. And I had to use the washroom. Irony.

Pesh's bed was empty. The shower was running.

I rolled over and pushed my face into the pillow. I really had to go.

If I had known Pesh better, I might have gone in and used the toilet. I wouldn't have felt so shy.

I thought about last night. It had to be a mistake. We talked about girls. And boobs.

I'd never talked about boobs before. I'm not sure I even really talked about them last night. Pesh figured out I was gay. We kissed. Then more. We were both ready and willing. That was it. At best, Pesh was curious. He wanted to know what being with a guy was like. And there I was. It was easy. It felt good. It was just some fooling around.

Then why was I so worried about seeing him? Why did I wish he had already gone down to breakfast?

The bathroom door was open a little. A long slice of light cut across our beds.

But what if Pesh had liked last night? I knew we both liked it, you know, *that* way. But what if, maybe, there was something else?

I couldn't let my mind go there. I'd only be setting myself up to be hurt. It could only ever be a mistake.

I really needed to use the washroom. It was starting to hurt to hold it in. I groaned as I got out of bed. I pushed open the bathroom door. The toilet seat was already up.

“Couldn’t wait,” I called over the sound of the water.

The shower shut off. Pesh pulled back the curtain.

He said, “Throw me a towel.”

I finished and grabbed the nearest towel. I handed it to Pesh.

“Sorry,” I said. I didn’t look at him. I guess he noticed.

He stepped out of the shower. “It’s no big deal. We’ve changed in front of each other before.”

We did a lot more than change in front of each other last night.

I turned my back to him. I didn’t want him to see the reaction I was having from being so close to his wet body. I wasn’t happy with my own body’s betrayal. Or my lack of control over it. This morning or last night.

I went back to my bed. I was still thirsty.

“All yours,” Pesh said a few minutes later. He threw the towel behind him as he walked

out of the bathroom. Naked again, he lifted his bag onto his bed. He began to go through it before he got dressed in front of me.

I snuck glances. Pesh wasn't shy in the locker room. He wasn't shy out of it either. It didn't matter that we had never shared a room before. It didn't matter that we had messed around only hours before. He moved around as confident as always. He was letting it all hang out there. I wished I could have been that confident. But my body didn't look like his.

"Now that we made the playoffs, things need to change. This team is better than anyone thought. I want to be captain," Pesh said. "And I want to be made centre. That means we have to practise hard. I want to win."

My body hadn't calmed down. I stayed in bed. I lifted one knee and propped myself up on the pillows. I had to be blushing.

"We have a good chance," I said.

"A great chance. We could take this. This is one step closer to me going pro."

I sat up in bed. “Is that what you want?”

“Isn’t that what every Canadian kid who grew up on skates wants? I’m not just going to want it. I’m going to do it,” Pesh said. “I can’t rely on luck. I’m going to work hard. I’m going to make sure the other guys do too. We’re going to take it. I can’t let anything stop me.”

I stretched. I noticed Pesh look me up and down as I did. Now I was definitely blushing. He gave a small smirk before he finished getting dressed.

“Get cleaned up, Coop,” he said. “We need our star goalie to fuel up down at breakfast. What do you think there will be? I hope it’s not dry toast and muffins. We need actual food.”

I still had a semi but I stood up. “We’re only taking a bus ride back to Toronto.”

“Get a move on. I don’t want the other guys swiping all the good grub.” Pesh was acting like nothing had happened.

I was fine with that. I let out a breath. Things seemed okay between us. Nothing

was strange. Last night was likely a one-time thing. Something we would never talk about. Something we'd both act like never happened. Pesh got it out of his system. And I'd gotten some action. That was it.

But when I was showering, I thought about the night before. I thought about kissing Pesh.

Pesh and I might be able to act like nothing had happened. One part of my body hadn't gotten the memo.