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Chapter One

“Maybe try without smiling.”

Troy Barrett nodded at the photographer—a young woman with short silver hair and a French-Canadian accent—and packed away his awkward attempt at a smile. He replaced it with his usual cold, blank stare.

“Better,” she said.

Troy had never been traded before, and posing for the camera in a black-and-red and, frankly, ugly Ottawa fucking Centaurs jersey felt weird. Until yesterday, Troy had been a top forward on the division-leading Toronto Guardians. Until this week, he’d had friends, a shot at the Stanley Cup, and a sweet condo with a view of the CN Tower. Now Troy was living in a hotel room outside Ottawa with a view of a Costco parking lot. Definitely not the cool part of town.

Did Ottawa even have a cool part? Toronto had Raptors games and big concerts and awesome parties. Ottawa had government buildings and rivers.

And the worst hockey team in the NHL.

“That’s probably enough,” the photographer said, stepping out from behind the camera. “And, hey. Good for you, calling out Dallas Kent.”

The name made Troy flinch. Maybe it always would. "It's complicated," he mumbled. It was a word he'd been using a lot lately.

"Sounded pretty clear to me." Her smile was warm and a little teasing. Troy didn't return it, but she was right. There'd been nothing unclear about what Troy had yelled in Kent's face during practice. Everyone on the ice had heard it, and everyone who watched the leaked video afterward had heard it.

You're a piece of shit rapist, Dallas.

Not much to deconstruct there.

Troy wished the league gave a shit that one of their biggest stars was a monster. He wished he'd never met the guy. He wished he'd never been his roommate on the road, his line-mate on the ice. His best friend.

He wished he'd been paying closer attention to what Dallas had been doing all those years. To what kind of person he was.

Learning the truth about his friend had been the first blow. Learning that the team he'd worked so hard to be a part of—that he was so *proud* to be a part of—was determined to protect Dallas had been the knockout punch.

He thanked the photographer, then, in a clumsy attempt to be friendly, said, "Sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"Gen."

"Nice to meet you, Gen." He searched for a polite question he could ask her. "Do you do most of the team photography?"

She began detaching her camera from the tripod. "I do the off-ice stuff, mostly. Portraits and promo shots. I work with Harris. Have you met him yet?"

Troy had been introduced to equipment managers, coaches, trainers and the team doctor, but he assumed Harris wasn't any of those people. "I don't think so, but I'm not great at remembering people."

"He runs the team's social media. And trust me, you won't forget him."

Troy couldn't imagine what that meant. Was Harris an asshole? A weirdo? Hot? Also, Gen was vastly underestimating his ability to not remember people.

And, if he had his way, he would be interacting as little as possible with the team's social media manager. Troy had no interest in that shit.

He left Gen to pack up her gear and made his way to the locker room. The room had been mostly empty when he'd arrived very early for practice, but he knew it must have been getting full by now.

The first person he noticed when he entered the room was Wyatt Hayes, the one guy on the team who had played with Troy in Toronto. Wyatt had been the Guardians' backup goalie until two seasons ago. Now he was Ottawa's starting goalie, and a damn good one. He was a nice guy, but he probably hated Troy, and not because Troy had yelled at Dallas Kent. Because Troy had been friends with Dallas in the first place. And also because Troy had devoted his entire career to being a fucking prick. He hadn't been friendly to Wyatt when he'd been a backup goalie, so he didn't deserve to be friends with him now that Wyatt was an NHL All-Star.

Wyatt glanced up at him from where he'd been tying his skate. "So it's true then?"

"I'm afraid so," Troy said, trying for a joke. The room, which had been buzzing with chatter when he'd walked in, had gone silent.

Wyatt stood. "Is this the new and improved Troy Barrett?" Troy forced himself to meet Wyatt's gaze. There was nothing stern or intimidating about Wyatt, but Troy had always found his unwavering goodness to be unsettling. Troy tended to gravitate toward men on the opposite end of that spectrum. Men who sneered at and made fun of nice guys like Wyatt.

Troy answered him as honestly as he could. "I'm trying."

Wyatt offered him a smile that seemed cautious, but cer-

tainly warmer than Troy's earlier attempts for the camera. "The enemy of my enemy is my...well, I'm not gonna say friend yet, but I'll give you a chance."

Troy's gaze fell to the floor. "Thanks."

Relieved *that* was out of the way, he found his stall and began getting undressed. The room once again filled with chatter, and he no longer felt his new teammates' eyes on him. He was hauling on his new black-and-red socks when he heard a familiar Russian-accented voice cut through the commotion of the room.

"Is Harris here yet?" The team captain, Ilya Rozanov, was scanning the room as if this Harris guy everybody seemed to be obsessed with was hiding among the players somewhere.

"I don't think so," said Evan Dykstra, a defenseman Troy had played against but never actually met before. "But the new guy's here. Barrett." He nodded, and the brim of his camo trucker hat pointed in Troy's direction.

Rozanov glanced briefly at Troy, then quickly turned his attention to Wyatt. "Harris said he was bringing a puppy today."

The back of Troy's neck heated with embarrassment. This was how it was going to be if he wanted to keep playing hockey: teammates who either hated him for ever being associated with Dallas Kent, or who hated him for being a traitor. Friends weren't going to be an option.

Probably for the best. Friends sometimes turned out to be monsters.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," Wyatt said. "And you have to greet your new teammate, Roz. It's part of the whole team captain deal."

"Fine." Rozanov strode over to where Troy was sitting. He loomed over him for a moment, frowning. Rozanov was much larger than Troy's five-nine frame, and Troy had difficulty not squirming under his hard stare. "Am I supposed to like you now? Think you are a good guy because you finally noticed that your best friend is a fucking scumbag?"

Troy managed to hold his gaze. "I'm just here to play hockey." It was a weak reply, but it was also the truth. He couldn't promise more than that.

Rozanov studied him another moment, then finally extended his hand. "Welcome to Ottawa. I hope you like boring museums."

The handshake was more of a hand slap, and as soon as it was over, Rozanov turned and walked away. It wasn't a warm welcome, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Troy's former teammates in Toronto had been furious with him, calling him everything from a traitor to...worse.

You actually believe those attention whores?

They're obviously lying, Barrett. Women are fucking liars.

I thought you had my back.

A commotion broke out near the entrance of the locker room as Troy was tugging on his practice jersey. He heard a loud voice he didn't recognize, followed by Rozanov exclaiming, "Fuck yes! Finally."

There was a small black puppy in the middle of the room. It was adorable in every way, from its too-big feet, to its soft floppy ears, to its excitedly wagging tail. The puppy had instantly reduced a room full of macho hockey players into cooing heart-eye emojis.

But while Troy's new teammates were captivated by the puppy, Troy's attention quickly shifted to the man who was accompanying it. He was nice to look at. Stocky and rugged, with neatly combed dark-blond hair and a trim beard. He was wearing a denim jacket over a plaid shirt, and, Troy noticed immediately, he wore at least three Pride-related pins on his jacket.

Troy felt like ice water had just been injected into his veins. Mandatory official Pride Nights aside, he had never seen anyone blatantly displaying rainbow symbols in a locker room before.

Troy knew he wasn't the only gay NHL player—Scott Hunter, for example, never shut up about it—but he was terri-

fied of coming out. Of doing anything that would suggest to anyone that he might be gay. That he had a boyfriend.

Except he didn't have a boyfriend anymore. Not after Adrian had dumped him over FaceTime last week. Two years of dating in secret, of exploring each other's bodies and figuring out the whole gay sex thing. Two years of protecting each other, trusting each other, and being comfortable with each other. Two years of being in love. Finished. Ripped away so unexpectedly that Troy hadn't had a chance to fully process it, leaving him without anyone who he could fully be himself with.

And now this man—he must be Harris, the social media guy—was boldly hanging out in an NHL dressing room, covered in rainbows like it was no big deal. He seemed to be well-liked, the way the guys were gathered around and laughing with him. Troy felt a flash of jealousy at his ability to be himself and have people like him for it.

The puppy, for whatever reason, bounded over to Troy. It immediately snatched one of Troy's gloves off the bench and began chewing on the thick, padded thumb. It seemed to smile up at him as it did it, and Troy stared warily back at the one member of this team who seemed happy he was here.

"Oh shit. Chiron, you goof! Don't eat the equipment." The man who was probably Harris came to a stop in front of Troy. "Sorry about him. He's going to be a therapy dog, but he hasn't started school yet." He gently removed the glove from the dog's mouth. "Those gloves cost like a jillion dollars each, buddy."

Troy leaned forward and gave the puppy a tentative pat on the head. He'd never owned a pet in his life, not even as a child, so he was awkward around animals. "What did you say his name is?"

"Chiron. Y'know. Like the centaur."

Troy did not know. "He's cute."

"You'll be seeing a lot of him. He's the new official team dog. Oh, and I'm Harris. You'll be seeing a lot of me, too." Harris

offered Troy his hand. His handshake was a little too firm and a little too hearty, but it was the friendliest touch Troy had experienced in a while. He almost hated for it to end.

"I'm Troy."

"Yep. I worked that out for myself." Harris put his hands on his hips and smiled down at him. Troy wasn't particularly tall, but if he stood now he'd probably have a couple of inches on the guy. "Part of the whole social media manager thing. It helps if you know the names of the players." He laughed so loudly that Troy almost winced.

Troy's eyes kept landing on the pins on Harris's jacket. "You been with the team long?"

"Longer than you," Harris joked. Troy got the impression that Harris was rarely serious. "It's my third season." He picked up Chiron, who immediately began licking Harris's face. Harris laughed—again, too loudly—and said, "This is the most I've been licked by a member of this team."

It was a ridiculous joke, but it still seemed shockingly bold to Troy. Harris probably hadn't meant to put an image in Troy's mind of...licking him, but that's where his imagination went. He had never had such a vivid sexual thought in a locker room before because he always kept careful control over that sort of thing. But he'd never been confronted in a locker room by someone who comfortably advertised themselves as queer before. And it didn't help that the man was attractive.

He was also, Troy realized, talking to him. And Troy wasn't listening.

"Sorry?" Troy said.

"Just sayin' that you don't seem to have a social media account." *Not one that anyone knows about.* "Uh, no. I don't."

"Management wants all of the players to have at least an Instagram account. Doesn't have to be fancy or personal. You can just repost official team stuff if you're not comfortable doing more. I can help you set one up, if you want."

"It's mandatory?" Troy *hated* publicity stuff. All he wanted was to play hockey and be left alone. The celebrity part of it sucked.

"Basically. But if it's a problem I can probably—"

Nope. Troy wasn't going to start out with his new team by reinforcing the notion that he was difficult. "I can set one up. It's fine."

Harris smiled like Troy had just told him he'd give him a million dollars. "Awesome! Also, I want to do a Q and A with you. Just a little video to introduce you to the fans. Maybe later this week."

Ugh. "Uh, I guess. If you want."

"I'll go easy on you," Harris promised with another flash of his warm, earnest smile. "Softball questions only."

His eyes were a comforting mossy green and they shone with playfulness that wasn't even a tiny bit mean. If Troy had to describe his own eyes, he would use words like *cold* and *dead*. And his smile wasn't worth mentioning.

"We can wait until Sunday at least. Let you get a game under your belt."

"Whenever." Troy's gaze found Harris's pin collection again. What would it be like to be that comfortable—that open—about yourself?

When he realized he was staring, Troy snapped his attention back to Harris's face. Harris had stopped smiling. He was looking at Troy strangely—suspiciously—as if he'd spotted contempt in Troy's expression when he'd been examining the pins. Troy wanted to correct him. Explain himself. But years of being rigorously careful made him unable to find the words now.

"Hey, Harris! Stop hogging the puppy!" That was Roza-nov, interrupting Troy before he could make a fool of himself. But also before he could convince Harris that he wasn't a homophobe.

One more disappointed glance from Harris, then the smile

returned to his face as he walked off toward Ilya with the dog cradled in his arms. "I keep telling you to just adopt one of your own, Roz."

"Who will take care of it when I am on the road? You?"

There was laughter on the other side of the room, and Troy was left alone and forgotten.

After all these years, Troy still got a thrill from stepping onto a pristine, freshly resurfaced sheet of ice. A couple of quick laps later, he began to feel settled. His life might be a mess, but hockey still made sense.

He knocked a couple of pucks that were sitting on the boards in front of the bench onto the ice and headed for the net with one. He fired a quick wrist shot that sailed into the top corner. Always satisfying.

When he turned back to the bench to grab another puck, he was surprised to find one already headed his way. He took the pass, then did a double take when he saw who'd fed it to him.

"Coach."

"Barrett. First one on the ice. I like that."

Ottawa's head coach, Brandon Wiebe, was only in his early forties, barely older than some of his players. He'd had a long—though not exactly distinguished—NHL career himself as a forward, and this was his first season as a head coach.

Troy passed the puck back. "Just needed to clear my head a bit."

"Best way to do it. You probably have a lot of shit to clear."

That was the fucking truth. "I won't be distracted."

"Didn't say you would be, though I wouldn't blame you if you were." Coach smiled wryly. "I think you'll like it here, though. I'm a bit different from Bruce Cooper."

Troy's throat tightened at the mention of his former coach. Cooper was a hard-ass, but he had liked Troy a lot.

Not as much as he'd liked Dallas Kent, apparently, because

he'd insisted on having a final meeting with Troy, minutes after Troy had learned he'd been traded. Cooper had spent several devastating minutes tearing a strip off Troy before he finally let him go home to pack. Troy had left the office with his eyes burning and his stomach twisting with shame. He'd always had a hard time withstanding the furious disappointment of men like Coach Cooper. Men like Troy's father.

"I'm ready to work hard," Troy promised. "I want to get us to the playoffs."

Coach Wiebe smiled in a way that Coach Cooper and Troy's father never did—warm and patient. "That's good. I'm going to try you up front with Rozanov and Boodram."

"Really?" Troy was used to being a starting forward, but it was still a surprise to hear his coach wanted to put him on the top line right away. "I mean, thank you."

"Thank me on the ice, Barrett. Let's show Toronto they backed the wrong horse, okay?"

Delight bubbled up inside Troy. He even came close to smiling. "You got it, Coach."

Coach squinted at the bench, where several players were gathered and laughing animatedly. "Oh Jesus. They've got a puppy."

Rozanov stepped onto the ice with Chiron bundled snugly in his arms. "He wants to try out."

"Ten minutes with the puppy." Coach's voice was stern, but his eyes twinkled with amusement. "Then we've got work to do."

"Twenty," Rozanov countered.

Troy couldn't believe his audacity. Was he about to witness Ilya Rozanov getting yelled at by his coach?

But Coach Wiebe only chuckled fondly and said, "Fifteen." Definitely a different coaching style than Cooper.

For fifteen minutes, the rest of the members of the Ottawa Centaurs frolicked on the ice with an excited puppy while Troy stood near the bench, watching and waiting for the real prac-

tice to start. What the fuck was the deal with this team? Was there going to be cake and lemonade at the end of practice?

"Are you allergic to dogs?"

Troy turned to find Harris standing in front of the bench, leaning casually on the boards. His golden hair was now hidden under a red-and-black Ottawa Centaurs pom-pom toque. In the bright arena lights, his green eyes looked more like sparkling emeralds than moss.

"No."

"Phew. I should have asked before I brought a dog into the dressing room. I'd checked with everyone else already, but—aw jeez, look at that." He lifted his phone and snapped a few pictures of the puppy standing with his front paws pressed against one of Wyatt's goalie pads. "That's going on Instagram for sure."

"He's a popular guy."

"Who? Wyatt?"

"The puppy."

Harris beamed. "Of course he is! He's new and adorable."

And Troy was new and...not.

It actually made a ton of sense that he would show up at his first practice with a new team and only be the second most interesting thing there. If that.

His grumpy thoughts were broken by an air-horn-level burst of laughter from Harris. "Get him, Chiron! Atta boy!"

Chiron was trying to steal a puck from Zane Boodram. Everyone was laughing and having a great time, and Troy wasn't sure what to do. He felt like he'd walked into a party he hadn't been invited to.

"Do dogs like the ice?" Troy asked. Chiron seemed to be sure-footed and happy as he chased pucks, but he asked anyway.

"Not every dog, but Chiron is part Labrador, part mountain dog. He's built for the cold."

"And he's going to be a...therapy dog? Like a Seeing Eye dog?"