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Prologue

September 2018

“Are you happy?”

Ryan Price couldn't tell if Coach Cooper was asking the question of him, or of the computer the man hadn't taken his eyes from. The honest answer was that Ryan couldn't quite recall what happiness felt like, but that would be an awkward thing to admit, so instead he just said, “Sure.”

“Great,” Coach said absently. “Glad to hear it. You found a place to live yet?”

“Still at the hotel, but I'm looking at—”

“I guess you're the expert in changing cities.” Coach finally turned his gaze to Ryan, and smiled at him as if he'd just thought of the funniest joke in the world. “You've pretty much got a full bingo card now, right?”

“Yeah.” Ryan didn't even try to return the smile. “Pretty much.”

Coach leaned back in his chair and folded his muscular arms over his chest. Bruce Cooper was possibly in better shape than any player on the Toronto Guardians roster. He'd never

played in the NHL himself, but he kept his body in top form, as if suggesting to his players that he could very easily tie on skates and replace any of them at any time. “Well, you know why you’re here. I don’t have to tell you what kind of player you are, and what we expect from you. You get what I’m saying, I’m sure.” He stopped smiling, and fixed a very pointed look at Ryan.

Ryan got what he was saying all right. It was the same thing every coach he’d had since he was seventeen had told him: we need you to beat the shit out of opponents who threaten our real players.

“Yes, Coach,” Ryan said. He had just finished his first skate with the Guardians, and it had gone...fine. A few players had shot him curious looks, but no one had been particularly friendly to him. Ryan’s reputation had obviously preceded him.

“Protecting Kent is the priority,” Coach said. “He’s got a mouth on him, but we don’t want him getting hurt. Guys might think twice about coming for him if they know they’ll have to, you know, *Pay the Price*.” He grinned.

Ryan cringed. “Yep. Got it.”

“Good,” Coach said cheerfully. “Now, the other thing I wanted to talk about was your history of not getting along with your teammates.”

Ryan Price ran his tongue along the bottom of his front teeth, scraping off the residue of the four Tums he had crunched down before he’d entered his new coach’s office. He wanted to get as much of the antacid into his stomach as possible for this.

“It’s not that,” Ryan tried to explain. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t get along with them. I just...keep to myself. I guess.”

Coach frowned. “The Guardians are a *team*, Ryan. On the ice and off. Teams are built on trust and camaraderie.”

“I know. I’ll try harder.”

“Great to hear,” Coach said, as if the matter was resolved. Ryan didn’t expect to form any particularly strong bonds to any of his teammates. Something about being naturally awkward, shy, clinically anxious, terrified of flying, and, oh yes, gay, didn’t exactly make him a friend magnet in the ol’ locker room.

But he *would* try.

“And, listen.” Coach dropped his voice and leaned forward. “You’re not gonna, like, freak out on us, right? Like before?”

Ryan’s eyebrows shot up. *Wow. That’s direct.* “I, uh... I’ve been working on that.”

Coach narrowed his eyes. “Working on it, like, what? Meditation or yoga or whatever?”

“No. I mean, a bit. But, like, therapy. And I have a prescription—”

“So you have it under control. Good.” Coach waved his hand, clearly glad to have the conversation over with. “Let’s get through training camp and we’ll figure out where you’re gonna fit on this team.”

“Okay, Coach.”

When Coach turned back to his computer, Ryan stood up, nodded, and left the room. The little chat hadn’t been much different from the one he’d had with his last coach. Or the coach before that. *We want you to be terrifying on the ice, and normal off of it.*

Ryan headed back to the locker room to get ready for the physical testing the Guardians would be doing that afternoon. In the room, he saw Toronto’s star player, Dallas Kent, talking to another star player, Troy Barrett. Kent was short for a hockey player, with blond hair and pale blue eyes. He wasn’t what Ryan would call attractive, but that was mostly

because his arrogance showed all over his face. Barrett was prettier, with piercing blue eyes and dark hair, but still far from Ryan's type.

Ryan figured he may as well introduce himself to the men he was expected to protect. As he got closer, he could hear Kent describing his previous evening's sexual exploits in great detail to Barrett. Kent didn't even glance up at Ryan when he'd approached, leaving him to stand awkwardly while Kent finished his gross story.

"Swear to god, I thought she was gonna pass out!"

Barrett laughed. Ryan cleared his throat, and Kent finally looked up.

"Oh. Hey." There was a bit of a sneer in Kent's tone.

"Hi," Ryan said stupidly. He thrust his hand out. "I'm Ryan."

Kent stared at Ryan's hand, then shot a look at Barrett. Finally, he quickly shook Ryan's hand and said, "I thought you went crazy."

"No," Ryan said, heat rising in his cheeks and down his neck. "I have it under control."

Barrett snorted. Kent looked at Ryan like he was a pile of dead snakes. "I fucking hope so, Red."

Ryan's jaw clenched. That was *not* a name he was going to answer to.

"Ryan," he corrected him. He straightened his spine, rolling his shoulders back to bring himself to his full height. He let just enough of the monster out to show Dallas Kent that Ryan wasn't someone to fuck with. "Not *Red*."

Kent put his hands up in a placating manner. "Whatever, man." He turned back to Barrett and resumed his story as if Ryan wasn't even there anymore.

Ryan felt his chest tightening as he retreated to his stall.

Fortunately, he'd gotten good at talking himself down from these mild attacks.

Inhale for two, exhale for three. Inhale for three, exhale for four. Inhale for four, exhale for five...

He was okay. He was fine. Dallas Kent was clearly a fucking asshole, but Ryan was okay.

This is just a job. This is not you. You are more than this job.

Every job has shitty co-workers, right?

He counted one more breath, in and out, then started rummaging around in his gym bag, just for something to do.

"Wanna know a secret?"

Ryan was startled by the unexpected question. He turned to see Wyatt Hayes, who had been Toronto's backup goaltender for years. "Sure?"

"Dallas Kent is," Wyatt leaned in and dropped his voice to a whisper, "a bit of a douchebag."

Ryan sputtered, surprised. "So it's not just me, then?"

"Hell no. But he's the superstar, right, so what can you do?"

Ryan could think of a couple of things he'd *like* to do to him.

Wyatt laughed. "Holy shit, Price. Your face! You can't punch him!"

"I know. I wasn't gonna."

"Well, if you change your mind, make sure you tell me. I wanna watch."

Ryan shook his head, but he was smiling. He decided that he liked Wyatt Hayes. So that was something.

He had thought it might be different, this season. In retrospect, he had no idea why. Since his junior hockey days, Ryan had obligingly filled the role of enforcer on any team he played for. He had never been enthusiastic about it; if he'd

wanted to be a boxer, he could have followed in his father's footsteps and been one. Ryan wanted to be a hockey player.

This past summer, after learning he had been traded yet again, Ryan had decided to throw himself into training. He'd worked on his skating, his speed, his lower body conditioning. He'd found a trainer in Buffalo, where he had still been living, and worked his ass off doing sprints, lunges, squats, and a whole nightmare of similar inhuman activities.

He'd shown up for this training camp in Toronto in the best shape of his life with the hope that he might be taken seriously as a defenseman. He would give these fitness tests everything he had, but he doubted it would change anyone's mind about the role he would play on this new team.

God. Ryan wasn't sure he could do this anymore. He *would*, because what else was he going to do? His résumé was pretty sparse.

"Ready to go through hell?" Wyatt asked. Ryan knew he was referring to the fitness testing, but Ryan was thinking about the whole season.

"Sure," he said. "Let's get it over with."

Chapter One

Fabian Salah *hated* hockey.

Clearly there was some sort of game happening today because the subway train was packed with people wearing blue Toronto Guardians jerseys. Fabian wished he could sit down; he didn't like standing in the middle of these people, being judged by their boring, ignorant brains. There was at least one dull jock who was openly sneering at Fabian in disgust.

Fabian kept his eyes down and resisted the urge to sneer right back at the man.

Three more stops and you're home, he told himself.

A little girl in a pink version of the Guardians jersey—because obviously you can't let your daughter wear something that isn't bubblegum pink—smiled up at him. He forced himself to smile back.

It wasn't her fault he was in a bad mood. It wasn't her fault that he hated hockey and the people who loved it, or that her parents were far too concerned with aggressively gendering their child. She was just enjoying an afternoon out with her parents, cheering on the hometown boys.

Fabian was sure the team was packed with heroic, upstand-

ing young men. Certainly not a bunch of homophobic alpha assholes who would be celebrating their win by doing very gross alpha things tonight. Fabian had met exactly one hockey player in his entire life of being forced to meet hockey players who wasn't a complete nightmare.

"Is that a guitar?" the little girl in the pink jersey asked him.

Fabian blinked. "It's a violin," he said, as warmly as he could manage.

"Is it yours?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how to play it?"

Fabian smiled. "Yes I do. I think I was about your age when I started learning. Do you play any instruments?"

She shook her head, but then said, "I like to sing and dance."

"Me too."

The girl's mother pulled her closer on their joined seats, and whispered something in her ear that was probably benign, like "Leave the nice man alone" or "Don't talk to strangers," but Fabian couldn't help but imagine it was more like "Don't talk to men who are wearing eyeliner and nail polish."

The girl stopped talking to him, but she watched him intently all the way to Wellesley Station, where Fabian finally removed himself from the hoard of hockey fans.

As he made his way down Church Street, Fabian felt the lingering tension from the subway ride leave his body. He had better things to think about than stupid jocks. For one thing, he had finally broken things off—for good this time—with Claude last night. Claude had been the latest in a long line of self-obsessed snobs that Fabian had, for whatever reason, invited into his bed. He wouldn't call what they'd had a relationship; he'd just kept running into Claude at various

events and they would inevitably end up fucking. But Fabian was *done* with that shit.

He was in a good place now. He had some very promising shows booked, had almost finished his new album, and he'd recorded an in-studio interview and performance for CBC Radio last week. His *parents* had even listened to it, so he had definitely made it big. If things kept up he would be able to quit his part-time job, become super rich and famous, move to a private island, and never see a hockey jersey ever again.

Ryan was pretty sure he had an ugly dick.

The guy jacking off on Ryan's laptop screen right now had a great-looking dick. It was long and straight and not too thick. It was all smooth and cut, with perfectly hairless balls. The shaft jutted proudly out of a tidy patch of dark curls.

Ryan's dick was thick and red, and the hair that surrounded it was even more red. He tried to keep on top of grooming the area, but his pubic hair was as unruly as the hair that covered his head and face. His balls seemed too large and kind of saggy. His dick poked out of a lumpy sleeve of foreskin. The head was fat and dark, and a very prominent vein wrapped around his shaft.

And, unlike the dude in the video he was watching, Ryan took forever to come. He had always been a little slow at sex, but getting off had taken a lot of extra effort the past year or so. He knew it was at least partially the fault of his anxiety meds.

Ryan closed his eyes, blocking out the image of Mr. Perfect Dick, but not the man's happy moans. Ryan took a slow breath—in and out—then looked down at his dick.

"All right, buddy. We can do this. No pressure, just whenever you're ready. But let's try to get there this time, okay?"

He went easy on it, stroking himself with loose fingers

and a lot of lube. Sex these days, even with himself, required a lot of patience. For this reason, he rarely dragged anyone else into the ordeal.

The guy on the screen was having a lovely time, swearing and gasping and promising a huge load very soon. "Show off," Ryan muttered. He started scrolling through the recommended videos that were listed under this one because he knew he was going to need another.

He wasn't even sure what he was looking for. He liked jerk-off videos because he could kind of pretend he was sharing an experience with someone. He could pretend he was the one making the beautiful man on his computer screen moan with pleasure.

Instead he was alone in his apartment, offering encouraging words to his barely interested dick.

Why couldn't he do this? He was horny as fuck, that was for sure. He hadn't been with anyone for months. He hadn't come for over two weeks. The situation was getting desperate.

"Just one little orgasm, buddy. How 'bout it?"

It felt nice, stroking himself like this. It certainly didn't feel *bad*. He could keep this up for a long time and just enjoy the ripples of pleasure that never fully crested—and he often did just that, stroking himself for an hour or more without getting off. It was frustrating, though, and this time he was determined to come.

"Oh shit," the video guy gasped. "Oh fuck, I'm gonna come I'm gonna come..."

And then he did. The asshole.

"You know what?" Ryan snapped at his dick. "I'm calling the shots today. I'm going to put on another video, and we're both gonna watch it and I'm gonna start from scratch. I'll go slow, but we are fucking coming tonight."

It's not like coming was impossible, but he needed to be relaxed. He couldn't be distracted at all, but he also couldn't be overly focused. The circumstances needed to be exactly right—everything lined up like the perfect shot at an open net. If he could find that sweet spot, he could achieve orgasm. But it was a tall fucking order.

It was time to bring out the big guns. He went to his favorites folder and brought up a video of a porn star that he particularly liked named Kamil Kock. He was small and slim and a bit femme, with an elaborate peacock feather design tattooed down the left side of his torso. He had gorgeous dark eyes and light brown skin. Ryan had a lot of his videos saved.

"Look," he said to his dick, "it's Kamil. We love Kamil."

His dick gave a halfhearted twitch. It was something.

Ryan spent the next twenty-seven minutes watching Kamil Kock pleasure his lean, elegant body while Ryan punished his own. Kamil had a musical lilt to his voice, and his long, slender fingers were covered in elaborate rings. He was beautiful in a way that Ryan never could be.

Ryan had a type, no question. He liked men who...blurred the line, a little. He found androgyny very sexy, and it wasn't just the physical beauty of a dazzling, decorated man that attracted him; he was in awe of their *confidence*. Of their bravery to openly be themselves and *dare* anyone to say anything about it. It turned Ryan on like nothing else.

He had been quietly out for years, which meant he didn't actively hide his sexuality, but he didn't talk about it either. Chatting online and hooking up in various cities had been Ryan's go-to method of getting laid for most of his hockey career. His teammates didn't ask him many questions about who he was hooking up with because they likely didn't care.