

Chapter One

“Look out!”

Alek Bergeron jumped out of the path of a pint-sized boy wielding a hockey stick just as the kid slammed into the boards. None the worse for wear, eight-year-old Gunner Ferguson let out a frustrated groan, his tongue visible through the gap where one of his incisors had yet to grow in. The expression on the boy’s face was a lot like his father’s, the Milwaukee Mayhem’s star center Denis “Gus” Ferguson, after Gus lost the puck to a rival player.

“You need to learn to *feel* the puck with your stick so you can keep your eyes focused ahead,” Alek advised Gunner. “Otherwise, your sister will deke you out of your skates every time.”

The boy’s younger sister sprinted past them, skating as though she were born wearing blades. Given that she’d been chasing her father and older brother since she could walk, it was no surprise that five-year-old Grace was a natural on the ice. She took the corner of the rink like a speed skater, hanging on to her balance as well as the puck right before she shot it toward the net.

“That’s my girl!” Gus called from the other end of the rink despite the puck veering wide right of the goal.

Gunner snorted. “Dad told me I had to let her steal the biscuit at least twice today. That way, she wouldn’t whine the whole way home.”

“You’re a good big brother.” Alek patted the top of Gunner’s helmet.

“Yeah. But now I’m going to show her how it’s done.” He raced off to grab the puck as it rebounded off the far boards before shooting it into the empty net with a perfect flick of his wrist.

“Well played, Gunster.” Timothée Valentine, the Mayhem’s right winger and league heart throb, skated over to high-five the boy.

Two tween girls, likely belonging to someone in management, trailed Valentine, the pair sporting adoring looks. The team had broken training camp that day, and everyone within the organization was at the practice facility getting in some last-minute downtime with their families. The grueling seven-month regular season would kick off the following week.

“Excellent shot,” Gus praised his son as he weaved his way through the other players and their kids enjoying the free skate on the practice ice.

Grace snowplowed into her brother, nearly decapitating him with her stick when she went to wrap her arms around his neck in congratulations. The siblings’ playful camaraderie brought to mind a similar brother and sister Alek had known once upon a time. His chest burned at the thought. He quickly squeezed his eyes shut to keep the memories from seeping in and destroying the balance he’d carefully cultivated over the past decade.

“There are treats in the canteen,” Gus said to his kids as he guided them to where Alek leaned against the boards next to the exit gate. “Go snag one of Mom’s chocolate peanut butter cupcakes for me before they all get eaten.”

Gunner tossed his stick to his father and raced off the ice, barely pausing to put on his skate guards. Gus lifted Grace onto the bench behind the glass, kneeling to unlace her skates.

“Do you want a cupcake too, Uncle Alek?” Grace asked.

Alek stepped off the ice amid a stream of his teammates who were headed in the direction of the dressing room. “You betcha.” He bent down to remove the cumbersome pads that guarded the goalie’s legs. “I never pass up anything your mom bakes.”

“Hey! What about me?” Valentine asked, his fan club having skated off in the other direction.

Grace giggled. “You’re not my godfather.”

Valentine made a show of clutching his chest. “But I thought I was your boyfriend, Gracie?”

If looks could kill, the stink-eye Gus leveled at his teammate would have incinerated him. Not that Valentine cared. His long lashes, matching dimples, and glossy dark curls got him out of as much trouble as they got him in to.

“Okay. I’ll save you a cupcake, too,” she promised before racing off in her stocking feet, calling for her brother to wait. She blew a kiss in the direction of her father before she disappeared.

The adoring grin Gus wore as he and Alek followed Valentine into the dressing room had Alek’s chest twitching again. Almost as if he envied the guy or something. Which was ridiculous.

Both men were at the top of their game on a team poised to make a strong run for the Cup this year. Sure, when Gus left the ice, he went home to his magazine-cover-worthy family. His wife of ten years kept the home fires burning during the season, raising their two amazing kids while working as an occupational therapist.

When Alek went home, it was to an empty house. Just the way he liked it. Everything within his place was exactly what he wanted and where he wanted it.

His twin sister accused him of being a neat freak. His teammates joked he was an old fart who lived in a mausoleum. Alek ignored them. So what if he lived his life in an orderly and predictable way? He spent half of every week on the road constantly surrounded by nineteen

teammates. The solitude his house provided helped to ground him, allowing him to focus on what was really important: hockey.

That didn't mean he was a monk. Companionship was easy to find for a professional athlete with his notoriety. If his sister was to be believed, Alek's "piercing blue eyes and thick sable locks" didn't hurt when it came to attracting the opposite sex, either. And if he wanted to experience the chaos of family life, he had plenty of kids to play "funcke" to, including his sister's year-old twins.

But his relationships were always on his terms. And never if they interfered with his goal of winning the Cup. After all, that had been the mission from the moment he picked up his stick as a professional. It had eluded him for seven seasons so far, and Alek was starting to get a little twitchy.

It didn't help that his dad was recently diagnosed with earlyonset Parkinson's Disease. While most guys at thirty still saw their lives spread out before them, his father's illness was a gut-punch reminder that there were no guarantees in this world. Given everything his parents had done to help him get to this level of play, Alek wanted his dad to share in the joy of hoisting the Cup.

Before his dad's health issues, the only ticking clock was how long Alek's body would allow him to play. Now, though, the clock seemed to be a lot louder and faster. He sat on the bench in front of his stall and tugged at the laces of his skate in frustration.

"What's eating you all of a sudden?" Gus asked as he shoved his kids' hockey sticks into his equipment bag. "If I know my wife, she's already packed a to-go box of cupcakes for you. Not to worry."

Which was likely true. Claire Ferguson never missed a chance to feed Alek as if he were one of her own children. Unlike with her kids, however, cupcakes didn't make everything better.

"Nothing," Alek replied, trying to muster up a smile. His funky mood was on him, not Gus. "Just focused on getting my head together ahead of the season."

Valentine groaned. "Oh, man, Ice-Berg. The season is still a week away. No need to be a fun sucker and queue up your speech about putting in the work. Every guy here knows you never miss a practice, a morning skate, a training session, or a game unless blood is spewing from some part of your body." Valentine bowed. "Believe me, we all strive to emulate your work ethic. It's just that some of us have a life outside the rink."

Alek had a life. So what if his looked a little lonely to the guys because he didn't have a family or girlfriend constantly distracting him? He wasn't like Valentine or most of the other hockey players in the room, who all possessed unlimited talent. Alek never believed he'd make it to the pros. It took him twice as much grit and hard work to earn a job between the pipes.

The nickname Ice-Berg didn't just refer to his glacier-colored eyes, but also his menacing single-minded focus. And being the best had his undivided attention for the time being. That and winning the Cup.

Gus paused from wiping his skate blades, shooting Alek a compassionate look. He was the only person within the organization aware of his father's prognosis. His friend knew how much Alek wanted to go all the way this season for his dad.

"We've got this," Gus said with quiet conviction.

"You know what you need, Ice-Berg?" Zach Picard, the Mayhem's captain said from across the dressing room. "You need a woman. Someone to help you relieve all that preseason . . . tension." He punctuated the last word with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Alek shook his head at his teammate. Sex seemed to be the captain's answer to everything. Picard was a "no strings attached" player with a puck bunny eagerly waiting for him in every city. Alek found it hard to believe that all the women were cool with it. Yet Picard skated from ice rink to ice rink with no drama impeding his game.

The Mayhem's newest addition, Brad Merriweather, looked up from his dressing stall. "Bergeron had a woman, except he let some pro football player steal her away. Oh wait, it wasn't a steal. Bergeron practically walked her down the aisle and handed her over to the guy."

Every man in the room suddenly stopped what they were doing. Merriweather had a reputation for being brash and a bit of an asswipe. Since joining the team this summer, the defenseman had lived up to that hype.

Unlike Picard, Alek's recent love life had not been drama-free. The Milwaukee media had a field day when the woman Alek had been seen around town with ended up marrying the Growlers quarterback. It didn't help that punches were thrown at a charity gala that both men attended. No one cared that they were defending the woman's honor. Instead, social media managed to make more of the incident than was necessary. As usual.

The silence stretched as everyone waited to see if Alek would react.

"You're misinformed, Merriweather." Valentine's French Quebec accent was much more clipped than normal as he jumped to Alek's defense. "Bergeron and London are friends. That's all. She and the quarterback were high school sweethearts."

While Alek appreciated the save—Valentine was more than just a pretty face and a wicked stick handler—his recitation of the facts wasn't entirely accurate. Alek had thought he'd found "the one." And it still stung. Not the part about her choosing another guy over him. Alek begrudgingly had to admit London and Trey were meant for each other.

The idea that he had been so off base about London's feelings made Alek question whether or not he was cut out for a long-term relationship. After all, he'd been wrong about a woman's love once before.

The tidbit about him and London remaining friends was true, however. The best part about it? Alek continued to be a thorn in the side of the Milwaukee Growlers quarterback.

"If you're ready to get back out there," Valentine continued as he tugged a Mayhem hoodie over his curls, "the influencer I'm dating has a friend. I'm happy to set you up."

Gus covered up his laughing gasp with a cough. Valentine's content creator girlfriend had the annoying tendency of adding a rising inflection to the end of everything she said. Carrying on a conversation with her felt like a game of twenty questions. No doubt her friend was the same.

And the last thing Alek wanted was to get involved with a woman whose day revolved around social media. As one of the league's premier goalies, he already spent enough of his life in the very judgmental public eye. It turned out that once a player signed a lucrative contract, every fan felt it was their God-given right to pile on when that player had an off game. After the Mayhem didn't make it out of the first round of the playoffs last season, fans—and more than a few hockey pundits—blamed Alek despite the team being short two starting defensemen.

"I think Ice-Berg is interested in something more substantial." Picard eyed Alek critically. "In fact, I think something more long-term might do you some good."

Here we go again.

"For the hundredth time, I'm not getting a dog," Alek told them.

"What's your beef with dogs?" Valentine demanded. "Why do you hate them?"

"I don't hate dogs."

Gus laughed. "He tolerates ours just fine."

“We are on the road half of every week,” Alek argued. “There’s no way to take care of a dog.”

It was his standard argument. The fact of the matter was he wasn’t a dog person. For some reason, though, that made him some sort of monster.

“You’re just afraid a dog would mess up your neatly ordered mausoleum,” Valentine accused.

“Will you guys shut your pieholes? I wasn’t going to suggest a dog,” Picard interjected, quieting the room. The captain turned to Alek. “Now that you’ve officially entered the dirty thirties, you probably should get serious and start looking for a wife.”

The rest of the guys laughed while Alek shot his captain the bird. “You’re only a year younger than I am.”

“But I have the stamina of a nineteen-year-old,” Picard declared. “I don’t need a wifey to tuck me in at night yet.”

This was met with a chorus of guffaws.

“You know, there’s a lot to be said for settling down,” Gus argued. “For one, it’s easier to concentrate on the game when you know who’s warming your bed at night.”

“Why would any guy want to settle down?” Merriweather sounded as though someone had told him the hockey season had been canceled. Given that the guy was married with two little kids, Alek found his teammate’s reaction odd. Judging by the looks the other guys were doling out, he wasn’t the only one.

“What?” Merriweather shrugged. “Don’t lie and tell me you married guys aren’t chomping at the bit to escape from under the honey-do list and get back out on the road. To sleep through the night without being woken up by your whining kid. Or to not have to listen to your

wife tell you she's 'too tired' when you want some." He winked at Alek. "The ladies are never too tired on the road, am I right? Why give up a sure thing for a ball and chain at home? In fact, I'm happy to be your wingman this season. Not to brag, but I do pretty well with the chicks myself."

The strained silence was back except for a whispered exchange between the two Swedish players. Alek didn't speak the language but whatever they said was uttered in a tone laced with disgust.

When no reply was forthcoming, Merriweather hefted his equipment bag onto his shoulder. "Suit yourself. But my offer stands. Later," he called before sauntering from the dressing room.

Picard heaved a sigh. "Something tells me that guy could be a handful this season."

For the most part, the players tried to police bad behavior within the confines of the dressing room. The guys liked to keep the outside distractions to a minimum. It helped them play better as a unit. A rocky marriage during the season could seriously mess with the team's mojo, though.

"Yeah. I feel sorry for his wife. She's already got her hands full with two kids under the age of three." Gus grabbed his bag, exchanging a look with Alek. "Do you want to come by the house for dinner?"

Alek appreciated the offer, even if it was a pity ask. As much as he enjoyed spending time with the Ferguson family, he had no intention of butting in on one of their last nights of togetherness before the season.

He shook his head. "Thanks, but no thanks. I have some stuff to take care of at home."

Picard laughed and gestured to Alek's longish hair. "He's got to wash his flow tonight."

Gus looked like he was going to call him out on his lie. Instead, he released an exasperated sigh. “Stop by the canteen to pick up your cupcakes before you go.”

He and Picard headed in the direction of the party. The Swedes followed them out.

“I’m going to tell that jerk-off Merriweather that you already have a wingman,” Valentine said as he made his way to the door. “And it’s me. Picard’s right. You need a woman. Leave it to me. St. Valentine will find you the perfect happily ever after this season.”

Alek scoffed loudly in the now empty dressing room. As much as he appreciated his teammates having his back, he didn’t need them focused on finding him his “happily ever after.” He was resolved that one wasn’t in the cards for him. Besides, the Mayhem’s number one priority this season was to win the Cup. End. Of. Story.

He reached for his cell phone and keys right as the phone buzzed. It was likely Claire demanding that he join them for dinner. Except when he went to slide the phone to talk, the number on the screen wasn’t hers.

It was one he thought he’d blocked nine years earlier. A number that belonged to the guy Alek expected to stand up for him at his wedding to his college girlfriend. Until that same guy ran off and married her himself.

Alek swore as he hit the Do Not Accept button. For the first few months, Jamie called repeatedly. Alek never picked up. He had nothing to say to his former best friend. The calls only stopped when he blocked Jamie’s number.

A hazy memory stirred. He vaguely recalled unblocking Jamie after consuming too much alcohol to numb the pain the night he’d learned of his father’s diagnosis. Fortunately, he’d fallen asleep before any drunk dialing could take place. Well, he’d remedy this situation right now.

He was opening the phone's screen to reapply the block when Jamie's number popped up again.

"Ah, what the hell? He's never going to get the hint without hearing it directly from me," Alek mumbled before sliding his finger across the screen. "What do you want?"

The line was quiet for a long moment before a small voice spoke up. "Is this really Alek Bergeron?"

Alek immediately regretted his ugly tone. It wasn't Jamie. Just some random kid.

Except why is he calling from Jamie's number?

"Yeah," he said cautiously. "Who's this?"

There was an excited gasp before the boy spoke again. "I'm Finn. Finn Cobert. And I'm your biggest fan."

Right.

Jamie had a son. Alek's mom had mentioned that at some point during the past nine years. The boy must be somewhere around Gunner's age. Leave it to Jamie to use his kid to weasel his way back into Alek's life. He was going to be disappointed, though, because it wasn't going to work.

"Good to know. Hey, Finn, if you're calling for an autographed stick or sweater, have your dad reach out to my publicist. I'll be glad to send you one of each." It wasn't the boy's fault his father had screwed Alek over.

"Cool! Thank you. But that's not why I called."

Of course it wasn't. He could almost sense Jamie hovering in the background, waiting for Alek to take the bait. The guy had never met a stranger and couldn't stand it when anyone was

miffed at him. He was used to being the beloved center of attention. A cool breeze brushed against the back of his neck as if Jamie was saying, “Gotcha.”

“Look—”

“Please don’t hang up.” Finn’s excitement had dimmed. “I feel like I know you. My dad and I watched all your games whenever they were on the hockey channel. Even on school nights. He always told me bedtime stories about all the crazy things you got up to when you were roommates in college. Especially when you traveled overseas to play against each other in Europe.” Finn paused to suck in a breath. “He said they were the best days of his life. Well, except for when me and him were doing something fun together.”

The boy’s voice cracked before it trailed off. His use of the past tense had Alek instinctively bracing his shoulder against the wall.

“Finn, can I talk to your dad?”

The boy ignored him. “Dad told me that if he couldn’t be here and I ever needed anything, I should get in touch with you. That you were him in a different place. And you would always have my back.”

The room felt like it was spinning. Alek dropped onto the bench. “Finn, put your dad on the phone. Please.”

The boy was silent for so long, Alek thought he had hung up. Until he said the words Alek wasn’t prepared to hear.

“I can’t. My dad and my mom are dead.”