

Prologue

Hockey is not for pussies. Technically, it's defined as a sport. Words like play and game get thrown around liberally to shield its true nature: hockey is warfare with water breaks. In the rink, you have over two thousand pounds of brute force clashing with whittled clubs, a rubber disc that could crush a larynx, and knives attached to feet. Let's not pretend there's anything civilized going on here.

—Clifford Chase, three-time Stanley Cup winner, NHL Hall of Famer, and all-around asshole

Sold out. The arena was freakin' sold out.

On jellied legs, Isobel Chase skated to the face-off circle at the center of the rink in the Bayside Arena, home of the Buffalo Betties. The puck hadn't even dropped yet, but the raucous crowd of twenty thousand was already on its feet in anticipation of history about to be made.

The inaugural game of the National Women's Hockey League, playing to a sold-out stadium, and she was here! On this night of firsts, Isobel would continue her storied career. Winner of the Patty Kazmaier Award for best NCAA player, last captain standing after the Frozen Four, silver medalist for Team USA . . . She could go on, but she had a professional fucking hockey game to win.

Melissande Cordet, the famed Canadian power forward and the only woman to get called up for a game in the NHL, hovered, ready to do the ceremonial drop. They'd chitchatted before the game and posed for photos while Cordet told Isobel how far women's hockey had come. How Isobel and her fellow athletes were blazing a trail.

Come back to me with that BS, Mel, when there isn't a salary cap of \$270K on each team in the women's league.

Yeah, yeah, Isobel got it. Baby steps. Until they could prove their worth with decent attendance figures, TV broadcast deals, and feminine hygiene product sponsorships, the Great Experiment would continue.

“Ready to make history?” Cordet asked in a voice liltingly inflected with her French Canadian accent.

Isobel remained still, her left hand choking her stick, her body bowed and tipped toward

her opposite, Jen Grady, the captain of the Montreal MAVENS. They'd roomed at Harvard together, skated to glory at the Games together, but that meant jack shit now. Tonight Isobel would be the first to touch the puck.

Drop, sweep, flick, chop—all viable strategies to win a face-off. Every day since he'd plopped her on the ice at the age of three, her father, Clifford Chase, had drilled into her the same advice. *Know your enemy. Know what they're going to do before they've even thought it.* Grady liked to go for the crisp slice, so chopping her stick would be Isobel's best move.

The old man was on his feet somewhere in the stands, though with his wealth and renown, he could have easily landed an entire box to himself. Wanting to feel the crowd, that pulsing, living thing as it rose and fell with the team's fortunes, he'd bought a Buffalo Betties cap and planted himself in the thick of it.

When women go pro, you'll be first on the line, Izzy. It's why I'm harder on you than I am on the boys. It's for your own good.

The boys, meaning the pro players on the Chicago Rebels, the NHL team her father owned and ruled with an iron fist. Substitute sons, they were sporadically successful, which only served to place more pressure on Isobel's shoulders. She inched those shoulders forward.

The puck dropped.

Grady touched it first.

The night went downhill from there.

Chapter 1

Two years later . . .

“So this is just a flying visit, right? A couple of dances and we’re out?”

Isobel’s younger sister, Violet, flicked a look of disgust over her shoulder. Granted, Isobel had vowed to make more effort in the Grand Plan: get herself a real, live boyfriend versus the battery-operated one she defaulted to in times of need. But six weeks into the year and she’d gotten no further than a few awkward online chats.

What are you wearing?

A sports bra and— Hello, hello, are you still there? Oh, fuck off, dickbiscuit.

“You’re never going to get laid with that attitude,” Violet said as they hacked through teeming masses of nubile, tanned, scantily clad bodies that packed the floor of Ignite, Chicago’s newest, hottest whatever. Most of these people looked like they’d been shipped in from a Pitbull music video.

When Isobel didn’t respond, Violet stopped and pivoted. “What did I tell you about showing a little skin?”

Isobel looked down at her nightclub ensemble: black leggings and Joan of Arctic fur-lined boots paired with an Eddie Bauer parka over a black turtleneck. She called it her “French cat burglar” look. Not only did it throw off a sixties beatnik poet vibe and hug in all the right places on her six-foot-tall frame, it had the added benefit of protecting against a Chicago winter. She was nothing if not practical.

“This isn’t really a good night to be looking for a man,” she muttered mutinously.

“It’s Valentine’s Day. This place is filled with losers who couldn’t get a date and now they’re on the prowl for the leftovers.”

“Like me?” Because she certainly didn’t include Violet in the desperate-dateless-leftovers category. Her sister currently might be without an official boyfriend, but she was keeping a few members of the Rebels hockey team—the team they jointly owned and ran with their elder sister, Harper—on the hook. Not exactly principled, but Violet wasn’t known for her scrupulous attention to the rules.

Vi grinned big. “Exactly like you!”

Who was Isobel kidding? Satan would be ice-skating to work before she got lucky, which suited her tonight because she really should be at home, replaying game videos in preparation for tomorrow, her first coaching gig with the Rebels. So, all right, she was only a consultant, but it would lead to more. She knew it.

“It’s a good thing we’re on the list,” Violet shouted over her shoulder as she elbowed her way through the frenzy with sharp jabs, “because there’s no way we would have gotten in with you looking like South Pole explorer meets South Side gangbanger.”

The list? Now that Isobel thought about it, they *had* skipped a considerable line along with the serious scrutiny of the club’s security. Violet looked like she belonged here with her fabulous gold bustier, a black band masquerading as a skirt, and lashings of colorful ink adorning her gleaming olive skin. Really, she fit in anywhere that was cool and dangerous.

The two had only recently started hanging out when the requirements of their father’s will threw the formerly estranged half sisters together to manage the team. Two years ago, Isobel hadn’t even known of Violet Vasquez’s existence, as dear old Dad had shoved the result of his one-night stand into the Chase family armoire. On Clifford’s death five months ago, Violet had moved from Reno to Chicago and was largely responsible for smoothing over the tension that thickened the air whenever Isobel was in the same room as big sis, Harper. Isobel theorized that since she grew up out of Cliff’s shadow, Violet wasn’t burdened by the Chase legacy. She had a way about her, a go-for-broke attitude that Isobel envied.

“What list?” Isobel asked just as they reached a short stairway leading to a VIP area. “What’s going on, Vi?”

“We’re hanging with Cade and the guys.”

Awesome! A night skirting ethical boundaries with pro hockey players who worked for her.

Violet was already skipping up the stairway littered with bored supermodels, several of them “wearing” skimpy cropped tops that barely covered their tits. The poor women were either freezing to death or highly aroused, because their nipples popped like pucks against the thin fabric. The letters VESNA blazed from several surgically enhanced chests. Why did that word sound familiar?

A few more steps and it became clear that the line of women clinging like sex-starved limpets to the stair’s rail was an actual queue with a goal in mind. A mall line for Santa, perhaps,

where a deviant Mr. Claus was about to have the time of his freakin' life. And here was Isobel blindly following Violet, who now waved at someone behind the velvet rope at the top of the steps.

Shit.

Isobel's heart sank to her not-gettin'-laid-tonight boots. She recognized the head elf pulling back the rope, though Alexei Medvedev was more crusty goblin than Christmas imp.

Vadim Petrov's right-hand man hadn't changed much in the eight years since she'd last seen him, his age still anywhere between forty and sixty. Following some ridiculous feudal custom, the man supposedly owed service in perpetuity to Vadim's bloodline. He served as cook, porter, alarm clock, and bodyguard, to name just a few of his jobs. No doubt he picked up his charge's dry cleaning, ushered women out of Vadim's bed in the early hours, and waxed his boy's scrotum for that silky, manscaped feel.

If Isobel had thought Alexei might have forgotten her, she was quickly disabused of this notion when he let Violet through but placed his Russian solidity in Isobel's path. Seemed she was *persona non grata* again. They sized each other up, and Isobel was happy to say that she was still taller than him, her six feet besting Alexei by a good four inches. But he made up for it in squat, torpedo-shaped bulk. Plus, she was at a clear positioning disadvantage—he could easily push her down the stairs.

And he looked like nothing would please him more.

“What's up, Igor?” He'd *loved* it when she called him that in olden times.

Wondering why the holdup, Violet turned and grabbed her arm. “Hey, she's with me, *tipo*.”

After a few seconds, Alexei stood back, his soulless, shark's eyes boring into Isobel. All he was missing was the two-fingered prong gesture *I'm watching you*. Fine, they understood each other.

Moving forward into the crowded room—huh, not so exclusive after all—Isobel felt her skin prickle with foreboding. As if it knew something she didn't.

She turned and *whoosh!* Sure, she didn't need all that breath in her lungs anyway. Vadim Petrov sat on a chocolate velvet couch wearing a sharp suit, an icy stare, and a half-naked blonde.

The man had made a bargain with the devil, and the devil had yet to call in his marker.

Undeniably beautiful, he sported mountain-high cheekbones that pronounced his descent from an aristocratic lineage, eyes as blue as Lake Michigan in spring, and full lips that miraculously softened the sharp angles of his face. Coal-black hair fell over his brow, its silkiness appearing as untouchably otherworld as its owner. And don't even get her started on his sculpted, tatted body—currently covered up, thank Gretsky—which he proudly flaunted on billboards as often as his numerous sponsorship deals demanded.

A few days ago, the Rebels had traded him in from Quebec. The plan was to use him on the left wing, but he wasn't quite game fit owing to a recurring knee injury. This gave him plenty of time to indulge his other interests: clubbing and manwhoring.

For the briefest moment she wished she didn't look like a lank-haired, parka-sporting, clodhopper-wearing schlub the first time in years she'd been less than ten feet away from him. But then she shot titanium into her spine, cocked her hip à la fuck it, and sidled up to Violet.

Cade “Alamo” Burnett, one of the Rebels' defensemen, had just kissed Violet on the cheek and looked like he wanted to lean into Isobel, but seemed to change his mind at the last moment. *No problemo*. Isobel was all about boundaries.

“Hey, take off your coat, Iz,” Vi said.

Isobel felt too warm, too cold, and mighty uncomfortable. “Not staying long.”

“Izzz . . .”

“Oh, okay. Keep your bustier on.” As she unzipped her parka, she was surprised to feel a tug. “Uh, that's mine.”

“I know, I'm trying to—”

“Back off, lady.”

After a few seconds struggling, she discovered that the woman behind her was actually a coat check person and not a parka thief.

Isobel really should not be allowed out in public.

She hoped Vadim wasn't watching— *Oh, who cares what he thinks?*

Apparently her eighteen-year-old self did, because that's what she'd reverted to. *That loser's* traitorous gaze couldn't help itself, and when it landed on the Russian again, Isobel was surprised to find him watching her with mild amusement. This was different. When he was nineteen, humor had been about as foreign to him as a PB&J sandwich.

Some guy who had “PR clown” written all over him was taking a photo of the blonde as

she inched her hand inside Vadim's lapel, apparently needing the warmth only those muscles could provide. Poor thing, forced to freeze her ass off at the club. Two seconds later, the blonde was subbed out for a redhead, who appeared to have similar body heat problems. Santa, aka Vadim, whispered in her ear, probably inquiring if she'd been naughty or, you know, extra naughty.

The tabloids called him the Czar of Pleasure, a man as well known for his exploits in the bedroom as on the ice. Oh, Isobel's tell-all about Vadim's erotic talents would make for some *really* surprising reading.

Eyes bright with admiration, Cade looked around the VIP room plastered with signs for Vesna, which Isobel now recalled was a high-end Russian vodka. "Man, I want a vodka deal."

"You'd be lucky if you got a deal fronting Budweiser Clydesdale piss, Alamo," came a slow drawl behind them.

Remy DuPre, the Rebels center straight from the heart of the bayou, appeared bearing the most froufrou drink Isobel had ever seen. Blue with a big chunk of pineapple in the center.

"Is that for Harper?" Isobel asked, knowing it wasn't, because her sister wouldn't be caught dead in a club with the players even if her boyfriend's presence gave her a good excuse. *Banging one of them is bad enough*, Harper was fond of saying. *I need to at least give the illusion of labor-management boundaries*.

Remy's blue eyes crinkled. "I'm just here to make sure these boys get home by curfew."

Isobel hid her smile. She liked how Remy had stepped up to the position of elder statesman since his arrival four months ago. She also liked how Remy was a calming influence on her oldest sister. He could have bailed on the Rebels when he had a shot at trading out, but didn't because he loved Harper.

A pang of envy bit into Isobel's heart, but she breathed it away. She wasn't looking for the love her sister had found with Remy, but she wouldn't say no to the obvious fireworks that lit up their bed. Not that anything like that would be happening in this godawful club.

Excusing herself, she headed over to the bar set off in an alcove, determined that this would be a one-drink-and-done kind of night. A plastic-encased menu listed the cocktail options: Vesna Driller, Vesna on the Beach, Vesna Slap 'n' Tickle . . . you get the idea.

The bartender, who was cute in a swipe-right kind of way, caught her eye.

"Hey," she said, pinning on her I'm-dateable-let's-practice smile. "So what's in the

Vesna Bomber?"

"Vodka, grenadine, and passion fruit," she heard behind her in a tone that could freeze a Cossack's ball sac.

Here we go. She turned, the first thing that popped into her head skipping her filter and landing right on her tongue. "Sounds girly."

Okay, so one would ever describe Vadim Petrov as "girly." Before her stood the most masculine streak of cells to ever grill Isobel's retinas, and she lived in a world teeming with machismo.

"Thought you hated vodka," she said.

"I do." A negligent wave of his hand said this was all beyond his control. Who was he, a mere multimillion-dollar spokesman, to counteract stereotypes about Russians?

The gesture might have been casual, but his stare was anything but. "I was sorry to hear about your father."

"Oh. Thanks." It still gnawed, less a sharp pain now, but a constant awareness of the void. Clifford Chase had been driven, difficult, and demanding. He'd expected great things from his favorite daughter, so her failure to make a career in the pros had strained their relationship.

She missed him like crazy.

Vadim had lost his own father about eighteen months ago. She opened her mouth to offer similar condolences, but they got stuck in her throat with all the other things she longed to say. He'd had a strained relationship with the elder Petrov, a billionaire businessman with rumored ties to the Russian mob, and a man who didn't want Vadim to play hockey in the United States. Better he expend his athletic energies for the glory of Mother Russia. Sergei Petrov got his wish—after his visit to Chicago all those years ago, his son enjoyed a star-making turn in the Kontinental Hockey League.

Isobel might've had something to do with that.

The silence sat up between them, the tension expanding. Vadim seemed to be expecting her to say something, so she happily obliged.

"How's your knee?"

Not that. His eyebrow raised slightly. "Improving."

Tiptoe around his ego. "There are some special drills you could do to help with your speed. Get you back to how you were preinjury."

“I’m sure the team will do what is necessary.”

“Yes, we will.”

Gotcha! That eyebrow became one with his hairline.

She cleared her throat. “Moretti has assigned me to give you personalized attention. We’ll meet for an hour before each regular practice and work on your skating.”

Now that injury had forced her out of the game, coaching was all she had left. This morning Dante Moretti, the newly hired Rebels general manager, had appointed her as a skating consultant with one charge: get Vadim Petrov into good enough shape so they could qualify for the playoffs in two months. She’d planned to drop this knowledge on the man himself after tomorrow’s team practice but hey, no time like the present.

Now she waited for his predictable explosion.

“There is nothing wrong with my skating,” he grated.

“There’s always room for improvement,” she said with unreasonable cheer. Kill the boy with happy. “Right now, you’re placing too much weight on your uninjured leg and it’s thrown off your motion. We’ll focus on—”

“Nothing. I can work with Roget.” The regular skating coach.

“He doesn’t have time to give you the extra attention you need. It’s typical for teams to hire consultants, especially for players who are underperforming.”

And there was that famous Russian scowl. Poor ol’ Vad was a touch sensitive about his diminished capacity since that knee injury had sidelined him for half the season. Having battled a career-killing injury herself, she understood what he was going through. The doubts, the questioning. The fear. But, unlike her, he was in a position to get back to full strength as a pro. What she wouldn’t give for a similar opportunity.

He snorted. “You are not just any consultant, though, are you, Isobel? You are a part owner of the team. You are Clifford Chase’s legacy. And even after his death, you are getting your way.”

She understood she’d have to get used to slings and arrows, accusations of using her father’s name and her position as owner to get a coaching gig. But that last dig about getting her way? Said it as if she had done that before.

“I know what I’m doing, Vadim.”

“Do you?” He leaned in, using his height to intimidate. It sort of worked. “You can no

longer play at the pro level, yet you insist on playing games. With me. And not for the first time. Once your selfishness screwed with my career.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Isn’t it? Three years—” He cut off, his anger a cloud that practically stung her eyes. “All because you put me in your crosshairs, Isobel. Well, forgive me if I would rather not trust my professional future to you.”

Her cheeks heated furiously. Of course he would see it that way. She had been young, immature, more sheltered than the average eighteen-year-old. All she knew was hockey. It was her life, and then Vadim had skated into it, and she’d seen something else. Her eyes had opened to beauty and passion and—hell, she’d been a teenage nightmare.

He stood close enough for her to view rings of blue fire around his irises and a smudge of pink lipstick tinting his jaw. It was hard being Vadim Petrov.

Regularly bombarded by photos of him in magazines and on billboards over the years, she wanted to think it was easier to look at him objectively now. As a perfectly formed machine of mass and muscle. As a chiseled Renaissance sculpture that was cool to the touch. She wanted to think it, but she remembered too much about the last time she had been this close to him.

Apologizing for how it all went down would make things easier.

Well, not exactly *easier*.

They had to work together, put aside their differences for the sake of the team. But she didn’t like his assumptions about how she’d landed this job. Or maybe she didn’t like that she half agreed with him.

Doubts that she had right completely on her side put her on the defensive. “These late nights at the club will have to stop.” She curved her gaze around his broad shoulder to the ever-increasing line of women waiting to sit on his lap. “You’re going to need your sleep for the extra practice you have to put in.”

He didn’t respond to that, but if he had, it was easy to guess what he’d say. What every athlete would say.

I know my limits. I know what my body can take.

Athletes were consummate liars.

He leaned in again, smelling of fame, privilege, and raw sex appeal. Discomfort at his proximity edged out the hormonal sparks dancing through her body.

“Does Moretti know that we have history? That you are the last person I wish to work with?”

Before she could respond, someone squealed, “Vadim!” A blond, skinny, buxom someone, who now wrapped herself around Vadim in a very possessive manner. “You said you’d be back with a dwinkie!”

A dwinkie?

Drawing back, Vadim circled the squealer’s waist and pulled her into his hard body. “*Kotyonok*, I did not mean to be so long.” He dropped a kiss on her lips, needing to bend considerably because she was just so darn petite! Not like big-boned Isobel, who could have eaten this chick and her five supermodel Playmates for a midmorning snack. A group of them stood off to the side, clearly waiting for the signal to start the orgy. And Vadim clearly wanted to give it, except he had to deal with the annoying six-foot fly in the sex ointment.

Why did the lumberjack hotties always go for twigs instead of branches? Did it make them feel more virile to screw a pocket-sized Barbie?

Yep, feeling like a schlub.

But he didn’t need to know that. All he needed to know was that she had the power to return him to competitive ice. This was her best shot at making a difference and getting the Rebels to a coveted play-off spot. Vadim Petrov and his butt-hurt feelings would not stand in her way.

“Do you need to talk about it, Russian?”

She infused as much derision into the question as possible, so that the idea of “talking about it” made him sound a touch less than manly. Big, bad, brick-house Russians didn’t need to talk about the women who done them wrong.

“There is nothing to talk about,” he uttered in that voice that used to send Siberian shivers down her back. Now? Nothing more than a Muscovian flurry.

“Excellent!” Superscary cheerful face. “Regular practice is tomorrow at ten, so I’ll see you on the ice at 9 a.m. Don’t be late.”

Pretty happy with her exit line, she walked away.

Far too easy.

A brute hand curled around hers and pulled her to the other side of the bar, out of the sight line of most of the VIP room. She found her back against a wall—literally and

figuratively—as 230 pounds of Slavic muscle loomed over her.

He still held her hand.

If she weren't so annoyed, she'd think it was kind of nice.

She yanked it away. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Who am I?" he boomed, and she prayed it was rhetorical. Unfortunately, no. "I am Vadim Petrov. Leading goal scorer for my first two years in the NHL. Winner of both the Kontinental and the Gagarin Cups. A man not to be trifled with. And you are, who, exactly? The daughter of a hockey great who was not so great when it came to running a team. The woman who can no longer play yet thinks she can offer 'tips' to me. To me! You may have pedigree, Isobel, but there is nothing I can learn from you."

This arrogant, douchewaffle piece of shit!

She straightened, pulling herself millimeters from the wall, which had the effect of putting her eye-to-eye with him. Or eye-to-chin. Close enough.

Too close.

He was breathing hard, and so was she, the lift of her breasts teasing, tantalizing brushes against his chest.

"One conversation and you're out of breath, Vaddy? We're going to need to work on your conditioning."

More of the dark and broody. More of the nipple pops against her sweater.

Stop being so Russian, Russian!

"My conditioning regimen is fine."

A glance over to the bar found "Dwinkie" biting her lip in concern, throwing nervous blinks at her gal pals, and possibly telepathically planning an extraction with SEAL Team Boobs Are Our Weapons.

"Getting your exercise with puck bunnies and Vesna groupies doesn't count." Isobel slid her hand between their bodies and brushed his abs. Good God, hard as ice and hot as sin. "As I suspected, a bit flabby with all your time off. We'll take care of that with your recovery program."

He stepped back, as though burned by her touch, and she willed away the ping of hurt in her chest. At least she knew where they stood on *that* issue.

"I will discuss this with Coach Calhoun and Moretti tomorrow."

“You do that, but do it early, because I’m still expecting you in full gear at 9 a.m. And Vadim? I’d suggest you quit with the trail of women looking to sit on your . . . knee. We don’t want to weaken it or any other parts of your anatomy. Keep that up and you won’t even have a shot at *Dancing with the Stars*.”

Then with the reflexes that once accorded her MVP status on the ice, she escaped his orbit and headed back into the crowd.

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SO OVER YOU (Chicago Rebels, #2)

Three estranged sisters struggle to sustain their late father's failing hockey franchise in Kate Meader's sizzling Chicago Rebels series. In this second entry, middle sister Isobel is at a crossroads in her personal and professional lives. But both are about to get a significant boost with the addition of a domineering Russian powerhouse to the Rebels

Isobel Chase knows hockey. She played NCAA, won Olympic silver, and made it thirty-seven minutes into the new National Women's Hockey League before an injury sidelined her dreams. Those who can't, coach, and a position as a skating consultant to her late father's hockey franchise, the Chicago Rebels, seems like a perfect fit. Until she's assigned her first job: the man who skated into her heart as a teen and relieved her of her pesky virginity. These days, left-winger Vadim Petrov is known as the Czar of Pleasure, a magnet for puck bunnies and the tabloids alike. But back then . . . let's just say his inability to sink the puck left Isobel frustratingly scoreless.

Vadim has a first name that means "ruler," and it doesn't stop at his birth certificate. He dominates on the ice, the practice rink, and in the backseat of a limo. But a knee injury has produced a bad year, and bad years in the NHL don't go unrewarded. His penance? To be traded to a troubled team where his personal coach is Isobel Chase, the woman who drove him wild years ago when they were hormonal teens. But apparently the feeling was not entirely mutual.

That Vadim might have failed to give Isobel the pleasure that was her right is intolerable, and he plans to make it up to her—one bone-melting orgasm at a time. After all, no player can perfect his game without a helluva lot of practice . . .