

Chapter One

The blast of my brand-new alarm clock sounded ten times louder than the lunch bell at school. In fact, I was pretty sure it could be heard from one end of Cutter Bay to the other, and probably from every other town on Vancouver Island.

I imagined the goalie from the Esquimalt Eagles squinting in the dark and wondering what the racket was. And I could practically see the whole starting lineup for the Sooke Seagulls (who smoked us twice last season) scowling and pulling their blankets over their heads.

Nobody loves the scream of an alarm clock at five in the morning, not even the most diehard players in the island league.

I groaned and reached out from under the warmest, coziest blankets on earth and turned it off, ready to sink back to sleep. But I'd barely closed my eyes when Mum knocked on my door. It wasn't a gentle tap with the knuckles, but more of a quick, powerful bang of her fist.

She meant business.

“Are you up?”

“Uh-huh,” I grunted, opening one eye.

All I saw was pitch darkness, all I heard was rain splattering against my window, and all I knew was that the wood floor of my bedroom was going to be as cold as the arctic ice floes we’d been studying in Mr. Marshall’s class. Probably colder.

My gut instinct was to huddle under the blankets for just five more minutes. Mum knew it, so she banged on the door again.

“You can’t be late on the first day, hon.”

My eyes popped open as I realized she wasn’t talking about school. It was something much, much better than that.

Finally.

The first day of practice!

I smiled in the darkness, picturing the Zamboni slowly circling the rink, leaving a slick, shiny trail I couldn’t wait to carve up with my skates. The image was what Dad would call “a kick in the pants,” but the good kind. The kind that made me throw off the covers and leap out of bed, excited and ready to go.

I showered and dressed as fast as I could, smiling the whole time. When I met Mum in the kitchen, I was ready for action in warm track pants and my favourite Canucks hoodie (the one with the old-school logo).

“Have you got your gear ready?” Mum asked, buttoning her raincoat.

I nodded. It was my responsibility to keep my equipment organized. Before I went to bed the night before, I’d packed my pads, uniform and all the stuff I’d need after practice for school.

I may not have grown much taller over the summer, but my feet were a full size bigger than last year, so I'd also packed the sweet new Bauers I'd been dying to break in.

Mum handed me her keys and I went to the mudroom to grab my bag.

I'm strong for my size, but lifting the gear onto my back and carrying it outside took almost everything I had. With a grunt like a rabid animal (or my sister before nine in the morning), I heaved it into Mum's minivan.

I climbed into the passenger seat and buckled up just as Mum got in with a travel mug of tea for herself and a hot chocolate for me. She started the van, cranked up the heat and turned the radio to CBC news.

Boring.

"There's a bagel in the bag," she said, nodding toward her purse while the weather report told us it would be raining all week.

Rain in B.C.?

Surprise, surprise.

"I'm not hungry," I told her. I was too excited about practice to think about food.

"Well, you've got to eat something," she said, pulling onto Evergreen Drive and squinting against the headlights of another car.

"But —"

"Nugget," she said, shooting me a look that could probably wound, if not kill, "you're eating the bagel."

"J.T.," I reminded her.

"Fine. Jonathan, J.T., whoever you are today, you're eating the bagel."

It was no use arguing with a professional nutritionist. She'd probably make me wear one of her yellow food

pyramid t-shirts to school if I didn't give in, so I unwrapped the bagel and took a big bite. It was excellent — lightly toasted and smeared with crunchy peanut butter. Maybe I was hungry, after all.

“Thanks, Mum.”

“You're welcome,” she said, with a smile. “Have you got everything you need for school?”

She was the queen of double-checking.

“Yup. My clothes are in the bag,” I told her, once I'd swallowed my mouthful.

“And your Math homework?”

“It's in there,” I told her, taking another bite.

“Complete?”

Uh oh.

“Completely in there,” I told her, as my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth with peanut butter.

She glanced at me. “I meant is it complete?”

“Almost.”

“Almost?” she asked, slowly pulling over to the gravel shoulder, as if the rink could wait.

“What are you doing?” I gasped. It was the first day of practice! We didn't have time to waste yakking on the side of the road.

“Getting to the bottom of this.” She turned to face me and I hoped her eyes wouldn't drill holes through my forehead. “Why isn't it done?”

“It will be,” I promised. “I'll finish it in Mrs. Cavanaugh's car on the way to school.” After all, Kenny's mum drove so slowly, I could probably do a year's worth of homework in one trip.

“Nugget.”

“J.T.”

“J.T.,” she sighed. “We’ve already discussed that the car is not the place for homework.”

“I know, but I had to pack my bag last night and —”

“And that’s not a valid excuse. Hockey is never going to come before school at our house. You know that.”

I nodded.

“I can’t hear you.”

“I know,” I told her.

“This isn’t happening again. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she said, pulling back onto the road. “Listen, I know you love to play, but school is your priority.” She shook her head. “Look at your Dad. Ending his hockey career took one bad judgment call and less than five seconds.”

She was right, of course. Dad played right wing (just like me) for a junior team in Saskatchewan before he met her. Everyone says he would have become an NHL All-Star, for sure. But just before the scouts for none other than the *Calgary Flames* came to check him out, he got hit in the cheekbone with a puck going about a thousand kilometres an hour, and he wasn’t wearing a face mask.

The puck shattered the bone and damaged his left eye so he couldn’t play anymore. He was a ref for a little while after that, but his vision was messed up and it just didn’t work. So that was the end of that. Of course, I knew Dad liked working at the insurance company, but not as much as he would have loved playing for the Flames.

And since his career was cut short, the McDonald family hockey legacy was resting on my shoulders. It was up to me to play hard and fast, skating circles around the competition as a right winger. It was up to me to lead the second-place Cougars to the championship.

And I wanted to!

But my puny size had always stood in the way of ending our second-place streak. My size and Coach O’Neal, that is.

Our season always came down to one big game, and I never, *ever* got to play in it.

The Shoreline Sharks were not only the top-ranked team on the island, but the biggest. And when I say big, I mean they were a bunch of bruisers who looked like professional body builders. (Okay, they might have looked more like, say, average sized fourteen-year-olds, but the rest of us were eleven.)

Because I was extra small, Coach didn’t think I could handle myself on the ice against those goons. Every single year, I spent the Shoreline game watching my team lose from a front row seat on the bench.

The best seat in the house, for the worst moments of the season.

But what Coach didn’t know was that while I may not have grown, after a summer of working as hard as I possibly could to prepare for the season, I was tougher and faster than I’d ever been. And I was going to play against the Sharks, no matter what.

Mum didn’t seem to notice I’d stopped listening to her, and luckily, I’d heard it all before, so it wasn’t hard to catch up as she was finishing. “So, if your Dad didn’t have an education, he would have been out of luck. School is more important than anything else.”

“I get it, Mum. But seriously, I’m never going to use *Math*.”

She laughed. “Of course you are.”

“Nope. I want to play for the Canucks and all hockey players have to do is skate and score.”

“Is that right?” she laughed again. “How do you plan to handle your NHL salary and bonuses without Math?”

Hmm.

I hated to admit it, but she had me there.

When we got to the rink, I kissed Mum goodbye and carried my bag inside, where my buddy Kenny Cavanaugh was just ahead of me on the way to the locker room.

“Hey, Nugget,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

I took a deep breath. It was time to get the ball rolling.
“J.T.”

“Huh?”

“I go by J.T. now.”

“Since when?”

“Since now.”

Kenny paused for a second, then shrugged under the weight of his gear. “Whatever you say.”

I followed him to the locker room, which smelled the way it always did: like burnt popcorn and sweat. Kind of gross, but kind of nice too.

We started pulling gear from our bags, piling helmets, gloves, pads and practice jerseys onto one of the benches. We wouldn’t be allowed to use the lockers until we were in high school, and I couldn’t wait.

“So?” Kenny asked, licking his palm and trying to squish one of his cowlicks. It was going to take a lot more than spit to tame that thing. It stuck up like the antenna on Mum’s minivan and all it needed was a happy face bobble at the tip.

“So what?” I asked.

“So, why J.T.?”

I didn’t want to tell him I thought it sounded cool and mysterious. “Those are my initials,” I said.

“Gotcha,” he nodded. “Jonathan.”

“Yeah, Jonathan Thomas.”

“J.T.” He shrugged. “It works for me.”

“I mean, they only call me Nugget because —”

“You’re small,” he finished for me.

I gritted my teeth. “Right, but it’s mostly because my sister’s Wendy McDonald. You know, the double fast food thing. They’ve been calling her *Big Mac* for as long as I can remember, but obviously instead of *Hamburger* or *Quarter Pounder*, I got stuck with . . . *Nugget*.”

“Oh,” Kenny said, nodding his head. “I always thought it was like a gold nugget or something, but it’s actually —”

“Chicken,” I told him quietly.

He shrugged. “Well, they’re good with sweet and sour sauce.”

Like that was going to make me feel better.

“I’ve spent two years being called a chicken nugget, Kenny.”

He nodded, like he understood. “And you didn’t like it.”

I stared at him. “Would you?”

Kenny shrugged. “My brother calls me Turd, so I’m probably not the best person to ask.”

I cringed. Apparently, things could have been worse.

Even so, I hoped J.T. would catch on. It suited me, and I didn’t even care that my sister had already said it stood for “Just Tiny.”

You know what I thought?

I thought the dumbest thing about nicknames like “Nugget” or “Minor League Midget” was that they were so obvious. I knew I was short. Everyone knew I was short. All they had to do was look at me to see the evidence stacked up and staring back at them.

“J.T.,” Kenny said, interrupting my thoughts. “Earth to J.T.”

“What?”

“You zoned out. I was saying I can’t believe how cold it is out there.” He pulled on his shin guards.

I thought so too, but told him, “This is nothing compared to where my dad grew up in Saskatchewan.”

“Oh yeah?” Kenny asked, as he reached for his red and black hockey socks.

“One winter the snow got so high, Dad and my Aunt Judy could jump off the roof onto it.”

“Huh,” Kenny said, not as impressed as he should have been. “Well, my brother in Calgary tripped on his way to a movie last winter. Know what he tripped over?”

“What?”

“The light on the top of a taxi.”

Big deal. “It fell off a cab?”

“No, dummy. The whole car was buried. The whole *road* was buried. He was walking on top of the taxi and didn’t even know it.”

I stopped and stared at him. “No joke?”

“No joke.”

“Whew. Now that’s snow.”

I wished I lived somewhere back east, like Quebec, where instead of rain, it snowed like crazy and the lakes froze solid enough to skate on. No one even had to worry about paying for ice time. I wished that all I had to do was play hockey. That way, I could forget about Math, and forget school altogether.

Just play hockey.

“So, what do you think about the new guy?” Kenny asked, as he sat on the bench and started taping his stick.

I’d already taped mine the night before, since it was my favourite part of getting ready for the new season. “What

new guy?” I asked, adjusting my shoulder pads.

Jeff McDaniel walked into the locker room and dumped his bag on the other bench. His sweatshirt was inside-out and there was a piece of beef jerky hanging from his mouth. Mum would have flipped if she saw that was how he started his day.

“Nice breakfast.” Kenny laughed.

“What new guy?” I asked again.

“Eddie Bosko,” Jeff said.

His breath smelled like the inside of Dad’s slippers. After a long weekend. During a heat wave.

“Eddie Bosko?” The name sounded super familiar.

“So, now we’re swimming with the Sharks, eh guys?” Colin Bechter said, joining us and dropping his overflowing bag on the floor.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Did you guys hear about Eddie Bosko?” Patrick Chen asked, from the doorway.

“I know,” Kenny said, rolling his eyes.

“How’s it going?” David McCafferty mumbled, nodding to everyone as he came in. His hair was flat on one side, like he’d slept against the car window on the way over. He always looked half asleep.

“We’re talking about Eddie Bosko,” Colin told him.

“I heard,” David said. “What a burn.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I practically shouted, mad that I was the only one who didn’t know.

“Geez! Cool your jets, Nugget,” Colin said.

“J.T.” Kenny told him.

“What?”

“Never mind,” I growled. “Can somebody just tell me what’s going on?”

“Our new player,” Colin explained, “is Eddie Bosko.”

“Okay,” I said, still not sure what the big deal was.

Colin rolled his eyes. “Eddie Bosko from the *Shoreline Sharks*.”

Oh, nuts.

That Eddie Bosko.

“What?” I croaked.

“That dude is a killer stickhandler,” Jeff said, shaking his head in awe.

It couldn’t be happening. It didn’t make sense. “Yeah, but . . . he’s a Shark,” I said, quietly.

“Not anymore. His family just moved here,” Kenny said. “So he’ll be going to school with us too.”

“The kid is massive,” Jeff said, still shaking his head. “And have you felt his shoulder-checks?”

All the guys silently nodded, remembering the jolt of bodies slammed against the boards. Everybody but me, anyway. I just remembered watching him pound on us while I sat on the bench, itching to get out on the ice.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about it, and with him on our side now, this could end up being our best season ever,” Patrick said.

“Dude,” Kenny said, “he’s the enemy.”

Most of us nodded and got back to dressing for practice. That is, until Eddie Bosko entered the locker room. I didn’t see him or hear him right away, but I felt his presence, like ice cream melting down my spine.

When I turned to face him, he looked about seven feet tall.

His hair was dark and shaggy and I swear the kid had a *mustache*. His bag, loaded with just as much stuff as mine, dangled from one of his monster paws like it weighed nothing. Like a bag of marshmallows.

I wished he didn't look so big and tough. I wished guys like Jeff and Patrick weren't happy about him joining our team.

But more than anything, I wished he wasn't a right winger too.