

CHAPTER 1

Rocket grabbed his hockey jacket and sticks and headed to the elevator. The TV was going full blast in apartment 1207. They drove his mom crazy because her bedroom was next to their living room. She'd asked them to turn it down lots of times, but nothing stopped them from watching at top volume. Now she just slept with earplugs. He pressed the elevator button. The hallway smelled different today — like moldy cheese — but underneath was its usual dusty smell. The guys in 1201 had dumped some garbage in the hall, but they were rough and there was no way anyone would tell them to clean it up.

When Rocket and his mom had first moved in, after his parents split up, she'd said the place was a dump and it would only be temporary: "A month at most." That was almost four years ago.

The elevator doors opened and Rocket stepped inside.

His thoughts turned to his team. Minor bantam this year — a huge step up for sure. He'd heard scouts came to games to check out guys for junior. Stupid that he

had to bother with this tryout, though. The team was basically set. They only had to replace one kid, really — Derrick, the coach's son. He'd decided not to play competitive hockey this year. Rocket still found that hard to believe. Derrick was one of the best defencemen in the entire league.

He looked down at the crest on his jacket. His mom had sewed it on only two days before: *Oakmont Huskies AAA — Pee wee Champions*. His chest filled with pride. What a team. Only lost one game all year, and that was in the playoffs. He'd centred the number one line with his two best buds, Ty and Adam, and he'd come within four points of setting a scoring record. The three friends had a favourite saying: "Bring it." That's what he was going to do this year. He could've gotten four more points. From now on he was going full out, every shift, every game. He gripped his sticks tightly.

Bring it.

And he would keep bringing it until he made the NHL.

The doors opened at the ground floor.

"Hey, where you going? Hockey?"

"What was your first clue?" He grinned at his friend Maddy and stepped out.

"Didn't you just finish the season or something?" she said.

"That was the playoffs. This is a tryout. You have tryouts in April for the next season, which starts in September," he said.

"So do I get a break from having to listen to you talk about hockey after your tryouts?" Maddy said. She straightened her arms out, pulled the ratty cuffs of her

sweater down to cover her hands, and crossed her arms. She looked pale and tired today, probably from too much studying. She was always working on something for school.

“Well . . . there are usually three tryouts, although the team is basically the same as last season, so the next two are more like practices. Then we usually do a tournament or two, plus we continue our land training, and I’m playing in the three-on-three league with Ty and Adam, so . . . not too much more.”

“Awesome,” she said, clapping her hands. “There are two hours in August when you won’t irritate me about your hockey.”

“I’ll always irritate you about something,” he laughed.

She brushed a strand of hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. She looked the same as always: grey wool sweater that was way too big for her, jeans with rips at the bottom, black boots laced up and her hair tied in a ponytail. “You don’t *always* irritate me — just most of the time,” she said.

He knew she was joking and he laughed again. Maddy was one of his best friends, even though they went to different schools. Her school was just around the corner, but his mom had wanted him to go to one in a better district. She’d gotten him on a waiting list for Forest Mills, called the principal about a thousand times, and talked to a bunch of teachers. He was pretty sure she’d even lied — saying they were looking to move into the neighbourhood, when there was no way they could ever afford to. It was a seriously rich area.

Rocket had met Maddy when he’d moved into the

building, and she was always around. She ended up hanging at his place most nights, either for dinner or to watch TV or to game. He probably spent more time with her than Ty and Adam.

“You coming or going?” he said.

“Coming. Griffen needed me to buy him some Advil. He’s home early from work with a headache — probably self-inflicted at the bar last night. He’s being such a jerk.”

“That’s what Griffens do.” Rocket grinned.

“This time he’s setting a Griffen record for jerkiness,” Maddy said.

Griffen was her mom’s boyfriend — or, more like, ex-boyfriend. Maddy’s mom had taken off with some other guy a year ago and had never come back. Maddy didn’t have anyone else, so she’d been living with Griffen since then. Rocket felt so bad for her. Griffen was about his least favourite person in the world.

“Hey, do you want to do something later?” Maddy asked.

“I think I’m going over to Ty’s after the tryout,” he said. “He got this amazing new hockey game for his Xbox.”

She shrugged. “No problem. I have homework.”

She always seemed to be doing homework. “You should do something fun for a change.”

Maddy looked into his eyes. He felt a chill. Her eyes were fixed and hard, her lips pressed tightly together — and then, just like that, her face relaxed and she laughed. “I forgot, you’ve never heard of homework. Sorry. I’ll explain how it works sometime.”

He laughed and tapped the floor with his sticks.

“Looking forward to learning about this ho . . . me . . . wor . . . k?” he said very slowly.

She smirked and pressed the elevator button. He headed to the front door.

“There’s more to life than hockey,” she called out.

He shook his sticks in the air and, without turning around, said, “You’re the funniest person I know. See ya.”

“Bye, Bryan.”

Her voice sounded kind of strange, and he almost turned around. But that was classic Maddy. Laughing one second, deadly serious the next, and then back to laughing. Probably just a bad day at school; maybe she only got a 95 on her math test.

“Hi, Bryan,” a man called out.

“Hi, Grady,” Rocket said.

A shabbily dressed man was squatting against the wall beside the lobby doors. His sleeping bag was pushed up against the building, his shopping cart lying on its side on the walkway.

“Got a hockey game?” he asked Rocket.

“I do, Grady,” he replied.

“I used to play hockey — a right-winger. Played junior. I could’ve gone pro, too, if I hadn’t messed my knee up. I could’ve,” Grady said. He shook his head.

“I bet. Too bad about the knee,” Rocket said.

“Played in Springfield. Nice people there. They loved me. Coach’s name was . . .” He growled and shook his head. “Can’t remember.”

“Gotta run. See ya, Grady,” Rocket said.

Grady tipped an imaginary hat at him. Rocket set off for the bus stop.

Most nights Grady slept in the alleyway beside the

apartment building. Once in a while, a cop would chase him away, but he always came back. Every time he saw Rocket carrying his hockey sticks he'd tell him he used to play — usually on a different team and with a different coach. It was kind of funny and sad at the same time. This wasn't the first time he'd mentioned Springfield, though. He must have been a fan. There used to be a famous team called the Springfield Indians that started way back in the 1920s or '30s. They'd had a coach, a guy named Eddie Shore, who was a Hall of Famer and had played with the Bruins.

Rocket began to walk faster. This wasn't sports trivia time. This was the time to get pumped. Sure, it was only a tryout; but they had a new coach, a guy named Barker. He was going to be paid, not like Derrick's dad, Coach Neilson, who'd done it for fun. First impressions were huge. Rocket needed to establish his rep as first-line centre.

Go hard every drill.

His mom wasn't thrilled about a paid coach. She thought it meant the fees would go up, and it was already expensive. He couldn't stop himself from sighing. He probably wouldn't need new pads this year. Why was he the only kid who wasn't growing? Next to Ty and Adam, he looked like the kid brother. Some guys in the league were almost a head taller than him. He took vitamins, got lots of sleep and didn't eat junk food: all the things the doctor told him to do. Nothing helped.

The bus was coming, and he ran the last little bit. Two other guys arrived at the same time and stepped in front of him. Rocket looked away, backing up to give

them some room. They wore gang colours. You didn't mess with guys like that. The doors of the bus opened and people started to get on.

The line slowed.

"Push on," one of the guys in front of him said, "or I'll throw you off."

People pushed their way forward. The bottom step opened up and the two guys jumped on.

"Excuse me," Rocket said. "Can I slip on too? I'm meeting some people and . . ."

One of the guys ignored him. The other snickered.

"What's your problem, little man?"

"Uh, nothing," Rocket stammered. He hated this neighbourhood.

A man behind Rocket muttered something under his breath and went to sit in the bus shelter. The doors closed and the bus pulled away.

Ty's dad got annoyed when he was late for pickup. The next bus would be at least fifteen minutes. If his mom only had a car like everyone else . . . He kicked his bag. She didn't, and that was that.

It was embarrassing having to get a lift all the time.

He spun his bag sideways and sat down, right in front of the stop. He was going to be the first one on the next bus, even if he had to cross-check someone, and he didn't care what gang they belonged to.

One day he'd teach guys like that not to disrespect the Rocket.

One day.