

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.

CHAPTER 2

The puck caromed off the boards, spinning like a top near centre. Ty and Rocket turned toward it.

“All yours, Rocket. Set it up,” Ty said.

“Go wide right,” Rocket said. He pulled the puck onto his forehand with the tip of his stick and shovelled it back to his left defenceman, who fired it across ice to his partner, who one-timed it to Adam. Rocket had timed his curl perfectly and was across his own blue line, shoulders squared, when the puck hit Adam’s stick.

“Ad-man!” he called.

He took Adam’s pass without breaking stride. Coach Neilson would have loved that play. They’d worked on it all last season.

Ty had set up on the right side, just across centre. Rocket sent the puck over, confident Ty would know what to do. Sure enough, half a metre before Rocket hit the blue line, the puck lofted into the corner of the red team’s zone. Rocket raced past the defenceman and gathered it in, cradling the puck on his backhand, surveying the action.

The right defenceman lumbered toward him. Ty

stormed the net, covered by the left defenceman. Rocket almost laughed out loud.

It was going to be that easy.

They'd left Adam wide open. He waited another second to draw the reckless defenceman closer and sauced a soft pass into the high slot. Adam bore in on the goalie.

"Bring it!" Rocket yelled.

Ty set up a screen and Adam cut to his left to give himself a shooting lane. He had the best shot on the team. Rocket knew he'd score; he never missed from there.

Suddenly, Rocket was flat on his back and sliding to the wall. The defenceman had extended his gloves into Rocket's chest and carried through with his shoulder.

"You've gotta be kidding!" Rocket said, scrambling to his feet.

This guy was toast — who cheap-shots the first-line centre? Seriously. His teammates would kill him.

At the blue line, Adam was punching gloves with Ty and the two defencemen. He'd obviously scored, which meant they hadn't seen the hit. Rocket took a step forward and then hesitated. The defenceman had already turned away. But that wasn't what made him stop. He was the biggest player on the ice — huge. Rocket barely came up to his chest.

He decided to let it go. The defenceman couldn't skate and he was useless with the puck — the type of guy who comes to a AAA tryout so he can brag about it to his friends. A tourist. He'd be cut and that would be the end of it. No point fighting. Rocket skated to his linemates, his glove extended. He looked back at the

defenceman. How could a thirteen-year-old be so big?

“Did you see that ape run me over?” Rocket said, as he punched Adam’s glove.

“I was too busy dangling that pathetic goalie,” Adam said. “Has he even played before? I almost didn’t know where to shoot, I saw so much net.”

“Barker wants a change,” Ty said.

“Doesn’t want us to make the Red team look too bad,” Adam said.

Rocket laughed. He followed Ty and Adam to the bench.

The tryout had been a total snore so far. They’d done a ton of skating drills and then they’d gone in alone on the goalies. Barker had finally blown the whistle and organized everyone into two teams for a scrimmage. There were so many guys that Rocket had only had two shifts.

If Rocket was unimpressed by the tryout, he was even less impressed by their new coach. When Barker wasn’t talking to the other assistant coaches or the team sponsor, he was screaming at kids like a maniac, telling them to “want it” and to “push through the wall.” One kid had fumbled a pass and Barker had called him useless. Maybe the kid didn’t have the skills, but that was harsh.

Rocket had to go behind the bench and sidestep his way to the middle to find a place to sit. The bench was totally packed.

Ty and Adam were sitting together.

He tapped their helmets. “Hey, move over — if you get called bench hogs, it won’t be my fault.”

Ty snorted. “I can live with it.”

“No room, bro. Suck it up,” Adam said. He turned and grinned up at Rocket.

Rocket was irritated, but he let it go. It *was* crowded and it wouldn’t kill him to stand. But he wasn’t going to let them burn him just like that. He reached forward to grab a water bottle, smacking Ty and Adam on their helmets with his elbow.

“You’re going to hurt for that,” Ty said.

“Suck it up, bros,” he said, taking a sip of water.

Adam elbowed Ty. “Bark-Breath alert.”

Adam was always coming up with nicknames. He’d given new handles to half the kids on the team, including himself, Rocket and Ty, whose real name was Tyler.

Barker leaned sideways against the boards and draped an arm over the lip. “Love the drive to the net, Tyler,” Barker said. “Strong net presence. And way to keep your head up, Adam: great skill move to pop it in.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Ty and Adam said.

Barker lowered his head. “We’ll be making tons of cuts,” he said quietly. “I thought it was dumb to have an open tryout for a AAA team — I think our sponsor likes the money everyone pays.” He laughed. “Tomorrow will be more like a real practice. I’ve made my decisions already.” He gave Ty and Adam’s gloves a punch and skated away.

Rocket took a sip of water. Barker probably hadn’t noticed him standing behind the bench. Nice of him to forget who set the goal up, though.

Whatever.

Rocket had a feeling he was going to miss Coach Neilson. He never would’ve talked about other players like that. It was also kind of weird to hear Barker

trash-talk the sponsor. Rocket took another sip of water. Next shift he'd make that ape of a defenceman pay for his late hit. He'd wait until he wasn't looking and then pop him under the chin, real quick. The dude was too slow to ever catch him. He'd only got that hit in because Rocket had been caught watching the play.

Coach Neilson had been on him about that, too. Don't watch the puck — skate!

There was always something to work on in hockey. Like Coach Neilson said, even professionals practise.

The whistle blew, and Barker waved them to centre.

Rocket hit the bench with his stick.

“No way that's the end of the scrimmage,” he said. “We got on twice, for like a minute. Worst tryout ever.”

“Doesn't matter,” Ty said to him. “You heard him. They're going to cut everyone and we can have a real practice tomorrow.”

Rocket shrugged. “Still, it's an hour and a half of ice wasted. Kind of pointless.”

“Hey, we popped one in,” Adam said, “so it wasn't totally a waste.”

He put a skate on the bench then threw his legs over the boards. Ty laughed and did the same.

Rocket grimaced and walked to the door. The showing off was getting on his nerves — big time. So what if they could hop over the boards.

He shuffled out and drifted to centre where Barker had set up with the players around him in a semi-circle.

Rocket felt sorry for the new guys that had come out. Brutal to kill yourself trying to impress a coach who

couldn't even be bothered to run a real tryout. He wasn't even watching half the time — more than half — and each player had to pay thirty bucks!

“Great work. Good energy,” Barker said. “Thanks for coming out. I hope you appreciate a real, top-level tryout and get a feel for what it takes to play with the best. The Oakmont Huskies might be too much of a jump for some of you, but I admire your guts for coming anyway. Hope you had fun. As the saying goes, many are called, few are chosen. That’s a life lesson, boys. We can only carry fifteen skaters, with two goalies. Good luck with any other tryouts and, hopefully, I’ll run into you again.” He paused. “So, guys, that was awesome. Now, let’s go for a skate three times around the rink to end it off. Go for it — I’ll be watching.” He blasted his whistle.

The boys took off. The players who’d been on the Huskies last year lazed along, including Ty and Adam. Rocket skated up beside them.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go for a skate.”

“Too pathetic,” Adam said. “No point busting our butts for nothing. Look at them. Don’t they get it?”

The other guys were skating their hearts out, and soon a few had even lapped them.

Barker was off the ice by now, speaking to the team manager, Rob Thompson, and the sponsor, Mr. Cole. The sponsor’s son Sean played on the team. Adam called him Money, on account of his rich dad.

Money wasn’t Rocket’s favourite guy: he was always bragging about the awesome trips he was going on or the new, expensive things his dad had bought him. Rocket knew some rich kids at Forest Mills, but they

were nothing compared to Money's dad, apparently. He was some kind of lawyer.

At least Money could play. Rob's son, Mitchell, was totally useless. He barely got any ice time, but he was still on the team.

Another pack of guys lapped them. Rocket couldn't stand it.

"Let's show them how Huskies skate," Rocket said. "We look like house leaguers."

"I can't be seen sweating at a tryout," Adam cracked.

"Go for it, Rocket," Ty said. "We'll clap for you."

Rocket snickered. "If you can't keep up, I understand." He took off.

Ty took off after him.

The two boys motored around the ice, weaving in and out of the other players. Rocket carved sharply on his inside edges, the blades scraping over the ice as he swung around the net. A few short, powerful strides and he was back at top speed. Ty still hadn't caught him — and he wasn't going to. He wasn't called the Rocket for nothing. He swerved to the middle of the ice to avoid a pack of players, and with arms and legs pumping faster and faster, he felt like he was practically flying.

He wished the tryout was just beginning.

A whistle blew. "That's it, boys. Clear off. Zambo-ni's coming on." Rob waved at them from the door. Rocket figured he could sneak in another lap, and with no one in his way, he went even faster. Ty and Adam were still on the ice talking to Rob when he rounded the last corner. He skidded to a stop a metre away, spraying them with ice chips.

“Sorry, Ty. Thought you were a pylon,” Rocket said.

Ty rubbed the top of Rocket’s helmet. “How cute. The little boy wants to play.”

Rocket knew Ty wasn’t serious. It still bothered him, though.

“Must’ve been hard to watch someone’s back in a race,” Rocket said.

“I got no problem losing to you,” Ty said, tapping his shin pads. “So did you see anyone you liked?”

They stepped off the ice and headed to the dressing room. Rocket felt dumb getting mad at Ty for making a stupid joke. They were best friends!

“Hard to tell with so many guys,” Rocket said. “There was that left-winger in the blue helmet and the red pants. He looked like a player.”

Ty shrugged. “Bit small, especially for a winger. I bet that huge defenceman will make it. He could clear the front of the net with his pinky finger.”

Rocket flushed as he opened the door to the dressing room. Hockey was about heart and skill, not stupid muscle.

“Awesome skate, Tyler,” Barker called out. “Great sniping, Ad-man.”

The dressing room door closed behind them.