

Chapter 1

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The noise scared me at first, until I turned around and saw this kid in a dark-blue hockey jersey and a black tuque staring at me through the wire mesh that went around the hockey rink. The kid was banging away on the boards with his stick. I was about to flip him the finger and take off when he called out to me, “You mind getting our puck?” He nodded to the kid next to him. “This loser doesn’t know how to shoot.”

The other kid was real big and wore the same hockey jersey. “It’s not easy to deflect a puck off the crossbar and over the fence. That’s true talent,” the big kid said, laughing.

“Give me a break,” the first kid said. “You couldn’t do that again if you took a million shots.”

I really don’t know why I helped. I really don’t. I was freezing cold and totally hungry. All I’d eaten today was a bag of chips. Why should I care about a couple of Reggies? That’s what Undergrounders call kids with regular lives, kids who go to school and have

parents — and play hockey — and who don't live on the streets. Of course, I didn't exactly live on the streets. I lived in the Underground with Lewis and Rigger and all the other Undergrounders.

"It's over by that blue van, I think," the first kid said. "Could you look? We got our skates on and can't go on the pavement."

I shoved my hands into my pockets. Some idiot had stolen my gloves last night; my hands were about to come off. Lewis said it's the cold that'll kill you, not the streets. I think not eating is the killer, but I didn't say anything because he was a lot older and didn't like it when I didn't agree.

I found the puck leaning against one of the blue van's tires, and the two Reggies cheered when they saw I'd got it.

"Toss it over the fence. Thanks a lot. We owe you one," the first kid said.

A third player came over. He wore the same jersey as the other two. I figured they must be on the same hockey team.

"Did you get it, or what?" the third kid demanded. He sounded real angry. "I'm freezing standing around."

"We got it. We got it," the big kid said. "Chill out."

"That's the problem," the angry kid said. "I am chilled out."

I threw the puck as far as I could onto the ice. It felt good to move my arms like that. Two of them chased after it. The first kid banged his stick on the boards.

"Thanks again. If you live around here you should

come play. We're here after school most days." He turned to join the shinny game. I don't meet many friendly guys like that.

Weird how I hated hockey now. I used to love it. I was on a real team, and was always playing street hockey and at school. For some reason the sight of these guys playing hockey made my chest feel heavy. The grumbling in my stomach was all the motivation I needed to leave, anyway. I had to eat soon or I'd faint.

I tried to remember when I had last played. For sure it was way before my mom died, maybe just before we moved to Brentwood after my mom lost her job at the auto parts factory. I usually forced myself not to think of my mom because it made me too sad. Once I cried about her a bit and one of the Undergrounders, Will, made fun of me and everyone was laughing and calling me a big baby and stuff. Now that I was all alone I let myself remember a bit. Ron had got a part-time job in Brentwood, so off we went. I most definitely didn't like thinking of that jerk, and I'll never know why my mom made him her boyfriend. She said she was lonely after Dad left, and Ron made her laugh. He never made me laugh, not once.

I was in the hospital room when Mom begged Ron to take care of me after she died because there was no one else. The doctors had told her the cancer was too big in her body. I was crying and Ron said, "No problem, Angela." I heard him say it.

"Be strong, my sweet boy. It'll be okay, I promise. Ron will take care of things. It'll be fine. You're a strong boy —

and so smart. Things will be good. I know you're sad, and so am I. Just remember that your mommy loves you — I'll love you forever, for all time. Just remember I'll be keeping my eye on you from heaven, so make me proud. Just remember you'll always be my angel boy."

Those were the last words she ever said to anyone. She fell asleep and never woke up. Never even opened her eyes. The cancer plain killed her. Even though I knew she had only died a bit more than a year ago, it sometimes seemed like a million years — and then sometimes it felt like only yesterday.

Ron was a liar, that's for sure, because he disappeared the day after my mom died, ran off just like my dad. I woke up that morning and he was gone. I made some toast, although the bread was totally old and gross. Then someone started pounding on the door. I figured it was Ron and I yelled, "The door's open, idiot!" The pounding kept going so I opened it and there was the landlord all red in the face and with angry eyes.

"I knew you were no good!" he yelled. "It was stupid for me to rent to losers."

I didn't care what he said about Ron, but there was no way he could say that about my mom.

"My mom's not a loser. *You* are — you stupid jerk," and I gave him my best glare.

He sort of caught me off guard by grabbing me by the collar and pulling me outside. I struggled but he was strong for an old guy. "Don't sass me. I'm out three months' rent because I felt sorry for your mom. I just

saw Ron drive off with his car packed, which makes me doubt he'll ever pay me, and I sure don't think you got the money."

He let go of my collar and looked at me real hard. I had no idea how much three months' rent was, but I knew I didn't have it. All I had was five bucks in quarters and loonies, and a ten-dollar bill I'd found under the couch back a few months, which fell out of Ron's pocket when he was sleeping.

"Ron cleared out. Now you have to clear out in ten minutes or I'm calling the cops. Ten minutes or you're going to jail!" he thundered.

"But my mom . . ." I stammered.

That softened him up a bit. He shrugged and said, "Okay. Maybe you can take the morning to call your relatives, pack up and go. But I need you out by twelve. I have to clean this place up and show it to possible renters tomorrow morning." And then he was gone.

My mom had no family. Ron was supposed to take care of me. I never knew my dad. He took off before I was born. "Nothin' wrong with being a single mom," she always said to me. "You're the only man I need since I love you so much." I knew she loved me, but for some reason she let Ron stay with us, and look where that got me. I guess love doesn't make you smart. So I was on my own, and I wasn't going to wait for the police. I grabbed my sleeping bag from under my bed. I got it when I was a little kid, and it wasn't much thicker than a towel, but I figured it was better than nothing. Then I stuffed some clothes into a knapsack, and with only a

small picture of my mom, left that bogus apartment and never looked back. Been on the streets since then.

At first it wasn't so bad. In the summer I could sleep in the forest down by the river, only it kept getting colder and I think I might have frozen to death if Lewis hadn't got me into the Underground. He saved my life and was my best friend, which is why I didn't mind doing business stuff for him like delivering packages.

The Underground was an old abandoned part of a building behind the train station. Some crazy guy started to build a shopping mall, but he never built more than the underground part. Lewis said he ran out of money. An older kid, called Rigger because his last name was Riggins — and he wasn't really a kid but more like an adult — figured out how to get water from a pipe with no one finding out. Rigger charged fifty cents a night to sleep there, but it was worth it. We Undergrounders were different from Streeters because we had a place to sleep at night.

I left Cedarview Park and the outdoor rink and kept walking about twenty minutes until I got to the alley, which was a sweet shortcut Lewis showed me to get to the Market. I wanted to hawk at least two bucks today, and I had to get a good spot near the front doors. Then I'd have enough to give to Rigger for rent tonight, and have extra for some Chinese buns and maybe even a drink. Yesterday, I was late and had to go to the back of the Market, and there was hardly any traffic, or maybe all the cheapskates came out that door on account of street kids bugging them for money all the time.

I would have loved to be in the Underground right now. Rigger was strict about that and we had to clear out in the morning by nine and couldn't come back until after five, which was hours from now. I would turn into a Popsicle by then. Stupid weather. I jingled the two quarters together in my pocket. Enough to pay rent for tonight, but nothing for eating, and my stomach was like a black hole pulling at me, like an itch you can't scratch.