

LAST SHOT

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CHAPTER 1

Feedback crackled like thunder over the arena's loudspeaker. The people in front of him nearly jumped out of their seats. Rocket didn't flinch. Six hours slouched in this spot, waiting for his name to be called, had numbed his body and his nerves.

Yesterday he'd come for his friends, Tyler and Adam, and he'd been stoked when they were drafted. Ty went fifth in round one to the London Knights. The Oshawa Generals grabbed Adam early in round two, with the third pick. Rocket had known he wouldn't go in the first three rounds.

The three of them had been obsessed with the Ontario Hockey League draft for weeks, though Rocket pretended to be low-key. He'd scored thirty-nine goals in midget last season, fourth highest in the league. A few scouts had called Coach Sonia to ask about him. Still, she had warned Rocket not to go to the draft.

"It could be awful," she said. "You might sit in the stands for two days and not get drafted. Stay home and wait to hear from the team that picks you."

Good advice. Too bad he'd ignored it. In the past he would have just checked online, but the OHL had decided to do it live in an arena, like they had years ago. But round after round — nothing. Each time a general manager went up to the mic, Rocket's heart started to beat a little faster.

Another name was called out — not his.

“Cool news about Tyler and Adam.”

Rocket looked up at hearing his friends mentioned. Two men had taken a seat across the aisle. The man closest to him wore a suit and sunglasses with thick black rims. A large gold watch caught the light every so often as the man gestured with his hands. The second man was younger, thickset, wearing track pants, a hoodie and running shoes.

The first man was Mr. Cole and the second was Coach Barker.

Rocket quickly turned away so they wouldn't see his face. Barker had cut Rocket from the Oakmont Huskies years ago. Cole had been the team's sponsor. Rocket didn't have fond memories of either of them.

“I should be down on that floor,” Barker said. “I'm good at working trades and stuff like that.”

“I just bought the team,” Cole said. “I don't want to rock the boat. You'll come on as an assistant coach this year.”

“Well, we got to take care of that power play, and your team is way too small. We need some big bodies to cycle in the corners, and I want my defencemen to punish guys who try to get to the net,” Barker said.

Rocket had played for the AAA Oakmont Huskies for three years, but in his bantam year, Cole had brought

in Barker as a paid coach. Rocket still remembered sitting in the dressing room after the tryout, laughing and joking with Ty and Ad-man. He'd thought he was a lock to make the team. He was the team's lead scorer, and the Huskies had just won the league championship. The manager had read the names out, and Rocket had to sit, humiliated, as it became clear he'd been cut, just like that, in front of everyone.

The hurt had never gone away.

Barker had cut him because he was too small.

And now, years later, that was likely the reason he was still sitting here, not drafted.

Despite his talent, OHL hockey teams couldn't see beyond his size.

Rocket would prove them wrong. He had so far.

Thirty-nine goals last season!

If he didn't get drafted, he'd have to try again next year. It was possible, but if he didn't get any bigger, it wasn't likely. He looked at the scoreboard. Round fifteen was about to start — the last. Twenty teams, fifteen rounds.

Would all the championship teams, the goals and assists, the years of training, early morning runs and shooting a tennis ball against the wall at the back of his apartment count for nothing?

"I like a few of the kids on the team," Barker was saying. "You have that Nugent kid on D. He's a banger. I can develop him. Watch me. And I really like that Ferguson. Kid's got jam."

"That he does." Cole slapped Barker on the side of the leg and stood up. "Anyway, I should get back down there for the final round. Let's circle back tomorrow. I'll

introduce you to the staff and we can talk about training camp.”

“Sounds great. Looking forward to it.”

As Cole left, Barker pulled out his phone and made a call.

“Yeah, I just spoke to him. Went well. I’m irritated that I couldn’t help with the draft, but I get it. Cole doesn’t want to step on any toes. But I’m perfectly positioned to take over. Only Cole would buy such a useless team. Guess he’s got more money than brains. I heard he spent seven million. He’s got no patience. The team will start losing, and he’ll name me head coach ...”

How much money did Cole have? Seven million! That was ridiculous.

Rocket wondered what team it was. Then he felt sorry for whoever had to play for Barker. Ty and Ad-man had hated him. Rocket brought his feet up on the top of the seat in front of him and gripped his knees. He let himself relax. Barker wouldn’t recognize him — too long ago.

For the umpteenth time, he considered his options. Play Junior A or B, or major midget, and get drafted next year. That was the best-case scenario. If he didn’t get drafted next year, either, he could go to an OHL training camp and try to make it as a free agent. Not the best plan — that almost never happened.

He knew the stats.

The rink had been packed this morning, families jumping up and cheering whenever their lucky kid was named. Hour after hour passed, family after family celebrated — hugs and kisses everywhere — but here he was, sitting alone, round fifteen. Maybe Coach Sonia

had been trying to tell him that he wasn't going to be drafted. Maybe the scouts had told her.

All his life he'd dreamed of playing in the NHL. The OHL was the first step — the Big O.

Ty and Adam had already made it. No surprise there. Their parents were rich, and his friends seemed to get everything they wanted: elite hockey camps, top-of-the-line equipment, tropical vacations, the latest phones and tech. Rocket didn't care so much about that. But Ty and Adam also had the one thing he'd give anything for: they had the size.

The loudspeaker boomed again. "The Barrie Colts will pick first in the fifteenth round, having obtained the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds' pick."

A general manager approached the podium. "The Barrie Colts select Dominique Jeffries."

"They picked that Jeffries," Barker said in his phone. "I know the kid. He's a stiff. Can barely skate. Anyway, I gotta go. I'll call you back."

Rocket gripped his knees tighter and waited as five more picks went by. His lower back began to hurt and his neck began to ache. He remained perfectly still.

"The Axton Axmen have the next pick."

The Axmen hadn't done well last year. They'd traded up and got the third pick overall, an American named Aaron Cashman. Rocket had never played against him, but he knew the name.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with a flattened nose and a slight, manicured beard took the stage and grabbed the mic. After sitting in the rink for two days, Rocket had learned the names of most of the general managers. This was Jamie Gold. Rocket had looked

him up. He'd actually played in the NHL.

"The Axton Axmen will take ..." Gold stared at his iPad. "The Axmen take ... Brent ... Hold on." He paused to put on his glasses.

Rocket leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling. He should go home.

"Sorry about that," Gold said. "The Axton Axmen take Bryan Rockwood."

The arena started to spin and all the lights seemed to have gone dim.

"Bryan Rockwood, taken by the Axton Axmen," a voice announced over the loudspeaker.

Rocket rose unsteadily and shuffled to the aisle. His head was spinning so fast he felt like he'd just come off a wicked rollercoaster.

"The Rocket gets drafted." Barker laughed as he went by. "I think you were this size in bantam."

Rocket ignored him and continued down the stairs — slowly. He didn't trust his legs.

Get stoked, he told himself. Not the round you wanted, but you got drafted. Someone wants you.

Axton might not be a bad team, either, not with that Cashman.

Rocket walked through the gate and onto the concrete pad. It felt weird to be in a hockey rink without ice. A spattering of applause filtered down from the few remaining people in the stands.

Rocket looked up toward the stage. The general manager had gone back to the team's table already. Another man was walking toward Rocket, hand outstretched.

"Welcome to the Axmen," he said as Rocket shook

his hand. “My name’s Bradley Washington. I’m the assistant coach. I saw you play a few times last year. Love your skating and vision — and your work ethic.”

“Thanks. I’m ... happy to be drafted by Axton.” Rocket figured that was the right thing to say.

“Come on over to the table and meet everyone,” Washington said.

Two men were seated there, the general manager, Gold, and a smaller man wearing a loose-fitting suit, his tie half undone. His dark brown eyes pierced into Rocket, but he said nothing and went back to looking at his computer screen.

“Gentlemen,” Washington said, “I’d like to introduce Bryan Rockwood. Bryan, this is Jamie Gold. He’s our GM and an owner.”

Gold looked Rocket up and down. He pointed a pen at himself. “Like he said, owner of the Axton Axmen, team president and general manager — so welcome. I ... uh ... I’ve been where you are now, drafted late, and I went to the Battalion as a nobody. But I fought for every minute of ice time — and fought most of the guys in the league. Didn’t let no one stop me — no one — and I played two years in the NHL. I learned that hockey’s about grit and guts and determination, and that’s what Axmen hockey is going to be: tough and physical. We’ll dominate in all four corners — and on the scoreboard.” He checked himself. “I sort of like my boys to have some meat on their bones. You’re, uh, not the biggest cup of coffee I’ve ever seen.”

He laughed. Washington seemed embarrassed. The other man wasn’t paying attention.

“I’ll tell you this,” Gold continued. “One of us here really wanted to draft you — and it wasn’t me. It was the fifteenth round, so I didn’t care. Hopefully, you’ll prove me wrong. Anyway, we want you to come to camp and show us why you deserve to be an Axton Axman. That’s an honour, believe me. I hope you can live up to it.”

Washington smiled uneasily. “Bryan, this is our coach, the legendary J.J. Alvo.”

Alvo looked up. For the briefest of moments, his eyes warmed up. “See you at the end of the summer for training camp, Bryan,” he said. His eyes went back to his screen.

Washington gave Rocket a large white envelope with *Axton Axmen* printed on the front in bright red lettering. “Everything you need to know about training camp is in there, along with information about billeting with a family, school choices and expense information,” he said. “Training camp starts the last week in August. We’re going with a three-day camp this year. Come in shape and ready to compete. Sound good?”

Rocket’s head had barely stopped spinning the entire time. It was all he could do to nod.

“The London Knights select ...”

Washington put an arm around Rocket’s shoulders and led him toward the stands. “Go celebrate with your family.” He slipped a card into Rocket’s hand. “Give me a call if you have any questions, anything at all. I’d be glad to speak to your mom or dad. It’s a big step for kids: leaving home, changing schools and playing in the major juniors, all at the same time. Just remember, not too many sixteen-year-olds make it through the training

camp, so you need to manage your expectations.” A big smile crept across his face. “But today you got drafted, Bryan. Be happy! Go enjoy yourself and we’ll talk soon.”

They shook hands and Rocket left the floor.

Not the biggest cup of coffee. Rocket thought about Gold. The Axmen’s GM had played for Boston, the New York Rangers and then the St. Louis Blues. Not much of a player, more like a journeyman, and a bit of a goon, but an NHLer.

Two years in the NHL — you could live off that money forever, Rocket thought. He could get his mom out of their nasty apartment building and buy her a house in a nice neighbourhood. He’d still have enough to pay for Maddy’s university — and get her a house, too.

He headed into the stands. Unfortunately, Barker was standing by the exit, leaning against the wall, grinning.

“Congrats, Rockwood,” he said. “I got to admit, I didn’t think you still played and I certainly didn’t expect you to get drafted. Last round ...” He laughed.

Rocket wasn’t going to let Barker ruin this for him.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said.

Barker tilted his head back. “Here’s some advice. Quit while you’re still in one piece. The OHL is for big boys — and I mean big. You ...?” He shook his head. “I cut you in bantam because you were too small — and I let myself be talked into asking you back. Trust me, I was against it, and no one was happier when you said no. I coach in the OHL now, so listen up. Hockey’s done for you. You didn’t grow. Not your fault. You just

didn't."

"One man's opinion," Rocket said.

"Just being honest. Sorry. That's me. I tell it like it is," Barker said.

"I'm sure you'll be as bad a coach in the OHL as you were with the Huskies," Rocket said. Then he walked past Barker, through the exit and over to the escalator.

The Axton Axmen! Barker could mock him all he liked, but Rocket had been drafted, and if he made the cut at training camp, it would be a huge step toward the NHL. He'd establish himself as a serious player and put an end to the questions about his size.

Gold said he'd fought for every minute of ice time. Rocket would do more than that. He'd fight for every second.