

ICE TIME

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CHAPTER 1

The reporter shuffled over and held up her mic. “Check, check. Testing. Check, check. Is that good?”

The camera operator nodded. He held up three fingers and counted down. The red light on his camera turned on.

“Hi, Rita Martin for SportsInfo. I’m here with Bryan ‘The Rocket’ Rockwood, who’s been turning some heads with his play at training camp. Bryan, what do you think of your chances of making the team?”

Rocket had done his share of interviews when he played junior hockey, but this was his first for the NHL. He cleared his throat nervously.

“The coaches are telling us rookies to approach it one day at a time. They said not to worry too much about the outcome. It’s been awesome to play in a couple of exhibition games — great experience. Hopefully, I’m ready and I can help the team.”

“So, Bryan — or do you prefer Rocket?” Martin said.

He smiled self-consciously. “Up to you, I guess. Most of the guys go with Rocket.”

She laughed. “That’s a better hockey name, I think.

Tell me, Rocket, what's the biggest adjustment you've had to make?"

"The game's a lot faster, for sure, and the guys are bigger. Your decisions have to be that much quicker, and you can never stop moving your feet. The intensity is very high: every shift, every drill."

"I know you've been asked about your size. Some people criticized management for spending a fifth-round pick on you because they said you're too small. You got cut from your minor bantam team because of that, right?"

This interview wasn't going the way he'd thought it would.

"I did, yeah — kind of an unpleasant memory. But the game's changing. It's all about speed and skill, so . . ."

"You spent two years in junior after getting drafted. Did that help?"

"I was disappointed to go back to junior, for sure. But we had an awesome season. The Axmen made the Memorial Cup, and Coach Alvo's the best. I learned a lot. I got invited to the junior national tryout, which was another great learning experience. Always tough to get cut, but the coaching staff wanted a . . . certain mix of players."

Cut because of his size — again. It was a huge blow that still stung.

But he forced a smile. "That's what hockey's about for me right now: keep learning, keep getting better."

"Thanks, Rocket," Martin said, "and good luck with the rest of camp." She faced the camera. "This is Rita Martin for SportsInfo, your source for sports. Back to you, Kevin."

The red light turned off.

“That was great,” she said to Rocket. Then her head whirled to the right. “Oh, Jonathon, can I do a quick interview?”

She ran off, the camera operator trailing behind. Rocket had to laugh. Jonathon Daniels was the team’s leading scorer last season, an all-star. Rocket was just a rookie trying to break in.

How long had he been dreaming of the NHL?

Forever.

How long had he been dealing with questions about his size?

Just as long.

The game had changed, though. Smaller guys were doing big things. He gave his head a shake and went back to the dressing room for his helmet and stick. Most of the guys were heading out for practice — big boys, mostly. This was a tough team that liked to play a physical style. Rocket had the bruises to prove it.

“Ready to roll, Rocket?”

Rocket looked up. “Hope so, Bossy.”

“How was the interview?”

“Fine, until she asked why they’d drafted a shrimp like me.” He laughed like it didn’t really bother him.

Bossy snorted. “Ignore her. You know you belong.”

That was easy for him to say. Bossy seemed even bigger than he had when they’d played together for the Axmen. Rocket was only five foot nine.

“I’ve been talking to a couple of the coaches,” Bossy said, waving him closer. “They like what you’re doing out there.”

“All four centres are back from last year,” Rocket

said. "I can't help obsessing on that. Those guys have one-way contracts. Why pay one of them a few million to play in the AHL when they can pay me the league minimum? It makes sense to send me down."

"It's a tough spot to be in."

"Whatever." Rocket gave Bossy's shin pads a whack with his stick. "Let's play hockey and let the coaches make the call. Bring it!"

Bossy grinned. "Always."

They punched gloves.

"See ya out there," Bossy said, heading for the ice.

Rocket pulled his helmet from his bag and put it on. A hand patted him on the back and he turned. "Coach Vic, how's it going?"

"All good. I wanted to let you know that we're holding a scrimmage to give the younger guys a chance. We want to see what you can do in a game environment." Vic was an assistant coach. He'd been good about helping the rookies transition to the pro game.

"Sounds great," Rocket said.

"We really want you to focus on both ends of the ice," Vic said. "We know your offensive game is good. That won't cut it, though. We need you solid in the defensive zone, too. When to go behind the net, when to support a defenceman — those decisions are critical. Don't try to do so much on offence that you leave us vulnerable to a counterattack."

He looked Rocket squarely in the eyes.

"I get it, Coach," Rocket said. "Forecheck, back-check, paycheque."

Vic laughed and slapped the side of Rocket's

helmet. “Kids today — too much confidence. Now go out and do it.”

Rocket got his stick and headed down the hall to the ice. Guys were skating around, stickhandling, taking shots, talking.

It was still hard to believe he was actually at an NHL training camp!

He was so close to making it. But clearly Vic had been giving him a message. He needed a strong scrimmage to answer questions about his defence. He’d been a high-scoring centre all his life. That reputation was hurting him. He took a few strides on the ice.

Forecheck, backcheck, and then maybe that paycheque would be his.

He turned on the jets, circling the net and powering up the side. He needed to burn off some nervous energy. He felt like he could skate through a brick wall.

So close.