

## CHAPTER 7

The hockey bags told the story. Rocket counted seven returning players from last year. He figured they'd split the veterans evenly, so there were probably another seven in the other room. OHL teams were allowed to carry twenty-five players on their active roster, which included two goalies. They could also carry twenty-five reserve players, who could be brought up for a maximum of ten games. But the taxi squad wasn't Rocket's goal.

He knew the Axmen's goalie, Robert Glass, was back, so they probably needed ten new skaters and one goalie this year.

"Totally loving the scrimmage idea," Cash said to Hoffer. "I figured we'd be doing figure eights and suicides for three days."

"Gold did this last year, too," Hoffer said. "It's like a war out there. Guys are super-hyped."

"Ya, like that walk-on guy who tried to take my head off to get Gold's attention," Gruny said.

"Day one is full of meatheads," Hoffer said to Cash. "Be careful. Guys will be looking to take a piece out of you."

Cash seemed unimpressed. “Let ’em try. I can take care of myself.”

The door opened. Gold, Alvo and Washington walked in. Rocket had spoken to Washington a few times during the summer, but hadn’t seen Alvo since the draft.

Washington had called Alvo legendary, and Rocket knew Alvo had coached in the OHL for about twenty years. He had a rep for being tough — and having high-scoring teams. He’d also won three Memorial Cups, the last one four years ago.

“Listen up, boys. Coach Alvo wants a word,” Gold said.

Alvo’s cold, unsmiling eyes surveyed the room. Everyone quieted.

“I want to welcome you all to the Axmen training camp,” Alvo began. His voice was low and gravelly. “I won’t sugar-coat this. Every position is open. Every spot is up for grabs. I don’t care who you are. You’re here because we believe in you. Who stays depends on who wants it the most. We need to see who thrives under pressure, in real game situations, and that’s why we’re having three scrimmages over the next three days. We want you to have the chance to show us what you’ve got. So good luck to all of you. Coach Washington will be coaching the Red side. Mr. Gold will read out the lineups.”

Alvo left as abruptly as he’d entered.

Gold tapped the screen of his iPad. Rocket leaned forward.

“This scrimmage we’ve picked four lines and three sets of D for each team, with a few spares. Not everyone

will get to play. We'll do our best to rotate guys in tomorrow. You boys will be on Red. First line, we'll go with Cash at centre, Hoffer on the left and Gruny on the right. You boys ready to take it into another gear?"

Cash nodded and grinned.

"Beauty. Second line we'll have Bourquey in the middle . . ."

Rocket's heart was pounding through his chest. Would they put him on the wing or on defence — or on the bench?

"Third line will be Rockwood at centre, Bossy on the left and Fryer on the right."

Rocket pretended to fuss with his laces so the guys wouldn't see how relieved he was. Good sign that they'd put him at centre. Bourque played last year — this was his NHL draft year. Despite what Alvo said, Rocket figured Cash was a lock. That left two centre spots. Fryer had to be Hunter Fry. He was second year. Rocket didn't know a ton about him, other than he had a fair number of penalty minutes — although not as much as Bossy. He wasn't a scorer, in other words.

It would be strange playing with the team's tough guys. Rocket was used to being on the scoring line.

After Gold had rhymed off the rest of the lines, he said, "Plenty of physical play, please. We want to see some banging. Play hard. Play mean. I'll be watching." He slapped Washington on the back. "Good luck out there," he said and left.

"Get yourselves ready to play," Washington said. "I know you guys haven't been on the ice together before, so I'm not going to load you up with plays. We want an

up-tempo pace and lots of back pressure, and Coach Alvo wants guys willing to play in all three zones. Glassy, how about you lead us out?”

The goalie waddled to the stick rack, pulled out his paddle and headed to the door. Rocket grabbed some tape from his bag. His dumb superstition of being the last guy out of the change room could be awkward. Technically, this wasn't a game, but he wasn't about to tempt fate now. He pulled a couple more strips around his shin pads as the rest of the guys filed out.

“Hey, Bossy, Fryer, come meet your new centre,” Washington said as the two boys were about to leave.

Rocket tossed his tape in his bag and jumped to his skates. Bossy and Fryer looked over.

“Coach Alvo wanted you three together,” Washington said. “I think you'll make a good unit. Rocket's playmaking will give you guys a chance to show off your offensive game a bit more this year. His nickname tells the story; he's all over the ice.”

Bossy looked down at Rocket and half-smiled. “Yeah, cool,” he said.

“Sounds good,” Fryer said flatly.

“Have a good game, boys,” Washington said. He held the door open. Bossy and Fryer walked out.

“You'll do fine,” Washington said to Rocket. “Play your game and don't be intimidated. The boys are going to be a bit standoffish. They'll come around.”

“Thanks, Coach. I feel good.”

Washington tugged on Rocket's sweater. “Those boys aren't exactly afraid to drop their gloves. If you need help out there, just ask them.”

“Okay. I will.”

He slapped Rocket's shoulder pads. "You'll do great. Go for it."

Rocket had hoped to tape up his hand for support, but he didn't want to do it front of the coach or the other guys. It would raise too many questions. He hustled out to the ice. Washington was obviously looking out for him. He was less happy that the coaches thought he needed special protection. That wasn't good. He'd have to prove to everyone that he wasn't afraid of contact.

Most players were circling the ice in twos and threes. Two players were warming up the goalies. Rocket fell in behind a pack of guys and began to stretch out his legs. An elbow jabbed into his back, and when Rocket turned around, Kyle and Nathan were grinning back. They were in blue. Rocket slapped their shin pads with his stick.

"Didn't you hear? Red sucks," Kyle said.

"I kind of think it goes with my eyes," Rocket said. Nathan looked at him. "I kind of think it does."

They all laughed.

"So who'd they put you with?" Kyle said.

"I'm centring a line with Bossy and Fryer," Rocket said. "What about you guys?"

Kyle shrugged, and Nathan lowered his head and tapped the ice with his stick. They swerved around the net.

"Alvo said he'd try and work us in when he could," Kyle said. "We're free agents, so . . ." He tapped Rocket's shin pads. "Good luck out there. I'm going to go for a bit of a skate. Might be my last chance."

He set off, Nathan right behind. Rocket was

impressed. Kyle could really motor. Nathan was a bit more awkward, with a jerky, loping stride.

Rocket spotted a puck against the boards and snagged it with his forehand. Stickhandling wasn't too bad. His bottom hand did most of the work. It hurt, but he could tough it out.

On a whim, he lowered his hands and tipped the puck onto this blade. As he passed the net, he stuffed the puck under the crossbar. He winced. That hurt — but this was the time to get some attention. Hopefully, Gold and Alvo noticed.

Rocket spotted another puck against the boards near centre. He reached out. A red sweater brushed past him and took the puck away, two other Red players close behind. It was Cash, and the chasers were Hoffer and Gruny. Cash pulled ahead and headed in on goal.

“Clear the way,” Cash shouted.

The player warming up the goalie stepped aside. The goalie came out to challenge. Cash dipped his shoulder near the slot, and the goalie lowered into his crouch. Cash cut to his backhand, brought it back forehand and drove for the post. The goalie dropped into a butterfly and jammed his skate against the post, dropping his paddle on the ice to protect the five-hole. Cash whipped the puck across his body, let go of his bottom hand and, with one hand on the stick, tucked the puck into the corner of the net.

Cash raised his arms in the air. Hoffer pretended to bodycheck him into the boards. Rocket put his stick across his knees and glided across the blue line. He had a feeling Gold and Alvo saw that.

The buzzer rang out. The scrimmage was about to

begin. Rocket set off at top speed along the boards for a final skate. This was it.

“Get to your benches,” a referee called out.

Rocket cut across the ice to Red’s bench. The other Red players were crowded around Washington.

“Give me Cash’s line first,” Washington said. He pointed at centre with his iPad. “Rainer and Big Z, you’re on D. Rest of you on the bench. Bourquey’s line is next.”

Rocket waited for the others to go in, and then he took a place next to Bossy and Fryer near the middle of the bench. The referee blew his whistle. The centres lined up and the puck was dropped. Rocket figured he should get to know his new linemates.

“You guys want to dump and chase or try to cycle it?” he asked them.

Bossy seemed to find that funny. “Maybe you should try not to get yourself killed out there, little guy.”

Rocket gripped his stick so tight he hurt his hand again.

“How old are you?” Fryer said.

“Old enough,” Rocket said.

Bossy laughed outright.

Fryer leaned over. “We’re veterans and about twice your size, so you might want to chill the attitude.”

The hair on the back of Rocket’s neck rose.

“I’d hate to find you taped up like a mummy after this scrimmage,” Fryer added.

Rocket kept his eyes on the ice.

“Good boy,” Fryer said. “Behave yourself.”

Rocket had heard about the hazing that went on.

These two guys could hold him down easy. He pictured himself wrapped up in tape and left on the floor of the dressing room. He'd never live that down.

Cash had pulled the puck to Rainer, who one-timed it to Big Z. The defenceman snapped a pass to Gruny at the boards. Gruny fed Cash at centre, who sidestepped a winger and dumped it in deep for Hoffer.

Rocket took a sip of water. His throat had gone dry. He took a deep breath and sat up straight. These two lunkheads weren't going to intimidate him. Chill the attitude?

Not in this lifetime.