

Chapter One

“We just stick to the plan, guys,” says Trace. “Keep the puck in their end. One guy ready to drop back to help out Dev. Nothing fancy.”

We’re all at the bench, huddled close together so we can hear our captain give his pep talk. Coach Scott went over the plan first, so we know exactly what we have to do to win this game in overtime.

“And of course you guys are going to score the next goal, right?” says Dev. Yeah, we can always count on our goalie to keep things light.

He’s right though. Next goal wins this second game of a best-of-three playdown. Next goal earns us a spot in the Elite Six Invitational Hockey Tournament next month in Toronto. Next goal sends the Cougars home.

“You got it, Dev,” Trace says. He sticks out his glove and yells, “Hawks!”

We all lean in and mash our gloves together.

“Hawks!”

“So do you want the glory or do I get to be the hero this time?” I ask Trace as we skate to center ice for the face-off.

“I don’t care who scores,” he says. “You, me—Dev can score if he wants.” He grins around his mouthguard. “I just want to win this game.”

“Hey, Brewster. No NHL scouts here today? Just as well, loser.”

Jared Colt skates by us. As usual, he skates in close and bumps Trace with his elbow. Bumps him “accidentally,” just a little more than he needs to. But what do you expect from the Cougars captain and biggest jerk?

“Ignore him,” I say to Trace.

“Ignore who?” says Trace, and we both start laughing.

Jared’s NHL-scout comment is true though. Well, maybe not NHL scouts. But it’s true that scouts from elite junior leagues have started showing up at our games to watch some of the guys in action. And that means Trace mostly. He’s the best player in our league, the leading scorer, a magician with the puck.

Everybody knows he’s going to be a star in the NHL one day.

He’s also my captain, my centerman and my best friend. So random comments and elbow jabs from jerks like Jared Colt just make us laugh.

And pump us up to play harder.

The arena is loud and getting louder as we skate into position for the face-off. Trace bends down over his stick, not looking at anything but the puck in the ref's hand. You can tell he's ready. All he sees is the puck and that small space on the ice where it will land. I know all he's thinking about is scooping that puck back to Mitch, our defenseman. Trace doesn't hear the noise the way I do.

And it's probably just as well. Because over all the voices from our cheering section, I can hear Trace's dad yelling the loudest.

"Get the puck! Put these jerks away! You've got this!"

I look over quickly. My parents are standing right in front of Mr. Brewster, and they're cheering too, but I see them glance at each other. Everybody knows Trace's dad goes a little crazy with the team support. My guess is he already sees himself in a

private box at a big arena, watching Trace score the most goals in the NHL.

So, yeah, it's loud. And on-ice rivals as well as loud fans can be distracting. It's time to shut that out and focus.

And that's exactly what Trace is doing. That's what I have to do too.

The noise from the stands gets louder as the ref blows his whistle, raises a hand and looks at both teams to make sure we're in position and ready.

Oh yeah, we're ready.

Puck drop.

Trace scoops the puck back to Mitch, just the way we planned it. Jared right away plows into Trace, of course. But Trace is too strong to be knocked over. He's also a lot faster, and he's already circling around, stick on the ice and ready for the pass.

I'm on the left wing, and I head for the Cougars blue line. I'm ready to rush into the zone as soon as the puck crosses the line. Over on right wing, Frankie hangs back, ready for Mitch's pass. All the Cougars expect the pass to go to Trace, of course, but he just fakes it. Makes it look as if he's Mitch's target.

No, it's Frankie who has the puck on his stick and races into the Cougars zone. He stops, side-steps a hit and sends the puck cross-ice to me.

Their defenseman reaches for the puck and wheels around, off-balance. Perfect!

Now the puck is on my stick, and I send it to where I know Trace will be. And he's ready.

The slap of Trace's stick. A roar from the stands as the Cougars goalie misses Trace's shot. We all hear the *ping* as the puck hits the post and bounces out.

The puck bounces straight out to Jared, who is now streaking down the ice with one of his wingers. Trace and Mitch take off after him.

Trace gets there first, of course. He's the fastest skater on the ice, but not fast enough to stop Jared from taking a shot.

Dev kicks it out. The puck comes straight back to Trace. He puts his stick down to control the rebound.

Only just as he does this, Jared shoves him from behind.

We've all caught up now. I try to slow down the Cougars right-winger with my body. We're all in our zone now. We switch to defense, but the guys are all out of position.

"Trace! Here!" I yell as I see the puck on his stick. Well, not quite on his stick. He's fighting for control.

"Back! Back!" yells Mitch. He's near the face-off circle with his stick on the ice, jostling the Cougar who's trying to take him down.

It's crazy and out of control. Not the way we planned it at all. The air is roaring. I'm not sure if

that's the sound from the stands or from somewhere in my own head. I feel a surge of panic.

I see Frankie get dumped by his man, and I push and shove with the Cougars defenseman at the side of the net. Trace tries to free his stick from Jared's shove and almost gets his balance back.

The puck bounces on Trace's stick, and he tries to get it under control.

We all watch it unfold in slow motion.

The puck leaves his stick and slides five-hole, between Dev's pads, across the line and into the net.

There is silence, just for a split second.

And then it gets really, really loud.

Chapter Two

It only takes a second. It's as if time stops and we're all just frozen there on the ice, staring at the puck in the net. And then reality sinks in.

Trace just scored on our own net. We just lost the game because Trace scored a goal on our own net.

The Cougars aren't frozen though. Time starts up again, and so does the sound. Or maybe the sound was there all along and I just couldn't hear it.

I can sure hear it now.

Jared and the other Cougars are yelling those things you yell when you win. Sticks in the air. Jumping up and down in a pack.

“Hell, yeah!”

The Cougars fans are cheering from the stands. Foot stomping too. A bunch of girls are screaming.

“Whaaaaaat?”

I guess they’re happy, but it sounds more like they’re terrified. I glance over at the stands. No, they’re not terrified. They’re happy, all right. Parents are high-fiving and clapping and yelling.

The Hawks fans are clapping too. The “support the team even when they lose” clapping. Someone calls out, “It’s okay, boys. You’ll get them next game.” That’s probably my mom.

But then I look away because I can hear one voice over everyone else’s.

“What the fuck was that?”

Yes, it’s Mr. Brewster. Making his feelings known.

I glance quickly at Trace. He hasn’t moved. He’s bent over and staring at the ice.

Yeah, he heard it too.

I skate in and tap Dev on the pads.

“It’s okay, bud,” I say.

Mitch is there too. And Frankie. And Shawn, our other defenseman. Dev shakes his head.

“Fuck,” he says. Yeah, that just about covers it.

But then we move toward Trace, still bent over and staring at the ice. I know he can still hear his father’s voice above the noise

The Cougars players start to skate back to their bench, and Jared does exactly what Jared does best. He passes by Trace just a little closer than he needs to.

“Nice one, Brewster,” he says. Big grin for all of us. “Thanks, guys.”

“Fuck off, Colt,” I say.