

Prologue

I never wanted to move here. I was content with the life I had, the friends I still have, and the way my life was. It is said that with death new opportunities arise, and new opportunities arose, albeit for other people to ruin my life. If there is one lesson I learned from my ordeal, it was to always expect the worse from people, no matter how caring they may seem or how inclined they appear to make you feel welcome. If you enter a door promising paradise, expect hell. In addition to that, never walk into unfamiliar territory and expect a warm reception, because more often than not, somebody does not want you there. Unintentionally, you may cause a ripple effect which hampers their plans for life. I learned two important things from my short stay in Branton: the first is to never forget. Second, naïveté can be the downfall of anyone.

Chapter 1

I was in the process of feeding my History Channel addiction when the phone rang. Reluctantly, I pulled myself off the couch and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Is this the Adams residence?”

“Yeah.”

“This is Michael Sullivan from Baer, Werner and Associates in Boston. I’m calling regarding Mae Hickey. Is Sarah Adams in?”

“Sure, hold on. Mom! Telephone!”

The phone calls lately have been nonstop regarding Aunt Mae. She’s been in poor health for a number of years now, and since my mom was the only niece who cared about Aunt Mae’s health, she became the de facto caretaker. She’d been driving down to Aunt Mae’s house in Branton every other day for the past year to cart her around to appointments and such. I assumed it was the doctor’s office to confirm another appointment. I went back to watching my documentary. Five minutes later, my mom came in and asked me to turn off the television.

Teary eyed, my mom said, “Daniel, Aunt Mae is gone.”

“What? How?”

“Natural causes, last night. One of her friends came to pick her up for bingo, and when there was no answer at the door, they called the police. They found her in bed. We have to go to the law office tomorrow and discuss her will.”

She looked like she was about to speak again, but couldn’t find the right words.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“I know, Daniel. I’m sorry too.”

“Let me know if there is anything I can to help in any way, Mom.”

“Thank you, Daniel.”

Chapter 2

Baer, Werner and Associates was the prototypical law office; volumes upon volumes of bound law books crammed into bookcases buckling under the weight, offices with walls of diplomas, accolades, and family accoutrement; elder looking men, dignified with thousand dollar suits and seventy dollar haircuts; and finally, the cheery receptionist at a cherry front desk.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, we have an appointment with Michael Sullivan.”

“Your names, please?”

“Sarah and Daniel Adams.”

“One moment, please.”

The cheery receptionist left her cherry desk, presumably to fetch Mr. Sullivan. She soon returned with Mr. Sullivan in tow, who seemed out of place with the décor of the office, as he seemed to be much younger than any of his co-workers.

“Hello Sarah, Daniel. I’m Michael Sullivan, the executor of Mrs. Hickey’s estate. Please, come to my office and discuss the terms of the will. In the interests of expediency, I will show the part of the tape which pertains to you.”

We sat in Mr. Sullivan’s office in front of a television and VCR which held the last words of my late Aunt Mae. Sullivan turned on the video, and the static gave way to my Aunt Mae, sitting composed, facing the camera. The words Aunt Mae were about to speak, although I was unaware of the consequences they were going to have in the future, seemed common and typical for the situation at hand. Nothing would indicate about how my life was going to be turned upside down, and how the words uttered forth from Mae’s mouth would have an ironic twist in the future.

“To my niece, Sarah, for your unquestionable devotion and selflessness, I leave you my house and all the belongings contained within, including automobiles. In addition, a savings account at Rockland Federal Credit Union is in my name with you as the beneficiary. May you use this money to better your life for yourself and my nephew, to move away from the unfortunate neighborhood in which you currently reside and live a life which you so rightly deserve. To my...”

Sullivan rose out of his chair and turned the TV off. I looked at my mother, who had tears in her eyes, then looked down at my feet, trying to soak up the contents of the tape. New

house? Money? I didn't want a new house, but the money was sure was nice. Money was something we didn't have, but a house, or rather an apartment, was what we did have. An apartment near friends, near school, near my life. Exultation turned to indignation as I knew that my mother had already made her decision.

“We'll be in touch, Ms. Adams. Here's my card.”

“Thank you.”

Chapter 3

“No, I’m not leaving.”

“Daniel”, my mother said, “this is an opportunity for us to better ourselves. We finally have a chance to get out of this terrible neighborhood and live a better life. And God help me if I let this opportunity get away without taking a hold of it. This is chance to leave it all behind, Daniel. You can get away from all the troubles you’ve had in the past. Not many people get a chance to start over. Daniel, you would be stupid not to take an opportunity like this and run with it.”

“I don’t care, Mom. I’m happy with what I’ve got here. You’re asking me to just get up and leave all this? Huh? What about what I want, what I have here? I don’t want to move, plain and simple. And why do we need new house? What we’ve got is fine.”

“Do you really like hearing gunshots every night and dodging drug dealers on the way to your car? Daniel, the heartaches, all the troubles we’ve had to go through, with barely being able to pay the rent every month and not always having food on the table? That’s what you want? You want to continue living like this? Daniel...” the words caught in her mouth as she attempted to choke back tears. “Daniel, we need this. For us. Please, Daniel. Please.”

For as long as I can remember, it’s always been me and my mom. I never really knew my father, only getting a curt, angry response from my mom whenever I asked about him. All I ever managed to glean from our conversations was that he left her when she was pregnant with me, and she never heard from him again. I was the only man in her life, and she proved that time and time again by doing everything in her power to make me happy. She’d often work extra hours during the holidays to buy me things that I really wanted (like my Xbox), and I can remember her working 70 hour weeks during my freshman year because I needed new skates. I wasn’t a little boy anymore; I was a man in my mother’s eyes, and I knew that a man had to sacrifice for his family. Seeing the pain in my mother’s eyes crushed me. She deserved this. She had sacrificed so much for me, and it was time for me to be a man and sacrifice for her. “Okay, Mom.”

Chapter 4

My Corsica rumbled around the corner of Third and Main to Big's house. My mother told me that Aunt Mae had two seasonal cars in her garage that were hardly ever used. I thought it kind of ironic to have two cars and never drive. Once the paperwork went through, Aunt Mae's 2000 Crown Vic would be in my name. Maybe the Crown Vic would start every time I turned the key, as opposed to my Corsica which started when it felt like it. Big was on his front stoop, smoking a cigarette.

"Danny, what's up, kid?"

"Hey, Big, what's shaking?" I took a drag off his cigarette.

"You looked like somebody just ran over your puppy. Still upset about your Aunt?"

"Yeah, amongst other things."

"What else?" he inquired.

"Big, I'm moving. To Branton."

"Where the fuck is Branton?"

"That's where my Aunt's house is."

"Damn. I guess that means you're leaving Central too, huh?"

"Yeah, I don't have a choice. I gotta go to Branton High. I looked into staying at Central, and athletic rules said you hafta attend the district where you reside, or some bullshit like that."

"Coach know?"

"Yeah, I saw him in the principal's office when I was getting my transcripts sent over."

"He's gotta be pissed."

"More upset than anything. We talked for like an hour. But he understands. He knows I don't wanna leave." I shook my head in disdain. "This sucks, Big. This was gonna be a big year for us. We were a shoe-in for the Super 10. Now I gotta play for Podunkville High."

"What division are they?"

"C. Not nearly the skill level in our division."

"So you'll burn these kids."

"That's not the point. I'd rather stay at Central and have a terrible season than go to Branton and score 100 points."

"Well, you know me and the crew are here for you."

“I know. Thanks, Big.”

I walked to my car and opened the door. “Big.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

Chapter 5

“Where is Branton anyways?”

“About 20 miles south of here. It’s much, much different than Boston, Danny.”

“How different.”

“Much. It’s only about 15,000 people, one high school, very small commercial area. But it is on the beach. It’s a bit of a change compared to what we are used to.”

Great.

We pulled into our new house. Since everything inside was given to us, moving in was simple enough. I had my clothes, my hockey equipment, and my Xbox. My mother, being a woman, had enough clothes to open her own clothing store. It took about an hour to unload the car. “A bit of a change” was an understatement. The house was freegin’ huge. Since there were four bedrooms in the house (the master bedroom defaulting to my mother), I had my pick of the remaining three. I picked the biggest.

“So, what do you think.”

“It’s big, Mom.”

“It’s better than our ratty old apartment.”

“Yeah.”

“I know this is tough for you, Daniel. But really, it’s the best thing that could have happened to us. You get a fresh start and we don’t hafta penny pinch anymore.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re going to Branton High tomorrow to get your schedule set up.”

“Ok.”

Chapter 6

If Central High was a pay-be-the-hour motel, Branton High was the Ritz. Everything was new and immaculate, and it didn't have the same, stench, that Central had. I took in the newness of everything as we stepped into the principal's office.

"May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Sarah Adams, this is my son Daniel. We just moved to Branton and we're looking to get Daniel enrolled and his schedule set up."

"Ah, yes, Adams. Paperwork came in today. Have a seat."

It took all of ten minutes to set up my schedule. English, Pre-calc, History, Art, and Spanish. Hopefully these classes weren't any harder than they would be at Central. Once my schedule was finished, we thanked the secretary and were set to head out when the hockey coach came in.

"Daniel Adams?"

"Yeah."

"Coach Brimmer. Pleased to meet you." We shook hands. "Have a few minutes to talk?"

"Yeah."

"Ms. Adams, if you would excuse us for a few minutes, I'd like to talk a bit to Daniel about the hockey program. Feel free to get more acquainted with the school."

"Ok. I'll see you in a few minutes, Daniel."

"Aight, Mom."

Coach Brimmer doubled as Athletic Director. He was short and stocky, maybe an athlete in his days. If those days ever existed, they were long behind him. His hair was long and graying in the back, a feeble attempt to compensate for his rapidly receding hairline, while his nose was bulbous and red at the end. I was covered in a spray of spit as he opened his mouth to talk.

"Daniel Adams. I've heard about you. First freshman to ever win City League MVP, and then you repeated as MVP Sophomore year."

I stared.

“Boy, did we ever get the luck of the draw. You’re an excellent talent, Daniel. You’re gonna be a star on this team. We got a great shot at the title this year with someone like you on our team.”

“I know.”

“Confident, too.” He chuckled. “Wait til I tell the team. They’re gonna be ecstatic.”
Whoopdyfreegingdo.

“We start training in October, and captain’s practices start at the end of September. Usually, that’s a chance for the captains to evaluate the new players, but there is no need to evaluate you. I’m sure I’ll run into you when classes start.”

“Yeah”, I intellectually replied.

He extended his hand. “Well, good luck with getting situated, I’m sure this isn’t easy for you.”

“Yeah.”

I shook his hand and then met my mom outside.

“So?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

“Oooooook.”

Chapter 7

Classes started a week later. I could tell a lot about the town by the way people looked at me. I was a new kid. And that made people edgy. I dressed differently than everyone else. I didn't sport the popped collars and gelled hair that these kids did. My baggy jeans, big hoody, and sideways titled Red Sox hat was a style that seemed to offend people. I was stared at in the hallways, in the classroom, at lunch, and leaving after school. This happened for a week or so. Then I blended in. The one benefit Branton had over Central was that I could walk from class to class without a fight in the hallway or something getting in my face for looking at them funny. Life seemed easier here and less threatening. I shrugged my shoulders. I really need to stop doing that. Days turned into weeks, and eventually the first captain's practice was held at Rockland Rink, only a few minutes from the school. There was no way I could have missed the first practice, even if I wanted to. I couldn't take a crap in the bathroom without seeing a flyer for it.

I stepped into one of the locker rooms, and silence ensued once the door shut. I walked to the far wall as eyes followed me, put my bag down, and sat down. They kept staring. What the hell were they looking at? As I looked around the room, everyone had the same haircut, the same bag, the same everything. There were twenty black and red bags in the locker room, and my blue and red bag stood out like a white guy at the million man march.

Finally, someone stood up and swaggered over. He stood about 5'8, had broad shoulders, and piercing blue eyes. He had a tough expression on his face, as if I stepped on his territory. As he opened his mouth to speak, I noticed his two front teeth were chipped.

"Who are you?"

Did this kid think he was tough talking to me like that? I didn't like the directness of the question.

"Dan."

"Adams?"

"Yeah."

What the hell? How did they know my name? Maybe Brimmer already informed them.

"Coach told us to expect you. Said you were some hot shot from the City League.

I stared, feeling my blood boil, and shrugged my shoulders. Goddamnit.

Then his hard facial expression broke, and he laughed. "I'm just giving you a hard time. I'm Mike Taggert, nice to meet you. People call me Tags for short."

I immediately relaxed and we shook hands.

Everyone else in the room introduced themselves. All sophomores and freshmen. Due to my superior ability to infer, I came to the conclusion that there were probably two locker rooms, there other locker room consisting of juniors and seniors.

"Is this the entire team?" I inquired.

"No. The juniors and seniors are in the locker room down the hallway. You're in the wrong locker room."

Sherlock Holmes would be proud.

I turned towards Taggert. "So are you a freshman or a sophomore?"

"Neither. Senior."

"So why are you in here?"

"For sake of sanity", he quickly replied.

Oh.

Chapter 8

It was evident five minutes into practice that if Branton, in Brimmer's words, was one of the best teams in Division C, and I was running a clinic on the best team in Division C, that I would be the leading scorer in Division C. I shrugged my shoulders. Again. Not that there was a need for it. I guess I'm a creature of habit. I thought back to the conversation with Big and thought about the poetic irony. 100 points seemed attainable. Nevertheless, it appeared that the Branton hockey heroes seemed threatened by my presence. When you walk around the supposed best defensemen on the team and make him drop his jock and question his sexuality, in that order, people are going to take notice. They are going to notice it even more when you do it repeatedly.

I received a centering pass in our defensive zone and swooped wide as I entered the offensive zone. Captain America Brian Kallock stepped up to pokecheck the puck, and I effortlessly dragged the puck around him and cut in, only to be encountered by another defenseman. Quickly shifting my hands over, I put the puck through the defenseman's legs and buried it upper corner. Kallock skated to the bench, broke his stick in half, and sat down. I skated by while Kallock stared, and pondered whether he was gonna kiss me or jump over the boards and strangle me. After all, I did make him question his sexuality after embarrassing him twice already during practice. I was hoping for the latter.

"You're lucky there's no contact."

I smiled at him. Then shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe."

"What are you smiling at?"

People tend to get nervous, and pissed, when you smile at them. Maybe he was being flirtatious and liked my smile. I sure hoped not. I always had a cocksure attitude, and being cocky got me into more scuffles than I can count. Maybe me being cocksure had made Kallock cock-sure. Of mine. I decided to capitalize on his anger.

"I'm smiling at you cutie."

"Fuck you."

"Don't make a promise you can't keep."

"Who do you think you are?"

"I'm having trouble deciding. But I do know that you're my bitch."

"Yeah?" he said, standing up.

“Yeah. See you in the showers, cutie.”

I spent the rest of the practice targeting Kallock. I was in his head, and there was nothing more I hated than a kid who thought he was better than he actually was. Finally, Kallock snapped. After receiving a pass at the offensive blue line, I looked up to see Kallock leaving his feet to crosscheck me in the throat. I casually dropped to one knee as he flew overhead. I skated in uncontested, deked left, and slid the puck in five-hole. The rest of the team jeered Kallock as he stood up. Their jeering turned to constraining as they rushed over to prevent him from skating over and biting my head off.

“Fuck you, pussy.”

“I don’t fuck on the first date,” I explained to him.

That pissed him off. Even more so. He started to skate towards me again before being herded off the ice by a few of his teammates as I headed to the freshman-sophomore locker room. Welcome to the world of Branton High Hockey. I showered, headed outside, and was stopped by two kids on the way to the Vic. “Hey, Adams.”

I looked over.

“Mike Cooper.” Cooper stood about 5’ 10”, and maybe weighed 150 pounds soaking wet. His off-color green eyes and blond hair seemed like a product of mix and match genetics. He had a cocky smirk on his face and sported big horse teeth when he opened his mouth to talk.

“Rick Emerson.” Short and chubby, if a human mated with a cocker spaniel, it would produce Emerson. The big, droopy ears, chubby cheeks and squinty eyes were definitely traits I observed in cocker spaniels. Poor bastard.

“Hey”, I acknowledged.

Emerson spoke up. “We’re captains, along with Kallock and Jim Gardiner. Kallock didn’t wanna come over and introduce himself.”

“Isn’t that a shame.” I quipped.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s one of the best defenseman in the state and doesn’t like it when he gets beat.”

In the state? Yeah, right. He would have been the seventh defenseman at Central.

“You’re a good player. We’re glad to have you on the team”, Emerson said. Off to my left, I saw another player approaching. Cooper nodded to him, and Emerson said, “Dan, this is Jim Gardiner.” We shook hands.

“What’s up” Gardiner said. I nodded. Gardiner was about six feet tall, blond hair, blue eyes. A prototype for an officer’s position in the SS.

Now it was Cooper’s turn to speak. “We just wanted to introduce ourselves. Anything you need, just say the word. We’re trying to make it smooth here for you.” Yeah, right.

“Thanks.” I got in my car and as I drove away, I saw Emerson, Cooper, Gardiner, and Kallock all standing together and watching me as I drove away. Kallock was big, but chubby. Black hair, brown eyes, a darker skin tone. Summoning my Sherlock Holmes powers, I decided that they were comparing notes on me. The discourse I had with Emerson and Cooper was more to size me up if anything. I shrugged my shoulders as I took the right turn out of the parking lot.

Chapter 9

Captain's practices happened every Friday until the week of first week of December. Then, the "real" tryouts happened. I use term loosely because Coach Brimmer already had his team picked. Those few kids on the cusp had a chance to prove themselves because it was a chance for them to be elevated to hero status in Branton. Tryouts were also used to determine who was playing with whom and where. I learned my place about ten minutes into the first "tryout".

"McDougall, Doublet, and Adams, face off against Cooper, Emerson, and Gardiner", Brimmer shouted.

Hmmmm. The three people so eager to meet me were on a line together. After 30 seconds, I saw why they were on the same line. McDougall and Doublet were average, while the other line had a solid chemistry. Cooper really wasn't any good, but he was better than McDougall and Doublet. By default, the three best players played on the same line. Now I saw why they were so eager to meet me. Maybe my presence threatened to break up their line. Go Go Sherlock powers. I guess I was a second-line player here. Sad. I guess I'd hafta deal with it. Two weeks of practice, and I was still on second line, despite me single-handedly dominating the first line. And Kallock. Stupid Kallock, such a prick. The last day of practice was following by a rah-rah speech from Brimmer, telling us about how it was a new year, how we have great leadership, and that no one could touch us in the conference. "No one could touch me", I thought. That's what makes us untouchable. God, I was so cocky. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

Brimmer made a point to speak about team policy. The punishments here were stricter than at Central. Any kind of violation that involved drugs or alcohol carried an automatic five games. If anyone got suspended from school, they missed whatever games fell during that suspension. Any negative progress report from a teacher or a failing grade in a class forced that person to sit out until a satisfactory report was issued, if it all, at the end of the next grading period. Any disrespect or back talk was an automatic game. Any police involvement or suspected crime immediately kicked someone off the team. "Blah, blah, blah" I thought. I'd come a long way since my troubles at Central, so I didn't envision myself having a sudden bout of alcoholic, drug-induced, disrespectful back talking all whilst on a crime spree.

After practice, Cooper pulled me aside. “Hey, Adams, spaghetti dinner at my house. Little tradition to start off every season. See you there.”

“Aight, cool.”

Chapter 10

The spaghetti dinner at Cooper's was the first of many that season. Apparently, there was a spaghetti dinner before every game that season. Can't beat free food. I headed into the kitchen and ran into Cooper, Emerson, Gardiner, and Kallock.

"Hey, Adams", they said. Kallock just stared.

"Hey."

"Soda's in the fridge" Cooper said.

"Thanks." I helped myself to spaghetti and meatballs and headed into the living room. Those four were always together. Maybe that's what gave them their chemistry. Where you saw one, you saw the other three. I overheard them talking about how it was their year this year, and how their line is gonna be the most productive and talented in the conference. No sooner did their conversation tail off did a well-endowed brunette plop herself down next to me.

"Danny Adams?"

"Yeah."

"Hi. We have Spanish together. I'm Meghan. Mike's sister."

I didn't recognize her, because I sure as hell wasn't staring at her face. That's great, I thought. Who are you friends?

"Yeah? Where do you sit?"

"In the back." She smiled coyly.

I nodded. We chatted for a while. Well, she talked. I stared.

"I heard you're really good at hockey. I can't wait to see you play."

"I guess I'm alright", I responded.

"Well, good luck in the game tomorrow. I'll be watching."

"Thanks."

She smiled and walked away as she looked over shoulder and eye-fucked me. Well nice to meet you, too. Hopefully I'll be watching her after the game tomorrow. I hung around for a while, and then headed into the kitchen, where I said the obligatory thank you and goodbye to Cooper. I headed home, thinking about the game tomorrow. I was excited. Very, very excited.

Chapter 11

Hockey in Massachusetts is like football in Texas. The town is excited for every game, and starting the second week of December, work schedules are cleared to make way for game schedules. Even the has-beens come to the games, reliving the glory days and how they supposedly ran the school when they were there. Move on guys. It was ten years ago. Regardless, the rink was electric. The first game of the season might as well be a local holiday. Little kids littered the stands in their youth jerseys, parents wore old hockey coats, and students filled the stands as a light aura of alcohol was emitted.

Brimmer came in and called us together. “Gather round boys. First game of the season, let’s not disappoint. We got the team this year to go all the way, and we all know that. Let’s go out there and show Oak Creek that Branton is the team to beat this year.” Brimmer then headed out into the hallway, leaving his captains to lead us to the ice.

Cooper stood up. “Let’s get a ‘Marauders’ on three. 1...2...3...”

“MARAUDERS.”

Kline the goalie led the procession as Cooper, Emerson, and Kallock waited by the door to high five us as we headed to the ice. Pennywise’s “Bro Hymn” blared deafeningly as the crowd cheered and shook the glass. Holy shit, I thought. These people are hockey mad. While at Central, I never saw this many people at a game. Both parents and students had jobs and could rarely afford to miss work to watch a game. I guess it was a little different here in Branton.

We could barely hear Brimmer as he shouted at us on the bench. Warm-ups ended, and the line of Cooper, Emerson, and Gardner lined up against Oak Creek’s first line. The referee dropped the puck, and somehow the rink got louder. Two minutes later, my debut in a Branton uniform was about to begin. I won the draw in our zone, quite easily, and Bernie Andrews handled the puck behind the net. I tied up my man, then spun off and headed up ice. McDougall handled the pass from Andrews, to my surprise, and passed to me as I exited the zone. I had a crazy adrenaline rush, and my stick felt like an extension of my arm as I effortlessly skated up ice and entered the Oak Creek zone. I curled away from the defenseman, and saw that McDougall and Doublet were still at center ice. “What the fuck”, I thought. “Hurry up.” I saw the Oak Creek center back checking, and realized that by the time Slow and Slower got here, the Oak Creek line would already be back in their zone. I pushed off and headed to the corner, with

the defenseman and center both closing in. I broke hard in the corner, spraying the defenseman with ice shavings as he came in to hit me. I banked the puck off the boards behind my back and spun away from them both. As I picked up the pick in the middle of the face-off circle, I saw the remaining Oak Creek defenseman ready to defend me. I got him to open up, and I fired the puck between his legs and over the goalie's shoulder. The place erupted. My teammates jumped me in front of the net as the goal celebration song came on. I skated to the bench and high-fived my teammates.

“Thataboy Danny!” Brimmer shouted, muffled by the crowd's singing of the song and high-fiving each other. The loudspeaker crackled as the scorekeeper prepared to announce the goal. “Branton goal, scored by number 10, Daaaannnyyyyyyyy Adddaaammsssss. Assisted, by number 13 Briiiaannnn McDooouuggalllll, and number 6, Berrnnnniiiiieeeee Aaaaanndddrreeewwsss.” The announcer wasted his breath announcing it a second time, as the crowd erupted after the initial announcement. “That's Adams, from McDougall and Andrews at 4:30. The black and red monster that was our fan base started on the Oak Creek goalie right away, pointing at him and calling him a sieve. I caught my breath on the bench, soaking up the excitement of the fans.

The cat was out of the bag. The Oak Creek coached had me double-teamed the rest of the period, leaving the first line to do the remainder of the scoring. They were unsuccessful. Very unsuccessful. Cooper was set-up in front of the net four times, fanning on two, shooting one wide, with the last one fluttering lazily toward the goalie. With me being double-teamed and my linemates unable to do anything on their own, our offense stalled. The red and black monster quieted. With the score knotted up at 1 after the first, we headed to the locker room where Brimmer flipped out.

“1-1? 1 to fucking 1? Are you shitting me? What the fuck is the matter with you guys? You suddenly can't shoot? Can't pass? You guys weren't even playing hockey out there. Cooper, what the fuck is the matter with you? You should have four goddamn goals at this point. A blind kid with one arm would have put in three of them. If you can't fucking score after being set up like that, I'll put someone out there who can. Some leadership that is. Don't fuck up again.”

Brimmer walked out, and Cooper stood up. “He’s right guys, I fucked up huge. I’m not on my game. We need to pick it up as a team. We’re better than this, and we know that. Bring it in and get a ‘Marauders’ on three. 1...2...3...”

“MARAUDERS!”

Cooper didn’t pick us his game, evidenced by his breakaway 30 seconds in and subsequent stuffing by the Oak Creek goalie. The black and red monster roared when Cooper broke away uncontested, then fell silent when the goalie easily handled his attempt. The first line skated back to bench, and my line came out next. The double-teaming continued, and any time I touched the puck, two players immediately converged. I iced the puck after a long two minutes on the ice, and Brimmer shouted for a line change.

“Adams, stay out there. Emerson, Gards, play the wings.” Hmmm. Maybe I would fare better with two kids who had a better shot of keeping up with me than my current linemates. I won the draw back to Kallock and he immediately passed to Emerson, who was left open because Oak Creek lined up two men strong in front of the net. Emerson banked the puck off the boards past the defenseman, and I picked it up while Gardiner skated up weak-side. The black and red monster began to stir. I crossed the blue line, and Gardiner and I broke in two on one. The Oak Creek defenseman skated backwards, inching closer to Gardiner to cut off the pass angle. The goalie was positioned for the shot, while the defenseman tailed away and picked up Gardiner. I faked the shot, and the goalie took the bait and dropped into the butterfly. I snapped a shot over his shoulder blocker side, and the post made a reverberating “ping” as it ricocheted off the post and in. The black and red monster roared, and I was met in front of the Oak Creek net and swamped by my teammates, with the exception of Kallock, who skated to the bench.

“Nice fuckin shot, Adams” Emerson sneered. “Do you know how to pass?”

“You’re kidding me, right? You were tied up. The defenseman would have broken up the pass” I retorted.

“Whatever.”

The black and red monster swayed as we proceeded with the obligatory high-five. The new second line of McDougall, Doublet, and Cooper stepped foot on the ice, not before Cooper shot me a look that would have stripped the paint off a steel drum. “Fuck you too”, I thought.

With the exception of my line, Oak Creek walked all over our team. Kline the goalie had 30 saves through two periods, and we headed into the locker room up 2-1. Brimmer was still

pissed. Cooper pouted. After bitching us out during the intermission, we headed back on the ice. I continued playing with Emerson and Gardiner, much to the chagrin of Cooper. With five minutes left in the game, Oak Creek was pressuring hard, winning the pucks in the corners and adding a new edge to their physical game. On my next shift, I gained the blue line and dumped the puck in, which caused the Oak Creek defenseman to face about and chase the puck down. I covered their center as the defenseman turned to head up ice. I read the play perfectly. He took two strides and passed the puck to the center. He gathered the puck just in time to look up ice and see my shoulder smash into his chin. I threw all of my 5' 11", 185 pound frame into every hit. He crumpled and the crowd roared. Pleased with myself, I picked the puck up and skated into the Oak Creek zone. Both defensemen were out of position since they didn't expect their center to get decapitated after receiving the puck. I glided through, resulting in a mini-breakaway on the goalie. He hesitated for a split second, expecting the shot, and that's all I needed. I feigned the shot and he flopped like a dead dog. I skated around him and tucked the puck in. Too easy. I threw my hands up and exulted, then curled away from the net and expected to be met by my teammates. The only one who met me was Anderson, a defenseman. Kallock, Emerson, and Gardiner were already headed toward the bench, getting ready for the next line change. At least I had the crowd, and their hats, which they threw and chanted my name as I skated to the bench. Fuck the high-fives. If they weren't gonna congratulate me on the ice, I didn't expect congratulations on the bench.

While the referees clear the hats off the ice, the scorekeeper announced my third goal. "Branton goal, his third of the game, scored by DAAANNNNNYYYYY AAADDDDDAAAMMSS. Unassisted. Time of the goal, 11 minutes, 34 seconds of the third period. That's Adams, his third of the game, unassisted."

The black and red monster became louder now, knowing the game was in hand. My name was chanted as the puck was dropped following the goal. I couldn't help but smile. I felt a sense of satisfaction and triumph, complete with the feeling that this was going to be my year, my show. No one else's. Fuck Emerson, fuck Cooper, fuck Gardiner, and fuck Kallock. They can talk all they want about how it's their year, how they were going to win the conference. Without me, they would be lucky to win a game. I didn't see any of them running a clinic out on that ice. My thoughts were interrupted by Brimmer calling for my line to head back out on the ice.

“Powerplay. Let’s go fellas”, Brimmer shouted.

The Oak Creek defenseman was called for slashing with only 30 seconds left, and if Oak Creek had any inkling of a comeback, it disappeared like the last piece of pizza in a house full of fat people. We lined up strong side in the Oak Creek zone, and Emerson won the draw back to Kallock. He crept up the right side of the boards towards the corner, drawing the Oak Creek defenseman towards him. Emerson squared up behind the net as he received Kallock’s pass. Pushing off slightly, he made his way to the left side of the net as the Oak Creek players formed a tight diamond in the zone. I lined up along the boards, completing the overload setup and called for the pass from Emerson. He looked up and curled back towards the corner, only to lose the puck in his skates. The Oak Creek defenseman jumped on the loose puck and quickly swiped it away. I intercepted the weak clearing attempt and looked up to see the forward at the top of the diamond press towards me, forcing me down the boards. I dug in, heard the crunch as the toe of my skate dug in, and I beelined for the net. The defenseman was stationary, his first mistake, and watched the puck instead of my body, his second mistake. Any decent defenseman would have watched my body. I dug in with my left skate, put the puck between his legs, and curled around him, picking up the puck behind him. With the puck on my backhand, I cut in towards the goalie, moved the puck towards my left, and the goalie went down, kicking out his right pad with his left acting as the plant foot. I moved the puck back to my right and tucked it in one-handed behind the goalie, watching the puck glide across the line. I raised my hands, and the monster roared. The clock showed one second. Again, expecting the celebration, my teammates were already heading for the bench, with only Anderson waiting to congratulate me. What is this shit? Why am I not being congratulated? Is it because I took Cooper’s spot on this line? If that was the case, these kids needed to grow up. Acting like a bunch a six year old girls who didn’t get their way. It was pathetic.

Back in the locker room, I was more well-received by the rest of the team, Kallock, Gardiner, Emerson and Cooper aside. Brimmer came in with another rah-rah speech, congratulating us on a good “team” effort. Team effort my ass. More like an Adams’ effort. Brimmer left, and Cooper stood up, ready to give his “captain’s perspective” on the game. Being bumped off the first line was gnawing at him. He gave a short, quick speech telling us how well the team played, and wrapping up his “speech” by stating that there was a party at his house to celebrate the victory. Party? I can roll with that.

Chapter 12

I headed home to shower and change for the party at Cooper's. My mom met me with a hug and a kiss, telling me how proud she was. I was floating. No better way to make a big impact in your first game than single-handedly winning it for your team. Recaps of the game played through my head as I showered and changed. I couldn't get over this feeling of euphoria. This all seemed too easy, too simple. I had a couple of hat tricks while I was at Central, but I never potted four in a game. I headed out the door, smiling, knowing that this year was going to be a big one.

I jumped in the Vic and turned on the radio. I was singing alone when my cell phone rang. "Hey, Big, what's good?"

"Danny, what's up? How did your first game go?"

"We won, 4-1. I scored all four."

"Well, listen to you, Mr. Hotshot, Mr. Four-goal-game."

"Big, it was too easy. These kids are nothing compared to what we're used to. How did you guys do?"

"7-0 over Latin."

"Damn. You guys aren't missing me too much then, huh?"

"C'mon, Danny. You know that we would rather lose every game this season and have you on our team than win every game and not have you there."

"Thanks, Big. How's the rest of the crew?"

"You know, same ol' same ol'. Shanny's still wrecking people, Jonesy's still making defenseman look stupid. And well, Jimbo, you know how goalies are. Jonesy's gotta work extra hard without you there to dish him the puck, but he's making due. We miss you though, win or lose. You know that."

"I wish I was there, man. I'll just hafta show Branton how it's done by us Central boys."

"Those suburban boys are too soft. Nothing like a ruffian such as yourself to toughen them up. Gotta show 'em how to play dirty sometimes."

I laughed. "You know it, Big. Aight, I'm on my way to a party right now. I'll hit you up later."

"Aight, man. Peace."

"Later."

I pulled onto Cooper's street, parking at the end of very long line of cars. Rap was blaring from every open orifice of the house, and all the windows were open despite it being a ten-degree December night. One-beer queers and two-can Sams were strewn about. Literally. I strolled in and saw Taggert yukking it up with an average-looking girl by the door.

"Adams. What's up?"

"Hey, Tags."

I pushed a passed-out kid out of the way and sat down. An extremely drunk Anderson came stumbling over. "Heeeeeeyyy, Adamsh."

"What's going on, man?"

"How many did you shcore tonight, like twenty?"

"Close enough."

"Yeah, man. Adamsh 20, Oak Creek, 1. WOOOOOOO."

I had to break out a drunk dictionary to decipher his last sentence. Minus the exclamation, of course. I'm sure the whole party heard it.

"Anyways, beersh are in the fwidge. Help-p yoursself."

"Thanks."

I grabbed a beer out of the fridge and made my way back to the couch, only to see Meghan sitting in my seat. "Hi, Danny."

"Niiiiiiiiice", I thought. Maybe this can be my fifth goal of the night.

"Great game tonight. I had no idea that you were that good. I mean, four goals. Wow."

She nudged in closer to me.

"Thanks."

Closer.

"Without you thing, they probably wouldn't have won that game."

"Probably not", I responded.

She chuckled. "Well, aren't you cocky?", emphasizing the last word by actually reaching over and grabbing my crotch. That took me by surprise.

"I guess a little."

"Ooooooh, I'd say a lot more than a little." She stood up and grabbed my hand. "Come on."

Wow. This girl must really like hockey. She showed me how much she liked hockey when she locked her bedroom door and pushed me onto her bed. She began straddling me, rocking slightly back and forth, and kissing me on the neck.

“I have such a thing for hockey players. Especially good ones. And you, Danny Adams, are an amazing hockey player”, she said. “And you’re really cute. Those periwinkle blue eyes could make any girl melt” she continued, doing so as she unbuttoned my pants. Periwinkle?

“Woah, hold on. Isn’t your brother downstairs?”

“Yeah, he is. But he’d rather drink and be stupid. He knows that everyone comes upstairs and fools around. But there are so many people downstairs, he won’t notice us missing.”

“Alright” I said, feeling more relaxed.

“Unless my dad comes home.”

“What?”

“Relax, Danny. I’m just trying to get a rise out of you. Aaaaand,” she said, rubbing my groin, “it appears it worked. My dad is working the overnight shift, and my mom goes out with hockey moms after the games.”

“Ok. Lemme grab a condom outta my wallet.” Gotta wear a helmet before you go to war. Meghan got off me, slowly and teasingly undressed, then laid down on the bed.

“Come on, hockey stud. Scoring comes easily for you, doesn’t it?” she cooed, opening her legs and guiding me inside of her in the process.

Yeah, it does. I scored my fifth goal in style that night. And my sixth a half hour later. Life is good.

Chapter 13

Sundays were an off day from hockey. Therefore, most of my time was spent on homework assignments and a sundry of other pertinent tasks. The end of December meant the end of the term, which meant final exams and term papers. Forever the procrastinator, I left all my terms papers until the week before they were due. I knew it would come back to bite me in the ass. English was only a five pager, history a ten pager, and Spanish was a two page composition. In Spanish. That was probably the worst of the three. Regardless, it had to get done, so I planned to spend my entire Sunday afternoon on English and Spanish. I started my day at 8 with breakfast and the morning paper. My mom had a stupid grin on her face as she handed me the Sports section. I just looked at her quizzically. She nodded down at the paper. “Read.”

I stared down at the headline on the paper. “*Adams’ Four Goal Outburst Carries Branton to Opening Night Win.*” Sure as shit, there I was, caught on film scoring my fourth goal. Hey, alright. I could get used to this. I thought of my own headline. “*Adams’ Four Goal Outburst Demotes Cooper to Second Line.*” My internal subtitle read, “*Scores Later that Night with Cooper’s sister.*” Hahahaha, go to hell, Cooper.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, Mom.” I didn’t even realize that I was laughing out loud.

My Sunday was productive. I wrote my Spanish, (of course with a little help from an online translator), and wrote four out of five pages for English. Things seemed to come too easy for me with my new Branton gig. Forever the pessimist, what goes up must come down. I was hoping to never come down. Jeez, pessimism and procrastination seemed to be my two strongest characteristics. And shrugging my shoulders was the namesake mannerism. If I didn’t have this talent that so many Branton kids would screw over one another to have, I wouldn’t be much. I’ll keep my character flaws to myself.

Chapter 14

Monday practice, Tuesday practice, Wednesday game. Thursday practice, Friday practice, Saturday game. This was the life of a Branton hockey player. My hockey life was a little more dangerous, if you will. Every time I touched the puck I had to duck or sidestep a flying crosscheck from Cooper. Hey, Cooper, a little pissed about me taking your spot? Wear your heart on your sleeve, pussy. Not only was Cooper attempting to cheapshot me, Kallock, Emerson and Gardiner spent the practice giving me hospital passes, setting up Cooper for his flying decapitation attempts. They were all pissed that Cooper was somewhat removed from what was supposed to be “their” season. Well, tough shit. So Mommy and Daddy told you that you were the greatest? Well dick, I’m better. Deal with it. The thing I noticed about Branton kids is that hockey seemed to be everything they had. Being a hockey player in hockey crazy Massachusetts was any guys’ ticket to girls and notoriety. Remove hockey from the guy, and there goes his notoriety. It seemed somewhat juvenile that all these kids seemed to think that they were the best hockey players in the state. I remember that first captain’s practice when Kallock was described as one of the best defensemen in the state when his skill level was equivalent to that of the sixth or seventh defenseman at Central. None of these kids were good enough to play at the next level. I knew I had the talent to go somewhere. But I also wasn’t relying on hockey to get me everywhere in life, like all these kids were. They had such a twisted sense of reality. I had to shake my head when I heard them talk about how good they were. There’s more to life than hockey, guys. Even when you’re good. Which none of you are. Find something else to do.

Chapter 15

Nearly a week after our opening night over Oak Creek, we traveled to Smithfield. I wouldn't have called it a game, because I played the first period before I was told to undress. We were up 9-0 in the first period, and I chipped in with three goals, skating with what Brimmer referred to as "the first line". Tough luck, Coop. Being up that much against a team as bad as Smithfield was a sure victory, so the first and second line made way for the third and fourth lines to get some playing time and finish up the game. I focused on the game while Captain America and the goon squad talked about how good they were. It's easy to make a kid fall over with a deke when he can't stand up, Cooper, Jesus. Kallock bantered on how he wrecked two kids in the same shift. Wow, saving the world one check at a time. I rolled my eyes and watched the rest of the game as Smithfield was routed 16-0.

Back on the bus, after the bags were packed and we were getting ready to leave, someone's dad walked on the bus. I didn't know who he was at first.

"Nice game tonight guys, or lack thereof" he finished with a chuckle. "Here are some cookies and soda for the ride back. Enjoy."

"A smattering of "Thank You, Mr. Cooper" ensued. I leaned over to my bus buddy Taggart and nodded in Mr. Cooper's direction.

"Yeah, Cooper's dad."

"What's his deal?"

"President of the Booster's Club for the team. He's in charge of fundraising and shit like that."

"Cooper's dad is President of the Board. And Cooper is a captain. Is that how things work around here?" I said sarcastically, fully expecting it not to be true.

Tags chuckled. "Believe it or not, yeah. It's truly pathetic. Guess who else's dad is part of the Booster's Club?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Cooper's dad is President, Emerson's dad is Secretary, Gardiner's dad is treasurer, and Kallock's dad is Chief Blowhard. Just like his kid."

"So you're telling me that kids play here based on what their parents do for the team?"

“Yeah, it’s always been that way. My brother graduated four years ago and he was stuck playing on third line because my parents weren’t on the Boosters or didn’t line up to get in Brimmer’s thong. You seem to be the exception. Brimmer has no choice but to play you.”

“Regardless, that’s ridiculous. To be honest Tags, you are better than everyone playing above you. I just can’t see why they are playing over you.”

“Simple answer. Doublet and McDougall had brothers that graduated two years ago who weren’t half bad. Light years better than their brothers. Brimmer has some far-fetched hope or blurred vision that McDougall and Doublet are going to be as-good or better than their brothers. There are kids skating third and fourth line who would do more for this team in one shift than the first two lines would do for the whole game.”

“Ridiculous.” I shook my head. “Back in Central, you played based on skill. If parents lined up to jump the coaches’ bones, it hurt their chances more than it helped them. There was none of the ‘presidents of the Booster’s Club’ bullshit. It was all about talent, straight up.”

“Well, this is Branton. This is a town where parents will screw over somebody else’s kid for a half-chewed piece of bubble gum rolling around in a sewerpipe. According to the Booster’s Club, all their kids are going to play Division 1 hockey somewhere. And they’ll do anything to advance their own kids, because it’s all they have. My parents want me to go somewhere based on skill and hard work. At least I got smarts”, he chuckled.

I shrugged. Not that the situation called for it. “All I know is that I have the talent to play at the next level. I haven’t been coddled by my Mom and told I’m the greatest thing since sliced bread like half the kids in this town. Most of these kids have probably never left Branton. If they left this town and saw there’s more to life than just hockey, their perspective on life would be much different.”

“I know, Danny. I don’t plan on playing hockey in college. I know I’m not going pro. My parents told me a long time ago that I was to just have fun playing hockey, then when it’s done, it’s done. Move on to something else. I’ve realized it. Kids here haven’t.”

The end of our conversation brought the end of the trip. My conversation with Tags opened up my eyes to how Branton hockey was run. One simple rule summed it up: Kiss ass, and you’ll play. Unless you’re me, and nasty. Otherwise, have Mommy and Daddy wipe your bottom for you and do everything they can to give you false hope and lead you down a dead-end road. I shrugged my shoulders, got into my car, and drove off.

Chapter 16

With my term papers passed in and all my finals completed, the end of the first trimester came to a close. I've always only done enough to get by, and my three C's and two B-'s were indicative of that. Good enough to play hockey, and that's all I cared about. I probably didn't care as much as the goon squad. The end of the trimester meant a few weeks off of school, which allowed me time to catch up with my Central crew. I called Big and got no answer, so I called Jonesy and Jimbo later on that night. Both had the same sentiments I did; we all needed to chill out and catch up on things. After the Christmas Break tournament, I told them, we would all get together and chill like old times. The Christmas Break tournament was held over the course of three days, with the elimination games Tuesday and Wednesday and the championship on Thursday. The upcoming tournament games were going to be harder than our previous two season games. Our first game was against Dunn, one of the better Division C teams in the state. Better teams result in better games for me. When the competition is tougher, that's when I step my game up. Having a larger than usual crowd helped too, since the student body had nothing better to do except drink and party and not worry about classes.

The game definitely didn't start out in our favor. Captain America got called for tripping thirty seconds in, giving Dunn the momentum early in the game and a tally only fifteen seconds into the power play. Dunn's momentum carried them the rest of the period, with only Kline keeping us in the game with twenty first period saves. Dunn had done their homework on me; I was shadowed the entire first period and slashed or hacked every time I touched the puck. The slashes and hacks were going uncalled, which just added to my aggravation of having an unproductive first period. We went into the locker room down 1-0.

Brimmer came in throwing stuff and screaming, as I learned to become more accustomed to the more the season wore on. We were called lazy, scared, timid pussies that shouldn't drag our skirts next period. Real eloquent, Brimmer, you dick. The two assistant coaches just stood next to Brimmer, maintaining their pre-programmed drone-like actions. Cooper, always the peg boy for Brimmer, just reiterated Brimmer's exceptionally eloquent motivational speech, even though Cooper was probably the biggest pussy on the team. Seizing his time to shine, he took a stab at my on-ice production.

"Coach is right, guys. We're playing scared out there. Take the hit along the boards and then make the pass. If you don't wanna get hit, you shouldn't be out on that ice. And start

shooting. We put four shots on net in the period. We won't score putting four shots on net. Since we can't seem to get the offense going, we need the other lines to step up and pick up the slack."

Cooper was looking at me as he said it. So I smiled at him. He squinted, then looked confused. I laughed and put my helmet on, and headed to the ice.

When I don't play up to my expectations, I take it pretty hard. I know I have the ability to change the outcome of a game if I really want to. So I stepped my game up the second period, using the Dunn defensemen as food for the black and red monster. Everything that could have been done to the Dunn defensemen, I did, and did it with anger. I was sick of getting stuck and hacked every time I touched the puck, so the first shift of the game I broke the wrist of the first idiot to took a hack at me. When the refs weren't looking, of course. Nobody in the arena knew what happened when they saw the Dunn forward skating to his bench without his stick, clutching his wrist in obvious pain. Catching up to the play as Emerson dumped the puck into the Dunn zone, I made a beeline for the poor bastard I was about to hurt real, real bad. Since I was a lefty, I came into check the Dunn defenseman with my right shoulder, using my body as I cover for the butt-end I flashed out at the last second. I hit the Dunn defenseman square in the ribs and he hit the ice like a ton of bricks, losing the puck in the process. I scooped it up, cut quickly in front of the net, and buried the puck behind the goalie. The Dunn center, obviously pissed at my clear lack of sportsmanship, crosschecked me in the face after I scored the goal, giving us a powerplay. The black and red monster was not yet satiated, but frothing at seeing the goal and subsequent powerplay opportunity. The monster would have to wait to eat, because the powerplay never got off the ground. I just got more motivated as the game went on. The bastard I butt-ended had some choice words for me, with my responding smile only pissing him off.

"Fuck you", he so eloquently introduced himself.

"You're the one getting fucked. All game, pal."

"Keep your head up, pussy."

"Don't you worry. I'll keep my head up to look at the score after I put two more goals in."

"Don't count on it."

"I can count to two. That would give me three. See, I can count."

"You're dead, smartass."

My promise to my new friend would have to wait until the third period. The second period was marred by penalties, and my tally would be the only one of the period. Cooper pushed me aside on the way into the locker room.

“You got away with two boneheaded plays right there. You won’t be so lucky the third time”, he said.

I wasn’t having it. “Fuck you, Cooper. Start talking shit when you actually start scoring goals.” His face fell, and he looked like he was about to cry. Nobody in his entire life had probably ever talked to him like that.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” he blurted.

“Whoever the fuck I wanna be. Right now, I’m the offense. Pretty soon, I’ll be the hero. So shut the fuck up, sit back, and watch, bitch.” I headed into the locker room, leaving Cooper speechless in my wake.

Brimmer was a tad more optimistic this intermission, calling us just pussies, as opposed to lazy, scared, timid pussies. Maybe I should suggest sensitivity training for him. Cooper was too pissed to talk, muttering only, “Good period, guys, let’s keep it up.”

I kept my promise to my new friend. A late second period penalty by my newfound friend carried over into the third, so we got the advantage of a fresh sheet of ice and the powerplay. I didn’t waste any time in fulfilling my promise. Gardiner lost the draw, and the Dunn defenseman received the puck and slowly skated backwards, waiting for his team to get into position. Emerson pressured him, causing the Dunn defenseman to attempt a blind pass to his partner. I dug in quickly and rushed toward the other defenseman, deflecting the puck over his stick, breezing by him, and shooting a knucklepuck under the goalie’s left arm. The clock read 14:54. It took all of six seconds to take a 2-1 lead. I made it a point to skate past the penalty box, making eye contact with my new friend and holding up my index finger. He replied with a simple, “Fuck you.” Clearly, he was a man of eloquence. The black and red monster showed its’ appreciation by chanting my name and calling the Dunn goalie a sieve. I chuckled. Passing Cooper on the way back to the bench, I told him to grab some popcorn because the show was about to start. I think him and my new Dunn friend took the same eloquence classes, as he replied with a “Fuck you.”

Cooper was pissed about me disrespecting his captaincy, because on his first shift of the third period, he hit a Dunn defenseman from behind, ejecting him from the game and giving our

team a five minute penalty. “Nice fucking job, you idiot”, I muttered to myself as Cooper skated off the ice.

“Shut the fuck up, Adams”, Emerson shot over.

“Fuck you Emerson.”

“What?”

“Fuck. You. Want me to spell it out for you?”

“HEY, CUT THE SHIT!” Brimmer shouted. “Focus on the game.”

Dunn didn’t waste their five minute powerplay, scoring two goals before our penalty kill finally settled down. The black and red monster was quiet now. The energy it emanated was no longer existent. We had our backs against the wall with a little less than six minutes left.

Crunch time.

“Taggart, skate with Doublet and McDougall.” Brimmer shouted.

I offered encouragement to Tags as he walked by. “Come on man, show ‘em what you got. This is your chance. Show Brimmer he’s a fool for not playing you.”

As soon as Tags stepped on the ice, it was clear that he was nervous, carrying a grand piano on his back and having feet for hands. He botched a pass from McDougall, then lost his footing as he turned to chase the Dunn winger. I felt his pain. That was me my first few games at Central, but unlike Tags, I knew that I was gonna have another shot. I was hoping Tags took advantage of this chance.

Anderson laid a check on the Dunn winger carrying the puck in with a resounding thud and subsequent cheer from the monster. Doublet skated the puck up ice, with Tags shooting up the right side and McDougall trailing slightly behind the play. Doublet crossed the blue line with a wide arc, drawing the defenseman to him, and dropped the puck off to McDougall. Tags streaked in uncontested towards the net, McDougall hit him on the tape, and Tags deflected it over the shoulder of the Dunn goalie. The monster roared, and Tags raised his arms. I was more happy for Tags than anything else. He was a kid with talent who just couldn’t catch a break in this town, and I was glad that Cooper’s stupidity and rashness had led to this chance for Tags.

He was clearly overjoyed as he skated to the bench for the high-five, pumping his fists and rejoicing. His energy got the rest of the team charged up, and with the momentum in our favor late in the game, it was exactly where we wanted to be. And the stage was set for me to play the hero, cramming it up Cooper’s ass. I was more driven by a desire to shut Cooper up for

my own personal gratification. I love putting people in their place, and there was no more opportune time than now.

We changed lines on the fly, and I hit the ice pumping, looking to force the play and cause a Dunn player to make a mistake. The Dunn winger dumped the puck in, and I took residence along the boards, waiting for the breakout. The Dunn center and winger tried to double team Kallock, but he got the puck up the boards to Gardiner, who banked it off the boards and skated around the Dunn defenseman. Emerson was a step ahead of his man, giving us a three-on-two if we made no mistakes. Gardiner skated up ice with the puck, challenging the defenseman to pokecheck him. He crossed the blue line, drawing the defenseman towards him, and dropped a quick pass to Emerson who immediately one-timed it on net. I saw the puck bounce off the goalie's pads in slow motion, and I knew that the puck wasn't going to hit the ice before I got there. Amidst the flecks of ice shavings, I saw the puck turning end over and end, and I took a swing at it. I heard the distinctive crack as I made contact with the puck and saw it disappear as it blended in with the goalie's black pads. I quickly put the brakes on in case of a second rebound. Time stood still, and I stood frozen in front of the net. I saw the referee's eyes moving, and then I saw his arm shoot out perpendicular to his body. I don't know how it went it, but I didn't care. The tiebreaking goal went in, courtesy of me, with just under a minute to play. I went into my new goal scoring celebration and pumped my fist as I was mobbed in front of the net. The animosity Emerson and Gardiner displayed earlier was gone, caught in the moment of a big goal and newfound life late in the game. The monster, sensing the kill, began to prep its prey for the final blow, bellowing it into submission. Dunn called a timeout as the goal was announced.

“Branton goal, his third of the game, scored by number 10, DAAAANNYYYYY AAADDDDAAMMMSSS. Assisted, by number 26, Rick Emerson, and Number 13, Jim Gardiner. That's Adams, from Emerson and Gardiner, at 14:37.”

Brimmer took use of the Dunn timeout to outline our own strategy. “Ok, guys, they're gonna try to freeze the puck in our zone and pull their goalie. It is crucial that we win this draw and clear the red line. Adams, I want you on the draw.” Gardiner stared at me, obviously pissed that I got the nod over him. “Let's get a Marauder's on three. 1...2...3...”

“MARAUDERS!”

The monster was hungry for dinner. 23 seconds was about 24 seconds too long. I won the draw back easily to Kallock, who cleared the red line and lazily dumped it in, trying to eat up each valuable second.

20 seconds. My newfound friend on Dunn picks up the puck and heads up ice, passing it off to his winger.

16 seconds. The winger one-times the pass to the center.

14 seconds. The center carries the puck over the red line, flips it towards our goalie, and the Dunn goalie heads to the bench.

12 seconds. The Dunn winger skates hard to our goalie, who immediately freezes the puck as soon as the winger arrives.

11 seconds. The referee drops the puck for the faceoff, which I easily win. Kallock coughs the puck up, Gardiner loses his coverage which allows the Dunn winger to fire off a point-blank shot, which is smothered by Kline.

9 seconds. The puck drops and takes a funny bounce, skittering towards the Dunn wingers, who are lined up two on the strong side. The Dunn winger takes Emerson out of the play and lets the puck go to his teammate, who fires a quick shot...

8 seconds. It rings off the post with a resonating clang and ends up in the corner. Kallock hustles to the corner to retrieve the puck and gets rattled by the extra skater.

6 seconds. The extra skater picks up the puck and skates behind the net, looking for the defenseman creeping in from the slot.

3 seconds. The pass comes into the slot, the defenseman one-times the puck, and it sails over the net, cracking against the glass.

The time ran out and the monster rejoiced, no longer having to wait to enjoy the catch. Our bench erupted, overjoyed and exhausted from an emotionally draining win. We surrounded Kline, who finished up with 40 saves on 43 shots, an impressive feat, nonetheless. The time came for the post-game handshake and some parting words for my Dunn nemesis.

“Nice game...nice game...nice game...Told you I’d score three...nice game...”

“Good game...nice game...nice game...Fuck you, pussy...nice game...”

Brimmer brightened up with the win, congratulating us on a hard fought win and solid team effort. He made special emphasis on the play of Kline, who kept us in the game. The captains, however, were not as grateful and commending as Brimmer was. Cooper was

embarrassed and pissed off about being kicked out and the fact that I put him in his place, and Gardiner was pissed that I was chosen to take the draw over him. Tough luck, fellas. Can't step your game up, then the big boys will. It's gotta be embarrassing for the captains when a couple of no-names come out of nowhere and steal their thunder. The only respectable thing Cooper did was congratulate Tags on his goal while acknowledging his own stupidity. Brimmer came back in, telling us to take a night off and relax because we had another game tomorrow night, albeit against a weaker team.

Chapter 17

I got undressed, picked up my bag, and headed outside. I was stopped by a reporter for a few questions.

“Hi, Danny. I’m Arnie Fischer from *The Patriot Ledger*. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Uh, sure, go ahead.”

“Great. Tell me your thoughts on the tonight.”

“It was a real test for the team tonight. Players that needed to step up did so, and I hafta mention Nick Kline, who pretty much kept us in the game tonight. Mike Taggert filled the void left by Mike Cooper and gave us a big goal when we needed it.”

I had a feeling that last comment was gonna come back to haunt me.

“Good, good. What do you attribute to your success so far this season?”

“Uh, being able to step on the first line and be that clutch player that a team needs. Also, having played two seasons in Division A has obviously been a big help to my game.”

“Great. One more question. Do you think you will be able to keep up your torrid scoring pace for the rest of the season?”

“Yup.”

“Wow. You’re a confident young man. Thanks for your time.”

“No problem.”

I was used to reporters from the previous two seasons at Central. Being quick and to the point was key, because anything long-winded tended to get misconstrued. I continued the trek to my car and saw Brimmer, Cooper, and his dad in an animated discussion by the car. Usually, personal conversations like that are none of my business, but it was one word that piqued my interest and made me lend my ear. The word was “Northeastern.”

Why Northeastern? Northeastern was a Division 1 hockey program. I had often entertained the possibility of going that, albeit while at Central. Transferring to Branton had put a damper on any prospective Division 1 suitor. I listened to more of the conversation.

“That was a boneheaded play, Michael. You’re a captain, you need to lead by example”, said Cooper’s dad.

“Yeah, I know it was stupid. My emotions got the best of me.”

“You’ll never get to play at Northeastern if you get kicked out of games and get stupid penalties.”

Oh my god. Did he honestly think he could play at Northeastern coming from Division C Branton? What fantasy world was he living in? I had a better shot when I was at Central, and even still, it was a long shot.

Then, Brimmer chipped in. “You know, Mike, I’m going through hell and high water to get scouts here to look at you. I’m cashing in all my chips for you to get looked at. But playing stupid like that won’t get you anywhere.”

Even Brimmer was in on this fantasy world of Cooper’s. Even he had to know, being a coach, although a terrible one, for the past 20 years, that Cooper had no shot at a place like Northeastern. I heard enough. I got into my car and drove off.

Chapter 18

I heeded the advice of Brimmer and called it an early night. I dreamt that night of winning a state championship, followed by another dream where I banged Cooper's sister. I should probably call her up again, cuz boy, was she fun. I woke up the next morning to an empty house with my mom at work, so I cranked the radio and strolled around the house in my boxers while making my power breakfast of bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches. The rest of my day was spent playing NHL 2006 on Xbox and pumping my body full of water.

Come game time, I was ready to go. I did hafta live up to my promise of a torrid goal scoring pace, so playing a weaker team like Monmouth would enable me to do so. Brimmer's pregame speech was one of pure arrogance and cockiness, referring to Monmouth as a "mere speedbump on the road to the state championship". Boy, was he wrong.

Kline couldn't stop a beach ball. He let up four goals in the first period on five shots, and even the weakest shots gave him a problem. It just added to the enigma of the goalie; on top of his game one minute, down in the dumps the next. If Brimmer was smart, he would have pulled Kline in favor of the back-up Cavelli to give us more of a chance in the game. Kline acknowledged his sloppy play after the first period, taking sole responsibility for the four-goal deficit. Brimmer harped on Kline's poor goaltending and laid into us for getting dominated by a team like Monmouth. "You guys", he said, "are above and beyond a better team than them. Go out this period and show it."

The black and red monster was agitated. Rarely seeing a deficit, an unusual quiet played over the monster. The only life the monster showed early in the second period was giving Kline a Bronx cheer when he handled a fluttering puck from the blue line. I knew that getting the crowd involved in a game can give the team an emotional boost. Seven minutes in, I intercepted a lazy pass back to the defenseman, and pushed off as hard as I could. I could feel my jersey flapping behind me and I know that once that jersey gets going, the only attempt to stop me is to shoot me from the stands. I broke in, faked left, and buried it top shelf on the helpless Monmouth goalie. The monster was happy now. As I was accustomed to, I received no congratulations from my linemates, only being lauded by Anderson and Taggart when I got back to the bench.

"Nice goal, Danny" said Tags.

"Thanks, man. He had no idea what I was gonna do."

“Even if he had clairvoyance, he still wouldn’t have stopped that.”

I laughed. “You think you’re getting out there tonight?”

“Doubt it. Now that Cooper is back, there’s no need for me.”

“That’s bullshit, you could definitely give us a lift right now. More so than Cooper.”

That drew glances from Emerson and Gardiner. I stared back, and Tags laughed.

“If Kline can pick his game up, we’ll win this”, I said.

“Yeah”, Tags agreed.

Kline didn’t pick his game up. Six more goals in the second period for Monmouth overshadowed the two more from me and one from Doublet. Down 10-4 to a team like Monmouth was embarrassing, and Brimmer let us have it. We were scared, timid, lazy pussies again, along with being a disgrace to the game of hockey. Nice, Brimmer.

Kline was pulled in favor of Cavelli, who shut out Monmouth in the final stanza. I potted one more, while Cooper and Emerson each put one in, but it wasn’t enough. Monmouth was on to the finals against Washington, who trounced Dunn 9-1 later on that night. We were in the consolation game against Groton.

I was pissed about the loss, and I discussed it with Tags after the game.

“Kline had a tough game tonight”, I said.

“Definitely. He must have been tired from last night’s game”, Tags responded.

The goon squad rolled by and eyed me and Tags.

“Fuckin pricks”, I muttered.

“Heh. Second that.”

Chapter 19

I repeated my routine from the day before, rocking out to some AC/DC and G-Unit while relaxing with some NHL 2006. Since we were in the consolation game, we played at 5 instead of 8. I still felt tired from last night's game, but this game shouldn't have been a bad one. It turned bad for me when Brimmer came in for the pre-game speech.

“Ok, guys, a little change in the lineup tonight. Cooper, you're playing with Emerson and Gardiner. Taggert, you're with McDougall and Doublet.”

What? Why wasn't I in the lineup? I figured out why when Brimmer pulled me aside as we headed to the ice.

“You listen to me, Adams.” Brimmer was in my face, spitting as he talked. “You got a fucking problem with my coaching, you come to me and talk about it. Don't run your fucking mouth and think I won't find out about it. You can sit on the bench until you smarten up, and if you have fuckin' suggestions about my coaching, I DON'T WANNA FUCKING HEAR THEM!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Shut the fuck up and get on the ice.”

What the fuck just happened? I didn't criticize Brimmer's coaching to anyone. All I said last night was that had Kline played better, we would have won. Did Cooper and the goon squad think Tags and I were talking shit about Brimmer when they walked by last night? I noticed a guy in a jumpsuit with a clipboard, and it meant only one thing: college scout. Cooper thinks he's good enough to play college hockey. That fucking piece of shit. He had to have known there was gonna be a scout in attendance tonight. Playing first line would give him more exposure. Weasel. And since Groton wasn't a strong team, he would look like a good player.

He took advantage of the increased ice time, scoring two in the first period, much to the delight of the black and red monster. I knew it was Cooper who framed me when he sat down after the first period and shot me a smile. I wanted to walk over there and kick his teeth down his throat. I looked back at him, and mouthed “you fucking pussy”. He smiled again as Brimmer came into the room.

“Good first period, guys. Kline, glad to see you rebounded. Cooper, excellent first period, man. One more quick one and you got the hatty. Looking good out there, keep it up.” That just added to Cooper's shit-eating grin, and he just pissed me off more the longer it stayed

on his face. I played one 45 second shift at the end of the game. I was too pissed off to focus on my game, but I did make some kid wanna take up chess when I laid him out at center ice.

Cooper was overly excited about his hat trick and dicking me over. He congratulated us on a great game and told us that Brimmer informed him we had tomorrow and the next day off, to give us some down time for the holidays. I would love my Christmas present to be able to take a nail-studded bat to Cooper's face, along with the rest of the goon squad. On the way to my car, I was stopped by Brimmer.

"I hope you learned your lesson. Don't run your fucking mouth."

"Lemme ask you something", I said. "Who came to you and LIED about this?"

"Don't worry about it. Have a nice Christmas", he sneered.

I managed to keep my mouth shut and swallow my pride as I made my way towards my car. I checked my cell phone and had a missed call from Shanny. "Yo, Danny, we got tomorrow off and no game tonight, so lemme know if you wanna get together with the crew. Hit me up, lata."

That would do me some good. Rolling with my Central crew would take my mind off all of the drama going on right now. I called Shanny and told him that what we all needed was for them to come down to Branton, drink a few beers, and crash at my house. He agreed, and he arrived two hours later with Big, Jonesy, and Jimbo.

"OOOOOO, look at you, living in luxury. Should I call you 'sir'? Big quipped.

"I know I can call you 'bitch'", I shot back.

That drew a laugh.

"Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor, Danny", said Jimbo.

"I haven't changed, baby."

"Yo, let's get some grub. I'm starving", Big pleaded.

"Big you are always hungry. You fatass", Jimbo ribbed.

Big rubbed his belly and replied, "It's a fuel tank for a love machine."

We hopped in the Vic. "Yo, Danny, you got any Royce in here?"

"Yeah, Big, pull it outta the CD case."

"Word. Put on 'Boom'."

"You got it", I said.

I heard the “click, click, click” and the song began. Big was doubling as a hungry man and rap artist, reciting the lyrics perfectly.

“I’m the verbal-spit Smith Wesson, I unload with sick spit the quick wick could split a split-second, bomb with a lit wick expression, you here a tick tick, then you testing...”

“Yeah, yeah, uh, break it down, Big.” Jimbo was egging on Big to freestyle.

“Yo, yo, I’m one-half amaretto, four-eighths cocoa,

If I don’t get me some ass I’m gon’ go loco,

Don’t talk shit to Big and Co.

Lest I knock your teeth out with a hammer blow

My man Danny’s tearing it up in Branton,

And now I’m gonna pass the mic and hear him start jammin...”

It’s been forever since I freestyled. But I couldn’t disappoint Big.

“I blow by you with speed unparalleled and unequal,

You don’t like the fact you got burnt the first time? Here’s the sequel.

Sweet like sugar, but fat-free like equal

Stick around for a minute and get ready for the prequel.

These Branton pricks with their two-inch dicks,

I’m starting to get tired of this schtick,

Wait for the boom cuz here comes the tick,

I’m about to tear Cooper’s head off right quick.”

“Wooooooo Danny, you been practicing? That was some good flow. Who’s this Cooper cat?” Big asked.

“Yo, get this. This kid is team captain. Not nearly as good as any of us. He’s captain because his dad is presidents of the Booster’s Club for the team. I took his place on first line, so he and his crew are all pissed. I’m pretty sure he went to our coach before our game and said I talked shit about him so I would get benched. I played one fucking shift today man, one shift. He played first line and scored a hat trick, but my mom could have scored a fucking hat trick against this team.”

Jimbo chimed up. “Are you serious? That’s some pussy shit right there.”

“The kid is a pussy. That’s how the whole team is. In this town, if your parents don’t hold some position on the Booster’s Club, you don’t play. My boy Tags is real good, but he doesn’t play because his parents don’t line up to blow Brimmer.”

“Brimmer the Coach?” asked Big.

“Yeah. He’s a huge prick. Big fish in a small pond. Thinks he’s hot shit.”

We pulled into a pizza joint on South Street which was a popular hangout for Branton kids. We walked into a packed house, who all turned and stared, not used to seeing someone of color in Big.

“Wow, little unwelcome, am I?”

“It’s ok, Big. They’re not used to seeing someone who’s not white. Everything here is cookie-cutter. They don’t like chocolate chips in their cookies.”

We found a table in the back, stopping by Tags’ table for introductions and small talk.

“Sorry about the game today, man”, he said.

“It’s ok, not your fault. You played well.”

“Thanks. But I wouldn’t have played if Brimmer hadn’t benched you. Why did you get benched anyways?”

“Apparently, I was talking shit about his coaching style. The only person I talked to after the game last night was you, and you know I didn’t talk any shit.”

“I know. Do you think someone made it up?”

“Yeah, and I know who.”

“Who?” Tags leaned in, inquisitively.

I shot him a guessing glance, and said, “Who do you think?”

“Cooper? What a child.”

“No shit. But we’re gonna grab some grub. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Cool.”

“Is that your boy?” Big asked.

“Yeah, that’s Tags.”

“He ain’t too big.”

“I know. But he’s quick as hell.”

Big just nodded in acknowledgement.

As luck would have it, there was an empty table behind the goon squad. I had my crew lean in close and informed them that Cooper and his crew were sitting at the table in front of us.

“That skinny prick is Cooper? I would snap that kid in half”, said Big.

I overheard the conversation at the goon table. Cooper and his Northeastern fantasies, Kallock being courted by Division 3 schools, Emerson and Gardiner going to play juniors next year. I often wondered what kind of garbage their parents fed these kids. None of them were going anywhere; they might as well look for a good intramural team to play for in college, because they sure as hell weren't gonna play for the school.

“So, yeah, I'm thinking about playing for the Harbor Wolves next season”, I heard Emerson say.

“I'm being talked to by Suffolk and Salve Regina”, I heard Kallock say.

“All I know, is that I'm playing for Northeastern next season.”

I had heard enough. Standing up, I made eye contact with Cooper, and calmly said, “Oh really? I didn't know the Northeastern women's team was looking for practice players.”

“Fuck you, Adams.”

“Good one, Cooper.”

“Shut the fuck up, Adams”, said Kallock.

“Nice, two solid comebacks in a row. Those who sleep together must think alike.”

“Enjoy your time on the bench today, prick?”, Cooper retorted.

Both tables were standing at this point, causing the entire pizza shop to look over. Anyone standing in the pizza shop knew that what was about to transpire couldn't bode well for the Branton kids.

“Oh look, the coat rack can talk”, said Big.

“Who let you out of your cage, monkey?” Cooper shot back.

Then, Cooper pushed Big. That was a big, big mistake on Cooper's part. Big had grown up kicking the shit out of kids for making comments about his color, and I've seen him handle tough kids with relative ease. Anyone from our area knew Big wasn't to be trifled with. I shuddered at what Big could do to a suburban wimp like Cooper. Since Cooper made the first sign of aggression, Big could claim that he was acting out of self-defense. Big's eyes glowed with an anger that I hadn't seen in a long time. I saw him clench his fist to strike Cooper in the face, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Jimbo grab a pizza pan off a nearby table and hit

Cooper square in the face. Not really self-defense, but hey, to each his own. Cooper crumbled to the floor in a mess of blood, and Kallock took a step forward and sucker punched me in the face.

Pandora's Box had nothing on that mayhem that unfolded in the Branton House of Pizza. Chairs and tables were knocked over by retreating patrons as fists flew from every angle. Every frustration I had against Cooper and the goon squad was wrapped around every punch that I unloaded. I squared off against Kallock while Big had Cooper pinned to the ground. Shanny was powerbombing Emerson through a table while Jimbo and Gardiner wrestled on the floor. Jonesy stood by on guard in case someone else jumped in the fight, which after seeing the Branton kids get absolutely trounced, no one was stupid enough to even consider it. Cooper cried for help as Big unloaded blow after blow. Emerson picked himself up from the shards of the table he was just unwillingly put through and tackled Big off Cooper. Shanny cried out, "Where are you going? I'm not done with you yet", and smashed a chair over Emerson's back.

We were city kids. We did whatever it took to win, and in Jimbo's opinion, using a pizza pan for other purposes than its intended use fit within those guidelines. The pizza shop employees had called the cops after Jimbo rearranged Cooper's face with the pizza pan, and were en route. Seeing red, I summed all my aggravation into one punch and hit Kallock square in the mouth, feeling his teeth loosen as I followed through. Cooper scrambled to his feet and took refuge behind a chair. Big chased him down and delivered a face crumbling blow that knocked Cooper clean off his feet. I had Kallock pinned and was in the process of smashing his nose through his face when I was pulled off him and thrown up against the wall.

"Don't even fuckin think about fighting back, punk."

I managed to steal a glance over my shoulder and saw officers swarming the pizza shop, separating the combatants and slapping cuffs on. It took two officers to pull Big away from Cooper. After the melee was cleared, myself and the rest of the crew were pushed up against the wall in cuffs, while Cooper and his crew were on the ground. We were pulled away from the wall and roughly seated on the curb while an officer paced before us, carrying a menacing facial expression.

"So, you think fighting each other is the solution to everything, huh? You think punching each other's faces in is gonna solve anything? You know I could bring you all up on all sorts of charges right now. Destruction of property, assault and battery, aggravated assault, disturbing

the peace, the list goes on.” He paused, shooting us another menacing glance. “I understand some of you are Branton hockey players, right? What would Coach Brimmer say if he was here right now? He sure would bench all your asses, guaranteed.” He gave us another cop stare. “I’m going to overlook this little escapade, and let you all off with warnings. If I show up to a call in the future and it involves ANY of you, you will wish you were never born. Understand? Get the fuck outta here, and I never wanna see your faces again.”

We were uncuffed first and escorted to my car. The officer and I met eyes, and I glanced at his badge for future reference. “Cooper”, it read. Has to be a coincidence.

Back in the car, we waited until we were on the road to start congratulating each other on kicking the daylights out of Cooper and the goon squad. The adrenaline was still pumping and we were high-fiving each other.

“Nice idea with the pizza pan, Jimbo”, Big said.

“I didn’t like how that muthafucka called you a monkey.”

“You beat me to the punch, literally. You always are the fucking crazy one, Jimbo.”

“Those kids had no clue who they were fucking with. What made you grab the chair Shanny?” I asked.

“I didn’t appreciate him running away from me and jumping Big. So I had to teach him a lesson.”

“He definitely learned something.”

“We should be in big trouble right now, though”, said Jonesy. “I can’t believe we got let off with a warning.”

“I think I know why”, I said.

“Why?” asked Big.

“Well, the cop who spoke to us, his name was ‘Cooper’. I have a hunch that it may have been Cooper’s father.”

“The kid’s dad is a cop and chief head-giver for your team? Is this a hockey team or a government?”

“I’m not sure if it’s his dad or not. But the fact that we were let go first might have something to do with it. I’m gonna ask around, because it doesn’t seem right.”

“Yeah. Let’s go drink some brews”, said Jonesy.

“I hear that”, Big agreed.

“Yo, Danny, where can we go?” asked Jonesy.

“There’s a lighthouse two miles from here that everyone goes to and drinks. They build a big bonfire and everyone gets hammered. It also doubles as a boxing ring when kids need to settle a score. I doubt we’ll see Cooper and those kids, though. His dad will probably make him go home.”

That got a laugh out of the crew. We got shitfaced that night at my house after renegeing on the lighthouse due to the single digit temperatures. We recapped the fight and reminisced about the days at Central, but a tick in the back of my head told me that the fight tonight was only round one in a very long bout. I cracked my beer and grabbed a new one. Things were about to get ugly.

Chapter 20

My mom and I have always enjoyed simple Christmases. Not having enough money kinda makes you see Christmas as a time for appreciating family as opposed to material things. But now that my mom came into some money with Aunt Mae passing away, she bought me a few nice things to celebrate a worry-free Christmas. “I’m so proud of you, Daniel”, she told me. She brought out an Easton Synergy with a red bow on it. “The guy at the hockey store told me it was the best stick on the market. The best stick for the best player on the team.” She winked. I blushed.

“Thanks, Mom. Really.”

“I love you, Daniel.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Chapter 21

We had one day of practice, followed by a game the next. The practice was light, composed of mostly shooting and passing drills. Cooper and the goon squad would have to wait for the next practice to pass me hospital passes and attempt to cheapshot me. Brimmer still had it out for me, promoting Cooper to the first line and putting me back on the second line. He wasn't done with bitching me out. In a short, quick burst, he said "Don't bring your city trash, troublemaking friends around Branton again. I mean it." Fuck you, Brimmer. Of course I didn't say it out loud, because I was already in the doghouse and didn't need my playing time cut any more. But the fact that Brimmer knew about the ordeal the other night just led me to believe that the cop in charge of the situation was actually Cooper's father. Which also proved that he had his finger on the pulse of this town and probably had some clout when he wanted to use it. He thinks his kid has what it takes to get somewhere, bad, and it seemed that he was willing to skirt the rules for his own kid in order to do so. I happened to be the obstacle which impeded his kid from getting anywhere, which made me the odd man out. Damn.

Our next game was against run-of-the-mill Williams Beach, our neighborly rival. Branton and Williams Beach despised each other, from the selectman all the way down to family pets. Fights were bound to break out amongst the fans, and depending on where the game was would dictate if the cops got involved or not. More often than not, Tags said, that when Williams Beach kids came to the games at Branton, there was almost always a fight, and the Branton cops would only intervene after the Williams Beach kids had gotten beaten up bad.

Consistently a .500 team, Williams Beach dominated bad teams, and got dominated by the good ones. This game, Brimmer said, should be no contest. Maybe no contest for an Adams-led squad. My cockiness was getting to be too much. Having fourteen goals through four games would do that to anyone, but those fourteen goals were as easy as banging Cooper's sister. Hahahahahahaha. Before addressing the team, Brimmer pulled the goon squad and myself out in the hallway, and it wasn't for a pep talk.

"If any of you pull that shit again, I will kick you off this team so fast your head will spin. Captains or not. You need to lead by example, and you guys are lucky as fuck that Mr. Cooper was on duty, because otherwise, it could have been a hell of a lot messier. Cut the shit, and play as a team. This little rivalry dies right here. RIGHT NOW! Get in the fucking locker room and act as captains should."

I strolled back to the locker room with a cocky swagger. Looking straight ahead, I whispered, “You always gonna hide behind your daddy, Cooper?”

“At least I have a daddy, orphan.”

If Brimmer wasn't there, I would have kicked Cooper right in the mouth. I didn't care if I had a skate on or not. He was a wiseass little prick who didn't learn his lesson from one beating already. Maybe a second one would do him good. I needed one last parting shot before heading into the locker room.

“What happened to your face, Cooper? Did you bite down on Brimmer?”

He stopped midstride, unsure of what to say back. Chalk one up for the Adams camp.

We blew out Williams Beach 9-0. I potted four goals, bringing my season total to eighteen. I'm sure no one in Branton history had scored that many goals in six games. It just proved that I was head and shoulders a level above these kids; a man amongst boys. What made it even sweeter was that for the goon squad, this season would dictate their next four years, blinded by the absurdity of being told they were good enough to play college hockey. I knew I was good enough to play Division 3, maybe Division 1 after a year of juniors. My mom wasn't gonna fill my head with unrealistic thoughts; she knew there was a bigger world out there and more important things in life besides hockey. For these Branton kids, it was all they had.

Chapter 22

I spent my New Years' Eve relaxing. After the brouhaha with Cooper and his crew I needed to lay low. My Central crew had the New Year's Tournament in the city, so they were laying low, too. Branton kids were only tough when they had somebody outnumbered. If we were anywhere outside Branton, Cooper never would have pushed Big. Away from his crew, he was nothing more than a scared bitch, evidenced by him crying out for help while Big beat the piss out of him. I knew that if I went to any of the parties going on tonight, I was definitely gonna run into them. Four on one are extremely unfavorable odds for me, so I wasn't willing to call my bookie and place the bet. Classes started up again on the 3rd, so maybe I would spend the night organizing all my stuff and then relaxing until practice tomorrow. That sounded good.

Chapter 23

We had a few days off in between games, so we skated. A lot. Our conditioning was poor, Brimmer said, and conditioning is key as the season wears on. “Conditioning wins games”, Brimmer sternly noted. Okay, Socrates. Tuesday, we skated, Wednesday, we skated, while Thursday and Friday was usually light scrimmaging. Saturday was one of the biggest games of the season; division rival Berlin, undefeated thus far this season, were blowing out opponents every game while only rendering five goals in the process. “Time for Danny to shine”, I thought. If my torrid scoring pace wasn’t enough for everyone to take notice, maybe this would do it. Brimmer’s speech after practice on Friday was somewhat motivational. “This is the time”, he stressed, “for the rest of the hockey world to take notice. You beat Berlin tomorrow night, and you will be THE team to beat.”

He had a point, for once, this season. As much as I hated Cooper and the goon squad, some kids on the team weren’t all that bad. I wouldn’t mind bringing home a title to Branton, overshadowing the season that was supposed to be “theirs”. Time to step up, Danny. This is the big show.

The rink Saturday night was buzzing. Student bodies from both schools were in abundance, knowing that this was a big game. The black and red monster hadn’t eaten for a couple of days, and a win over Berlin would be the feast of all feasts. Brimmer was riling us up in the locker room while a frenzied buzz with whoops and shouts surrounded the team. The warm-up song came on, and the monster roared to life as we came on the ice. Particularly rowdier than usual, Branton students were grabbing the glass and shaking it in rhythm with the song. I was revved up; this was a big game, and I knew I was gonna be the go-to guy tonight. Berlin was going to key in on me, which meant I had to play better than I normally do. The better I play, the more I’m keyed on, and the more I’m keyed on, the better I play.

I was still on the second line, however. As much as I hated Emerson and Gardiner, they were a more viable option than McDougall and Doublet. I told my linemates that tonight they had to step their game up and communication was key. They just nodded, unfazed by my motivational attempt. The sight in the rink was amazing; one side completely red and black, the other, green and blue. One section was empty, except for a few jumpsuits and clipboards. Scouts. Word had clearly gotten around that this may be one of the best games of the season to

watch, despite it being Division C. I'm sure Cooper noticed the scouts, too. I'm sure it just added fuel to his dream car in fairytale land.

I was focused on the game, trying to determine if Berlin had set plays or key guys to focus on. I looked up just in time to see Cooper get plastered into the boards. The green and blue reptile from Berlin hissed, and Cooper skated to the bench, hunched over in pain and short of breath. "You okay, Coop?" asked Brimmer. Cooper crashed onto the bench and was hunched over in visible pain. That was the last bit of life he would show all game.

Berlin was a good team. They had defensemen who could skate, check, and read plays, and wingers who weren't afraid to take the hit on the boards in order to make the breakout pass. They were a stronger skating team than us, and it appeared early on that the only way to slow their onslaught was through contact, and lots of it. So the first thing I did when I got on the ice was rock the first kid I saw. This drew a cheer from the black and red monster, and instantly made me a target for cheapshots the rest of the game. Being cheapshotted I knew would have no repercussions for Berlin because the goon squad would be there to finish me off in the event that it happened.

Being paired with McDougall and Doublet, it was hard to get any offense going. Doublet was afraid of the defenseman crashing down on him, so he avoided the puck at all costs. I was being shadowed by two guys everywhere I went on the ice, so that eliminated me as an option. Kline was our only saving grace. He stopped the third and fourth shots off the initial rebound and was quick in clearing it away just before Berlin arrived to crash the net. The first period ended in a scoreless draw. Back in the locker room, Brimmer was neutral about our play; strong on defense, but weak on the forecheck. We need to hit, he said, because Berlin was big and fast and that was the only way to slow them down. I should coach this team.

In the second period, we came out flat and Berlin took it to us. Emerson and Gardiner both got rocked on their first shift and disappeared for the rest of the period. Seeing that our first line wasn't going to generate any offense, I knew that my line needed to step it up. Repeating my first shift of the game, I made a beeline off the bench and laid a crushing bodycheck on the puck carrier. He fell slowly and the puck squirted onto McDougall's stick. He turned up ice, took two strides, and passed me the puck as he got freight-trained by the Berlin defenseman. I heard the lizard hiss. With the defenseman laying the hit, it left him out of position and left his teammate to try and defend me. The Berlin defenseman, wide-eyed, saw it was just me and him

and tried to force me outside. I looked him in the eye, dropped my left shoulder, and he bit on the fake. He crossed over just as the puck went between his skates, and he knew I had beaten him. I had the crunch of my left skate as I quickly changed my angle and headed towards the net. Streaking in uncontested, I was preparing myself to take the shot when I felt the defenseman's stick crack over my forearm. Every hockey player knows that there is one inch of unprotected area where the glove ends and the elbow pad begins. Nine times out of ten, a slash happens to find its way and make clean contact with the bone, sometimes hard enough that it results in nauseating pain. To hold a stick at that moment is nearly impossible. The Berlin goalie saw this and skated out just in time to poke the puck away, prompting the referee to blow the whistle for the delayed penalty call. The monster cheered, and we were on the powerplay. I usually like the powerplay, but when my linemates are Cooper, Emerson, Gardiner and Kallock, it is extremely unenjoyable. None of them will pass to me, no matter how dire the circumstances. They would try improbable passes across the offensive zone, only to have them deflected or picked off and cleared. I knew that this powerplay was going to wear on my patience.

Gardiner took the draw, while Emerson and I lined up strong side. He won the draw, surprisingly, back to Kallock, who quickly fired a shot that was turned away by the Berlin goalie. I chased the puck into the corner and took up residence behind the net, waiting for my teammates to get into position. Emerson floated in front of the net while Gardiner lined up along the boards at the top of the faceoff circle. Inching towards Gardiner, I drew the Berlin defenseman towards me and then dished it off to him. He remained stationary while the Berlin penalty killer defended him, allowing Kallock to sneak in behind the defender. Gardiner sidestepped and dished the puck off to Kallock who rushed towards the net with only the Berlin defenseman standing in his path. I tapped my stick on the ice and called for the pass because I was left alone in front of the net. Kallock looked at me, then looked way. If he passed it, I had a definite goal. Since he let his personal feelings come on to the ice, he blew an opportunity at a sure goal. Using the defenseman as a screen, he fired a low shot on the ice that the Berlin goalie saved, but coughed up a poor rebound. I crashed the net and took a few swings at the puck, with him stopping the first and second shot. I took a final swipe at the puck as the Berlin defenseman dropped his shoulder and laid me out clean. I saw a bright flash of light and heard a cheer, first from the blue and green reptile, then from the black and red monster. I knew I scored. I

struggled to my skates, having troubling maintaining my balance since my legs felt like jello. My teammates, clearly not giving a shit, were celebrating with each other while I blinked a few times to clear my blurry vision. My stomach cartwheeled while my head swam, and I dragged myself to the bench and sat down right away.

“Danny, you O.K.?” asked Tags.

“Yeah, I just got rocked pretty good.”

“You put the goal in. That’s all that counts.”

I’d only been hit this hard one other time in my life. Last year, my crew and I got into a scuffle after a party and I got punched in the back of the head. I threw up the remainder of the night and my ears rang for a few days. Those same feelings overwhelmed me now. As the loudspeaker boomed during the goal announcement, the noise made my head pound even more, which in turn made my vision blurry. Thanking God after I realized that I just played my last shift of the period, I dragged my way to the locker room, immediately ran to the bathroom, and vomited. The pain was gut-wrenching; a vice tightened on my head and my neck muscles clenched with each violent spasm. After emptying my last three weeks of food, I stumbled back to my spot in the locker room.

The door to the locker room slammed and I winced. All throughout Brimmer’s speech I tried to clear my vision and not vomit again. I glanced around the room and saw a nervous gaze on Tags’ face. He gave me an inquisitive, “Are you OK?” glance, and I looked back at him and shook my head. Cooper looked to be in worse shape than I was. It was probably due to his lack of a Y chromosome. He was controlling his breathing by heavy inhales and exhales and looked ready to throw up. Instead of Cooper giving the captain’s take on the period, Kallock piped up. I didn’t listen to what he had to say.

We got dominated the third period. Berlin came out flying and we came out flat, and we were down 3-1 only five minutes into the period. After getting rocked, my energy was tapped and I was short of breath, and with each breath my neck muscles clenched even more as my brain punched the inside of my skull. As much as I didn’t want to, I knew that I was gonna have to take a few more checks and play the body in order to turn this game around. The whole pain is only temporary thing is such a cliché, but it was true; there was a lot of glory to be had in this game. At the halfway point, we iced the puck and my line came on the ice. My brain still

pounded inside my head, I still had the queasy feeling, and my vision was still a little blurry, but a solid shift here would give us the momentum.

McDougall won the draw, and Anderson cleared the red line and dumped the puck in. My legs felt rubbery and my brain took a second longer to relay the message to my legs to move faster. As I skated down the ice, I read the body of the Berlin defenseman and watched his eyes, and I knew that he was gonna try a long clearing pass. The minute the puck left his stick, I skated into the passing line and intercepted the pass. With my reflexes lagging and my reaction time a second later than it should have been, I had trouble cradling the puck and it bounced off my stick and slowly rolled end over end in the air. Waiting for the puck to drop, I caught a glimpse of the Berlin defenseman lining up to check me and steal the puck. Once he was a half-foot away from me, I immediately crouched and laid a vicious hipcheck, sending him sailing over me. Since no one was expecting what happened, including myself, a clear path opened while everyone skated in the opposite direction. I felt so lethargic and clumsy on my feet, but I knew that even as injured as I was, I would still make it to the Berlin net before anyone caught me.

I planted my foot, pushed off and skated toward the Berlin net, slightly wobbling side to side as I attempted to maintain my balance. The Berlin goalie skated to the top of his crease, positioned himself, then slowly glided back to his net as I came in. He was a big goalie and took up a lot of the net, and even though my brain would have trouble computing simple math right now, I knew that I had to get him down on the ice and lift it over him. Getting him down would require me to cut one way or another, and I knew I would fall over if I tried it. That left a shot as my only option. A quick, low shot would probably end in a rebound, giving me a second chance at it. I squared up with the Berlin goalie, struggling to keep my balance as I pushed myself slightly ahead of the puck, and snapped a quick shot to the lower left hand side. Although the shot wasn't terribly strong, the goalie was expecting me to deke and the unexpected shot fooled him. His left leg kicked out after the puck had already entered the net.

I didn't care that the puck went in. I was just glad my shift was over and that I could sit down on the bench and maybe throw up. My lungs burned, my head pounded, my stomach somersaulted. Sticking with tradition, my teammates didn't bother to congratulate me. I didn't give a shit. I could win this game without them. I had done it countless times this season. I got to the bench, put my head back, and felt the beautiful sensation of sleep envelop me. Sleep?

That doesn't happen during a hockey game. I should probably go to the hospital after this game. They would tell me that I had a concussion, tell me I couldn't play for a few weeks, and that would throw my game off. Fuck that. I'll tough it out.

Brimmer called a timeout. The head pounding and clenched muscles increased in intensity, and all I wanted to do was close my eyes and go to sleep. Brimmer sounded like a pissed off teacher from the Muppets, and I'm sure he was calling us pussies, or cowards, or something else encouraging. When the volume of his voice raised, each syllable was like a sledgehammer to the head.

After Brimmer's timeout speech, Gardiner gave his captain spiel. "We're not taking the body, guys. Berlin is knocking our asses all over the ice, and that's why they're winning this period. We gotta take this game over, right here, right now. 1...2...3..."

Yeah, go Marauders. Hooray aspirin and an ice pack.

Berlin came out hard after the short hiatus, but Kline was up to the challenge. He stopped five shots in thirty seconds, and the black and red monster showed its' appreciation. While our goaltending was up to par, and our defense somewhat up to par, our offense was lagging. Cooper, after getting rocked in the first period, was ducking every hit and avoiding the puck at all costs. His line couldn't get anything going. Since I felt like I had a pneumatic drill in my head and a pissed off wheel of bad cheese in my stomach, I was basically useless, too. I took the hits along the boards, crumbling to the ice shortly after. Brimmer was disgusted with our play, so he gave Tags and the third line a shot. Berlin was only throwing two lines over the boards, but our third line players were more of use to the team right now than our first line. Tags was a gamer, and I knew that when it came down to crunch time, he would step his game up. And that he did. With four minutes left in the game, Tags tied it up with a ridiculous end to end rush and even more ridiculous finish. I couldn't believe that after being dominated the entire game, we were knotted up at 3. It didn't seem right. Berlin called a timeout with the clock showing 3:13.

Brimmer took advantage of the Berlin timeout to outline our game plan. "We have new life now. This is where the hero needs to stand up. We shouldn't be in this game, but by the grace of God, we are. Take advantage of the momentum and put one in here. I want Cooper, Emerson, Gardiner, Kallock, and Adams on the ice. Adams, take the left wing, and Emerson, you play D with Kallock. Bring it in, guys. 1...2...3..."

Concussion!

I had nothing left to finish the game with. My legs were jello, my stomach some other gelatinous substance and my head a target on a firing range. The black and red monster roared as the green and blue lizard hissed, trying to establish dominance over one another. I knew that if I didn't feel the way I did, I would win this game for our team. But the fact of the matter was that I was in no shape to play hockey. None. I would be better off in a hospital bed. I suddenly came out of my rambling thoughts and saw the play going on with the puck lazily flipping into our zone. Kallock and Emerson rushed back to retrieve the puck. I set up shop along the boards, while Cooper skated behind the net to retrieve the puck from Kallock. Any smart center would have picked the puck up, passed to the wing, then immediately expected a pass back. Cooper wasn't smart. He started skating up ice, then flung the puck away carelessly when he saw a hit coming. The Berlin winger ended up with the puck on his stick, and three seconds later, it was in the back of the net. Two minutes left, Berlin was up 4-3. The black and red monster took a step back and the lizard took a step forward and established dominance over the kill. Two minutes can be a lifetime in a hockey game. Two minutes was a death sentence in this game. Berlin was a better team, and they had the momentum. It might have been a different story if Cooper wasn't such a pussy and ducked the hit. Nevertheless, the game was over, and both sides knew it.

The buzzer sounded and Berlin's bench emptied. The monster scattered quickly, while the lizard remained, relishing the victory. If we weren't already defeated physically, Brimmer defeated us mentally as he entered the locker room in a typhoon of swears and saliva. "You fucking cowards...ducking hits...I've seen more of a backbone in snakes...got dominated all game." He wrapped up with, "Practice at 6 A.M. tomorrow morning. And, OOPS, looks like I'll forget my pucks. Pussies."

Chapter 24

The last thing I wanted to do this morning was skate. So I slept in until 8:00, unintentionally. After my mother woke me up and told me that my alarm had been going off constantly since 5:00, the first word that popped into my head that morning was “Fuck”. I missed practice. An important practice. One that would stick me on the third line at this point. I knew I was hurt bad last night, and maybe my body didn’t want me to skate this morning. Regardless, I was fucked. Not that it mattered. When I walked outside to start my car, I noticed it listing to one side. I walked around the passenger side and saw that both tires were deflated. After inspecting the tires and noticing no puncture marks and the nonexistence of a valve cap, I summoned my Sherlock Holmes powers and conducted that there was only one culprit: Cooper. After Brimmer had singled him out during his post game tirade, he was probably afraid of being benched or demoted. After seeing him duck a hit and cough up the puck to lose the game, I would have benched him, too. His childish demeanor would translate into something as childish as this. Since my mom was at work and I had no other way to get to school, I decided to take the day off.

The more the day wore on, there more I became pleased with the decision. No shuffling between classes, no boring note taking, no slop for lunch. I knew that missing this morning’s practice was gonna come back to bite me in the ass, but it was a repercussion I was willing to deal with.

My mom came home from work around 5. “How was school today?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Why?”

“I came outside and my tires were flat.”

“Did you run over something?”

“No.”

“They why were they flat?”

“Somebody deflated them.”

“Did Cooper do it?”

I looked at my mom quizzically.

“I know more than you let me know, Danny. I know about the little scuffle you and the boys had with Cooper and his friends at the pizza shop.”

I just stared at my mom. Then shrugged my shoulders.

“Do me one favor, though. Actually, two favors. Be careful. And stay out of trouble.”

I nodded.

“Promise?”

“Yeah, mom.”

“Do you need new tires on your car?”

“No, they just hafta be inflated. I’ll call Triple A or something.”

“Ok.”

I looked up at the ceiling as my mom headed to her room. “Damn”, I thought. “Mothers know everything.”

Chapter 25

Before classes even started on Wednesday, I had an encounter with Kallock and Gardiner.

“So, Adams, too good to come to practice?” Kallock started.

“I don’t need the practice. You could definitely use it.”

“Alright, tough guy. You think you’re hot shit, don’t you? Well, Brimmer is pissed, and, ah, I don’t see you playing too much more this season”, he smirked.

“Well, to be honest, you guys don’t really have a season without me.”

“We played fine before you, and we’ll be fine without you”, Gardiner said, suddenly having the balls to step up and say something. Probably because it was two on one.

I looked at Gardiner. “I’d like to see you put up points without me, you clown. I made you. I’ve made this season so far. I am this team. Did Mommy and Daddy tell you guys that you were the greatest and that your shit didn’t stink? I’d really like to see how far you guys go without me. Keep trying your luck. That fucking stunt yesterday morning with someone deflating my tires was the final straw. That was just a testament to your cowardice. You pussies are nothing outside of this Podunk town. You were looking for a problem, and you found it. But you picked the wrong fucking kid to have a problem with.”

I faked like I was gonna punch Kallock, which prompted him to flinch back into the lockers. “Next time it will be the real thing”, I said.

“You’re done here, Adams”, I heard Kallock say as I walked away.

After dealing with Kallock and Gardiner, I went to homeroom. Before I even sat down, my teacher told that Coach Brimmer requested my presence. “Great”, I thought. I reluctantly made my way down to his office.

Brimmer acknowledged me, then told me to come in and sit down. By the mere tone of his voice, I knew he wasn’t pleased.

“First of all, why weren’t you at practice yesterday morning?”

“I had flat tires.”

“Tires, as in plural?”

“Yup. And I know I didn’t run over anything to cause that.”

“What are you implying?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m less than impressed with your attitude, Danny. Not showing up to practice after a game like that really speaks negatively about your conduct. There is a zero-tolerance policy on this team.”

“I’m telling that you I had no choice. I didn’t have a car to get there.”

“Why didn’t you call anyone?”

“Who was I gonna call? The captains?” I sarcastically replied.

“You could have.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Am I bothering you, Adams? Don’t you roll your fuckin’ eyes when I’m talking to you. Who do you think you are? I can end your season right now, you better believe it.”

I stared at him. “Ok.” I knew he wasn’t gonna kick me off the team.

“Get the fuck outta my office. And don’t count on playing tonight. But if you blow this game off, don’t even bother showing up for the rest of the season.”

I didn’t even dignify him with a response. I was fed up with this ridiculous town and the sheltered people that lived in it. This was a Division C school. Not the pros. These kids thought hockey was the be all, end all, and their parents just fed those thoughts by telling their kids they were actually good. It was pathetic the way people acted around here. They would screw you over for a piece of moldy bread on the sole basis that you wanted it. Usually I haven’t played down to the juveniles I’ve come across in my life, but at this point, I exhausted all my options. I was gonna call Big and the crew and show the goon squad I was done fucking around.

Chapter 26

With my day staring off on a sour note and knowing that I wasn't gonna play tonight, I spend my day pissed off and not caring about much. On game days, I absorb the buzz and excitement given off by the students, but today it just pissed me off. On my way to the last class of the day, I walked past Cooper in the hallway. He shot me a smug glance and chuckled to himself. I looked back at him and calmly told him, "You're a dead man." He rolled his eyes and headed on his way. I went home and called Big after a long day of classes. After explaining the antics that the goon squad pulled, he was none too impressed. As long as I had a problem with Cooper, he had a problem with Cooper too, he said. He was willing to help at all costs to even the score.

"It will be a surprise", he promised me. "We don't have a game tonight, and from my understanding, you do."

"Yeah."

"So, anything that happens to them or their cars can't be pinned on you because you're at the game with them."

"Yeah, but the next likely suspects are you and the crew."

"Come on, Danny. We've done worse than this. Everybody will be too absorbed in the game to even notice what's going on."

He was right. "Aight", I agreed. "Do what you gotta do."

"Thanks, homie. Now what do they drive for cars? License plates would help, too."

Chapter 27

Tonight's game was against Oak Creek, whom we beat earlier in the season, 4-1. That was my debut where I potted all four goals while the rest of the team looked like garbage. I was dying to see how they would fare tonight without one shred of offense. Brimmer came in for his pre-game speech and made it a point to note that any disrespect of team rules or transgression against the team would result in punishment. No one needed Sherlock Holmes to figure out that I was the one being punished. The goon squad all looked at me and smirked as Brimmer droned on. I just smiled back and blew a kiss.

I thoroughly enjoyed watching the game. Normally I hate to lose, but I relished every minute of the game. Oak Creek was all over our team; their defense smothering, their offense firing on all cylinders. I smiled as Oak Creek kept pounding in goals with ease as our team became frustrated with each passing second. The game got uglier each period. So ugly that half of the black and red monster left midway through the 2nd period. So much for Gardiner saying this team didn't need me.

The buzzer sounded on what was one of the worst beatings in school history. Oak Creek buried eleven goals on our helpless goalie tandem while Kallock got kicked out for intent to injure. "Karma", I thought to myself, smiling. If I was the picture of smugness, Brimmer was the picture of absolute disgust. "Never in my life have I ever seen such an awful display of hockey. I'm embarrassed to be your coach", he stammered before storming out of the locker room. I looked at Kallock and Gardiner and just threw my hands up and smiled.

I got undressed and walked out, but not before Brimmer stopped me. "I hope you learned your lesson."

"I know you learned yours", I shot back. Probably not the most intelligent thing to say, but I didn't care. I was pissed off at everyone in this town, and I really didn't care who I offended.

Chapter 28

When I got to my locker in the morning, Tags was waiting for me. He carried a look of both excitement and amusement, and the fact he wanted to tell me something was painted all over his face.

“What’s up?”

“Dude, Cooper and his crew are fucking pissed.”

“Really?” I asked. Nonchalantly, of course.

“Rumor has it that when they came out of the game last night, somebody removed the bulbs for their headlights and taillights. They were stuck at the rink ‘til almost midnight while they waited for AAA to show up.” He chuckled. “Naturally, they’re blaming you. Do I sense retribution for the deflated tire stunt they pulled on you?”

“How dare you accuse me,” I joked. “How could I ever do that to their cars while I was at the game? I wonder who could have done such an awful thing”, feigning curiosity.

“Don’t worry, man, your secret is safe with me”, Tags said with a wink.

“What secret?” I joked.

We ended our conversation with an obligatory pound and went out separate ways. No sooner did I turn the corner did I see the goon squad approach me. And it wasn’t an amicable introduction.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, Adams? Pulling some fucking stunt like that, you piece of shit.” Well, hello to you too, Cooper.

“Oh, by whatever do you mean?” I knew enough about Doc Holliday from my History Channel obsession to replicate his demeanor perfectly. “There is no possible way on God’s green earth I could ever pull such a devilish stunt like that. How dare you accuse me, sir.”

“This isn’t Hollywood, muthafucka. Stop acting like a bitch. I’m done playing these games. I’m done fucking around with you, Adams.”

“You’re done playing games, huh? Well this is my game, bitch, you’re just playing it.” Cooper didn’t take that last comment too lightly. He shoved me into the lockers, so I punched him in the mouth. Keeping in line with the Branton attitude where you get into an altercation only when you outnumber your opponent, the rest of the goon squad jumped in and pinned me down while Cooper threw punches at me. He laughed like a schoolgirl as he punched me in the face.

“Where’s your nigger friend now, huh? Where are your city trash friends? Huh, bitch?”

Despite getting my face pounded in, I still managed to shoot my mouth off.

“I hit your sister harder than this.”

No sooner did I spit out the last word did Cooper land one last punch. As my bottom lip split open, teachers came tearing around the corner and began to break up the fight. One teacher yelled at them to stop fighting and immediately pulled Cooper off of me. Three more teachers and their classes immediately spilled into the hallway to witness the episode. While three teachers herded the goon squad off to the principal’s office, one teacher pulled me to my feet and steadied me.

“You okay, son?”

I nodded.

“You’ll hafta go to the principal’s office to discuss the altercation.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me.”

I walked into the principal’s office, only it wasn’t the principal; it was Brimmer. He nodded to my escort, who then left.

“Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me? When will you kids grow up? Teammates, fighting in school. This is a disgrace to our hockey program. You three, CAPTAINS, acting like a bunch of Neanderthal idiots. Ganging up on your own teammate like that. Despicable. And you, Danny, can’t keep your mouth shut, can you? Your city-boy antics aren’t gonna work around here, you should have known that by now. I don’t know –“

“Keep my mouth shut?” I cut Brimmer off. “You think this shit is my fault when I get pinned down by there four pussies because they can’t take me one on one? And this is my fault? You gotta be shittin’ me. They’ve done nothing buy try to dick me over since I got here. Why do you think I wasn’t at practice the other day? Huh? Because these pussies let the air out of my tires. That’s why. So don’t you pin this shit on me, because it’s not my fault.”

“I don’t care who’s fault it is”, Brimmer interjected. “This little soap opera you have going on is the talk of the town. Our own hockey team, the pride and joy of this town, is being called a disgrace. All because you goddamn girls are jealous of each other. Grow the fuck up, all of you. You’re lucky this crap hasn’t ruined our season yet. And know what this little

episode means for the team? Our three captains and one of our best forwards are ineligible. You four get to miss three critical games because of your stupid antics.”

Then Cooper whined, saying “How come he doesn’t get suspended?”

“Are you an idiot?” Brimmer responded. “Look at the situation. Clearly you four were the aggressors. He is the only one walking unscathed out of this. Get out of this office, all of you. “You four”, pointing at the goon squad, “are suspended for a week. Danny, go to class.”

I took advantage of this opportunity to get some final shots. “Enjoy your time off, fellas.”

“Fuck you, Adams.” Kallock shouted.

“Don’t beg. All four of you have a week to do that to each other.”

“Get the hell out of this office, Adams. For not being able to shut your mouth, you can sit the next game, too. Now get out of here before I kick you off this team permanently.”

I blew a kiss and walked out of the office, all the way to my car. After being physically assaulted, the last thing I should have to do was go to class. I’d go home, sleep, then go to practice. I shrugged my shoulders and drove home.

Chapter 29

On my way home, I called Big. For some reason he answered, because he should have been in class.

“Danny, what’s up?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Well, technically, yeah, but I had a little run-in with your best friend.”

“Coat Rack?”

“Yeah, they jumped me in the hallway before class. All four of them, man. That’s the only way these kids encounter any situation. They made sure to tell me I wasn’t tough without, and I quote ‘my nigger friend and city trash friends’.”

“Coat Rack just doesn’t learn. Next opportunity we get, we’re rolling on them.”

“They won’t fight us man for man”, I said.

“We’ll make them fight. I’ll knock Coat Rack back to next week.”

“We’ll get an opportunity soon. I’ll keep you posted. Now, go to class.”

“Haha, alright man. Lata.”

Chapter 30

Despite needing to work on fundamentals during practice, Brimmer skated us until everyone threw up. He was trying to teach us lesson, and he was doing a good job of it. Although everyone knew of the altercation earlier in the day, no one dared tell Brimmer. “A good team puts up with each other’s problems; a great team works to fix those problems. We need to work as a team and fix these problems before we blow this whole season”. Wow, Brimmer. So deep. I think I read better material off the back of a Cocoa Crispies cereal box.

His ten second interjection was the only rest we got all practice. The practice dragged on and my lungs felt like a disturbed nest of angry scorpions, and at the end of practice I was too tired to even complain about how tired I was. The entire team wasn’t thrilled with me. I could sense it in the locker room. I didn’t know why their loyalties laid with the goon squad. They constantly bullied and spoke down to the rest of the team. The team was probably too afraid to stand up to them, fearing to lose a spot or fall into the doghouse. Me standing up to them had resulted in this skating practice. At this point, I didn’t care if anyone here liked me or not. Everyone was too blinded by their own sense of false importance and lackluster abilities, unaware that their competitive hockey days would end upon graduation from Branton High. As much as I wanted to stand up and try to shed some light on the false hopes and grandeur these kids would never achieve, it wouldn’t accomplish anything. All I ever wanted to do was play hockey as long as I could, then accept it when it was over, all bullshit aside. These Branton kids were so sheltered in their own world that the thought of somebody better than them was threatening and frightening. There was more to life than hockey; I was the only one seemed to notice it.

Chapter 31

With the goon squad benched, there was major line shuffling done. I was benched the first game of their three game suspension, which ended in a 5-3 loss to the Smithfield team we blew out earlier in the season. The second game resulted in Tags as my winger, while McDougall played opposite him. If there was any better time to show the goon squad that I was this team, it was now. We played Dunn in a rematch of the Christmas tournament game where I scored three goals. Besides wanting to win this game, I had other points to prove. I needed to show the goon squad that this team could win without them.

45 minutes of hockey later and a final score of 12-3, I made it my business to rub the win in the face of the goon squad. My seven goal, five assist performance (three of the assists were on Tags' goals) was worthy of the front page of the next day's paper, and the three reporters frothing at the bit to talk to me just solidified that. My time with the news reporters just provided me the opportunity to toot my own horn while taking jabs at the goon squad.

"Danny, Arnie Fischer from *The Patriot Ledger*. Give me a few words about your record setting performance tonight."

"I felt real good tonight, and playing with Mike Taggart didn't force me to do all the work like I'm normally accustomed to. I seemed to get the bounces tonight and the puck found its' way into the back of the net for me."

"Danny, John Prazicka, *Branton Inquirer*. Do you have any comments about the in-house grumblings and drama that seems to have disrupted the team?"

"Yeah. It just shows that we can win without certain individuals."

"Is that all?"

"No. We had plenty of leadership tonight, probably more than we've had all season, and I think we played better as a team as a result of that."

I nodded to the final reporter.

"Andy Smith, *Boston Globe*. You're set to break the single season scoring record. Do you think you can keep up the pace with the team in disarray like this?"

"Absolutely. Tonight was evidence of that. Clearly we didn't lose any offense with the players that we're missing, and our defense held up fine. I think I'll break it, no problem."

The reporters put forth their congratulations as they closed their notepads and headed out. Before I headed to the locker room, I made eye contact with Cooper and told him, “There will be a report performance on Saturday. Don’t miss the show.”

All he could do was bite his lip and stare. For good measure, I blew him two kisses and added a wink. I was feeling particularly perky tonight. I really enjoyed the fact that I was in the limelight while the goon squad could only sit down and watch. What was supposed to be “their” season had officially become mine, and I did it with relative ease; they had waited four years of high school for this. I felt like a dream crusher. When it was applicable to these clowns, it didn’t seem so bad. I was met warmly outside by a large chunk of the student body braving the cold to congratulate me on breaking the record.

When I got home, my mom had my favorite dinner made. Since we now had money and she no longer had to work overtime, she found more and more time to come to the games. She missed so many of my games at Central because of work, but now that she could come to the games at Branton, I was glad she was there to share in my accomplishments.

“Wow, Daniel, I can’t ever remember you scoring so many points in a game. I heard somebody say it’s some kind of state record or something. Is that true?”

“Yeah, I guess it is. I’m happy with it.”

“I’m so proud of you, Daniel. Now, if you can just stay out of trouble, you’ll write your own ticket somewhere”, she said, smiling with a wink.

I laughed. “I’m working on it Mom.

Chapter 32

Remembering to keep my promise to Cooper about a repeat performance on Saturday, I made sure to get lots of sleep and just relax and keep my mind focused. Although we had two days of light practice, I worked extra hard to keep up my conditioning and skills. I was driven not by a sense of self-gratification, but rather a desire to show the goon squad that I was better than them on my worst day while they were having their best day. If my performance to date hadn't proven that to them yet, I would swear they lacked logical reasoning.

Luckily for me, my homework load was extremely light for the week. Not much in the way of Spanish or History, and my English paper was only a 3-4 pager on Huckleberry Finn. Since the book was enjoyable to read, the paper was extremely easy to write. I finished the paper late Thursday night, printed it, and put it in my binder to pass in tomorrow. I slept like a baby that night, dreaming of shattering scoring records while the pissed off faces of the goon squad floated in the background. I'm pretty sure I went to sleep that night with a smile on my face.

Friday blew by, much of it a blur since all I could think about was tomorrow's game against Monmouth. Although they blew us out earlier in the season, they weren't a good team. Their defensemen were slow, their goalie extremely clumsy and unorthodox, and I probably possessed more speed skating on one foot than their forwards had with two. With the goon squad unable to play, all they could do was sit back and watch me shine. I don't know if there was any expression greater than being on Cloud 9, but after the potential this game possessed, I'm sure I'd be there.

As I walked into the locker room on Saturday, Brimmer followed me in immediately after. "Danny, I need to talk to you outside."

"Ok." I was sure it had something to do either with my comments in the paper the other night or something to do with me breaking the record. What I was about to hear just added more confusion to the already messed-up situation I was already in. When I followed Brimmer around the corner, my English teacher, Ms. Rainer, was waiting for us.

"Danny", Brimmer started, "you obviously know Ms. Rainer."

"Yes."

"Ms. Rainer tells me that you didn't pass in your English paper yesterday."

"Ummm, I passed it in."

“No, Danny, you didn’t. I checked the batch three or four times and I didn’t find your paper in there”, Ms. Rainer said.

“That’s a load of crap”, I responded.

“Regardless, Danny, you know team policy. A failing grade in a class means no playing until the next satisfactory grading period”, Brimmer said.

I looked at both of them, opened my mouth to say something, but I was so enraged that I couldn’t even speak. I stormed off to the locker room and grabbed my bag, my teammates watching in confusion as I did so. I punched the locker room door and stormed passed Brimmer and Ms. Rainer on the way to my car. I threw my bag in the trunk and slammed it shut as Tags approached me, bewildered.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t play, Tags.”

“Why?”

“Apparently, I’m academically ineligible. My teacher claims that I didn’t pass in my paper yesterday, so she gives me a freegin’ failing grade. I’m so bullshit, Tags. This is complete bullshit.”

“Who’s your teacher?”

“Ms. Rainer.”

Tags’s mouth fell. “Are you serious? You’ll never believe whose mom that is.”

I looked at Tags and calmly said, “I hope I’m not thinking what you’re about to say.”

“Unfortunately, I am. Ms. Rainer is Cooper’s mom. Well, stepmom, actually.”

Suddenly, I got the urge to throw up. I was more in shock than anything. All this, over hockey? It’s a game, more about fun than anything. None of these kids were going to go anywhere with hockey. With each passing second, a red tinge slowly began to creep over my vision. I slammed my car into gear and sped toward the exit, then, realizing Cooper and Gardiner were about to get out of Cooper’s car, I hit the brakes in the middle of the parking lot. I opened my car and sprinted towards Cooper, screaming his name. I knew it wasn’t the brightest idea, but I was overcome by emotion and out of options.

The minute Cooper heard the brakes squeal, he turned around to see me possessed and running full speed at him. He froze, unsure of what to do. I was literally six inches away from him when I got blindsided and driven into the pavement. Somebody was pinning me down and I

fought tooth and nail to get whatever it was off of me. I was snarling and thrashing and grabbing onto anything I could, like a hungry caged animal being taunted by its' adversary. I vaguely heard somebody say, "Stop struggling", but I didn't care. I calmly saw Cooper and Gardiner head off to the rink.

"Stop struggling, or I'll have you arrested for assaulting a police officer."

"Fuck you."

"Stop now, Adams, I'm warning you."

Whoever it was got off me, and I scrambled to my feet with a fighting stance. Mr. Cooper looked at me, and then told me to leave before things got ugly. I responded by telling him his kid was a coward and a pussy.

"My kid would whoop your ass any day of the week", he said, then turned and strolled off to the rink.

"You're risking a hell of a lot for your kid to be pumping gas for the rest of his life", I yelled before climbing back into my car.

My tires squealed as I pulled into my house. My mom came sprinting outside with a confused look on her face.

"Danny", she said panting, "why are you home?"

"I got benched, that's why."

"Why?"

"My English teacher is failing me because she says I didn't pass in a paper. But I passed it in."

"Why would she say you didn't?"

"Because my teacher is Cooper's stepmother."

"Are you serious? I've had it. I'm going to the school on Monday and talking with somebody. Enough is enough."

I stomped off to my room and thought about the next move in this makeshift chess game between Cooper and myself.

Chapter 33

I called Shanny on Sunday after failing to reach Big, and told him about the events on Saturday. We were obviously on the same page when Shanny replied “These Branton kids are chumps. When the rest of the guys hear about this, they’re gonna be none too pleased. We’re coming down there next weekend and cleaning house, Danny.”

“Good. I’m ready to crack some heads. I’ve had enough. By the way, who came up with the idea about removing the bulbs from the cars?”

“Jimbo. He thought it would be a huge pain in the ass without causing any major damage. I thought it was clever. I know I would have just rather smashed their windows in with a baseball bat.”

“Goalies, man. They baffle me.”

“I know. Sometimes more than girls. Anyways, I gotta run. Talk to you soon.”

“Alright, lata.”

After school on Monday and before practice, my mother and I sat with the principal and Ms. Rainer to talk about the misunderstanding with the paper. My mother, usually kind-hearted and mild-mannered, turned into a banshee once Ms. Rainer claimed she never got my paper.

“My son, Ms. Rainer, wrote that paper. I don’t know where you get off claiming he didn’t. I’d like an explanation.”

“Your son did not pass in that paper, Mrs. Adams.”

“Ms. Adams” my mother corrected her.

“I’m not surprised.”

“Excuse me!?”

Principal Schwartz immediately intervened, reprimanding Ms. Rainer for her childish comment and told her to give my mom an explanation.

“I checked the batch three or four times. I wouldn’t just claim that some student didn’t pass in a paper when he did. My ethical values as a teacher would forbid me to do so.”

“Really?” my mother responded. “You seem like the kind of bimbo who would act like this because you’re upset that my son is better than your son and plays over him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. How dare you question my ethics as a teacher of some little feud in a silly game. You are clearly without foundations in your claims, Ms. Adams, and making up a scenario outrageous as this is a waste of everybody’s time. Now, if your son wants to pass in his

paper, albeit for a much lower grade, I will happily accept it and correct it. We can put this misunderstanding to rest and carry on. Does that sound fair?"

"I want you to grade it as if it was passed in on time, which it was", my mother retorted.

"Ms. Adams, school policy dictates that a student is penalized when an assignment is passed in late. This is the only course of action we can take", Principal Schwartz explained.

My mother knew that this was the only decision we could accept. "Fine. But would it be okay with you if you accompanied Daniel to class and witness him pass the paper in?" she asked Principal Schwartz. "Nice, mom." I thought to myself. There is no way she can deny me passing in the paper then.

"That is fine, Ms. Adams. I would be happy to do so. Is that ok with you, Ms. Rainer?"

"This is fine, Principal Schwartz. I'll accept the paper tomorrow, and I expect to see you both at last period."

My mother was more satisfied than when she first went in, so I considered it a small victory. On the ride home she told me that if I got the paper back and there was a failing grade on it, Ms. Rainer was in serious trouble. She said, however, that now Ms. Rainer was probably being scrutinized by the administration, that in order to save face, she would probably give me a passing grade to take the heat off her. I really hoped so. My mom was tired of this act more so than I was.

Tuesday went off without a hitch. Ms. Rainer accepted my paper with a happy demeanor and a big smile, which sure as hell didn't fool me. I wonder how Cooper inherited his stepmother's conniving demeanor when he wasn't even her kid. I shrugged my shoulders, then headed off to practice.

At practice, Cooper had an arrogance about him, which immediately showed me that he was confident he couldn't get into any trouble in this town as long as his parents were in advantageous positions. As long as he was in this town, he could do no wrong. As long as I was in this town, he could essentially dictate how my life played out. With that thought, I made sure to reverse the roles. I was done being the pawn in Cooper's little game.

We scrimmaged during practice since we had a game the next day. I was regulated to third line duty until Brimmer put me on second line midway through practice. Being on the second line meant I could scrimmage against Cooper. Goody. Taking full advantage of this opportunity to play against him, I poked, slashing, chopped and stuck him during the

scrimmaging. At one he got so fed up he two-handed me, which in reply I calmly told him that he would pay for it later. The next shift, he took a pass with his head down and I steamrolled him at the blue line. It looked like a makeshift graduation cap-tossing on the ice as his glove, stick, and helmet flew through the air. I looked down at him, yelled “Yard Sale”, then skated away. Brimmer immediately blew the whistle and tended to Cooper. Kallock and Emerson were extremely upset about me laying out Cooper and began skating towards me. The assistant coaches snapped into drone mode and immediately intercepted them and steered them towards the bench. Kallock used his dazzling intellect to call me a pussy as he skated away. Brimmer pulled Cooper to his feet, gathered his helmet, stick, and gloves and led him to the locker room. Tags came to me on the bench and gave me congratulations and laughed as he explained what Cooper looked like as he crumpled to the ice. Five minutes later, Brimmer came back on the ice and told me that it was practice and I shouldn’t set out to injure my own teammates. I gave him a half-assed nod and a shrug in response.

Since Cooper was out for the rest of practice, I took his spot and Tags moved up and took mine. Giving Tags the chance to skate was an unrealized benefit of me bundling Cooper. Tags was a better player anyways, and would probably help the team more than Cooper would. I hoped that I knocked his punk ass out of playing tomorrow night. I knew that I wasn’t going to because of my academically ineligible status, so him not playing would give me some consolation.

Chapter 34

Unfortunately, Cooper played against Bedford. But he didn't play well, which made me happy. The team as a whole didn't play well, although Tags was a bright spot in an otherwise dismal game. We lost the game 6-4, with Tags scoring two while Kallock and Gardiner both added one each. The team had only won a single game without me in the lineup. If Cooper had any common sense and really wanted to win a state championship, he would put these differences aside for a common goal. But he was a greedy, self-serving, arrogant prick, and as long as he got what he wanted, that's all that mattered. This entire town exhibited those flaws. Must be something in the water.

I read the morning paper before school, and a blurb about the game carried the headline, "*Bedford beats Adams-less Branton, 6-4*". Even when I wasn't playing I was still making the headlines. I cut the blurb out, and when I got to school I made four copies and put one in each locker of the goon squad. Granted it was a dick thing to do, but I didn't really care. Smugly happy, I ran into Tags on the way to class and congratulated him a on good game, but he just shrugged his shoulders and said that once I came back, he was back to playing very little. I joked about knocking Cooper out Friday so he could take his place in Saturday's game. "You'd do the team a favor", he responded.

Surprisingly, I didn't hear any response or smart-ass comment from the goon squad. Maybe they were humbled or just confused as to what to do next to try and screw me over. I got my paper back from Ms. Rainer with a "C" on it; I didn't care about the grade, I was just happy that I was going to be able to play hockey again. It felt like forever since I last laced the skates up, and I made sure to make the most of it at Saturday's game.

Saturday's game was against Brewer High School, who Brimmer said was an average team. Their goalie, however, was above average. He'd won close games for them throughout the season, and reading the game recaps always mentioned him making key saves late in the game to preserve wins. There wasn't a goalie I hadn't solved yet this year, and I knew I would have no problem solving this one.

On the way to the game, I got fired up listening to my power mix of Linkin' Park, Jug, and AC/DC. I wanted to go out tonight and blow this team out of the water and show everyone that I can best any goalie, no matter how good he was made out to be. The black and red monster was in full force tonight, ready to cheer and jaunt after having a few solid hours to get

their boozing done before the game. Before we even stepped on the ice, we could hear the crowd through the locker room walls, and they were anxious for a good game. Brimmer gave us his pre-game speech and attempted Herb Brooks impression. We came in for the “Marauder’s” chant and headed to the ice. As soon as I stepped out of the locker room, I heard a “Let’s go, Danny!” I looked to my right and saw Big and the crew standing with my mom. My friends coming to the game gave me added incentive to play even better. Pennywise’s “Bro Hymn” blared throughout the rink during warm-ups, riling the fans up even more.

I wasted no time putting us in the lead. After a botched clearing pass by the Brewer defenseman, I swooped in, made the defenseman drop his jock and the goalie look amateur as I buried it five-hole. The monster got noisy and I gave my friends a salute as I skated back to the bench. If there was a game for my friends to come to, with the exception of the game where I broke the scoring record, this was it. I simply couldn’t be stopped. Double teaming by Brewer only added to their frustrations; I only embarrassed anyone who attempted to take the puck away from me and the goalie would be seeing me in his nightmares as I burned him for five goals. After the fourth, he got an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for smashing his stick in half over the crossbar. I watched him and laughed, knowing that I was in his head and that if we ever crossed paths again, I would have the upper advantage. Big and the crew enjoyed the game immensely, cheering every time I scored and subsequently ripping on the goalie. I laughed as Jimbo screamed at the goalie, saying “You can’t stop him, you can’t stop him” and whipping his shirt over his head. Jimbo drew the curiosity of the entire rink as he acted like a madman, causing my mom to blush and attempt to hide her face. The game ended up in a 10-3 blowout; my five goals and two assists just added to my already staggering point total. After Brimmer’s post-game speech in the locker room, I headed outside to meet up with my mom and the crew.

“Look at you, Mr. All-Star. You ran a clinic out there”, Big said.

“Anyone could run a clinic out there. It’s just too easy for me sometimes”, I responded.

“You are that team, man. They suck without you.”

“Oh, I know. Cooper and his crew seem to think they would be better off without me. They’ve only won one game without me in the lineup. They’re just too ignorant to realize it. On a lighter note, who wants to go party?”

“Hell, yeah. I already got some brews in the car”, said Jimbo.

“Alright, follow me home, I’ll shower and change, then we’ll go get fuddled.”

“You got it.”

“Hold on, boys. Who is the DD tonight?” my mom asked.

Shanny volunteered. Reluctantly.

“Okkkaaay. I’ll see you at home, Danny.”

“Ok, Mom.”

Chapter 35

After showering and getting dressed to kill, I headed out with the crew.

“Where’s the party tonight?” asked Jimbo.

“Kallock’s. I’m 100% sure that Cooper and his crew are gonna be there since it’s at Kallock’s, so count on us fighting tonight”, I said.

“Good”, Shanny said. “Those kids need a serious ass whooping.”

“I got dibs on Coat Rack”, said Big.

“I’ll fight whoever I can get my hands on, but after they got whooped last time, it’s unlikely that they’ll wanna fight. So we’ll hafta instigate it”, I said.

“Oh, don’t worry, homie. I’ll gladly do the honors”, said Big.

“You got it, dude”, I said. “Let’s do it.”

“What is with these kids, anyways? Do they honestly think they’re good enough to play in college? I’m pretty sure that your team, without you, would get beat by Central’s JV team. I have a better chance of becoming the Grand Wizard of the KKK than these kids playing hockey in college. On the other hand, doesn’t it just make you feel special to be hated by so many kids?” Big said.

I laughed. “They’re in for a rude awakening come next year when they realize that they went through all this trouble to end up getting cut after the first day for any team they tryout for. I’ll have the last laugh, anyways.”

We parked down the street and if the party hadn’t been broken up yet, it was going to be really soon. We could sneak a few beers in before the cops showed up. The party was loud and everybody was shoulder to shoulder when we opened the door. We found some room in the kitchen, cracked open our 30 rack, and killed some time drinking beers while waiting for the inevitable. Naturally, Big was getting odd looks because he wasn’t entirely white. The sheltered attitude of this town just presented itself in it’s cautiousness about people of a different color. Some of the girls, however, were fascinated with Big, and of course, he loved every minute of it. He flirted with girl after girl, and I’m sure he got more phone numbers in a half hour than I had gotten in my entire life. Cooper’s sister stopped over to say hi and make small talk before being ordered to stay away from me by her brother. Jimbo gave me a “Did you hit it?” look after he carefully watched her walk away. I just winked and gave him a slight smile.

Our fun ended about a half-hour later when we found out the girl Big was getting cozy with was Kallock's sister. His crew stormed over, Kallock pulled his sister away, and got in Big's face.

"Stay away from my sister."

"She can't help it. I mean look at me. I'm an ebony god", Big quipped.

"If I turn the lights out, she wouldn't be able see you. Unless, of course, you smiled", Kallock mused.

I saw that look in Big's eyes. Uh oh. "You run a big game for someone who can't back it up, chump."

"Let's go outside and take care of it then", Kallock challenged.

"You suburban kids sure are stupid. I guess you didn't learn your lesson last time", said Big.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jimbo getting jittery and clenching his fists. I've seen him turn from Gandhi to gargoyles in the blink of an eye. I had a feeling that I was gonna witness one of those moments sooner rather than later. Big began backing up to the door, challenging Kallock to come outside. Big was smart enough to realize that if he turned his back, Kallock would probably suckerpunch him in the back of the head. Everyone in the party stepped back and made a path for the soon-to-be combatants and I cautiously followed after them, scanning over the crowd in the process. I didn't want some prick bottling Big.

Although the ground was covered in snow and it was about five degrees outside, I don't think either Big or Kallock realized. Big was too pissed to focus on anything else except tearing Kallock's head off his shoulders. As they assumed fighting stances in the narrowly shoveled walkway leading to the house, I stepped on the porch and felt a shoulder plow into my back. I fell headfirst down the stairs and into the freezing snow. I landed in a heap and then scrambled to my feet, just in time to see Jimbo grab Cooper out of the crowd and knee him in the groin. Cooper grunted in pain and Jimbo uppercutted him in the jaw, sending him reeling back into the crowd. Big crow-stepped and hit Kallock in the nose, sending him instantly to the ground. Gardiner, attempting to be tough and realizing that I was still trying to gain my bearings, hurried down the stairs and tried to get the first punch in. He threw a terrible right hook which I easily ducked, then I grabbed his shirt and buried my knee into his groin as I pulled him towards me. Shanny hustled across the porch towards Emerson, who immediately began backing into the

crowd, wanting absolutely nothing to do with Shanny after becoming an unfortunate placesetter in the pizza shop.

“Jimbo”, I yelled, “I want Cooper, take this kid!”, and pointed to Gardiner. Jimbo, eyes big and laughing maniacally, stalked over to Gardiner, whose face instantly fell. The people on the porch stood in awe as they watched Branton kids get massacred. Cooper turtled as I punched him in the head, and Kallock threw slow jabs that Big easily dodged and countered. Jimbo was having a grand old time as he inflicted tremendous amounts of pain on Gardiner. Cooper’s sister screamed at me to stop and at one point tried to pull me off of him. I pushed her away and kept punching Cooper. The fight was interrupted by the sounds of sirens and blue lights flashing through the trees as the cops proceeded toward Kallock’s. Big screamed, “Let’s go!” I finished Cooper off by dropping a knee with a satisfying crack as it connected with his nose.

The crowd dispersed as the sirens grew louder. Kids had been arrested all year for underage drinking, only to be let off when their parents complained and bitched to the administration. Still, nobody wanted the hassle of dealing with the cops, so everyone dropped their beers and ran. We sprinted to Shanny’s car, which we hoped was parked far enough out of the way so that we could leave without being stopped. Jonesy was in front seat with the car turned on and in gear as we piled in and sped off.

“You okay to drive?”

“Yeah, I sobered up once the fight broke out. Do you know where you’re going?”

“No”, I answered. “Just drive. Actually, the lighthouse is like a mile from here. Just stay on this road until I tell you when to turn.”

“Is that the lighthouse at Nashantuck Beach?” asked Jimbo, suddenly reverting back into his Gandhi role.

“Yes”, I answered, surprised. “How did you know?”

“I’m doing a project on state landmarks for history. The lighthouse is one of the landmarks on the list”, he responded.

“Jeez, Jimbo, forever the academician”, I quipped.

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

As Jonesy drove towards the lighthouse, Jimbo just started laughing. “I love fuckin kids up! WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

We all laughed and high-fived each other. Ten minutes later, we were still driving towards the lighthouse, but Jonesy was taking it slow because the road was icy in some spots. He was chatting with Shanny in the front seat when he blew the stop sign.

“Whoops.” He looked in the rearview mirror just to make sure a cop didn’t pull out after him. He breathed a sigh of relief and proceeded driving. He made a right turn when I told him, and that’s when we heard the sirens. We froze, hoping the siren wasn’t for us. Jonesy glided over to the side of the road, and the police car stopped behind us.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck”, Jonesy panicked.

“Just play it cool. Nobody act drunk. All he can bust us on is blowing the stop sign”, I said.

“That’s not all. I grabbed our beers when the fight started. They’re in the trunk”, Jonesy said.

“Shit! Alright, guys, just, just play it cool. We’ll be fine.” I encouraged.

That absurdly bright light that cops have on their cars illuminated the inside of our car. Everybody was frozen still, praying to God that we got out of this unscathed. One cop came to the passenger side, and the other one came to the driver’s side window.

“We are we off to tonight, fellas?” the first cop asked.

“Just heading home, sir”, Jonesy answered.

“Must be urgent. You didn’t stop at the sign back there.”

“I know, sir. I didn’t see it until the last second”, Jonesy responded. The second cop shined his flashlight over our faces.

The second cop spoke up. “You fellas been drinking tonight?”

“No, sir”, we responded in unison.

“You lying to me?”

“No, sir.”

“Step out of the car please. One at a time.”

A lump formed in my throat. I knew we were fucked. I knew that once we gave our names and they were run through the computer, knowing my luck, Cooper’s father would be on duty tonight and have me arrested. Cop 2 sat us down on the curb while Cop 1 took our identification and radioed the station. He came back in what was the longest five minutes of my life and told Jonesy to open the trunk. That was it, and we all knew it. It would take a sudden

bout of blindness for the cop not to see the beers. He reached in, pulled out the 30 rack of Bud Light and told us we were under arrest for minors in possession of alcohol. I slowly saw my hockey season going down the tubes, because anything involving alcohol was a minimum of five games. There weren't many games left in the season, and missing five games would put a serious dent in my shot at breaking the single season point total. The thought of my mother's disappointment struck me harder than all of this. I promised her I would stay out of trouble, and I let her down. I was dreading making the phone call for her to come get me from jail. My heart sank to my stomach as the cop slapped the cuffs on and put me in the car.

Chapter 36

My mother cried as I told her. I've experienced pain in the form of concussions and broken bones, but nothing hurt more than hearing my mom cry on the phone. I was so disappointed and upset with myself that I had let everything get out of control. I was furious that I was letting Cooper and his crew get the best of me, and just frustrated that me being better than all these kids at hockey had translated into this. It just seemed so ridiculous to me. They'd been out to get me the minute I set foot in Branton, and undoubtedly with the help of their parents. Nothing I had done here had worked out, with the exception of hockey, and that was rapidly fading from my life. This was a town so self-absorbed and greedy that it made me sick to my stomach. I often heard the phrase "small-town mentality"; somebody had this town in mind when coining that phrase.

I barely slept that night after my mother bailed the five of us out. We were all thinking what none of us wanted to say; we messed up big time. Certainly this was going to get back to the crew's coach at Central, and the repercussions for them were going to be equally as bad for me. After the crew and I exchanged humbled farewells in the morning, my mother sat me down at the kitchen table. The expression on her face said it all.

"Daniel. I'm very disappointed in you."

I just hung my head.

"This is going to follow you around for the rest of your life. Are you aware of that? When you apply to college, when you apply for a job, wherever you go."

"I know, Mom."

"How did it come to this, Daniel? You were doing so well here. You stayed out of trouble. I thought you smartened up, that you were past all the trouble you had in Boston. I guess I was wrong.

She wanted to say more, but instead she just stormed out of the room. I just sat at the table and let her words sink in. She was right. I was doing well, a near 180 from where I had been. I didn't think that telling her what got me in trouble helped pay for the rest while we were in Boston. Regardless, she was upset and disappointed. I was disappointed in myself for disappointing her. My battle with Cooper wasn't over yet. If I was going down, I was bringing him with me.

Chapter 37

My arrest had spread through the school like wildfire. A number of kids had gotten arrested, but I was the most recognizable name of all. I knew that at practice Brimmer would tell me that I was done for five games for violation of “team policy”. Fuck his stupid team policy. I wanted to shove his team policy up his ass. Whispers were abound that without me able to play for the next couple of games, hopes for a berth in the tournament were rapidly disappearing. I would have been happy to hear that because it would have pissed the goon squad off, but due to the circumstances, it didn’t really faze me. I was more focused on not being screwed over for the rest of my life.

Cooper was relishing the situation; on my way to class in the morning, he made the sound of bomb dropping, causing the rest of the goon squad to laugh. “Laugh it up”, I thought. I’ll be getting the last laugh. Cooper’s nose looked slightly off kilter and he had slight bruising around both of his eyes. I pointed at my nose and tapped my elbow, and he responded by flipping me off. I courteously sent it back to him. I turned the corner in the hallway and headed to class, the beginning of a long day where I wouldn’t be relieved once it was over. I was going to be suspended for nearly the rest of the season, and maybe get the chance to play the last couple of games and maybe the tournament if we got lucky and made it. My thoughts were interrupted by Taggart as he yelled my name over the hordes of people going to class.

“Adams!”

I looked up and gave him a nod.

“You got a few minutes after school?”

“After this weekend, I won’t be doing much of anything, so, yeah, I’ll have plenty of free time.”

“Good. I gotta talk to you.” He seemed excited about something, but I couldn’t fathom about what. “Meet me by my car after school. I’m parked in the last row in the corner by the football field.”

“Alright, see you then”, I said.

Tags seemed overly excited. College? Maybe recruited to a decent school? Got with some girl? I couldn’t figure it out. I’d have to wait until class was over.

However, when I went outside after class to meet Tags, I couldn't find his car. I called his phone to figure out where he was. "Oh, sorry man, I should have called you. I had to drive my sister home because she couldn't find a ride. I'll see you at practice."

Practice. Sweet. Practice for the team, death sentence for me. I wasn't looking forward to listening to Brimmer give his spiel, again, about violation of team policy and how we should be smarter about our actions. Cooper and the goon squad were going to be elated about Brimmer's decision, no doubt about that. However, Tags' excitement about something nagged in the back of my head. He knew about my arrest, so why was he excited?

I took my sweet old time getting to practice. I was in no hurry to get somewhere I had no desire to be and to hear news I didn't care to hear. I walked in at 3:00 for the 3:30 practice halfway through Brimmer's pre-practice talk. The team all looked at me when I walked in; clearly they already knew the situation. Emerson looked over with a smirk, Kallock was laughing quietly to himself, while Gardiner and Cooper just smiled. To grab a hockey stick and crack them all over the head wouldn't be the wisest decision; I decided to hear the last bit of Brimmer's speech before leaving.

"...better decision-makers. We've worked too hard all season to let it go down the drain. I hope we all learn our lesson from this." Brimmer then looked at me. "Danny, you know team policy. I'm sorry you have to be the example, but we all signed the 'zero tolerance' contract when the season started. I expect you at all the games, but you can't practice."

At that point, I noticed Tags out of the corner of my eye. His jaw was clenched, and he looked, for lack of a better term, livid. He rolled his eyes and shook his head, and I'm sure that if there was something to throw or break, he would've done it without thinking twice. I knew what he was thinking; my conversation with him after practice proved it.

I left after Brimmer told everyone to get dressed. I was pissed, but shooting my mouth off wouldn't have helped my cause at all. Since I couldn't practice or play, I decided my only option was to focus on my studies. My name was mud, but I could at least save face by pulling decent marks. Two hours into my homework, my house phone rang.

"Hello."

"Danny, it's Tags."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Do you have an hour or so to spare?"

“Yeah, why?”

“My dad wants to talk to you.”

“Your dad? Why?”

“Just come over. You know where I live?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, see you soon, bye.”

I was confused. Why would his father want to talk to me?

Chapter 38

I pulled in the driveway at Tags and knocked on his door. Tags greeted me and told me to come inside, leading me to the kitchen. He called his father to come downstairs. Tags was literally a carbon copy of his father, albeit much younger.

Mr. Taggert extended his hand. “Danny, pleasure to meet you.”

I shook his hand. “Same to you.”

“I had Mike call you over because I wanted to talk to you. I’m seeing what this town is doing to your reputation, and I’ve seen it happen all too often. You’re a good hockey player, son, and I don’t want this town to ruin the game for you. This town ruined it for Mike and his older brother, but you got something special, and you can go places with it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I understand you got arrested for minor in possession Saturday night.”

“Yeah”, I quietly answered.

“You weren’t the only member of the team to get arrested Saturday night.”

I recoiled. “What do you mean.”

“First of all, if you haven’t figured it out about this town, everybody knows everything. I mean everything. Unless you were born and raised here, people don’t take kindly to you. Anything different or threatening to their way of life, they shun it like the plague. This town is so in bed with each other that if one of them pissed the bed, no one would know who did it.”

That caused Tags and I to laugh.

“You laugh, but it’s true. However, I know everything that goes on behind the scenes in this town. What you’ve seen so far is only the surface.”

“How could it get more complicated than this?”

“I’ve seen Branton High Hockey for eight miserable years, first for Michael’s brother, and then Michael. I’ve seen Brimmer ruin kid’s lives. I’ve seen him wreck the confidence of kid after kid. And it wasn’t like these kids were jerks or bad at hockey. I’ve seen some good kids ride the pine at Branton, while kids who didn’t possess half the skill play first line and be completely over their head. You can thank the parents for that one. I’m sure Michael told you about the Board of Trustees and all that self-promoting garbage.”

I nodded.

“What these parents do is teach their kids to have everything spoon-fed to them. Half these kids don’t know how to wipe their ass properly. These parents kiss ass and grovel so their kids can play. They backstab, lie, cheat, and throw their morals out the window to advance their own kids. But tell me, Danny, do you think any of these kids are going to make something of themselves?”

“Definitely not in hockey. I would say Mike has a better chance of playing somewhere than the rest of these kids.”

“Exactly. Michael isn’t going pro. He knows that. I never told him he was going to, only to have him upset and heartbroken when he ended up not playing anywhere. I’m not going to do that to my own kid. My kids should know how to get somewhere based on merit and intelligence, and I’ve parented that way.”

“You and my mom would get along great. She feels the same way.”

“I’ve met your mom. Nice lady. She was relieved to know that nothing is going to happen with your alcohol incident.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It happens every year. Kids get arrested, but nothing ever happens. Parents complain and say ‘My kid wasn’t there’, then threaten litigation against the town. All you’ll get is a slap on the wrist. Anyways, but back to this godforsaken town and Saturday night. You weren’t the only one to have a run in with the police. Mike Cooper, Rick Emerson, Brian Kallock, and Jim Gardiner were pulled over Saturday night too, in Cooper’s car.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I don’t think Michael told you. I’m a volunteer firefighter in the town, so I need to have a police scanner to respond to calls and such. I heard your call go through, and I heard theirs. But guess who was working that night?”

“Let me take a shot in the dark. Mr. Cooper.”

“You’re no slouch. When Mike Cooper’s name was mentioned, a voice immediately cut off the dispatcher and told her he was en route to the scene. I wouldn’t have thought much of it because Cooper’s kid gets away with murder in this town. But there was no denying it; four males, black Ford truck. I know Cooper’s kid drives a black Ford truck, and those four are always together.

I just shook my head in disgust. “Unbelievable. So I get busted and they walk?”

“I know, Danny. It’s how this town operates. But I have something else to tell you that will make what I just said seem amateur.”

I nervously laughed. “It gets more complicated?”

“Complicated is an understatement. Mike Cooper, to be honest, is just not a good hockey player. Michael is better and clearly should be playing over him.”

“Without a doubt”, I said.

“But the reason you see Cooper play, along with his dad being the professional ass-kisser in Branton, is because Cooper’s dad has Brimmer in his pocket.”

“How so?” This should be interesting.

“Ever notice how you never really have early morning practices?”

“Yeah.”

“It doesn’t look like much now, but you never have early morning practices because Brimmer is too drunk to get out of bed in the morning. The guy could drink a brewery and not think anything of it. He frequents Tippy’s, the local bar, seven nights a week. Stays until close. But at that point, he’s too drunk to realize that he shouldn’t drive home.”

“But he drives home anyways?”

“Yeah. But, three or four years ago, I heard a suspected drunken driving call come over the scanner. Gerry Cooper responded to the call. The name of the driver? Andrew Brimmer.”

“You have got to be shitting me”, I said, flabbergasted.

“I wish it were so. That year, Cooper’s kid was a freshman. Brimmer never got fired, and Cooper’s kid suddenly started playing a lot more. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Brimmer and Cooper cut a deal. The funniest thing about it was seeing Cooper’s kid get decked game after game and not score a single goal the entire year. Parents were floored, but Brimmer held true to his end of the deal to save his own ass. Brimmer is a coward, Danny. He thinks he’s some hotshot in this town. Unless somebody kisses his ass, they don’t get anywhere. The minute a parent challenges him, he takes it out on the kid.”

I honestly couldn’t believe it. You’d think there were millions of dollars of something more valuable at stake than a spot on a half-rate hockey team. It all added up. Brimmer called schools to get scouts to look at Cooper because if he didn’t, Mr. Cooper would have him throw in jail for drunk driving. When Cooper said “jump”, Brimmer asked “how high?” I found it absurd that everyone was risking so much over empty dreams and dead-end roads. I wouldn’t be

shocked to find out that everybody was sleeping together too; that's how messed up this town seemed to me.

Mr. Taggert cut into my thoughts. "I'm telling you this, Danny, because you seem like an alright kid and I don't wanna see this town ruin you. Michael's brother hung his skates up after he graduated; Brimmer ruined the game for him. You're a phenomenal player and I think you have potential to go somewhere. I don't want you to get discouraged due to the unfortunate circumstances you were placed into."

"Wow. I just thought it was a bunch of kids who were pissed off that I came in and took their spots."

"It's just that, but with a twist. Cooper reacted the way he did because he was shaking in his skates that his time in Branton was over. You're so good that he was afraid Brimmer was going to give his spot to you. Gerry Cooper has probably been leaning on him more than ever since you showed up. On another note, I'm glad that you've stood up to these assholes. Every kid has been too afraid to do it; Cooper thinks he's invincible, and as long as his boyfriends run with him, they think they're invincible, too. Just keep doing what you're doing, and when this season gets over, Cooper and his buddies will be gone. You won't have to deal with this crap next year."

"Thank you, Mr. Taggert. I'm glad there is some shred of dignity in this town."

"Just keep your head up, kiddo."

I left Tags' house with the whole situation in perspective. My arrival in Branton had put a metaphorical stick in the spokes of the bike Cooper was riding to what he thought was going to be Northeastern. I happened to be placed into a situation where I was just plain not welcome. Everybody here thought that their life was figured out, that they could run the town how they felt and crush underfoot anyone who stood in their way. I didn't like being the example of their illusory power. I knew I was going down; I was gonna bring those pricks down with me.

Chapter 39

Mr. Taggert was my proverbial Dr. Watson. He had opened every door to the intricacies of this town, and now that I knew how it operated, I knew what I had to do to prevent from being caught up in it. I called Big to tell him everything Mr. Taggert just told me. The reaction from Big was that of nonchalance. You could have told him his house blew up and he still would have acted nonchalantly towards it. He did say that now that I had some downtime, I had no reason not to come to Boston and party like old times. Getting out of Branton and back to my roots would probably do me some good, allowing me to clear my head and think about my next move. Friday night, Big told me. I agreed.

The rest of the week went by without a hitch. Since I couldn't practice, I got my homework done and to bed early. The more I slept, the weirder my dreams got; none about getting with any girls, winning state championships, or winning the lottery. Thursday night's dream followed me into Friday morning.

While driving to a game, the weather outside turned from 90 degrees and sunny to driving snow and sub-zero temperatures. I slowed my car down because I couldn't see anything, and that's when I smashed through wooden dividers in the road and began plummeting down a cliff. Panicking, I opened my car door and jumped out, falling to the earth when a condor swooped out of sky and grabbed me. The driving snow had become tepid rain, and the snow covered landscape gave way to an Amazon-like forest. I became unexplainably relaxed until the condor dove to the ground and released me into a field of thorny brush. Struggling and slashing my way through, I came to a clearing where a Jeep was waiting. There was a man of indistinguishable features in the drivers' seat who told me to get in. We sped through the jungle on a rutted path when he took a sharp right and headed down a new path. The flora became immensely thick, shrouding everything in darkness except for a faint red light that slowly became brighter as we drove closer to it. I felt the driver release the gas, but the Jeep lurched forward as if being pulled by some unseen force. The light became blinding, and I heard a voice call out, "There's no going back now, Danny." Squinting, I saw Mr. Cooper's face peering through the red light. He was laughing like a psycho, and it got louder as we drew closer to the light. Suddenly, a pair of massive hands was pulling me roughly out of the car, and I was being half-dragged, half-carried through the jungle. The voice behind the hands yelled, "You need to run. You need to get out of here. Now! Before they get you. COME ON!"

I jerked up out of the dream, sweating and panting, and grabbing onto anything I could get a hold of. When I realized it was just a dream, I took a deep breath and blinked a few times. The dream seemed so real; the smells, the touches, the noises, the voices. I felt my back for talon marks from the condor, and then checked my arms for scratches and cuts from the thorny brush. I slowly laid back down, the dream running through my head. I knew what it meant, there was no need to consult Freud on this one, but the symbolism confused me. I needed to get out of this town, and fast. Meeting up with the crew in Boston would allow me a little stability and time to compose myself. Friday night couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter 40

I left my house at 7:00 Friday night, telling my mom that I would be back sometime tomorrow. I drove to Braintree T and grabbed the next train all the way into Davis Square. Watching the double-deckers whir by and seeing the congestion on the city streets just reinforced my good decision to not drive. Riding the train gave me some time to think; about what I should do next, what I could do next year, if I should even stay at Branton High next year, etc.

Big and the crew met me at the station, and we drove off to the party. My old Central teammates were everywhere; some were happy to see me, other's weren't. Can't win them all, I guess. One thing I missed about the Central was the amount of absurdly hot girls. Branton's average girls would fare better being featured in a Milk-Bone commercial. Plenty of past girlfriends and old flames came over to say hello, and I even got a couple of offers to spend the night. Being back to where I came from really made me forget about Branton and all the drama that was going on. Big was right: I needed a night like this.

I headed out to the porch to bum a cigarette off someone. Social smoking was a fixture at Central parties; somebody could find any brand of cigarette and people were always willing to share. Jimbo was sitting on the porch, beer in one hand and cigarette dwindling in the other. I strolled over, asked for a smoke, and he handed over his pack of Marlboros and lighter. The first drag immediately relaxed me, and coupled with the alcohol, the effect was intensified.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Yeah, Jimbo. I needed a night like this."

"I hear you. Parties just aren't the same without you."

"Yeah."

"Big told me how much worse things have gotten. Those kids can run wild and nothing happens to them, huh?"

"It's ridiculous, Jimbo. As long as they're in that town, they'll get away with everything. If they go to college, they're in for a real eye-opener when they realize they aren't above the rules anymore."

"We should just kidnap them, bring them back here, and kick the shit out of them", Jimbo suggested.

"That's a good idea. Then they wouldn't be in their town anymore", I joked.

Jimbo then got serious. "You're holding up okay though, right?"

“I’m hanging in there. It just sucks. I can’t take a crap without getting in trouble for it. I’m having these weird dreams, man. I wake up after they’re through and have a hard time falling asleep because I’m trying to break them down.”

“I’m good at interpreting dreams. Hit me”, Jimbo said.

“Naw man, it’s just messed up.”

“Come on, man. There’s always something behind every dream.”

Normally, I don’t talk about my dreams. It’s too weird and personal. But the booze loosened me up a little, so I decided it wouldn’t hurt. I told Jimbo my dream.

“Oh, come on, that’s nothing. Clearly the dream is all about how you need to get out of the town before you get sucked in.”

“I know that, man. But the condor and everything else in the dream I don’t get.”

“The sunny weather at the start of the dream symbolizes you at Central. Nice weather, relaxing, smooth sailing. The snow, cold weather, and falling off the cliff is your reaction to moving to Branton. The hesitancy, slowing down, unable to see two feet in front of you, that’s your psyche reacting to uncertainty. The condor? That’s the coach making you feel welcome, picking you up when you’re falling down, and coupled with the nice weather, you get to relax a bit. When you get dropped into the thorns and stuff, that’s the beginning of your troubles, with all the cuts and scrapes reflecting damage to your confidence and sense of well-being. It gets easier from here. Cooper’s dad is self-explanatory. He’s in the driver’s seat in your proverbial ride to hell. The red light obviously represents Branton and how it’s overcoming you.”

Go on, I thought.

“That last part of your dream, pay attention to that. Something is telling you to get out while you can. Don’t underestimate the human mind. Here’s a good example. Your presence in Branton is like William the Conqueror arriving in England. Harold Godwinson was all set to take over England and thought it was his show. William shows up, screws up his plans and then assumes power, so Harold gets mad pissed and send his army to prevent William from taking over England.”

I watched enough of the History Channel to know about the Battle of Hastings. But I wasn’t really sure where Jimbo was going with this.

“Ok. How about giving me a different analogy. I know what happened in the Battle of Hastings, but how does that apply to me?”

“Alright. It would be like Locke and his crew sitting around talking about how knowledge is derived from the mind, while Kant and his crew roll up talking about how knowledge is derives from the senses.”

“What?” I was so confused.

“You’re like Kant. You don’t fit in with Locke’s way of life, so he doesn’t want you around, just like William not fitting into Harold’s plans. You’re an outsider, Danny.”

Oh. Jimbo was both crazy and freakishly intelligent. He had all the ingredients necessary to be an evil genius.

“Wow. How do you know this stuff so well?”

“I got a mind like a sponge. I’m a history buff, and I think philosophy is cool. I didn’t want to throw any Freud into that dream analysis because he would have thought it had something to with getting with your mom, and that’s just weird. Plus, getting with your mom is my job.”

He had a big joker’s grin on his face as I punched him in the arm. “Are all goalies like this?” I asked.

“You will see goalies take over the world one day. I promise you that.”

I shuddered. That’s a world that would be odd, no doubt about it. I finished my beer, stomped out my cigarette butt, and went back into the house.

Chapter 41

After thanking the Central crew and popping a few aspirin to fix my hangover, I hopped on the train to head home. Already 11:00, I had to be at the rink an hour before the game, which started at 1:00. Not particularly caring about being on time or not, I stopped home to shower and change. My mom greeted me at the door on her way out, joking that I must have had a good night because I looked like hell. I smiled and went upstairs to shower.

I left my house at quarter past 12. Not being able to play was killing me inside; I had no motivation for much of anything with the exception of trying to pull respectable marks this semester to overshadow all the other drama in my life. I had to endure the humiliation of walking past all the parents on the way to the locker room amid the glances and whispers. I saw Mr. Cooper in the throng of people outside and made eye contact with him. This wasn't an acknowledgement kind of eye contact; I had something to say to Mr. Cooper with actually saying it. The look I shot him wiped the smug look clean off his face. It was a "Give it time, before it's all said and done, I'll be the one laughing" kind of look. I finished my silent dialogue with a slight smile, causing Mr. Cooper to tilt his head slightly in a pondering motion. Satisfied, I strode into the locker room.

Everyone in the locker room was halfway dressed, a few kids with just the bottoms on, a few taping sticks and tightening helmets. I got a smattering of "hellos" and a few sly looks complete with smirks from the goon squad. I laughed internally to myself, waiting for the moment the goon squad realized that they were in way over their heads without me to carry the team. Brimmer ambled in, probably slightly hungover from his liver-annihilating choice of activities the night before. Though, I shouldn't talk much, since I got wrecked last night, but I wasn't a boozehound like him.

"Ok, guys, big game today, big game. Ossining is a good team. They're big, they're fast, and they move the puck well. We gotta come out early..."

I tuned Brimmer out and stared off into space. I kept contemplating my next move in the game between me and Cooper; I knew that as long as he was in this town, he was untouchable. I had to get him outside of town limits, I just didn't know how. The "Marauders" chant broke my train of thought as the team headed out to the ice. I heard "Bro Hymn" rocking the arena, and it made my blood boil and my heart ache. I loved the few seconds before walking on the ice

surface, with the music blaring, the adrenaline pumping, and the fans completely crazy. There's nothing like the feeling. I reluctantly made my way to the stands.

I saw Mr. Taggert sitting away from the Branton parents, so I decided to join him. He greeted me with a handshake and an introduction to his wife, and we settled down to watch the game. Mr. Taggert never came to the games. He was sick of watching the overdramatized soap opera that was Branton High Hockey and had stopped coming to the games when Tags found out that he was going to be nothing more than a third-line player. However, now that I was out of the picture, Tags was getting more playing time, and as his dad told me, the days were numbered where he could watch his youngest boy play hockey. I respected and understood his decision.

Watching the game just made me want to play. As much as this season had become about me without any consideration for the team, I was itching to play. Seeing Cooper, Gardiner, and Emerson screw up routine plays made me want to put on my equipment and show them how it's done. I did have a slight enjoyment watching the goon squad choke and struggle to generate any offense. Brimmer had one thing right about Ossining: they were big. One thing I did notice, however, that Brimmer failed to take into consideration, was that an hour long bus ride for Ossining had left them sluggish out of the gate. The second period would field a different team, a team that had their "bus legs" behind them and itching to make up for a slow first period. Any bounces or loose pucks in the second period were going to work in Ossining's favor.

The first period ended with Branton up 1-0 and the monster unusually quiet. Tags had scored the lone goal, causing his parents to go bananas with high-fives and hugs. They weren't happy for the team. They were happy for their boy. Telling them that I would be back for the second period, I walked over to the locker room to hear Brimmer's analysis of the first period. Sure to be breathtaking, I thought.

As usual, Brimmer was calling everyone pussies and questioning their skill as hockey players, a great motivational technique I'm sure he read in *"The Idiot's Guide to Being a Terrible Hockey Coach"*. I tuned out again as he droned on and on. My thoughts were once again broken by the "Marauders" chant and subsequent heading to the ice. Cooper strutted by on the way out and said, "I told you we'd be fine without you." I chortled at his comment and retorted, "We'll see about that."

I watched our team get dominated the entire second period. I counted two clean breakouts out of our defensive end, only to have the wingers cough the puck up and the Ossining regain control. I laughed to myself as I observed the Ossining goalie stretching to stay loose nearly the entire period, facing only two weak shots in the final five minutes. Kline, on the other hand, stood on his head for the difficult shots, but let the routine shots in. Just another thing to add to the list in the enigma that is a goalie. Mr. Taggert just shook his head at the futility that Branton displayed and the aggravation of seeing his son play only two shifts the entire period. Ossining walked into the locker room with a 5-1 lead after two periods. Pulling out his *“Idiot’s Guide to Being a Terrible Hockey Coach”*, instead of pointing out where the team went wrong, Brimmer went into an obscenity-laced tirade with enough spit to power wash a house. Great, now, go get ‘em team. I just shook my head in disgust as he finished with some charming comments. A disenchanted “Marauders” chant followed Brimmer’s departure from the locker room. I was sure to be in Cooper’s vision as he exited the locker room.

“Go get ‘em guys, show the team you don’t need me”, I ribbed.

“Fuck you, Adams.” The rest of the goon squad echoed Cooper.

I watched in enjoyment as Ossining stuffed any offensive attempt that Branton mustered. I laughed out loud at one point as Cooper took a pass, tried to skate, then fell flat on his face and lost the puck in our zone, leading to a goal. I saw Mr. Cooper in my peripheral vision mouth something not so nice accompanied with a menacing stare. I just looked at him and continued laughing. The rest of the period just added to my enjoyment; I watched each member of the goon squad get leveled at least twice, causing all of them to duck hits the rest of the game. Mr. Taggert joked that nothing had changed in relation to Cooper’s freshman year as he got solidly leveled three or four more times. The score ended up in a 11-2 shellacking after Ossining pounded in goal after goal, with Brimmer’s face turning a deeper shade of crimson each time. No wonder why the guy drank. If I had to coach this team, without me of course, I would probably hit the bottle, too. After bidding adieu to the Taggert’s, I headed to the locker room to hear Brimmer’s words of wisdom. They never came. He was so disgusted with the team’s performance that he didn’t bother to waste his breath yelling. He just stormed out, smashing the door and kicking over the water bottles, equivalent to what a drunkard would do in a rage. So I supposed his actions fit his demeanor.

I entered after Brimmer did, congratulated Tags on his two goals, and make a point to smile and flip off the goon squad. I carried a smug look and a confident stride as I exited the locker room. My strut told the goon squad that without me for the next four games, they were going to endure beating after beating. Screw 'em. They brought it on themselves.

As much as I wanted to play, I did receive some consolation watching the team struggle without me. I wanted to play so bad and knowing that I couldn't, I bided my free time by continuing to pump my free time into my homework and my studies. I avoided all parties and anything to do with Branton hockey. My grades were improving significantly, including in Ms. Rainer's class, who I'm sure was aware that the administration was keeping a watchful eye over. While my grades soared, the team didn't. After the blowout by Ossining, they lost to Monmouth, Palmer, Shallowater, and suffered a huge 9-0 blowout at the hands of Dunn. They mustered three goals in those four games, and whispers were circulating even more so than before that tournament hopes were dwindling. "Last year's team was better", echoed off the school walls. The newspapers' hardly covered the games, and when they did, the only thing ever mentioned was my suspension for disciplinary reasons and how the team had suffered as a result. A .500 team was hard-pressed to make the tournament and even more hard-pressed to make it out of the first round. The black and red monster had shrunk in numbers with the losing streak, just adding insult to injury. Kids on the team had begun to lose what little confidence they had left.

I could see the trepidation in the eyes of the goon squad. Not so confidently strutting around like they had all year, they seemed distant and downtrodden. Brimmer was nervous, realizing that this may be the first team in over ten years to not make the tournament. All the while, I reveled in the hearsay and aura of depression. I was this team, and the goon squad had finally realized it. Their own selfishness and narcissism forced them into a corner, and I was the only way out. So when Cooper approached me, humble and soft-spoken, I knew they had finally realized that I was the only answer to the team's problems.

"Adams, got a few minutes to talk?"

"Cooper, go fuck yourself. I despise the sound of your voice."

"That's understandable. I wanna make peace."

“Eat shit. You just wanna make peace because you realize now that you aren’t gonna make the tournament with the team you got now, and us working together will help win games. You should be on your hands and knees groveling for me to come back, you piece of shit. “

“You’re right. We’re no good without you. I’ve been a prick all year because I was jealous that you took my spot. This was supposed to be my year, and...” he trailed off.

I was in no mood to hear his sob story. He’d been a conniving bastard all year, cocky as all hell with his puffed up dreams of going to Northeastern. He used his father and stepmother to screw me over, talked shit to Brimmer, and done everything he could to prevent me from playing. Just to see his season go down the tubes, I should have said no. But my desire to play trumped it. I threw Cooper against a wall and leaned in real close to him.

“Listen to me, you fuckin’ coward. I don’t fuckin’ like you. The minute I get you alone, with no witnesses and without your pussy friends to back you up, you’re in serious trouble. They’ll be lucky to find your body. I’m going to play, but I’m not playing for you or anyone else on this team. I’m playing for me, and I’m playing for Tags. You got that? You’ve been a spineless little prick the entire year, hiding behind your mommy and your daddy so you can’t get in trouble. You’re a goddamn coward, Cooper. You suck at hockey, you look anorexic, you talk a big game and can’t back it up unless your friends are with you, and I don’t know who told you that you had a chance at Northeastern, because I pick stuff out of my bellybutton that has more talent than you.” I leaned in closer and got real quiet. “I know that your father has Brimmer in his pocket. I know everything that goes on in this town. I should spit on a piece of shit like you, but I’ll save the saliva for your sister. We’ll win the state championship, thanks to me, and no thanks to you or your friends. I am this team.” I shoved him against the locker again. “Call me cocky, but I’m cocky because I’m good. And I know it. Once this season is over, you better tuck your tail and run when you see me, because if you even so much as steal a glance at me, people in prison will blush when they see what I’ve done to you. You got that?”

He was scared to death. It was hysterical. I wanted to punch him. Really, really bad. But punching him would probably get me in trouble, ending my season for good.

Cooper just stared with his jaw agape, finally sputtering, “Yeah, I got”, while his voice quivered.

“Good. Get the hell out of my face.” I pulled him violently away from the locker and shoved him walking. Prick.

Chapter 42

Having nearly three weeks off made me rusty and dulled my reaction time. Two or three practices and I would be as good as new and ready to run a clinic again. My conditioning had suffered considerably with the layoff; after one or two hard sprints up the ice, my lungs were screaming for air. I tired quicker than usual, but I knew this was the worst it was going to get. It had to be.

Based on our league standing, we had to win the next two games to make it into the tournament. Our two opponents weren't great teams, average at best, but they had the same stakes riding on the game that we did. It was going to be a dogfight for the last two spots in the tournament and no team could afford to lose.

As much as my mind was focused on winning our next two games and securing a tournament berth, a constant nagging in the back of my mind wouldn't go away. Cooper's suddenness to make amends had me confused; while I didn't excel in school, I was people smart, and it told me that Cooper just wasn't swallowing his pride for the greater good. Granted, I knew that he realized that without me they weren't much of a team, but his intentions weren't genuine. That much I was aware. The season was almost over and hopefully I wouldn't have to deal with him again, but I had an odd feeling that Cooper wasn't done playing his games.

Although we hadn't played Alford yet this season, we knew everything about them; one good line, great goaltending, but weak in the area of defensemen. The only worry I had didn't involve my ability to skate all over this team, it was my team lacking the ability to do likewise. These weren't just regular season games; there was much more at stake, and any team could win any game. It depended on who wanted it more. I knew that our team wasn't fueled by confidence, but rather fear; fear that would translate into public shame to be the first team in over ten years to not make a tournament appearance. Being nervous led to mistakes, and in these next two games, we couldn't afford mistakes. For my team, as cocky as it sounded, whatever mistake we made, I would be able to fix. I posted 32 goals and 7 assists in only nine games this season; while I wouldn't break the state record, I had a chance to shatter the league scoring record.

Chapter 43

I woke up on Saturday rearing to go. I hadn't played in what felt like forever, and with the upcoming games having so much at stake added to my excitement. I loved big games, and I always played big when I needed to. The locker room on Saturday didn't share my excitement; nervousness was the emotion of choice, especially in the faces of the goon squad. Cooper nodded a hello to me, to which I just squinted and shook my head. I saw through his supposed good intentions, so I wasn't gonna dignify him with a response. I wasn't on his team, I was on my own, and I didn't particularly care if he saw it otherwise. I began to get dressed, subconsciously thinking about the game and visualizing myself skating around defensemen and making the goalie look foolish. The more I visualized, the more excited I got. I could feel my blood racing, my heart pounding, my body quivering with anticipation. I was gonna go out there tonight and bury Alfond.

Brimmer strolled in the locker room and interrupted my daydreams. Freaking Brimmer, always ruining a good thing. Reality was going to be nicer than my daydreams, but Alfond wouldn't enjoy it too much.

"Alright, guys, listen up. We know this is a big game tonight. This is just one step out of many to make it into the tournament. Alfond is a good team, but we're better. We're carrying our full squad tonight, a squad that can compete with any team in Massachusetts. I can bet that Alfond is hungry, but I know, better yet feel, that we're hungrier. It's their home rink, but our fans made the trip to support us, so let's go out there and give them a good game. Bring it in, let's go guys!"

We came in for the "Marauders" chant then headed out to the ice. Alfond's warm up song, "Hell's Bells", blared throughout the rink. I felt my heart synchronize with the rhythm of the song and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I stepped on the ice. I had waited to play for so long, and I had to wait no longer. It was gonna be a good game. It was gonna be my game. Holding true to my belief that my warm-up dictated how I'll play in the game, as I got my legs underneath me, I knew Alfond was gonna be in trouble. My first step felt quick, my crossovers were fluid and effortless, and the puck was simply a blur as it snapped off my stick. The black and red monster was hungry for a win, having nibbled only on the crumbs of defeat for nearly a month. I was the hunter for the monster, and like a civilization making a sacrifice to a deity, the monster had to be placated.

The monster roared to oppose the blue and maroon two-headed beast of Alfond. Both crowds were loud and frenzied, and both knew how important the game was. Whenever a big hit or a big save arose, each side was sure to flaunt it in the face of the other. A rambunctious and supportive crowd can motivate a team, but neither side wanted to be outdone by the other. I wanted to give our crowd more fuel to outpace Alfond, so every chance I got, I laid one punishing hit after another the second any Alfond player touched the puck. We gained momentum for the rest of the period when the Alfond center took a hospital pass from his defenseman and I laid out a funeral setting for him. The referees blew the whistle when they saw the poor helpless bastard sprawled out at center ice, and the trainers came out with the smelling salts to revive him. The monster chanted my name as the Alfond center was carried off the ice.

Feeling good about the capital punishment I just put forth, I got my adrenaline pumping and my creativity, well, creating. I was in sixth gear of a five speed transmission, and all Alfond could do was slash at the air as I skated by. I got the crowd fired up after I pulled out of my ass the most ridiculous goal of my career, cutting to the side of the net, flipping the puck over a sprawling defenseman, and batting it out of the air over the shoulder of the Alfond goalie. I pumped my fist and jumped into the arms of my teammates, who were just as shocked as seeing the goal as I was about scoring it. I heard “We got Adams!” chanted repeatedly as I skated to the bench and got swarmed by my teammates. The Alfond scorekeeper reluctantly announced the goal as Cooper’s line took the ice. No sooner did he finish announcing the goal that a cheer came from the Alfond side. Our lead quickly vanished, my heroics momentarily forgotten.

The first period came to an abrupt end with the score knotted up at one. Brimmer was unusually happy about our performance, despite us mustering only five shots on net the entire period. My hurried but controlled breathing muffled much of what Brimmer tried to explain during the intermission. I’m sure it was nothing of importance or value, because Brimmer couldn’t coach a school of fish how to swim. His analysis came to a conclusion as we huddled together for a lackluster speech by Cooper. On the way to the ice, Cooper patted me on the helmet and gave me some congratulatory words. I told him to go fuck himself

.Both sides came out fighting tooth and nail during the second period. Every aspect of the teams matched up evenly except for one: me. Alfond didn’t have the go-to guy like our team did, and a team needed that go-to guy when the game needed to be broken open. And I did just that. While in the defensive zone, the Alfond winger Fedex’d a pass to his defenseman

which I easily intercepted. I blew through two defensemen who had absolutely no chance of catching me and I blazed down the ice, locking eyes with the goalie as I did so. He skated out to the top of his crease and then slowly skated backwards as I crossed the blue line. His stance was wide, leaving an exceptionally big five-hole, but glancing at him during warm-ups, he tempted shooters with the opening only to close it quickly. Deking was my best option. I squared my body to put all the torque I could into the shot, then drew it back quickly and tucked it neatly through the five-hole. The monster went nuts, as did my team; I was swarmed along the boards in front of the Alford fans as I received congratulations from my teammates. I was in the zone now. I felt almost superhuman; every sense was heightened and my reflexes were a tad quicker than normal. I wanted to win this game for me, and I planned on putting in at least two more just to make sure.

With each shift that went by, I just became more unstoppable. Though I felt impervious to the slashes and butt ends that Alford used to try and slow me down, nonetheless, they were illegal, to the tune of five times. We played a man-up for nine out of ten remaining minutes in the period. The powerplay was always a strong point for me, and with the way I was playing in this game, it could only add to the futility Alford displayed in trying to shut me down. With their penalty killers tired and their goalie exhausted after facing eleven point-blank shots during the first two powerplays, it was a literal domination during the next three powerplays. The Alford goalie could just flail helplessly at the puck as he saw me bury three powerplay goals with relative ease. Alford was lifeless after the barrage of goals, and walking into the locker room with a 5-1 lead, we were a much different team than the one that started the game. I was surprisingly energetic; I felt the best I had all season. Having five goals didn't satiate my appetite or that of the monster, and if putting in a few more wouldn't show Cooper and the goon squad that without me this team was terrible, I didn't know what would.

Brimmer came busting through the door all cocky and confident, as if he single-handedly put those five goals in himself. Typical Brimmer, taking credit for other people's work. He started in on his pathetic attempt to be a hockey coach, trying to break down the analysis of the game thus far, while the fact of the matter was that we were playing just fine. He kept reinforcing the fact that we needed to win this game to make it into the tournament. "Don't worry, Brimmer, as long as I'm here, we're not going to lose", I thought. God, I was so cocky. It's OK though, because I'm good, and I have five goals through two periods. I smiled after the

naivete of Cooper and the goon squad crossed my mind; how could they possibly think they could win without me? Seeing as how I was the only kid on the team who had all the tools of a complete hockey player, whereas they lacked several, I wondered how they came to that conclusion. I guess they were ignorant along with being terrible hockey players.

“Marauders!”, we chanted, and headed out to the ice. The two-headed beast of Alford was considerably less in size now, sensing that a four goal deficit in the third period would be too much to overcome. With our crowd in full force, a four goal lead, and only fifteen minutes left to play, this game was in the bag. We were on cruise control, while Alford played desperate and careless. They attempted Hail Mary passes to spring one of their guys, but every attempt was too long or too short, and nothing ever materialized. All the while, I skated effortlessly through the porous Alford defense and stickhandled deftly, frustrating Alford even more. I finish the game with six goals, four of which were unassisted. Now if that wasn’t an individual effort, I didn’t know what was. If I kept playing the way I was playing, we would be playing late into March, a thought which delighted me.

There was a party that night, keeping in custom with underage drinking in Branton. Tags told me he’d pick me up around 10:00, have a few beers, and then call it an early night. I agreed with him; with the adrenaline subsiding and the three week layoff catching up to me, exhaustion sprung upon me like storm clouds on a summer day. A few beers would get me ready for bed, and I didn’t mind the accolades that would greet me upon arriving at the party.

I got home, showered quickly, changed, and sat down to talk with my mom before Tags showed up. She told me that she was impressed with my performance, then quickly changed the subject about being careful and staying out of trouble when I went out tonight. I understood my mother’s reluctance about letting gme go out, but she knew that it wasn’t fair to keep me inside on a Saturday night. I pecked my mom on the cheek and walked out to Tags’ car.

Chapter 44

“Hey, Danny.”

“Hey, man. Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem. Nice game tonight.”

“Thanks.”

“With you back in the fold, we’re pretty much guaranteed to make the playoffs...unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately?”

“Because I’m so sick of this town and its’ obsession with half-rate hockey players. This town seems to think these kids are gods, and it’s starting to bother me. I’m sick of sitting on the bench when I know I’m better than every kid on this team. With the exception of you, of course.”

“I’m sorry, man. I know it sucks. I know you’re better than most of the kids on the team. All the politics and shit that goes into high school sports takes away from the fun. It screws over the kids who deserve to play”, I said.

“I know. My dad tells me to not let it get to me, but it’s hard sometimes. It’s disheartening knowing that I’m better than these kids, but I get looked over because of the small-town politics and the fact that my dad isn’t on the Board of Buttkissers. Most of these kids are gonna be in for a real shock when they reach the real world and realize their parents aren’t there to wipe their asses for them.”

“You know, Tags, we’re on the same level of thinking. I tell myself that my only consolation out of this whole ordeal is that these kids are gonna step outside the Branton bubble and realize they were nothing but small town-heroes. It’s poetic justice, in a way.”

Tags just nodded his head in agreement. My thoughts exactly. Much of my short time in Branton left me at a loss for words. Although it all revolved around hockey, I still enjoyed playing, no matter how much these pansy, cowardly, imbecilic pricks tried to ruin it for me.

We parked on the side of the street, got out of the car, and headed to the party. As usual, after a big win, everyone was loud and obnoxiously drunk, but there would be no breaking up of the party since it was at Gardiner’s. I was greeted at the door by a couple of rather forward girls itching to show me congratulations after my performance. I didn’t need the itching, so I brushed

them off and headed into the kitchen to grab a beer. While I grabbed a beer, somebody grabbed a palm full of my ass. I spun around wildly into the smiling face of Meaghan Cooper.

“Hi, Danny.”

I gave her a studly nod, then coolly replied, “What’s up?”

“Great game tonight. The team is much better with you on it.”

“I know.”

She laughed. “Oh, Danny, you are confident, aren’t you?”

I winked and flashed my million dollar smile.

“My brother was all excited because he said that with you coming back, they had a good chance of making the playoffs.”

“Your brother’s a prick.”

She gave me a playful slap. “That’s not nice, Danny.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’m gonna go socialize. I’ll see you later”, she said suggestively, grabbing my crotch as she walked by.

“I hope so”, I replied, making eye contact with her as she walked by. She was easy on the eyes, but she was a Cooper. She seemed harmless, so there appeared to be no inherent danger of getting with her again. I wouldn’t have to try either; it was like shooting fish in a barrel with her. Six beers and two uneventful hours later, Tags came strolling over and asked if I was ready to leave. I nodded, went to grab my coat, but saw Meaghan holding it instead.

“You’re not leaving with him, are you?” she said, accompanied with suggestive eyes and a sexy pout.

“Not anymore”, I replied.

“Right answer.”

I looked over at Tags, who looked back and nodded, giving me a fist pump as he strolled out the door.

“Come on”, she said, grabbing my hand.

“Where we going?”

“To my car. I’ll give you a ride, then drive you home” she whispered sexily.

“Sounds good to me.”

She threw me the keys and told me to drive. I knew where this was going. We hopped in the car, I put it in gear, and we slowly pulled away from the party. When I asked her if there was any specific destination, she replied that she didn't have anything in mind, just a nice, quiet, dark spot. I knew where to go.

I tried to concentrate on driving as Meghan reached over, fumbling to undo my pants. She finally figured it out, and I let out a pleasurable sigh as she took me in her mouth. She was good, real good, which made me think she did this often. That thought quickly vanished with each bobbing second. It was getting harder and harder to concentrate on driving, and knowing the lighthouse was only two minutes away, I banked a right and headed in that direction. Two glorious and stimulating minutes later, I pulled into a parking spot and killed the ignition. Meghan stopped, straightened up, then reached over to take off my shirt and pants. The front of the car wasn't terribly spacious, and as we mutually undressed each other, there was a smattering of painful and exasperated grunts until we were both completely naked. She somehow wiggled her way into the back between the two front seats, and I took the less direct approach by getting out of the car and going in via the back door. She laughed as she laid down on the seat, pulled me close, and started kissing me deeply. I kissed her neck and then her collarbone, slowly and teasingly making me way down her body until I felt her nails dig into my back and unleash a pent up moan. I continued until she begged for more, her body quivering and glistening with sweat. It was probably single digits outside, but the windows were fogged up and it was hot, even without our clothes on. She gently grabbed the hair on the back of my head and pulled me up to kiss her. I kissed her passionately, stopped momentarily to put a condom on, and then went back to work. I lost all sense of time as we became absorbed in each other, never separating except to change positions. As I sat in the back while she rode me on top, I felt her hands clench tightly on my shoulders and she began to climax, I followed suit a split second later. We collapsed on the seat in sheer exhaustion, panting noisily, trying to regain our composure. Sharing an awkward moment as we dressed and buckled our seatbelts, she put the car in gear to take me home. Fifteen minutes later we pulled up in front of my house.

"I told you I would give you a ride and then drive you home", she said, sheepishly.

"I didn't doubt you for a second", I responded.

She leaned in, kissed me, and we exchanged good-byes. It felt like a goodbye kiss. I strode confidently upstairs and collapsed on my bed; sex as precursor to sleep sure beats the hell out of Tylenol P.M.

Chapter 45

I slept in real late on Sunday as I was accustomed. The sex last night wore me out big time, and I still felt exhausted when I woke up around 1:30 that afternoon. My mom told me she thought I was dead because she tried to wake me up twice and got no response. After lumbering my way downstairs and rummaging through the cabinets, I settled on a bowl of Captain Crunch. As I hungrily annihilated my bowl of cereal, my mom attempted to engage in small talk. She asked me how my night was, what I thought about the season, and most importantly, if I was staying out of trouble. In between bites I answered with “great”, a shrug of the shoulders, and “yes”, respectively. Seeing that I was a fountain of conversation, my mom just threw her hands up in the air and went back to doing whatever she was doing. After sinking Captain Crunch’s boat twice over, I spent the rest of the day doing homework with a healthy portion of dinner mixed in. I called Big before I went to bed just to catch up on things. He informed me that they grabbed the third seed in the Super 10 Tournament, but had beaten the first and second ranked teams pretty handily. Quickly changing the subject, he asked how I was doing in Branton. Things lightened up, I told him, and he laughed for a solid minute when I told him Cooper attempted to make amends. Telling him that a win or a tie in our next game would squeak us in the tournament, Big joked, “Once you guys win the entire thing, that Cooper cat can enter the draft and go first overall, while his boyfriends go two, three, and four.” We laughed, made plans to get together soon, and hung up. Feeling good about my prospects and the potentiality of the tournament, I crawled into bed, ready for a hectic week.

Chapter 46

At practice on Monday, Brimmer gave us out the outline for the tournament and who our potential opponents would be. He also said that because of the standard week and a half off between the conclusion of the season and the beginning of the tournament to expect at least two conditioning practices. We had to win or tie, however, in order to reach that point. Light practices both Monday and Tuesday were on the agenda, with the final regular season game on Wednesday against Bismarck, who needed a win to make it into the tournament. All we had to do was tie and we were in; I didn't enjoy tying very much, so I was going to make sure we won, and big. After missing a number of games throughout the season, the scoring title would have to wait until next year, but I eclipsed the leading scorer in Division C by nearly 20 points. Unless some kid pulled off a Herculean feat, the scoring title was officially mine. *The Branton Inquirer* carried a big article about the season and about me in particular, which I'm sure irked Cooper a great deal, since it was supposed to be "his" season. I didn't care; it was my season from day one, and it was the Danny Adams show, final act, for the rest of the season.

Monday and Tuesday were a blur, and it was Wednesday in what seemed like the blink of an eye. I had been itching to play and wrap up the regular season for a number of reasons, the most important being that I could put this whole mess behind me and look towards next year. I wouldn't mind winning the state championship, but my whole season was marred by all the bullshit that went on during it. The student body wasn't ready to wrap the season up just yet. The black and red monster was the largest and most decorated I had seen it all season, and since the game was at our home rink, we already had the mental edge before the game even started. I had the scoring title wrapped up, and I knew we were going to win the game, so I didn't carry the nerves I normally would for a game of this caliber.

Brimmer came in for the pre-game speech, got us riled up, brought us in for the "Marauders" chant, then sent us out to secure a tournament berth. Once "Bro Hymn" started blasting through the speakers, the student body became exceptionally rowdy, even prompting a few kids to grab on to the glass and start shaking it. Our fans were crazy and off the wall, and seeing fans as much into the game as the team was could only bode well for us. Which it did. We dominated Bismarck in every facet of the game, and a thunderous roar came from the monster every time a goal was scored or a big hit was delivered. After a 7-2 pounding of Bismarck, complete with a four goal, two assist performance by me, Branton High Hockey

successfully secured a berth in the state tournament for the 11th year in a row. The relief was awash on the faces of Cooper and the rest of the goon squad, no longer having to worry about the being the first captains in over ten years to fail in making the tournament. I made sure to tell Cooper that I was the reason this team was here; his recent subdued demeanor quickly vanished, followed by him telling me that they would have made it to tournament even without me. I laughed in his face and went on my merry way; ignorance is not bliss. I don't care what anybody says.

Chapter 47

Brimmer gave us a day off to recuperate, but told us that the next two practice days after that were going to be all conditioning. I understood that we could use conditioning, but it probably wasn't the brightest idea to run us down before the tournament. I guessed Brimmer got this strategy out of the *Idiot's Guide* which he probably wrote.

Saturday was a preliminary game for two teams to battle it out for the last tournament spot; had we tied Bismarck, we probably would have been in that game. Whichever team won the preliminary game became hopeful of having a successful tournament, only to have their dreams shattered after learning their next game was against the top seed. As long as anyone can remember, Tags told me, the first place seed had never been upset. By us squeaking in, we got the second worst-case scenario; the second seed, Wilton High.

The state hockey tournament in Massachusetts is a big deal; the Super 10, played in Boston, draws thousands of spectators every game, many of them scouts. Central had a strong chance of winning the Super 10 this year, and I was pulling for them. I would have traded anything to don that jersey, but fate hates me and stuck me with the black and red of Branton. My house even got the unfortunate decoration treatment courtesy of the Board of Buttkissers, covering the yard, mailbox, and anything and everything that could be covered with black and red streamers. The *Branton Inquirer* ran a giant front page spread of the team, with yours truly in full stride. Stats, box scores, and photos adorned nearly every page of the Sports section. One of the articles in particular caught my eye, written by Prazicka, who interviewed me for the paper after my twelve point performance against Dunn.

Branton Hockey Cruises Into Tournament for 11th Straight Year

The Branton High Hockey team had its' share of ups and downs this year. In what looked to be a promising season with newcomer and division scoring champ Danny Adams, Branton High oozed the potential to be a dominating force this year. However, internal grumblings, disciplinary issues, and academic issues plagued the team. Adams in particular was affected most by the drama that unfolded, nearly missing half the season due to the aforementioned reasons. Lacking the scoring punch and flair that Adams brought (41 goals, 9 assists), the team was forced to win its' final two games to qualify for the tournament. Now, Branton, considered the dark horse of the tournament with a

full and healthy squad, and what the town hopes devoid of problems, faces off Wednesday night against Wilton, the #2 seed. In accordance with the state athletics commission, the game will be played at a neutral site, Cheshire County Memorial Area, in Surrey. Game time is 8:00.

Prazicka did have one thing right; had I been there all season, we would be ranked hell of a lot higher than #19. I hoped Cooper and his crew noticed that the article made absolutely no mention of them; just to be sure, I made four photocopies, highlighted the important parts, then put one in each of their lockers, scrawled with the note: “See? I told you it was my team.”

Our two practices following the win over Bismarck were torture; no pucks, and nothing but the screech of Brimmer’s whistle. As much as I hated conditioning practices, they always came in handy when it came down to the final two minutes of an important game and you needed that last boost of energy. Granted it was something I would have elected to do at the start of the season, but I wasn’t the world’s greatest hockey coach like Brimmer.

Following our two conditioning practices, we had Saturday and Sunday off, followed by two light practices and shooting drills. Wednesday morning classes had a considerable buzz of both anticipation and worry; tournament time might as well be Christmas to any hockey fan in Massachusetts, but facing the powerhouse of Wilton filled the student body with nervous anxiety. Well-wishing teachers and concerned students made small talk in the hallway, flinging questions like “Are you worried?”, “Do you think you guys can win?”, “How many are you gonna score tonight?” I told anyone I engaged talked with not to worry because I guaranteed a win. I felt good, I had something to prove, and as much as my enjoyment of the season had been tarnished, I still wanted to play as long as I could.

Chapter 48

The tension in the locker room could have been cut with a knife; nobody talked much, everyone had their headphones on, with closed eyes, imagining the outcome of the game. I didn't hear much of Brimmer's pre-game speech; I was too busy seeing myself bury goal after goal and upset the #2 seed. We gathered together in a moment of silence. Cooper, then Kallock, spoke in frenzied tones, trying to get us pissed off and hungry for blood. A "Marauders" chant ensued accompanied with whoops and shouts, then we headed to the battlefield.

Wilton's warm-up song, "Papercut", by Linkin' Park was cranked to full volume, but the cheering of thousands of people overwhelmed the song. I stepped on the ice as the rock ballad exploded through the speakers, and goosebumps appeared all over my skin in response. The fans cheered and the photographers flashed pictures. Tags and I attempted small talk during warm-ups, much of it going unheard of because of the noise volume. All I could gather from the conversation was Tags' amazement at the crowd turnout.

"It's never been this packed before. I can't believe it. This is absolutely crazy", he yelled.

"I know, I love it!" I yelled back.

Warm-ups ended and the starting lines were announced. I zoned out during the announcement until I heard my name announced as starting on the left wing. I was startled, and Cooper was beside himself. I flashed him a coy grin, and he looked back with anger painted all over his face. I saw him get even madder when the crowd went nuts after my name was announced. Tough shit, Cooper. I told you it was my team.

Whenever my adrenaline gets pumping at the level it is, I feel almost superhuman. I'm a step ahead of everything, and I have a sixth sense that I can't quite describe. My eyes were sharper, my ears more acute, my body a tightly-wound bomb just ready to explode when the time was right. The minute the game started, Wilton knew they were in trouble when I scooped the puck up off the faceoff, then kicked into fifth gear when I blew threw the amazed and flat-footed Wilton defensemen. Noticing the wide open eyes of the Wilton goalie, I knew he was thinking this was the last thing he wanted to face so early in the game. His hesitancy was well-observed by me, and I knew that every goalie is shaky until he handles a few routine shots. This wasn't going to be routine. I came in with the puck on my forehand, coolly pulled it to my backhand, and neatly tucked it under the crossbar. The clock read 14:55: five seconds was all I need to put

us ahead. The Branton side went crazy and high-fived each other. The Wilton side was painted with utter disbelief at the early goal. I pumped my fist and yelled, being swarmed by my excited but reluctant line mates Emerson and Gardiner. I could barely hear my goal announced as the roar of the crowd drowned out the scorekeeper.

Although we had the early lead, Wilton rebounded as good teams do, and dominated the rest of the period. Kline was sharp despite the offensive onslaught, turning away five or six point blank shots that our overwhelmed defense couldn't prevent. I got double-teamed the rest of the period, but that didn't stop me; I put us up 2-0 in the last ten seconds when Gardiner dug up some hockey skill and hit me with a beautiful tape-to-tape saucer pass, which I buried between the pads of the Wilton goalie. Up 2-0 after one period is never a comfort zone for any team; one quick goal by Wilton could easily change the tempo of the game. Brimmer must have bought a new coaching guide because he stressed the point during the intermission.

"As long as we keep pressuring, prevent the point blank shots, and stay out of the penalty box, we'll win this game. The next goal is crucial", he said. I caught Cooper glowering at me from the corner of my eye during Brimmer's speech. I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

Kallock must have been completely oblivious to Brimmer's speech during the intermission as he committed two penalties in the second period. The score would have been knotted up at 2 had I not scored a shorthanded goal at the 12:53 mark, allowing us to hold on to an undeserved lead. Three goals in two periods was a good feeling to have, but after the third goal, Wilton did everything in their power to prevent me from touching the puck. They succeeded by not letting the puck leave our zone. Brimmer was extremely critical of the lack of discipline exhibited during the period, singling out Kallock and nearly reducing him to tears when he called him an "incompetent idiot". Although Kallock deserved it and Brimmer had a right to call him that, it was still completely and unnecessarily uncalled for. Being singled out like that would make anyone feel like they're under the microscope, causing them to play scared and hesitant. The last thing this team needed was to have one of the starting defenseman playing scared.

As time quickly wound down in the third period, it was easy to tell that no side wanted to make a blind pass or a stupid play and change the course of the game. Kallock and Cooper must have had the same thing for dinner that night because after a Wilton player handed Cooper his head on a platter, Cooper slashed him in the back of the legs, putting us down a man. A good

team capitalizes on chances like this and Wilton wasted no time setting up their powerplay, putting a man at the far post, and tapping it into a wide open net to tie the score at three with a little over two minutes left to play. The black and red monster became visibly hushed as the air of excitement vanished after the Wilton goal.

Brimmer called a timeout with a deadly 1:30 showing on the clock. Any team that scored right now would undoubtedly win the game. Brimmer had us huddle together as he outlined the plan of attack. “Okay, I want Adams, McDougall, Gardiner, Kallock, and Anderson out there. Make sure you cover your men at the face-off, and Adams, since you’re weakside winger, you need to pick up the shooter at the top of the circle. This is a must. Bring it in! Let’s be the first underdog of the tournament.”

We skated to our end after the “Marauders” chant, and a chilly silence enveloped the rink. Both throngs of fans knew that this was a critical face-off. Wilton already had the advantage with the draw being in our zone; we were faced with desperation and nervousness of having the puck so deep in our zone with very little time left. Gardiner choked on the draw and the Wilton defenseman won the puck back to the shooter at the top of the faceoff circle. The puck was drawn back so quick that I couldn’t reach the shooter in time, and he let off a booming slapshot that was followed by a dull thud after a save by the right pad of Kline. I watched the play unfold as I kept a wary eye on the defenseman I was covering. Wilton set up deep in our zone and their center cradled the puck behind our net, waiting for someone on our team to blow their cover and leave an open shooter. The seconds slowly ticked away until the scorekeeper boomed, “One minute left in the period, one minute”. The Wilton skaters frantically scrambled around our zone trying to shake the coverage while Branton fought tooth and nail to maintain coverage.

Suddenly, out of my peripheral vision, my defenseman wasn’t there anymore. He was a foot in front of me, and his center, seeing a fleeting opportunity, tried to force the pass to him. I was lazy in my coverage, and if the defenseman got off a clean shot, the traffic in front of the net could make it hard for Kline to pick up the shot. As the defenseman lowered his stick to receive the pass, the puck hit a rut and jumped over his stick. I immediately put the brakes on and used my last ounce of energy to reverse my direction and chase the puck down. The other Wilton defenseman headed straight for the puck, hoping to reach it before I did. I got there a split second ahead of him, tipped it forward and skated as hard as I could. The Branton side cheered

at seeing the partial breakaway. As I skated ahead I felt the Wilton defenseman's stick poking at the back of my legs and arms, trying to force me to mishandle the puck. The puck never settled cleanly after I tipped it forward, and with the defenseman poking and hacking me, it took every ounce of concentration to maintain control.

Time slowed considerably as I bore down on the Wilton goalie. He too noticed the fluttering puck and made a last second decision to dive at the puck in attempts to knock it away from me. I knew what he was going to do, and as he dove, I ripped my arm away from the defenseman's stick and took a desperate swipe at the puck. The Wilton goalie smashed into my knees and took out his own defenseman in the process. I flipped head over heels and hit the ice just as the Branton crowd erupted. As I lay sprawled face down on the ice, I saw the puck lying motionless in the back of the net. I raised my arms as Anderson and McDougall pounced on me. My knees hurt, I was out of breath, but I scored, making it all worthwhile. 4-3, 37 seconds left. Wilton called a timeout to go over a last-ditch effort while Brimmer gathered us around and told us what we needed to do. I sat on the bench, chest heaving in and out to force air into my lungs.

The play resumed while I sat on the bench, and a tense 37 seconds came to an end as Anderson flipped the puck out of our zone as the buzzer sounded. The Branton side erupted, countered with shell-shocked faces on the Wilton side. The team smothered Kline, who finished with 40 saves, and saluted the fans as we lined up for the handshake. I headed off the ice and was immediately surrounded by reporters. Prazicka was the first to speak up.

"Danny, rumor has it that you were guaranteeing a win tonight. You made good on your guarantee and had a hell of a game. What was going through your mind prior to the game?"

I shrugged indifferently. "Well, there wasn't much going through my mind actually. I tired not to think too much about the game. I just wanted to go out and play it like any other game."

An unfamiliar face then spoke up. "Mike Arnolds, *Cheshire County Gazette*. What were you thinking when you saw the goalie dive out to pokecheck the puck away?"

"I knew it was gonna be the make or break moment. He definitely made the right decision. The puck wasn't sitting cleanly and he knew that I wouldn't be able to get a solid shot off. Fortunately, I got the bounce."

I was about to field another question when Brimmer came out of the locker room and told me to come inside. The reporters thanked me and I was preparing to hear another "My coaching

won the game” speech from Brimmer. I waited for him to finish before I got undressed, then picked up my bag and boarded the bus to Branton High.

Chapter 49

As we pulled into the parking lot, we were greeted by an orchestra of car horns and a good portion of the student body. We stepped off the bus to greet friends and parents. As I gathered my belongings and headed to my car, Meghan came running over and jumped on me. She kissed me on the cheek and marveled about the game I played, then asked me if I was giving anybody a ride home.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Feel like changing your mind?” she asked.

“I can make an exception”, and winked at her.

“Great. I told my dad I would get a ride home from one of my friends. So we can’t be out too long.”

“You got it.”

I put my bag in my car and she hopped in the passenger seat. She ducked out of sight so her dad wouldn’t see her, she said. As I turned the key, I saw Mr. Cooper and his son in an animated, heated discussion, probably about why he wasn’t on the ice for the last few minutes of the game. Ten minutes later we were parked at the lighthouse. She didn’t waste any time getting dressed, nor did I. It was short, intense sex, and I had her back within a half hour after leaving the parking lot. She gave me a quick peck on the cheek and disappeared into the house. As I put my car in reverse, I could have sworn I saw curtains by the front door part ever so slightly. Maybe I was just freaking out because this was a girl I shouldn’t be involved with at all. Regardless, it was a great night. Four goal game, getting laid after. What could be better?

Chapter 50

I received a million accolades in school the next day. I just smiled politely and thanked each well-wisher, soaking up the glory of being a hockey stud. We were scheduled to have a light practice today, which is exactly what we needed after a game like last night. After practice I headed home, took a quick shower, and collapsed on my bed for a nap before homework. Ten minutes into my nap, my mother came and woke me up.

“Danny, wake up.”

“Huh?”

“I need you to wake up and come downstairs.”

“Why?”

“The police are here to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“I dunno, they wouldn’t tell me.”

I walked downstairs and saw two uniformed officers sitting on the couch.

“Danny, take a seat.” I sat. “I’m Officer McDonald, this is Officer Conley.”

I nodded.

“Were you with Meghan Cooper last night?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have relations?”

“Yes.”

“Was it consensual?”

“Of course.”

“She seems to believe it wasn’t. She called the station in hysterics last night, claiming she’d been raped.”

“What! Are you kidding me? It was 100% consensual!”

“Regardless, when a girl calls and rape is mentioned, we must investigate it.”

“You have gotta be kidding me.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not. We’re gonna have to take a statement. It’s standard protocol. We’ll give you a ride to the station.”

My mother stood there, awestruck, then teary-eyed.

“We’ll call you when it’s time”, Officer Conley said.

My mother nodded, choking back tears.

I got dressed and reluctantly headed to the police car, fuming. That bitch was all over me. My peripheral vision was tinged with red. I started to shake, and my hair stood up on end. My mind started to race, replaying the night. Did her dad put her up to this? Did he see me drop her off? A black hole began to form in my stomach, and I began to shake violently and break out into a cold sweat. The black hole in my stomach grew larger. Everything turned red. Then I threw up all over the back of the police car.

Conley piped up. “Guilt, is that Danny boy?” McDonald laughed.

“Lying, fucking, conniving bitch.”

“Yeah, Danny, that’s what all rapists say.”

“I’m no fuckin rapist.”

“We’ll let the evidence speak for itself.”

After reaching the police station, I was pulled out of the car and led inside. “This way, rapist.”

“Fuck you.”

Conley pushed me into a brick wall. “Watch your mouth. Rapist.”

I was forced into a cold, all metal chair in a gray bricked room with no windows. I gave a brief statement to Cooper’s minions, who then called my mother to pick me up.

While I waited for my mother, I sat in a cell, wallowing in my own pity. Every emotion that I experienced throughout the course of the hockey season didn’t hold a candle to the emotions I was experiencing now. I was in disbelief. I just couldn’t fathom why everyone would risk so much, like dignity, careers, and self-respect just to screw over someone who was better at a sport than their own kid. People usually act this way over money, not over a spot on a Division C hockey team. It was simply ridiculous and unbelievable; I was also stricken with curiosity as to why the parents in this town would manipulate their children and fill their heads with dreams that would never come true. My mother arrived at the station, and the cops proceeded to tell her that I wasn’t to leave the area and was being released on my own recognizance.

The ride home was torturous and awkward.

“Please don’t tell me it’s true, Danny.”

“Mom, it’s not. I know you’re ashamed of the sex, but it was consensual. I wore a condom. We’ve been doing this since the season started. Everyone knows. Think about it, Mom. Her claims have no backing. It’s her word against mine.”

My mother had a hard time putting out words through her sobs.

“I hope it works out, Danny. I know you’re a good boy. You wouldn’t do something like this.”

“I know it will work out, Mom. I don’t know why she is saying this. It was consensual...” I trailed off and didn’t say a word the rest of the ride.

Chapter 51

I simply did not want to go to school on Friday, but my mother forced me to go. I begged and pleaded, but she was still upset and disgusted with me. Forcing me to go to school only to be scrutinized and talked about seemed like an adequate punishment according to my mother. To add insult to injury, there was a pep rally specifically for the hockey team in the afternoon. I already knew I was off the team and didn't need to hear it from Brimmer.

I arrived at school midway through second period and left amidst the crowd of students heading to the pep rally. I didn't even know what to think anymore. The only one to speak to me the entire day was Tags, apologizing for the situation, but stating his belief that he knew it was a bogus charge and that he'll testify on my behalf. In addition to that, he said he confronted Cooper, called him a fucking coward, and told him that if I didn't kick the shit out him, he was going to. I'd never seen Tags so pissed.

Granted this was a "he said, she said" case, but nonetheless, whatever the outcome, it would follow me forever. That afternoon, I crawled into bed, turned my lights, and cried myself to sleep. I woke up around 8:00 that night after my cell phone rang, feeling even worse than when I went to sleep.

Groggily, I answered. "Hello?"

"Danny?" The voice on the other end was sobbing.

"Yeah, it's Danny."

"It's...it's...Meghan."

"Why the fuck are you calling me?"

"I wanna talk. Danny, please listen to what I have to say. Please."

I hung up, curtly calling her a bitch and told her to never call me again. Even if she wanted to explain herself, I didn't wanna hear it. I didn't wanna talk to anybody, I didn't wanna see anybody, and I sure as hell didn't wanna hear what she had to say. I felt my stomach rumble, and remembered that I hadn't eaten in forever, so I went downstairs to fix something to eat. I found some ham and cheese in the fridge, made an enormous sandwich, and took residence up in the living room, planning to watch TV the rest of the night. I stumbled across the weather channel just in time to see a giant storm front moving to the area. "It's gonna be a doozy" the weatherman promised, stating that nearly three feet of snow is expected to fall over the course of the next four days. How could I miss this, I thought, then quickly realized I missed it because I

was being falsely accused of rape. Oh, forgetful me. I hoped that it would snow enough that school would be cancelled for a few days and I wouldn't have to endure the whispers and pariah status I was currently residing in. After three hours of the History Channel and some new big words to add to my vocabulary, I decided to turn in.

Chapter 52

I was freefalling against a darkly lit sky, and before I could blink, I splashed into a raging river, but the water was red, like transparent liquid Jell-O. Surfacing and gasping for air, I saw a ladder leading out of the river about a half mile downstream. I started to swim, more so out of fear than anything else, but the water felt heavy against my body and I winded very easily. I dove underneath the surface hoping to fare better. As I felt my lungs were about to burst, I swam towards the surface to get air. Something grabbed my left leg, and I kicked relentlessly to try and fend off whatever was holding on to me. I spun around and saw Kallock grabbing my leg, smiling ghoulishly, and without the need to resurface for air. We struggled briefly and I fought him off, then he disappeared from sight as I swam away. I heard my name called and looked to my right, and a flotation device was thrown into the river. As I reached it, it turned into a rock and sank quickly, and I was unable to let go until I was nearly at the bottom. I wriggled myself away from it and floated slowly to the top. I reached the ladder, painfully and breathlessly climbing to the top. At the last step, I look up and see Cooper's face peering down at me, followed by his foot pushing me off the ladder and back into the river. This process was repeated at nearly every ladder I climbed and every flotation device I came across. As I helplessly struggled in the river, I saw the faces of everyone involved in ruining my life since I arrived in Branton, and none were willing to help me out of the river. All held stone-cold, murderous faces, walking briskly alongside the banks of the river, making sure I didn't get out. The river continued endlessly with no end in sight, except for a faint blue light which seemed an eternity away.

I jerked up wildly out of my sleep, panting heavily, sweating, and ironically thirsty. I didn't need Jimbo to tell me what this dream meant; the blue light, however, I couldn't seem to figure out. Did it symbolize Central? Or something else? Did it maybe hint a return to Central for me, or were the blue lights a reminder of my current troubles?

Chapter 53

I woke up Saturday to a blizzard. My mother told me that a foot of snow had fallen already after only two hours. She went food shopping Friday night after hearing the weather reports talk about blinding snow and terrible driving conditions. I clicked on the news and saw some weatherman state the obvious about how terrible it was outside. No shit, Sherlock. I wondered if the game tonight would get pushed back to Wednesday since it was so bad outside. If it worsened, a game cancellation was imminent, just prolonging the inevitable end of the season for Cooper and the goon squad. By the time 6:00 rolled around, nearly two feet had fallen and it was snowing harder than before. Updated weather reports showed that the storm front had barely moved since last night, and that the worst was yet to come since what we were experiencing was only the outer portion of the storm. The hours passed and the snow kept falling. Monday classes were cancelled, Tuesday classes followed suit, and Wednesday classes were cancelled at the last minute. The storm eventually subsided Wednesday night after dumping four and a half feet of snow on the area. Everything reopened and classes resumed Thursday at Branton High. I doubted anyone had forgotten about the rumors of rape that circulated throughout the school the week before, and that doubt was reaffirmed by averted gazes and hushed whispers.

As I opened my locker Thursday morning, I saw a folded piece of paper lying on top of my books. It was addressed simply “Danny”. I had a feeling it was from Meghan, and I’m sure it was gonna be some long note explaining the situation. Instead, two short sentences were hastily scrawled: “Sorry Danny. Blood is thicker than water.” I ripped the paper into a thousand pieces and let it flutter to the floor. That bitch. Rather than lose my cool and hunt Cooper down and kick the shit out of him, I decided to extend my unexpected vacation. I closed my locker and went home.

I didn’t care if my mom knew I skipped school or not. If she knew what was running through my head at the moment I read that note, she would have been relieved that I decided to come home. Being in a quiet home by myself allowed me time to think. If I had feelings for Meghan, it would have added to my misery, but since she was an easy lay, it made the situation ironically more tolerable. Either she was forced to frame me by Cooper and her father, or she did it all on her own. I didn’t understand what she had to gain by putting herself through the

process. I was out of options; I had let Cooper best me at this game, and it pissed me off. A whole lot.

Chapter 54

I didn't go straight to my locker on Friday morning. Instead, I tracked down Cooper, threw him against his locker, causing the entire hallway to turn and stare. Leaning in real close, I whispered, "If you're as tough as you think you are, prove it. 9:00 tonight. You'll know where to find me." I raised my voice slightly and said, "If you're a real man, you'll come alone."

Trying to act tough in front of the crowd, he sneered, "Don't worry, I'll be there. I wouldn't wanna miss your funeral." I would let him think he was tough for the next twelve hours or so, because after that, he'll wanna move to a Buddhist community where they abhor fighting. I had lost my season, and I wanted to make sure Cooper lost his; he wouldn't be able to play with broken arms and legs. Revenge is a dish best served cold, and it being early March and chilly, the circumstances seemed to call for it.

I made it a point to raise my voice when I told Cooper to come alone, because rather than risk his popularity with the school and show up with his friends, he wanted to prove he was a tough guy and could take me on his own. He had something to prove after getting beaten up handily twice over. I knew the entire hallway heard me, but I lowered my voice enough prior to that so they wouldn't know what time we were throwing down. Any student could infer where it was gonna happen, but it being a Friday night and cold, most would take solace in a warm house party with a cold beer. I hoped, at least. I didn't want a big production.

Chapter 55

I was edgy all afternoon, and after my mom repeatedly asked, “What’s the matter?”, I finally snapped and yelled, “Nothing is bothering me. Alright?” She recoiled at the sudden flash of anger and left me alone the rest of the day. At 8:30 I came bounding down the stairs, determined, dressed for the cold, and ready to whoop some ass. My mother looked over her shoulder and asked, “Where are you going?”

“To settle a score.” Before she could say anything, I was out of the house, in the car, and speeding down the street. I saw her open the door and call to me as I made a right out of our street. She tried calling my cell phone and rather than explain anything to her, I shut it off and threw it in my back seat. Nervousness and wonder racked my body and filled me with one major question: Would he come alone? I called his pride into question in front of the school, and if he had any balls, he would honor his promise to come alone.

I had fought so many times in the past that this fight shouldn’t have bothered me, but I had my reservations. In the city, it was always a fair fight; it was your crew against theirs, man for man. Nobody ever jumped in a fight to make it uneven. There was an unwritten code about street fighting; I didn’t know if the same rules applied here. If it didn’t, I was screwed. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed Cooper wouldn’t show up by himself; he was too much of a coward to do so. Only engaging in fights when you outnumber your opponent seemed like the Branton motto. Branton was a town full of cowards, from Brimmer and Mr. Cooper at the top to arrogant fucks like Cooper and the goon squad.

I saw headlights creep across the pavement as Cooper’s car pulled in. A light snow began to fall and my breathing quickened, the condensed breath obscuring my vision. The moment of truth had come. When I saw the driver’s side door open and a single head appear, for a split second I thought he held true to his word. That thought was shattered when the rest of the doors opened and the goon squad exited the car. At the moment, I cursed my hard-headedness for actually believing he would show up alone. I wanted it to happen so bad that I let it cloud my rational thought. Now, in the bitter cold and with no backup, I was outnumbered 4-1.

“You dumb fuck, you actually showed up by yourself. How stupid are you city kids?” Cooper was wobbling slightly and I noticed a bulge in his front pocket. I knew it wasn’t because he was happy to see me. The rest of the goon squad laughed at Cooper’s slurring comments. Not only were they gonna lose tomorrow, they were gonna be hungover, too. Great leadership

skills.

“What you should be saying, Cooper, is ‘I’m a big pussy and I knew you were gonna kick my ass, so I brought my friends to back me up’. You’re such a coward. I knew you were a pussy from the minute I met you. Pussies are terrible hockey players, and you fit that mold. Come on, though. Northeastern? Are you serious? Did you honestly think you were that good? Your parents have kissed ass and done everything to get you to play hockey. And for what? To play for a half-rate Division C school. Tomorrow’s game will be last competitive hockey any of you play.”

“Fuck you, Adams.” Kallock was brimming with liquid intellect tonight.

“Clever, Kallock. Get pissed because I’m right. This was supposed to be ‘your season’, right? That’s all you guys talked about. Suddenly, it’s not ‘your season’ anymore when someone who’s better than you shows up and steals your thunder. That should have been a wake-up call, for all of you. Step outside the picket fences in this podunk town and look around, you fuckin’ idiots. Branton is peanuts in the grand scheme of things.”

“What the fuck do you know, you city trash piece of shit? The minute you walked into Branton you thought you were better than us. This is my town, Adams. If you think you’re better than everyone, you came to the wrong town to prove it”, Cooper gloated.

“I don’t think I’m better than you, I know I’m better than you. You’re eventually going to realize all the time and effort you put it to screw me over is gonna go for naught. I’ll be on to bigger and better things, and you’ll be here in Branton, reliving the glory days of terrible hockey. Maybe if you get drunk enough, you can bullshit people around town about how you were good enough to go to the pros.” During our discourse, I realized that while I faced Cooper, the rest of the goon squad fanned out on either side of me.

“Well, one thing I do know, Adams, is that your hockey season is over. You got us into the tournament and past the first round, and that’s all we needed. My sister wants to see me go to Northeastern too, and since you were stupid enough to get involved with her, it worked out perfectly. Nobody is gonna care how good you were; they’re just gonna know Danny Adams: The Rapist. With you out of the picture now, I get everything I want. Find a new place to play next year, Adams, because nobody in this town wants you here. And now that your city trash friends and nigger friend aren’t here to save your ass, you’re fucked.”

“Don’t you” was all I got out as I felt the beer bottle smash over the back of my head. I stood wobbling, turned around to throw a punch at whoever bottled me, and felt a fist smash my nose. That didn’t knock me over either, and I managed to blindly throw a punch and connect before I was tackled from behind. I didn’t know who I hit or who hit me with a bottle, but I did know I was in trouble and had no one to bail me out. I felt a sharp pain in my side as a foot smashed my rib clean through my lung. I coughed violently and my brain shuddered as a boot connected to the side of my head. Curling into the fetal position, my only option now was to protect myself from the blows until the opportunity sprung for me to escape. As my vision blurred and my ears rang, I prayed for anything to get me out of this situation. Suddenly, the blows stopped. Something wasn’t right. I heard one of the goon squad say, “Who is that?” As I painfully turned to see four blurry figures sprinting out of the darkness, everything went black.

Chapter 56

I squinted through my swollen eyes and abruptly closed them, unable to handle the blinding white lights above me. I didn't feel connected to my body, which was a blessing in disguise because I'm sure that my body was a mess of blood clots, internal bruising, and broken bones. I felt a hand on my shoulder shake me gently and a voice repeat my name. I groggily turned my head and struggled to open my eyes, and saw the face of my mother. I jerked upright in bed, wincing in pain.

"Take it easy, hunnie", my mom urged.

"Where am I?"

"Cheshire County Memorial Hospital."

"Huh?"

"You were brought here by ambulance. I got a phone call once you were transported here. A few more minutes and you would have been in serious trouble, Danny."

"How was I found?" I asked. The question dogged my mind. The four blurry figures running out of the darkness? It couldn't have been anyone from Branton, because by the time the fight started, a huge crowd would have already gathered.

"Heeeeeeeeyyyyyy, there he is, alive and kicking!" Big exclaimed as he came strolling into the room with Jimbo, Shanny, and Jonesy in tow.

"That's how you were found, Danny. These four boys are your guardian angels", she said, wiping away a tear. "Tell Danny how you found him."

"Well", Big started, "as soon as you decided to be Rambo and take on the world, your mom called me in a panic and asked me if I had talked to you. I told her no and asked her why she was freaking out, and she said you stormed out of the house and said, and I quote 'a score to settle'. I immediately rallied the troops and broke every rule in the book to get down here as fast as we could."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"That was simple", Jimbo chimed in. "I remember the first time we were in Branton and you mentioned the lighthouse at Nashantuck Beach. I distinctly remember you saying that the lighthouse is where kids go to 'settle scores'. It was a no-brainer. But there is where it gets tasty."

"Tasty?" the entire room responded.

“Yeah, this makes the whole story. Nashantuck Beach is actually under the jurisdiction of both Branton and Williams Beach. That lighthouse is some historical landmark or some crap like that and is due to get state funding every year for upkeep and to make the beach attractive.”

I nodded.

“Branton and Williams Beach have been quarreling for years over the rights to the lighthouse. They both used to be one town before they separated a long time ago, but the lighthouse was always a subject of controversy and council squabbling. Since they both claim to it, they have to spread the funding between the two towns and they don’t want to share with each other. If one beach is nicer, more people go to it, the town gets more revenue, etc. etc.”

Big started shaking his head in disbelief.

“What?”, Jimbo inquired.

“I still can’t believe how you put this all together”, he responded.

“School is good for something.” Jimbo just pointed to his head and continued. “So, remembering that, as soon as we found a parking lot away from the lighthouse, I called the Williams Beach Police Department from a pay phone and told them I was witnessing an assault on a single male by four other males down at the lighthouse. I would have bet everything I have that the Williams Beach Police Department thought that if they handled most of the crimes at the beach, they could have evidence supporting their attentiveness to the beach over Branton. I was right. Also, I remember you telling me at the party in Somerville that the only way to get those kids in trouble was to get them out of their town. It couldn’t have worked out more perfect.”

“We just reached the seawall when we saw you get hit with the beer bottle”, said Shanny.

“Who hit me with the bottle?” I asked.

“That big oaf. Kallock.” Big responded.

“Pussy” was all I could muster.

“You’re a tough cat, Danny, because after you got hit with that bottle, you didn’t do down. Then you got rocked in the face by Kallock, and I don’t know how you did it, but you hit him with the dirtiest left hook I have ever seen.” Big said.

“Good.”

“We messed them up good, Danny. We beat on them for a solid two minutes until we saw the blue lights, then we peaced out and hightailed it back to the car. We waited until we got the OK from your mom to come see you.”

“Thanks, guys.”

“No problem, kid. We knew those Branton kids would only show up if they outnumbered you because they’re all scared little bitches. They were scared to death when they saw us sprinting towards them. One of them tried to run away until Jimbo chased him down and tackled him to the pavement”, Big said. “We got worried when we hadn’t spoken to you for a couple of days. We’ve known you long enough to know how you get when something’s bothering you.”

I nodded. “I would love to see how bad they got it.”

“Not as bad as you”, my mom said. “You have two lacerations on your head, three broken ribs, and a concussion. And you’re missing two teeth.”

I winced. Not looking forward to that recuperation period.

“Well, we got a big game tomorrow, so we should probably get going. We’re playing Jefferson”, Jonesy said.

“Good luck tomorrow. And once again guys, thank you.”

“Anytime man. Talk to you tomorrow.”

My mom gave them all a hug and kiss on the cheek and thanked them profusely. She sat back down next to me.

“Danny, I was so scared. I’m just glad you’re OK.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but it was something I had to do. I guess I was just too hard-headed to realize he wouldn’t show up by himself. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I hope not. I need to go home and get some sleep. They want to keep you overnight for observation, so I’ll pick you up tomorrow as soon as I can.”

“Ok.”

She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “Goodnight, Daniel. I love you.”

“Goodnight. I love you, too.”

My mom left the room as the nurse entered. She put some glorious liquid in my IV bag and I was sound asleep five minutes later.

Chapter 57

Branton was set to play today in the game that should have happened nearly a week ago. I wasn't planning on attending until I listened to the message from Tags when I got home.

"Danny, it's Tags. Call me as soon as you get home."

I dialed his number and he excitedly answered.

"First of all, man, I heard about last night. Are you OK?"

"I've had better days, but I'll make it. Nothing I haven't been through before."

"Second of all, you'll be happy to hear that Cooper, Kallock, Emerson and Gardiner got arrested last night by the Williams Beach PD for suspicion of assault and battery."

I felt my heart skip a beat. "Really?"

"Yup. So based on 'team policy', any involvement with the police is an automatic dismissal from the team. His daddy couldn't save him this time. They can kiss their season good-bye."

I smiled, overcome with a sense of justice and relief. I had won; they had lost everything important to them. The bruises, broken bones, and overwhelming headache suddenly seemed like a small price to pay.

"What is funny about the situation is that when the police showed up, all four of them were beaten up really bad. But after referring to the earlier police call, they find it hard to believe that you beat all four of them up."

I chuckled. "Gee, what a mystery."

"I can guess", he said, "but I know the answer. I'm glad those pricks finally got what was coming to them."

"Me too. I'll see you at the game later on. I wanna witness the final game of the season and see the look on their faces when their hockey career comes to an abrupt end."

"Well, I'm looking forward to my last game in a Branton uniform. I'll talk to you after the game."

"Alright, man, I'm sure you'll be playing, so good luck", I said.

"Thanks. See ya."

This was sure to be interesting.

Chapter 58

I decided to arrive at the game fashionably late. A look of shock overcame nearly every Branton fan as I lumbered in with a noticeable gait, swollen, blackened eyes, and slightly kinked to one side to compensate for the pain in my ribs. I was a literal dead man walking and probably the last person anyone expected to see at the game. The game continued, but the cheering stopped; all eyes were fixed on me as I slowly made my way the length of the bleachers to where the Taggert's were sitting. The goon squad was sitting in the front row as I walked by, and they looked a hell of a lot worse than I did. They stood as I approached, but a group of faculty led by Principal Schwartz hurried down the bleachers and stood hesitantly between us, hoping to prevent any further altercation. We locked eyes as I walked past. To add insult to injury, I smiled ever so slightly, raised my index finger in the air, and chalked up a point for me. As I reached the top of the stairs and sat down next to the Taggert's, Mr. Taggert put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze. We both knew what the other was thinking; there was no need to say it.

I watched with glee as Branton got blown out 7-2 by Somerset Valley. Each goal was a nail driven into the coffin of each member of the goon squad, and as the game became out of reach, I glanced down and saw heavy tears streaming down their faces. Under any other circumstance I would have felt bad; but these pricks deserved it, and seeing their tears put a smile on my face. Their never-to-come-true dreams disappeared right before their very eyes, and all the effort and aggravation they put in to oust me from the team only came back to hurt them in the end. They were going to be the guys in the bars and at every game, reliving the glory days. It was karma, and I was OK with that.

The final buzzer sounded, just one step closer to me being free of the nightmare I was in since I moved here. The rape case was pending, but I had a feeling I was going to win; the plethora of evidence for me and overwhelming lack of evidence for her was going to result in an open and shut case. I carefully walked down the steps, down the length of the bleachers, and towards the exit. Mr. Taggert told me he was going to walk with me in case any of the fathers tried to do something stupid. They could do or say whatever they wanted, but I won; I beat them at their own game, and that feeling would never leave me.

The lobby was full of teary Branton fans and players, parents consoling their kids and one another about the year that could have been. I locked eyes with Mr. Cooper on the way out, who

started making his way through the crowd towards me. Mr. Taggart stepped in his way, looked him square in the eye, and said, "Gerry, if you even so much as lay a finger on this boy, you're gonna have to deal with me. You got that?"

Mr. Cooper backed off, and I stared at him as I walked out the door. Tags caught up with me as I was leaving, and he looked relieved and excited for the season to be over. "I took so much pleasure in taking off every piece of that uniform. I'm so glad I never have to wear it again", he said.

I smiled and gave him a pound. Brimmer was standing by the door talking to a few reporters. He stepped away from, looked at me, and said, "Sorry things happened the way they did. Maybe next year."

"I looked back at him and said just three words: "Yeah, for you."

Those were the last words I said as I exited the building. Goodbye, Branton hockey.

Epilogue

The paper on Sunday morning featured a story called “*Small-Town Scandal.*” The subheading said, “*Rape, Assault, Accusations, Swirl around Local Hockey Team.*” Anyone who was willing to speak to a reporter was quoted in the paper, and more often than not people mentioned the jealousy on the goon squad’s end since my arrival in town. This boded well in my defense, my lawyer told me after we sat down Monday morning. With things going in my favor and a lack of evidence for the prosecution, he was practically guaranteeing a victory.

No matter how the case turned out, my days playing for Branton High were over. Nothing in the world could get me to don that jersey again; even walking through the school filled me with an unexplainable feeling of sickness and anger. It was in the best interest of both me and my mother to look at other options for schooling next year. I knew I could play anywhere and money wasn’t an option. The sizeable fortune left by Aunt Mae could send me to any school ten times over.

I went to sleep that night relieved and carefree. My dream that night was similar to my river dream. Except this time, I floated relaxingly down the river straight into the blue light, where I climbed a ladder and arrived at a waiting Central crew. We got into the car and drove off, leaving everything behind. The blue light made sense of it all; when the police showed up to the lighthouse that night, it brought an end to the whole ordeal. “Never underestimate the human mind”, Jimbo told me.

I woke up the following morning and saw my suit, cleaned and pressed, hanging in the closet. I showered, got spruced up, and ate a huge breakfast that morning. My mother and I climbed into her car and headed to court. My trial was to begin today.