

Chapter One

Everything was going my way as I headed for the goal, as if I was daydreaming instead of right there, in person.

I deked out Colin Bechter, then Patrick Chen, in like, two seconds flat. No problem at all.

When I got within shooting distance I couldn't help smiling when I saw David "Bedhead" McCafferty bouncing from one foot to the other, trying to look ready.

But trying to look ready and actually being ready are two totally different things.

And Bedhead wasn't ready for me.

At that moment, Roberto Luongo wouldn't have been ready for me.

I hummed to myself as I lined up the shot. All Bedhead would see was a blur of orange when the ball flew past him and into the net. (Hopefully, it wouldn't go too far, though. We were on the last ball of the six-pack from my garage.)

I pulled my stick back, remembering the roar of the loudest Cougar fans at the last game before the holidays.

I wished we were playing at the Rogers Centre.

I wished my hoodie was a Canucks jersey.

I wished it was a real game.

“Car!” Kenny Cavanaugh shouted.

But most of all, I wished we weren’t playing on Daffodil Drive.

I groaned as Colin and Bedhead lifted Kenny’s junker net off the road so a Honda could squeeze by us.

The lady who was driving waved and honked her horn a couple of times to say thank you.

“No problem,” I sighed, waving back.

But it *was* a problem. A million-in-one shot like that wasn’t going to happen again any time soon. My huge (well, big, anyway) moment was gone.

“Why don’t we move to Primrose?” Patrick suggested. “Less traffic.”

“Less flat,” Colin reminded him. “We’ll spend the whole game digging the ball out of the ditch.”

“What about Bluebell?” Kenny asked.

“What about a thousand potholes?” Colin answered.

It was more like four or five, but I knew what he meant. Bluebell Lane was a mess.

Jeff McDaniel rested his chin on the handle of his stick. “We should play in the mall parking lot.”

“Seriously?” I stared at him. “On Christmas Eve?”

He groaned. “Oh, yeah. I forgot.”

Who could forget about Christmas, for crying out loud?

“Can you imagine how many people are down there right now?” Patrick asked. “I bet that place is packed.”

I shook my head, hoping that at least one of the last-minute shoppers was my sister Wendy, buying me the Canucks history book I’d put at the top of my wish list.

Unlike Jeff, *I* hadn’t forgotten about Christmas, but I

wasn't nearly as excited as I usually was. Any other year, I would have wanted Christmas Day to last a whole week, but winter hockey camp was starting on Boxing Day and I was counting the minutes.

And sometimes the seconds.

I'd been looking forward to camp since October, when I'd spotted a sign on the bulletin board down at the rink. As I read the big blue letters and my mouth dropped open with shock (and possibly a drip or two of drool), I was glad Eddie Bosko hadn't been around to call me a flounder.

And the more I read, the lower my jaw dropped, because this wasn't any old hockey camp.

The coach was Danny Holbrook, a retired Vancouver Canuck.

He'd played before I was born, back in the nineties, and I didn't know as much about him as I did about the stars like Pavel Bure and Russ Courtnall. But I didn't care (too much, anyway) because whether he was a star or not, he'd been a pro, from my favourite team!

If my parents would send me, I, Nugget McDonald, would have the chance to learn some new moves from an NHL pro.

And how awesome was that? (That is what my English teacher calls a rhetorical question. It doesn't need an answer because everyone knows it's, like, the most awesome thing ever.)

When I told Mum and Dad about the camp that afternoon, they thought about it for longer than they needed to (like, five whole minutes!) and finally, when I didn't think I could take the waiting anymore, they told me I could go. From that moment on, I'd been marking a big red X on my calendar every night before I went to bed.

And there was only one more X to go.

I watched the guys move the net back into place and as soon as Bedhead nodded I dropped the ball, ready to rock Daffodil Drive.

I moved the ball down the asphalt as fast as I could, knowing Kenny was right on my tail. Colin came at me from the left and tried to check me, but he didn't stand a chance. With some fancy footwork and a solid shoulder, I left him with a view of my back.

Bedhead looked even more nervous than last time and I couldn't wait to fire the ball right past him.

"It came!" someone shouted from behind me.

I spun around and saw one of the Watson triplets running toward us. He was wearing one of the biggest smiles I'd ever seen and waving something in the air.

My moment wasn't going to be ruined again. I turned back to the ball.

"What came?" Bedhead asked, stepping away from the net.

"Nothing as important as what I'm sending you right now," I told him.

"My Holbrook jersey!" the triplet shouted.

What?

That stopped me. In fact, I tripped over my own feet trying to turn around.

We all checked out the jersey he was holding up to his chest. The logo on the front was a pair of white hockey sticks, crossed, with a green box around them and the name "Holbrook's Heroes" above it.

The colours were pure Canuck.

Before I could ask where he got it, he turned around and showed us the back, which had "Holbrook" across the top.

“Shouldn’t it say Watson on the back?” Patrick asked me.

“I think it’s awesome,” I whispered back.

A personalized jersey from Danny Holbrook.

I couldn’t believe it.

“I got mine yesterday,” Kenny said.

What?

“No way! Where did you get it?” I asked, already dying to have one of my own.

“In the mail.” Kenny paused for a second, looking confused. “You didn’t get one?”

“No,” I told him, shaking my head slowly. “Was I supposed to?”

“Yeah,” Bedhead said. “Mine got here on Thursday.”

“Mine, too,” Colin said.

“I didn’t get one.” My hands were starting to sweat. “Yet.”

“Your mum signed you up for camp, didn’t she?” Kenny asked, looking worried.

“Duh,” I said, rolling my eyes. “We’ve only been talking about it for two months.”

“Well, you should have gotten a jersey, then.”

“So where is it?”

Kenny shrugged. “Maybe it’ll come tomorrow.”

I shook my head. “No mail on Christmas.”

Nuts! I wanted to wear my jersey on the first day of camp, just like everyone else.

Why hadn’t it shown up earlier in the week? Was it lost in the mail? Did someone steal it from our doorstep?

I had to find the answer.

I had to find that jersey.

Right away.

“I gotta go,” I told Kenny, turning back toward my house.

“Where are you going?”

I didn’t bother answering, even when I heard the rest of the Cutter Bay Cougars shouting after me to come back and play.

When I opened the kitchen door, Mum was sitting at the table, wearing the purple sweater Wendy and I went in together on for her birthday. I was glad to see she was using it, but I had way more important things on my mind.

“I’m surprised to see you already,” she said with a laugh. “Did you forget your puck?”

“We use a ball for street hockey,” I reminded her. “And no.” As if that would ever happen. “Hey, did something come in the mail for me?” I asked.

She smiled. “A couple of packages did, but I’ve hidden them away for tomorrow.”

“But I need to see —”

Mum shook her head. “Nope. You know, you’ve always been the worst for trying to sneak a peek at Christmas presents, Nugget.”

“This isn’t about Christmas,” I said, sounding a bit ruder than I meant to. But I couldn’t help it! This was an emergency! “Can I just see the packages?”

She frowned at me. “What’s going on?”

I pictured the Holbrook jersey in my head.

Man, I wanted one. Like, last Tuesday.

“The guys all got jerseys in the mail. For hockey camp,” I told her. “Did I get one?”

Mum frowned. “No, you have a package from Grandpa Charlie and another from Auntie Carol and Uncle Mike.”

“Nothing else?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “But I paid the registration fee when I signed you up, so I’m sure yours is coming.”

I nodded and tried to breathe normally. “Yeah, because that was way back in October.” Plenty of time.

“Actually, I think it was closer to the end of November.”
What?

“November?” I’d told her about the camp the same day I saw the sign, and that was *definitely* the beginning of October.

My heart started pounding like I’d been skating lines for twenty minutes.

Something had gone wrong. I just knew it.

“Look, it’s not going to matter whether I registered you in October or November, honey. If the camp comes with a jersey, you’ll get one.”

I wanted to believe her, but I had a gut feeling that it wasn’t going to be that simple.

“Are you sure you waited that long?” I asked, wondering what the heck she’d been waiting *for*.

“Let me grab my chequebook,” Mum said, leaving the kitchen.

I thought about my calendar, covered with X’s, and all the time I’d spent imagining ways to impress Danny Holbrook. What if Mum had made a mistake and I wasn’t even registered? I couldn’t spend the whole Christmas break taking shots against the garage by myself.

Maybe I could head down to the rink in the morning and talk my way in? Or was it too late? Was I going to miss out on the coolest camp Cutter Bay had ever seen?

Mum was back in a couple of minutes, waving her chequebook. “Here we go. November nineteenth. Made out to the Holiday Hockey Challenge.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Whew!”
Everything was going to be okay.
At least I *thought* it was.

* * *

Christmas morning was pretty awesome. My sister and I didn’t wake up at six o’clock the way we used to when we were little, but we were ready for action by eight.

As usual, it was almost impossible to sit through a French toast breakfast, watching Mum and Dad sip coffee as slowly as they could, before we hit the living room to open presents.

But it was worth the wait, because I got practically everything on my list. Wendy gave me the book I’d been dying to add to my hockey library, and my new gear bag (with the old-school Canucks logo on it) was the coolest one I’d ever seen. And the framed Jean Ducette rookie card from Grandpa Charlie? Seriously awesome.

My family seemed pretty happy with the presents I got for them, too. Mum and Dad both started using their new coffee mugs practically as soon as they opened them and Wendy actually hugged me when she saw the iTunes card I’d given her.

Not that I liked it or anything, but it was better than the noogie or eye roll she gave me every other day of the year.

Once we were finished opening presents and folding wrapping paper so Mum could use it again next year, the rain started. Of course, I wouldn’t have been allowed to play hockey with the guys on Christmas Day anyway, but it would have been nice to try out the new stick from Mum and Dad in the driveway or something. But it seriously poured for hours, so the McDonald family read, watched a

movie on TV and ate a gravy-drenched turkey dinner. Then it was time for board games.

I checked my watch and saw that it was seven o'clock. Just a few more hours until hockey camp.

"Just one more night," I whispered.

"Until you roll the stupid dice?" Wendy snapped.

Huh?

"Jonathan?" Mum said. "Are you still with us?"

I shook myself out of my daydream and realized it was my turn in our annual Christmas Monopoly marathon.

"He's on another planet," Wendy said, rolling her eyes. "Planet of the geeks."

I guess she'd already forgotten about that iTunes card. "Better than planet of the freaks," I told her, reaching for the dice.

"It's Christmas," Mum reminded us with a sigh. "Can we please take a little holiday from bickering?"

I rolled a seven and landed on Park Place.

Great.

"Ha!" Wendy shrieked. "You owe me . . ." she checked the card and counted the buildings on her property. She'd maxed it out with a hotel. "Fifteen hundred dollars." She smirked. "Pay up."

I glanced at my bank, which had way more ten and one dollar bills than anything else.

"Uh . . . can I owe you?"

She shook her head. "You already owe me two hundred dollars."

"But —"

"You're going to have to go bankrupt, Nugget." She snickered. "It's game over for you."

"It's Christmas," I reminded her.

“So?”

“So, why are you being such a creep?”

“Excuse me?”

“Okay,” Dad said. “Let’s try to end the day on a high note.”

“Yes, this has been a lovely Christmas,” Mum said, looking from me to my sister. “Thanks, you two.”

I didn’t think I could go after Wendy while Mum had happy tears in her eyes. I also didn’t have a chance to find out, because the doorbell rang.

“Who on earth could that be?” Mum asked, looking annoyed.

I had a pretty good idea who it was, and I turned out to be right. When I opened the front door, Kenny Cavanaugh was standing there, his usual Red Wings tuque on his head.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

I knew how Mum felt about Christmas being family time, so I tried to make the visit quick. I told him about all the cool presents I got and promised to show him the Ducette card later.

“A rookie card?” he said. “That has to be the coolest thing in your collection.”

I stared at him. “Sure, Kenny. Except for the signed Ducette jersey on my wall. You know, the one he signed *while I was wearing it.*”

It was only the greatest moment of my life.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I always forget about that.”

I never did. Meeting my favourite Canuck was the most awesome thing that had ever happened to me. And I was going to meet another one the very next day!

Danny Holbrook, here I come!

“Hey, what about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

“Christmas, Kenny. What did you get?”

He frowned, like he was thinking really hard. “A couple of sweaters, a fish puzzle with like two thousand pieces that looks impossible, a new coat and some socks and underwear.”

Ugh.

“Socks and underwear?” I asked. That was the Christmas kiss of death. Worse than school supplies, even.

He shrugged. “I needed some, I guess. My grandma knit the socks.”

He pulled up the cuffs of his jeans so I could see the brown wool. “They look . . . warm,” I said. And lumpy. And itchy.

“Yeah, my feet are already sweating.”

I could imagine, and I didn’t want to. “Did you get any *fun* stuff?” I asked.

He nodded. “Some video games. And my uncle from Toronto gave me a toboggan.”

We both looked down at the wet pavement, then up at the drizzling sky. As usual, snow seemed like a long shot.

“Cool,” I told him.

“Nugget,” Dad called from the dining room, “Scrabble starts in two minutes.” He paused for a second. “Merry Christmas, Kenny.”

“Merry Christmas, Mr. McDonald,” Kenny called back, then spoke more quietly. “Okay, I found out why you didn’t get a Holbrook jersey.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“You guys are on a different team.”

“What do you mean, *you guys*?” I asked, then realized there was a more important question. “Wait a second. What other team?”

He shrugged. "They had a lot of kids sign up for hockey camp. Like, kids from Port Alberni *and* here."

"So?" I asked, not sure what that had to do with me.

"So, they brought in another coach."

"Another Canuck?" I asked. What if it was someone more famous than Holbrook, like Stan Smyl or Courtnall? I'd have a heart attack, for sure.

Kenny shook his head. "I've never heard of the guy. It's Gunnar."

"Gunnar?" I repeated, totally confused.

"K. Gunnar," he said.

"Who the heck is K. Gunnar?" I asked.

"Didn't I just say I'd never heard of the guy?" Kenny asked.

I pulled him into the house and shut the door behind him.

"Follow me," I said, heading for the den.

"Whoa," Mum said from the doorway. "Where's the fire?"

I told her about Gunnar, the total unknown.

She shrugged, then patted my shoulder. "Nugget, it's the same rink and the same camp. The only thing that's different is the coach."

"But that's the most important part of it!" I practically choked. "Danny Holbrook was a *Canuck*, for crying out loud. I've never even heard of K. Gunnar."

Who was K. Gunnar?

"Relax," she said, giving the shoulder a squeeze that was supposed to make me feel better. "You're getting too wound up about this. It's going to be fine."

"Maybe it's Gunnar Grimmel," Kenny said, hopefully. "From the Blackhawks."

Not what I wanted to hear. At all.

“I hate the Blackhawks,” I groaned. “And Gunnar is the last name, not the first. We’ve got to check online.”

I logged on, typed the name and the words “hockey player,” then leaned back in Dad’s chair to wait.

It didn’t take long for an answer, and when it popped up, I couldn’t believe what I read.

Judging by the gasp from Kenny, he was as shocked as I was.

My hockey camp coach wasn’t an NHL player.

She was a girl.