

CHAPTER ONE

My thigh muscles screamed in pain. I sprinted down the field, holding my lacrosse stick at my shoulders, hoping for that perfect pass. When I saw the ball flying toward me, I snagged it from the air without breaking stride. I cradled my stick to keep possession of the ball. As an attack player, my mission was to get to the net and fire the hard lacrosse ball past the goalie. And I knew he could be beaten on his right top corner.

But first I had to get by the defenders. And they were big. Like massive. Most had 50 to 90 pounds on me. At five foot ten and 125 pounds, I wasn't exactly a heavyweight.

A defender with arms as big as my legs barrelled toward me, and I knew he wanted to slam me to the ground before I could take my shot. He waved his stick at me, ready to slash my forearms, hands, legs, any body part that would make me lose the ball. In a quick split dodge, I darted around him. Then I scanned the net. That top corner was open and if I could nail it, we would win. Only minutes remained in the game.

I whipped my stick back behind my head to use

momentum and all my muscles to shoot. Just as I was about to fire the ball, a second defender blindsided me with a slide tackle bodycheck. My feet went out from under me and I tumbled like a paper sack with nothing in it. I swear I did two somersaults before landing with a thud on the ground. My shoulder cracked. My head pounded. Stars swam in front of my face.

From my years of training, my entire body automatically curled. I rolled a few times before I bounced back onto my feet. Immediately I checked the field to see where the ball had landed. By now my fellow teammate, Quinn Hamilton, who had given me the perfect pass and played on my attack line, was in a battle with the opposing defenders. At six foot two, Hambone, as I called him, was four inches taller than me and seventy pounds heavier.

Sticks smacked against each other as at least four players tried to pick up the now-loose ball. Crap. I had lost possession.

I ran toward the scrum. My body ached from the hit, but I understood pain and had to play through it. Often I finished a game battered and bruised, and on the field was not the time to think about what hurt. I pushed into the group of players and poked my stick toward the ball to scoop it up, or free it so one of my teammates could get it. The big bodies knocked me sideways but I went at them again. Again I was tossed aside. And again I went back at them, grunting with every move. Then I saw the free ball.

Quick as I could, I ducked under the bodies and stuck my stick out to push the ball to Hambone. But I got caught and was slammed in the jaw. I had grown five inches in the

past six months and was playing like an awkward giraffe.

“Cover him!” the defender yelled.

They had my number. They knew I played scrappy lacrosse, so I was shoved backwards onto my butt. In the time it took me to get up — which was only a half second at best — the defender from the other team had picked up the ball and made a quick pass down the field to his midfielder, who was now running full tilt.

The momentum had changed.

And it was my fault.

I took off running and chasing, and every step was painful. Time wasn't on our side now. The reversed play was my mistake. If they scored, they would win and I couldn't let that happen. I pushed, taking longer and longer strides, and overtook one guy, then two. Running was my best strength. I could do it.

Come on, Nathan. Keep going. No pain, no gain.

I was halfway down the field when the whistle blew to end the game. I came to a crashing halt, and my first emotion was relief that they hadn't scored. I slowed to a walk. I was still breathing heavy, and the lactic acid in my leg muscles made them ache. I slammed my stick on the ground.

A 4-4 tie. What a brutal outcome.

I gritted my teeth. If I'd scored, we would have won the game. How could I have lost possession like that? How could I have let someone blindsides me that way? I hated it when I made mistakes, when I was the guy who didn't get the job done. As the captain of the team, I needed to show leadership and I needed to score goals.

A win would have put us first in our pool. But a tie, because of points for and against, put us second. Now for the semifinal game, we were matched up against a team that was higher ranked, more difficult to beat. Coming first would've almost given us a guaranteed berth in the finals, because the team we would've had to play had snuck in and was junk.

I lowered my head as I walked toward our bench. I didn't want to look at the fans; I didn't want to see the scouts, in their college jackets, watching the game. I knew they were there. This annual tournament in Baltimore was the biggest National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and professional lacrosse scouting tournament of the fall season. Our season really started in the spring, but in the fall we played tournaments for exposure.

At the sidelines our coach, Derkie — short for Joe Derkson — said, "I'll meet you in the dressing room. No one leave."

As captain I knew I should say something positive to my teammates, but the words stuck in my throat. I plodded off the field toward the dressing room, my feet feeling as if they each weighed a million pounds. Hambone walked quietly beside me. After we had walked almost halfway without talking, he said, "You got rocked."

"I know," I replied without looking at him. Hambone was one of those brutally honest dudes who told it like it was. To me he was like a dog with a bone, thus the nickname. "Really rocked. I didn't even get a shot on net."

"Don't kill yourself. The guy's gotta weigh in at 230."

"We coulda won if I'd scored." I walked a few strides

before I mumbled, “Thanks for the pass.”

“We’re not out.”

“Yeah.”

“I saw the scout from Syracuse.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled again. Then I whispered more to myself than to Hambone, “He probably just knocked me off his list.”

Our team had travelled from Podium Sports Academy in Calgary to a big field lacrosse tournament in Baltimore. Podium was *the* national sports school in Canada and you had to be invited to attend. I had received my letter in the mail before grade ten, and the training and skills I had received so far were unbelievable. My game had improved a hundred percent. Podium is such a natural feeder school for getting NCAA college scholarships. And here I was at the top tourney, desperately needing a scholarship to keep playing my sport, and sucking because I was built like a stick. There was no way I was ready to quit playing lacrosse yet, but after today . . . was the writing on the wall?

No. Stop thinking like that. You’ve got the height, you just need the weight.

I had big dreams. But I was skinny, and the guys chirped me about it all the time. And yes, the comments bugged me but I made like they didn’t. Fact was, I needed time to fill out before I even *thought* about playing professional box lacrosse — that means in an arena, like a hockey rink — in the National Lacrosse League. And that was my ultimate goal. So I had to get a scholarship to a Division 1 school to give me that time. At five-ten and 125 pounds I needed muscle. But my dad was skinny too, tall and lean

and a runner. I had a runner's build, not a pro lacrosse athlete's build. Had I been born into a bad gene pool?

No. Stop thinking like that. You can build muscle.

I clenched my stick. I didn't have a hope of playing box lacrosse if I couldn't play field. And I didn't have tons of time to gain the muscle. I needed it now. I hadn't thought that with field lacrosse, my size would be a big factor — until today. I had been tossed around. I couldn't let Blackie — Jonah Black, our team trainer — know how much I was hurting from the hits. A sports medicine student, Blackie gave us ice, wrapped our legs with tensors, massaged our muscles, fixed cuts with butterfly bandages, and was an awesome sounding board for anything you wanted to talk about. But if you complained about an ache, he was quick to refer you to the right doctor, and that usually meant some time off — which I didn't want.

Hambone and I entered the dressing room. I went straight to my stall and tossed my stick on the floor and my helmet in the bag. I plopped down, took off my soaking wet headband, leaned my head against the wall, and closed my eyes. My hair hung in wet strands over my face. I still had tomorrow. I had to make up what was lost.

I'd spent a lot of time drafting the letter I sent to every lacrosse coach of the colleges I wanted to attend, making sure they all knew I was going to be playing in Baltimore. I'd also sent off a video that had taken hours to edit. It showed me performing all kinds of skills, playing well in games, and *scoring goals*. Today I didn't get one flipping point.

I moaned. All that work, just to be bounced around like a ping pong ball.

The door creaked and Derkie walked in the dressing room.

“Tough tie,” he said, looking around the room. “But we’re not out.” His gaze rested on me. I wanted to lower my head but knew if I did, Derkie would definitely single me out. One of his pet peeves was a guy who couldn’t hold his head up after a defeat. At the beginning of the year he had called me into his office and made me captain because he said he thought I was the most skilled player, had the right stuff to be a leader, plus I was someone who could stand up and handle every single situation with a positive attitude. Today I wasn’t exactly doing that.

“We can win this tournament,” said Derkie. “But everyone has to stay positive. We’re a team and we work as a team to win, lose, and . . . tie.” He broke our gaze and once again looked around the room, making eye contact with every other player, one after the other. I felt my shoulders sag. He was right. I had to stop acting like I was a one-man team and thinking only of my own scholarship.

Derkie continued. “It’s very doable. I want to meet for an early breakfast tomorrow to go over some plays. We need to work on our attack. Goals win games. Our defence was solid and netminding was good, but I have some ideas on how we can push through *their* defence. I have a room booked in the hotel and will send a message about time later. Now get showered. We have a team meal in an hour.”

After Derkie left, I stood up. “Derkie’s right,” I said loudly. “We *will* win tomorrow. Let’s stay focused and positive and work as a team to take home the gold.” I looked

at my teammates. They had played hard. I had let them down. I grinned because I knew the guys expected me to be upbeat. “We didn’t come all the way from Can-a-da to crap the bed.”

Everyone in the room cheered and I nodded my head in reassurance. Then I undressed, wrapped my towel around my waist, and entered the shower.

As I stood there, water pouring over my body, I was still pissed off at myself. I had to get over it though, and now was the best time. Ryan Duncan stood beside me, shampooing his hair. He was a massive dude, and one of our best defencemen.

“Bro, you need some bulk,” he said, his head back, eyes closed, as he shampooed his hair. “Your breastbone damn near hits your spine.” He paused for a moment, then rolled his head to the side and opened one eye. “I know where you can get it.”

“Oh yeah?” A little voice in my head told me to get showered and fast. But instead I took my time, even though my stomach had tightened. Maybe I should hear him out.

“Guy works at Rocky’s Supplement Store,” said Ryan, just loud enough for me to hear. “He knows tons.” He shut his eyes again and stuck his head under the shower to rinse off the shampoo.

I thought about his comment. “Protein stuff?”

“Better.”

“Creatine?”

He grinned and winked. “Better than that.”

I shook my head. “My dad’s a doc. He’d freak.”

Ryan shrugged, then scrubbed his armpits, casually creating lather and bulging biceps at the same time. "It's your career. Not his."

I turned off the taps, wrapped my towel around my waist, and left the shower area, my mind racing. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about doing something, anything, to get bigger. Other guys did stuff all the time; it wasn't a secret in the sports world. But I was cursed with a father who was a doctor and who'd told me over and over how harmful steroid use was.

I approached my stall. Hambone had finished his shower and was getting dressed. "I'm *starving*," I said to him.

"I'd love a steak," he replied with a moan.

"Think again, dude. Five bucks says it'll be pasta." I quickly dressed in my game suit, leaned over, and shook my head to dry my long mop of hair, picked up my bag, and headed toward the door. "See you on the bus!" I yelled over my shoulder.

Once outside, I sucked in a deep breath because I saw Derkie talking to a man in a Syracuse jacket. As soon as Derkie saw me, he gestured at me to come over.

Crap. Crap. Crap. Why today?

I ran my hand through my hair, wishing I'd dried it with the dryer, squared my shoulders, and walked toward the duo. *Make eye contact. Be confident.* I stuck my hand out first. "Nathan Moore," I said.

The man returned the handshake. "John Markham. Pleased to meet you, Nathan."

"Likewise," I replied.

Derkie placed his hand on my shoulder. "I'll leave you

two to chat.” Then he looked at his watch. “Bus leaves in ten,” he said.

Mr. Markham gave a perfunctory nod and smiled, and I knew he was trying to make me relax. Once Derkie was out of earshot, he said, “He runs a tight ship.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “He sure does.”

“I know we only have a few minutes today,” said Mr. Markham, “so we have to be quick. But I wanted to touch base with you.”

I gave him a small nod. My mouth had dried instantly, and my palms had started to sweat. “Quick” was not a good thing. At least I thought it wasn’t. Something punched my gut and I swear my stomach flipped ten times.

“I like how you play,” he said. “I like your heart and Derkie has said great things about your drive and passion. I’m always looking for that in a player.”

“Thanks.” I made sure I was holding on to the eye contact. Was this going better than I’d thought?

“But you need some weight to be an effective player.”

My heart thudded to my toes. It was always the same comment. Although it used to be I was too small; now I was just too skinny. I swallowed. My lips were so dry but I didn’t dare lick them. I couldn’t let him see my disappointment.

“I’m working out with weights,” I said, hoping I sounded confident.

“That’s what Derkie said. He also said you are his hardest worker in the gym. To me, that’s important. Keep it up.” Then he stuck out his hand again. “You’ll get there. I will definitely be looking at you in the next six months. You’ve