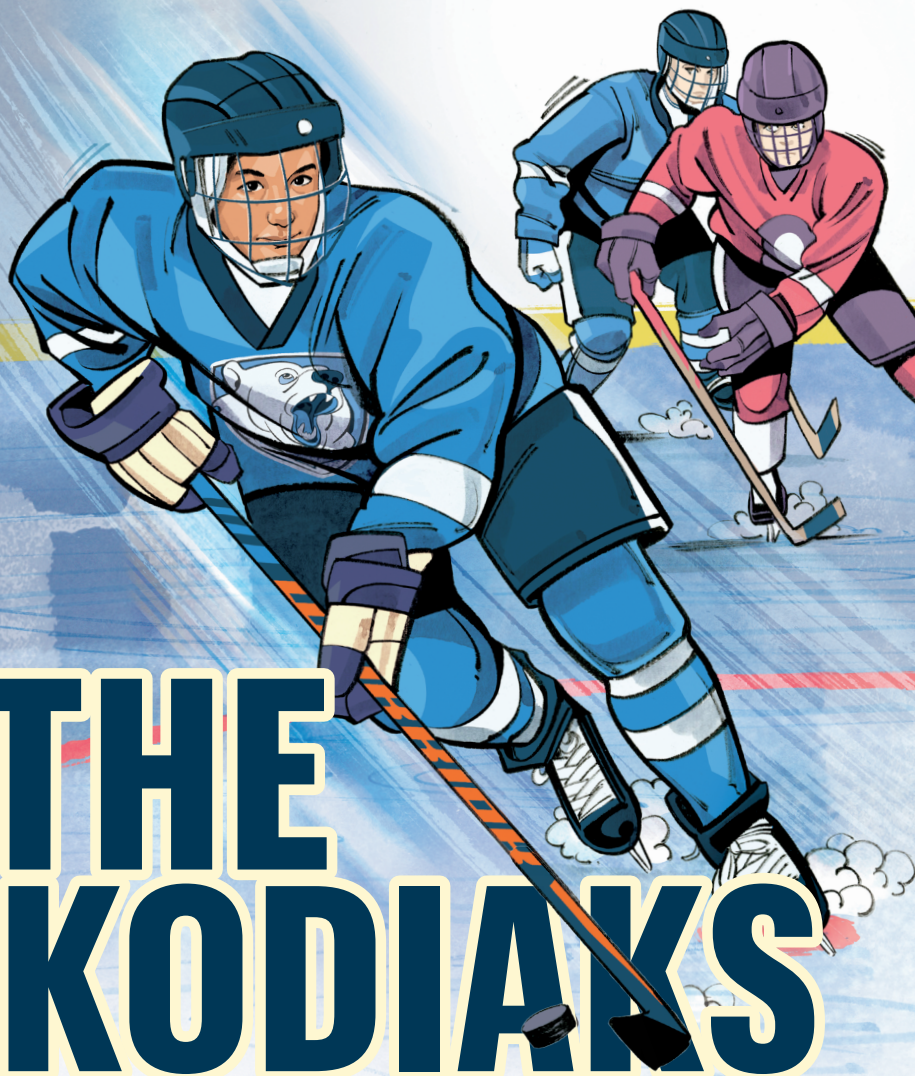


DAVID A. ROBERTSON



THE KODIAKS

HOME ICE ADVANTAGE

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DAVID A. ROBERTSON

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DAVID A. ROBERTSON

THE KODIAKS

HOME ICE ADVANTAGE

BOOK ONE OF THE BREAKOUT CHRONICLES



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CONTENT NOTE: This story includes scenes of racist behaviour and language that may be challenging to some readers.

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THE KODIAKS

CHAPTER 1



ALEX ROBINSON had hoped this day would never come. For a while, it was distant enough that it hadn't actually seemed real. Like it wouldn't actually happen. But here it was. It was time to leave life as he knew it behind.

Alex loved his home in Norway House Cree Nation and would never have decided to move to the city, but he hadn't been given a choice. All he could do now was say a few goodbyes. And so, on the morning of the big move, Alex—or Robo to pretty much every hockey fan in the community—got out of bed before anybody else.

"We're leaving first thing," his dad had said last night before Alex went to bed.

"Can't wait to go or something?" Alex had asked.

"No, that's not it. It's just like ripping off a Band-Aid," Dad had said, pretending to rip a Band-Aid off his arm. "The quicker you do it, the less it hurts."

Alex threw on some clothes, then glided through the house towards the front door, avoiding the creaky spots. He knew every creaky spot. After all, he'd lived there his entire life.

Safely outside, Alex rolled his bike down the driveway and jumped on when he reached the street. From there, he rode through Rossville, the main area of the reserve, towards the multiplex. The multiplex housed the radio station, a restaurant, the drop-in centre, the gym—and the hockey rink. The rink was what Alex needed to say goodbye to. It had been his second home ever since his mom strapped double-bladed training skates onto his boots and led him onto the ice.

He didn't need those skates for very long.

"You were a natural," his mom often told him.

Getting from one place to another in Rossville was quick. Other areas of the rez were sprawled out, but Rossville was like any small town. The multiplex, the hotel, Chief and Council's office, the mall, the gas station, and the school were all within a ten-minute walk. Alex biked into the multiplex parking lot and stopped near the entrance he'd walked through a million times before.

He lowered the kickstand and took a few steps towards the building. He wished he could go inside, but the doors were locked. He wished he could walk out onto the ice one last time. His dad once told him how he'd gone to centre ice and touched the red circle when the Winnipeg Jets left the city for Phoenix. An avid hockey fan, he said it had given him closure.

Alex imagined doing the same thing. He pictured himself walking across the ice towards the red dot. He

pretended he could hear the roaring crowd. This was all easy to do because he knew the rink like the back of his hand. Still, it wasn't the same.

He could see into the lobby from where he was standing. On game nights, it was packed. But nobody was there this morning. All Alex could see was his reflection. When he waved goodbye to the arena, he was waving goodbye to himself. It was like he was leaving part of himself behind.

A flood of memories hit him. Every single moment he'd ever experienced on the ice and in the dressing room with his teammates swirled around in his brain. He thought of the long trips they'd taken to play all over Manitoba. That's when they all became friends. When they were on the road, they spent every second together. He knew that hockey teams didn't travel much in the city. A road trip for them was thirty minutes, not, like, eight hours. Alex doubted teams went to other rinks on a bus. They probably went separately, in their parents' cars. And how many Indigenous kids were on those teams?

"Some people are going to think they know you, even if they've never met you before," his dad had told him one night as they were packing.

It had felt like a warning.

Alex kicked at some loose stones on the concrete and watched them skitter off. He looked through the front doors into the lobby one last time, trying to soak up all the good memories, so he could take them with him. Then he got back on his bike and pedalled away, wondering if he would ever play there again.

CHAPTER 2



ALEX RODE UP AND DOWN each street, waving at every car that passed. It made him feel good that people waved back. Alex knew why. The whole rez knew he was leaving. Alex was the best player on the hockey team. He had the most goals and the most points, played every penalty kill and every power play, and he was on the ice in the last minutes whenever the game was on the line. Last season, the North Stars won the championship and Alex was the MVP.

A passing car stopped. The driver rolled down his window.

“Give ’em heck down there in the city, Robo,” the man said, raising his fist.

“I’ll do my best,” Alex said.

“Ekosi!” the man shouted, which meant “Way to go!” in Cree, then kept driving.

Alex biked on, pedalling more deliberately towards his last stop. He'd put it off as long as possible, but now it was time to say goodbye to his best friend.

Alex had been pretty much brothers with George all his life, since before he could skate. Their parents had been friends forever, so they were destined to be friends, too. It helped that they actually liked each other, and that George also played hockey. He was Alex's linemate. Whenever Alex was on the power play or penalty kill or making a play in the final seconds of a game, George was right there with him. On the ice he was known as Cap because his last name was Captain.

Alex turned sharply into George's driveway. His tires crunched against the gravel and kicked up a cloud of dust. He dodged toys left out by George's younger siblings, then skidded to a stop at the front door. Alex checked the time. It was still early. To spare George's parents a wake-up call, Alex walked around the side of the house with a handful of gravel and tossed the tiny stones at George's window. George stuck his head out into the chilly morning air.

"Tansi, boy," George said.

"Tansi to you, too," Alex said.

"Ho-lay," George said. "When you told me you were coming early, you weren't kidding."

"We're leaving first thing," Alex said. "When else was I going to come?"

"Hang on a sec," George said.

He disappeared, and Alex waited there, leaning on his bike. Moments later, George jogged around the corner of

the house, holding a hockey stick. Alex recognized it as George's favourite stick. It was a Warrior QRE 50 - 40 Flex.

"Ever whippy," George had said when he started using it last year.

It was an amazing stick and it looked cool, too. It had a blue blade, a blue-and-black handle, and WARRIOR printed in orange down the middle.

"Cap," Alex said, "I don't have time to play road hockey." He looked at George's stick, which was in pristine condition. George took care of his Warrior like a newborn baby. He never took slapshots because he didn't want to break it. "You wouldn't use that on the road anyways."

"I don't want to play road hockey," George said. He held the stick out towards Alex, cradling it in his open palms. "This is for you."

Alex pushed it away. "No way! I can't take your stick, Cap. Forget it!"

George pushed the stick against Alex's outstretched hands, and it became like a reverse tug-of-war match.

"You *can* take my stick because I'm giving it to you," George said. "You're going to need it down there with all those city kids."

"But this is your favourite," Alex said. "You've literally told me that. You've told me that you never had a better stick."

George shrugged. "I never had a better friend."

Alex stopped resisting.

"I actually think there's something cultural about accepting gifts and stuff like that," George said.

"Pffft," Alex said. "Not even."

The boys laughed loud enough to wake up everybody in George's house.

"I'm gonna miss you," Alex said once they'd stopped laughing.

"I know," George said.

As Alex held the stick, he pictured all the times George had used it to pass the puck or score. Almost every time, he'd passed to Alex. Or Alex had passed to him. Who was going to pass to Alex now?

"I can't believe it's already almost tryouts," Alex said. "I bet there's going to be one thousand kids going for the same team. That's what my dad said anyways."

"Don't worry even if there are ten thousand kids, Robo," George said. "You got this."

Alex rolled the stick over his palms, back and forth, letting the sun glint off the smooth surface.

"What if I don't?" Alex asked.

George looked Alex dead in the eye, then poked his finger against Alex's chest.

"Dude, there'll only be one warrior out there," George said.

"Cap, lots of kids use Warriors," Alex said.

"You know what I mean," George said.

"You think I'll be the only Native kid trying out?" Alex asked, suddenly feeling anxious. He could hear his dad's voice: *Some people are going to think they know you, even if they've never met you before.* Had it really been a warning? What would everyone be thinking about him? How could a stick protect him against that?

"You never know," George said. "Either way, you've totally ruined my pep talk."

“All right, I’ll be a warrior.” Alex pushed aside his worry and tried to look confident. “Happy?”

“You’re lucky,” George said. “I was about to take it back.”

“I think there’s something cultural about taking *back* gifts, too,” Alex said.

“That’s not cultural, that’s just rude,” George said. “And I’d never take it back. It’s yours.”

“Ekosani,” Alex said. “Thanks.”

He promised George that he’d call him that night when he got to the city. That he’d call every night, no matter what.



When Alex got home, his parents were awake and sitting at the kitchen table, surrounded by moving boxes and eating bowls of cereal. They told him they’d gotten up after they heard him leave the house. He wasn’t as quiet as he’d thought.

“Weren’t you scared I was going to run away because I don’t want to move?” Alex asked.

“Where would you go?” Dad asked, chuckling.

“I don’t know,” Alex shrugged. “To the trapline?”

“We’ll still go there,” Mom assured him as tears welled up in Alex’s eyes. Moving was real now. It was getting more real with each passing second. “This place will always be our home.”

“Promise?” Alex asked.

Dad walked over and put his hand on Alex’s shoulder.

“Promise,” he said. “I know you were off saying goodbye, but you know what? There’s no word for ‘goodbye’ in Cree for a reason. We’ll visit all the time.”

“Do you think one day we can move back?” Alex asked.

“I hope so,” Dad said. “It depends on if the school gets better funding, and if I feel like I can do more good here than at my new job in the city. Either way, I’ve got to give it a shot.”

Alex wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie and nodded. With his tears at bay, he showed his parents the stick George had gifted him. They talked about hockey after that, forgetting, even with boxes all around them, they were moving at all. But soon it was time. They finished breakfast, packed up the rest of the trailer, and hit the road for Winnipeg. Alex looked out the rear window as the community got smaller and smaller, until it disappeared. Then he stopped looking back and started to look forward. It was late August and tryouts were only a few weeks away. If his dad was giving it a shot, he would too.

CHAPTER 3



THE NEXT FEW WEEKS passed quickly. Time always went by fast when there wasn't a moment to breathe, and that's exactly how Alex felt.

First, they moved into their new house. It was a green house in an area of the city called the West End. Alex thought the name was funny because the neighbourhood was closer to the centre of Winnipeg. The house looked pretty big when he first walked inside, but it felt a lot smaller when it was filled with boxes and furniture—as small as Alex felt in the city. The rez was big, but there was so much open space. Winnipeg was way bigger, and the countless buildings and houses were crowded together like the moving boxes in Alex's new room.

There were a lot of kids on the street, and Alex joined them in a game of street hockey while his parents unpacked. At the end of the street there was a

convenience store that had candy and soft drinks. It made the move a little easier to take.

Then it was the first day of school. Alex was starting grade 6. In Norway House, he'd gone to the Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Education Resource Centre, the school where his dad had worked. Now he was going to a school called Sargent Park. It seemed like a maze compared to his old school.

"It probably just seems confusing because it's new," his mom said after his first day, when he came home looking, according to her, overwhelmed.

Alex figured out his way around the school, but he found it hard to get used to the kids in his class. They seemed nice but he was nervous to talk to them. Most of them laughed when he got in trouble for not looking at the teacher when the teacher was talking to him. Alex got sent out in the hall for five minutes for being disrespectful.

"Even though there are other Native kids at school, the teachers may not have had a kid from the rez before. They don't know about our cultural traits," Mom said. "You just have to tell your teacher that you didn't make eye contact because it's a sign of respect for authority."

"Son," Dad said, "I know it's hard being in a new place, and it feels harder when people don't understand you. But sometimes you can help them understand."

Alex didn't feel comfortable talking to his teacher about it. He thought his teacher would get annoyed with him. From then on, Alex tried to look at his teacher when he was speaking, and he didn't get sent out of the room again.

Next Alex had to get used to how different living in Winnipeg was from living on the rez. Alex had visited the city a few times before they moved, but never saw much of it. He and his parents drove around to figure out where everything was. They even took the bus one day. Alex thought that was fun because he'd never been on a bus before, not a city bus anyway. The North Stars had taken a team bus when they travelled to other communities like Opaskwayak Cree Nation or Thompson to play games. But when he was on that bus, people didn't look at him funny. On the city bus, the way people looked at him and his parents made him feel bad, like they didn't belong.

"Is this what you were telling me about?" he asked his dad. "About people thinking they know us?"

"Yes," Dad said.

"How do I make them not look at me like that?" he asked.

"I don't know." Dad sighed. "But I do know this: You don't have to change who you are for anybody."

Finally, it was time for tryouts. Alex couldn't wait to get on the ice and do something that felt normal. There was no hockey team in the West End because there weren't enough kids that played, so Alex had to play in a neighbourhood called St. James.

"Our arena is bigger than this one," Alex said as his dad parked the car at Allard, the arena where tryouts were being held.

"I guess some things aren't bigger in the city, hey?" Dad said.

Alex got out of the car, opened the trunk, and took out his hockey bag. He slung it over his shoulder.

“I guess not,” he said.

He reached for the Warrior, sliding it out of the trunk as if he were taking a sword out of a sheath.

CHAPTER 4



WHEN ALEX AND HIS DAD walked in, the lobby was swarming with hockey parents and players. The line to register for A1 extended all the way from the rink doors to the arena's entrance. They went to the back of the procession and shuffled forward, inch by inch. The smell of popcorn wafted through the air, and popped kernels littered the ground like freshly fallen snow. By the time they reached the registration table, it was thirty minutes until Alex's ice time.

After registering, Alex followed his dad into the rink, where a different group was on the ice trying out. The crunch of steel against ice and the clap of sticks against pucks filled the arena. Parents were pressed up to the glass all along the boards watching, coffee cups in hand. There was a skate-sharpening booth beside two vending machines, one machine for drinks and one for snacks.

There was a donation bin full of used hockey equipment. It was all familiar to Alex. No matter how different one place was from another, hockey was the same everywhere.

Alex's dad headed for the stands and Alex made his way to the dressing room. When he opened the door, he found the room almost full. He spotted one empty space beside a red-headed kid who looked like he was having the time of his life, as though a smile had been tattooed on his face. Alex lugged his bag over, sat down, and began rummaging through his equipment to find his jock. He hadn't even put it on before the red-headed kid punched him lightly on the arm.

"Hey," the kid said.

"Hey," Alex said, pulling on his jock shorts, then grabbing a shin pad.

"What's your name, bud?" the kid asked.

Alex strapped on one shin pad and then the other. "Alex. Alex Robinson."

"You just said your name like you're a secret agent."

Alex paused before answering. "Maybe I *am* a secret agent," he said. "I could be here undercover on a top-secret mission. You never know."

"What sort of top-secret mission would happen at a hockey rink?" the kid asked, playing along. "Is one of the players an internationally wanted criminal?"

"That's classified," Alex said.

"Well," the kid said as they both pulled their pinnies on over their equipment, "I know what your code name should be."

"Oh yeah?" Alex said. "What's that?"

“Robby,” the kid said matter-of-factly.

Alex repeated *Robby* in his head a bunch of times. Then he alternated between *Robby* and *Robo*, his hockey name back on the rez.

“That’s not bad.” Alex shoved his feet into his skates. He tied them so tight that by the end of the tryout he wouldn’t be able to feel his toes. He noticed that the red-headed kid was doing up his skates super loose. “Why do you do it that way?”

The kid shrugged. “My dad told me it would make my ankles stronger, but now I do it because I’m used to it.”

Alex put on his helmet and gloves. He picked up his stick and leaned against it as if he needed it for support. He checked the time. The tryout was starting in a few minutes. He could hear the Zamboni cleaning the ice.

“What’s your name?” Alex asked.

“Aidan,” the kid said. “Wuerfel. You can call me Wuerf.”

“Wuerf?” Alex said. He liked the ring of it—it rhymed with Nerf. He didn’t mention that, however. He was sure Aidan had heard it countless times before.

“That’s what I’ve been called since I started playing hockey. I get called Wuerf more often than Aidan now.”

Alex looked down at his skates for a moment and pretended he was in the dressing room at the Norway House multiplex. It had the same black rubber flooring.

“Back home I got called Robo,” Alex said.

“Like, as in *RoboCop*? That’s awesome!” Wuerf said.

He stuck out his glove for a fist bump, so Alex did, too.

“I guess,” Alex said. “I actually never thought of that.”

Alex felt like he was making a friend. Well, a hockey friend. He thought of George, back on the rez. That was

his *best* hockey friend. Being friends with somebody else felt a bit like betraying George. Alex thought of a conversation he'd had with his parents on the way to the city.

"I don't want to play on a new team," he'd said out of nowhere. "I like the team I was on."

"I know it's hard to leave friends behind, especially a friend like George," his dad had said. "But you'll make new friends, and eventually they'll feel like family to you."

Was this new kid going to feel like family to Alex? Both of them had to make the team first. Alex thought he had a pretty good chance, but he had no idea if Aidan was decent. He could've been an ankle-bender for all Alex knew, especially with those loose skates. But what did that matter? If Aidan was bad, it didn't make him any less friend-worthy.

A man wearing skates, sweats, and a blue team jacket opened the door to the dressing room. Alex noticed a white logo on the jacket. He leaned forward and squinted, trying to see what it was, and finally concluded that it was the head of a bear.

"You boys ready?" the man asked.

Alex figured he was a coach. All the boys responded enthusiastically, except for Alex, who'd returned his gaze to his skates and the rubber floor underneath his blades.

"We're on," the man said.

He left the room just like that. Before the door closed, Alex saw the team name on the back of his jacket.

Kodiaks.

The dressing room cleared quickly as the kids filed out one by one, then lined up inside the boards from the gate to the goal light. Alex and Aidan were at the back of the

line. They'd taken an extra minute to leave the dressing room because Aidan started quoting RoboCop lines, in a RoboCop voice. As they waited to get on the ice, Wuerf glanced back at Alex and said, "I still like Robby though, because I made it up."

Alex liked it too. He wasn't in Norway House; he was in Winnipeg. Keeping his hockey name would make him miss home more than he already did. If he was going to make the team, he didn't need a distraction like homesickness. Like it or not, this was a new start, and having a new name made sense.

The coach with the Kodiaks jacket opened the gate and the kids burst onto the freshly cleaned surface. As if sparked to life by the sound of skates digging into ice, Alex's heart started to beat hard and fast.

"Ready to rock, Robby?" Wuerf asked as they moved closer and closer to the gate.

"Yeah," Alex said before stepping onto the ice. "I'm ready."

CHAPTER 5



AS THEY SKATED slow warm-up laps around the ice, Aidan explained to Alex that every kid trying out got three skates to show what they could do. After that, the team was chosen. One of the coaches blew his whistle, signalling that the tryout was about to start. He told the players to line up in four lines, facing cones that had been placed on the ice in a zigzag pattern. Each player had to stickhandle around the cones, then skate at full speed back to where they'd started. Alex had done the same thing a thousand times in Norway House.

Some of the players made the drill look easy, but others bumped into cones or lost the puck and helplessly watched it slide away. Alex cringed when that happened, feeling bad for the player while imagining himself making a similar mistake. When the player in front of him bumped into a cone *and* lost the puck, everybody's worst nightmare, Alex looked away as if he'd witnessed a car

DAVID A. ROBERTSON (he/him/his) is the 2021 recipient of the Writer's Union of Canada's Freedom to Read Award. He is the author of more than 30 books for young readers including *When We Were Alone*, which won a Governor General's Literary Award and was a finalist for the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award. David's most recent works include the graphic novel *Breakdown* (volume 1 of the Reckoner Rises series), the middle-grade novel *The Barren Grounds*, the children's book *On the Trampoline*, and the memoir *Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory*. He is also the writer and host of the podcast *Kiwew*, which won the 2021 RTDNA Prairie Region Award for Best Podcast.

A sought-after speaker and educator, David is a member of Norway House Cree Nation. He lives in Winnipeg.



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but can he stand proud when he's judged for
who he is and where he comes from?**

EVERYTHING IS CHANGING for Alex Robinson. After his father accepts a new job, Alex and his family move from their community to the city. For the first time in his life, he doesn't fit in. His fellow students don't understand Indigenous culture. Even a simple show of respect to his teacher gets him in trouble.

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