

CHAPTER 4



IN HOCKEY I'M what's called a peewee. That's eleven- and twelve-year-olds. I'll be twelve next month, so this is my last year in peewee. I'm trying to make the jump from peewee AA to AAA next season. Tryouts are coming up in less than two weeks. The AAAs are kids who skate fast, pass good, hit the puck hard, and want the puck more than life itself. That's me, I know it. I know it, but I got to prove it to Coach Dusan in the tryouts. Just thinking about this makes my stomach turn. Dad keeps saying, "Don't worry about being worried, worry about getting the puck. Don't think about anything but the puck."

When we get to the rink forty minutes later, Shu, in cargo shorts, is just unlocking the front door. He's sixty, but his calf muscles are still as big as grapefruits. He was on the Chinese national team when he was young.

Shu doesn't say hi. He says, "Last time you lazy, this time work hard."

"I had a stomachache last time."

"I don't care, skate hard or I pinch you." Then he reaches over and pinches my neck, I mean, really pinches HARD.

"Ow! I haven't even done anything yet! How can you pinch me?"

"I forget to pinch you last time," he says, walking away.

Dad heads to the ice, and I head to the dungeon-like locker rooms. Even at this hour, the dungeons are overly warm. I strip and put on my socks, leggings with cup, shirt with built-in neck guard, elbow pads, shin guards, shoulder pads, hockey pants, pants shell, mouth guard, and jersey. Then I focus on my skates. They have to be tied just right, or I'm no good. I pull the laces taut on the bottom eyelets, and then on the

top, I wrap the laces twice around my ankles and pull tight but not too tight, then knot them. I stand up and concentrate on my skates. All good.

I'm already sweating as I take off my skate guards and grab my helmet, stick, and water bottle. In the hall I pass Rocko rolling in his hockey bag. "Hey," I say.

"Hey," he says.

That qualifies as a long conversation when it comes to Rocko and me. We used to be good friends—he was in my class in third grade, but he moved to Glendale that summer. Later, by coincidence, we started hockey together, ending up on the same team for two years. Then when I made AAs, and he didn't, he stopped talking to me, even when I said hi. And his mom and dad stopped talking to my stepmom and dad. Some of the kids and parents are like that. Not a lot of them, but some. Maybe we would have drifted apart anyway. He just seems way younger. Like, his dad still ties his skates, even though that's against the rules for peewees. Also, Mr. Rockman likes to complain to the coaches, which doesn't even seem to embarrass Rocko. He complains if he doesn't

like the way practice goes, if he doesn't think Rocko played enough in a game, etc. Everybody at the rink knows who the crazy parents are. Some are crazy in a kinda funny way, and some are crazy mad like Mr. Rockman. You gotta have an incredibly talented kid for a coach to take on a parent like that, though some coaches are more tolerant than others of screaming parents. Still, I'm basically cool with Rocko, just don't see the need to try to escalate back into friendship.

Now my dad, even though he knows a lot about hockey, never complains to the coaches. Once in a while, if he has a suggestion, he says he politely shoots the coach an e-mail, but he won't confront a coach like Mr. Rockman does. Dad's main focus is not on the coaches but on me. Dad says you have to work hard to dig every ounce of your talent out of yourself. "You can't be sure how much talent you have until you hit a wall," he told me once. Now and again I think I've hit a wall, and sometimes that gets me so upset I cry, but I push through it and get better.

I stomp down the hall with a bunch of other skaters. Until I step on the ice, I feel like I'm kind of a regular kid. Then I step on the ice, and the world

changes. All my working out, all my skating lessons, all my hockey practices, all the time I spend hitting the puck in my driveway—it all comes together and makes me feel like a gladiator or something as I sprint once around the rink with my stick, stopping to slap a puck into the net. I had my skates sharpened yesterday, and they feel great!

A few midget AAAs are among the group here to skate with Shu. Midgets are fifteen to eighteen years old. I've talked to the guys here before. They're seventeen, and they're awesome. They're here 'cause they're reaching for the brass ring. The brass ring is either college or major junior or the pros. Anything, as long as you can keep playing at a high level. Except for Rocko, that's the only type of player who shows up at five in the morning to skate with a sixty-year-old Chinese man who pinches them hard on the neck when he gets mad. I've heard "Don't be lazy, I pinch you" about, I don't know, fifty times. And I've been pinched maybe twenty times, including today.

"Don't be lazy!" I shout for no reason, and skate at top speed halfway around the rink and come to a quick stop, spraying ice into the air.

Fifteen guys and one girl show up. Except for the girl—Ji-Hye—Rocko and I are the only ones who haven't made AAA yet. Ji-Hye plays college hockey, and she's super mean. Me and Rocko usually just try to avoid being in line near her so she doesn't beat up on us.

Shu appears and says, "I time you." He swings his stopwatch around in the air, and we all get in line. I get in front of Ji-Hye, but she pushes me out of the way and says, "Move over, or I'll sit on you." She's serious. She pushes and trips boys who are smaller than her, and then she sits on them. I let her go in front of me, since it's pretty embarrassing when she sits on you. You can't get up. You're only set free when Shu decides to make her get off. She lives in Koreatown near Jae-won, my best friend from last season's team. When I'm over at his house sometimes and she's home from school, we troll her just to get on her nerves, like we go to her parents' place and ring the doorbell. I don't remember if she sat on me first, or if Jae-won and I trolled her first. The funny thing is, at the same time, we all respect each other.

One by one, Shu times us. The fastest guy around

the rink clocks in at 14.45. That's blazing for a seventeen-year-old in full gear. Ji-Hye's lap is 16 flat. Mine is 16.21. I'm fast for a peewee. But I know I still need to learn to get into the hockey zone, like how it happens sometimes when I feel like I can see half the ice at the same time, my peripheral vision as good as my forward vision. Like how it happens when I know what a player is going to do before he does it. "That's a hockey player," my dad likes to say.

Shu pinches no one, so we all clocked pretty well for us. Next we zigzag through the cones while touching one of our hands on the ice. Then Shu runs a full-ice scrimmage. I manage some good moves and even dangle a midget before getting off a slap shot. During a break, Shu says approvingly, "You make AAA. You AAA." Really?? I stand there for a moment, letting his words wash over me, inside me. That's the first time he's ever complimented me! I look over to my dad; he's talking to the other parents. I'm pretty much 100 percent certain all they talk about is hockey. Maybe they throw in a few sentences about golf or politics or whatever, but basically they talk about hockey. Then it's like *whoosh*, as soon as I take

my mind off the ice, I think about our house. In my mind the fire's huge, and the houses and firefighters are tiny. I see the flames lick at the sky, but I shake the image out of my head and turn to Shu, aware that I'm frowning. *Focus*. There are a million things that can distract you every time you're on the ice. Sometimes big things.

So: *focus*.

After three and a half hours of alternating drills and scrimmages, one of the workers revs up the Zamboni to level the ice. We change and go outside to do muscle work.

Muscle work starts with frog jumps up and down the big garden. The parents are watching, even though it's hot outside. My quads are burning. Rocko collapses, but I keep going. A couple of other kids collapse. I keep going. Ji-Hye hasn't stopped either—she's stronger than some of the boys. Finally it's just me, her, and the midgets. Two more jumps, then with a groan I collapse to the ground and breathe hard. I groan again. Can't move my legs. I don't even watch what's going on, just wait for it to end. After a minute, Shu taps me with a foot, and I just look

at him as he skates away. Next is push-ups. I do my thirty-three. Then everybody's counting as the midgets keep going and going and going. The world record for nonstop push-ups was set by a Japanese guy who did more than ten thousand. But Shu tells them to stop at two hundred. So that's about six times more than me—means I need to work harder. Me and Ji-Hye get pinched at the same time. "Lazy, you both lazy." *Ouch*—it feels like he's just torn off a piece of my flesh. In fact, it makes me almost dizzy for a second.

A few more exercises, and thirty minutes later Shu sets us free. When Dad and I walk back through the rink, the figure skaters are on. Ivan's out there working on spins with a girl. I've seen her around, and her skating is as amazing as frick. You concentrate on eight edges when you figure-skate—front left outside, front left inside, etc.—and she works her edges perfectly. She's like a frickin' brain surgeon at ten years old.

I stop and drop my gear, then hop up and down on a bench up to thirty. Then I pick up my gear and continue. Dad doesn't say anything.

I take a moment to transfer my mind from the rink to the rest of the world. The rest of the world where you get in cars and drive around to places that aren't rinks and communicate with people and eat something besides buffalo wings and soggy salad from the rink café. It's hot here in Burbank, and I think about how hot and dry it'll be by our house today.

"Dad, can we drive by the house to see if it's okay?"

"Read my mind," he replies as we walk across the parking lot. "Taco Bell first?"

"Sure," I reply. As far as I'm concerned, someone should declare Taco Bell a national treasure. You know what I'm saying?