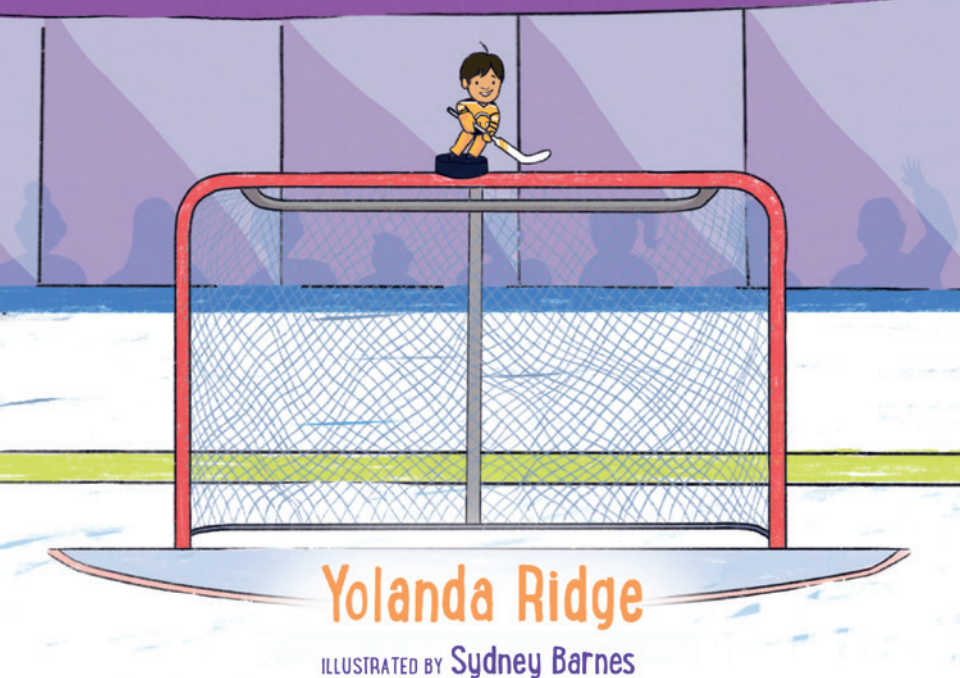


— CHAPTER SAMPLER —

ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

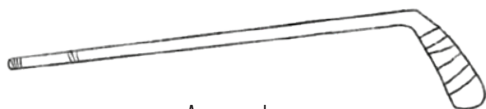


Yolanda Ridge

ILLUSTRATED BY Sydney Barnes

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —

ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE



A novel

Yolanda Ridge

Illustrated by Sydney Barnes

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Text copyright © Yolanda Ridge 2023
Illustrations copyright © Sydney Barnes 2023

Published in Canada and the United States in 2023 by Orca Book Publishers.
orcabook.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Elliot Jelly-Legs and the bobblehead miracle : a novel /
Yolanda Ridge ; illustrations by Sydney Barnes.

Names: Ridge, Yolanda, 1973- author. | Barnes, Sydney, illustrator.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20220185468 | Canadiana (ebook) 20220185492 |

ISBN 9781459833791 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459833807 (PDF) |

ISBN 9781459833814 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8635.I374 E45 2023 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022934492

Summary: In this illustrated middle-grade novel, eleven-year-old Elliot relies on his Carey Price bobblehead doll to help him excel on his hockey team.

Orca Book Publishers is committed to reducing the consumption of nonrenewable resources in the production of our books. We make every effort to use materials that support a sustainable future.

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover and interior design by Sydney Barnes
Edited by Tanya Trafford

Printed and bound in Canada.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —

*For Spencer. Thank you for turning me into a hockey mom
and showing me what determination can accomplish.*

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —

Don't be discouraged from the improbable.

—Carey Price

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —

CHAPTER 1

“It’s the most important penalty shot of the season.”

Duncan points his plastic mini stick at me before continuing in a deep sportscaster voice.

“Star goalie for the red team, Elliot Feldner-Martel, crouches into position. The outcome of the game rests entirely on his shoulders.”

Feet planted, I sink lower and narrow my eyes at my best friend. He keeps talking as he rushes toward me. “Duncan Bilenki, lead scorer for the blue team, stickhandles into the zone. He dekes to the right, waits for the goalie to commit, then snaps a laser toward the open side—”

My legs feel like they’re being ripped in half as one socked foot slides away from the other. I’m a millisecond too late. The ball curves past my outstretched pad into the small net behind me.

“—and scores!” Duncan pumps his fist.

“I wasn’t ready!” I shout, even though I was totally ready. The angle of Duncan’s shot was as obvious as an illegal cross-check. I should’ve blocked it. He had even told me what he was going to do. Not that he needed to—I know all his moves.

We play hockey pretty much every day. When it's too cold to play in the street, like today, we play mini sticks in Duncan's basement.

It's only September, but the rain outside is thick enough to resurface an ice sheet. We've been shooting a tennis ball at each other with our mini sticks for so long that the high windows of the basement are covered in steam.

"Reset!" I scramble to my feet and pull the ball out of the netting, tugging harder than I need to.

Duncan taps his stick against his palm. "Attention, sports fans," he announces to our imaginary audience, "there will now be a short delay while Feldner-Martel does his famous Patrick Roy routine."

This is Duncan's way of complaining about how long it takes me to get set. It might bug me if someone else said it, but with Duncan I don't mind. Duncan gets away with a lot of things I wouldn't put up with from others. There's something about him—he wins over everyone he meets, and he's good at everything he does. A couple years ago some of the hockey kids started calling him Can Can after someone said, "If anyone can do it Dun-can can." It's true.

"Patrick Roy's not the only NHL superstar who's superstitious," I say as I line the net up with the floor tiles. "Sid the Kid wouldn't call his mom on game days. The Great One refused to get his hair cut on the road. And Glenn 'Mr. Goalie' Hall used to throw up before every game—"

"On purpose!" Duncan finishes with a grin.

I hit my blocker three times before tapping each goalpost in the exact same spot I tapped last time. I don't talk to my

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

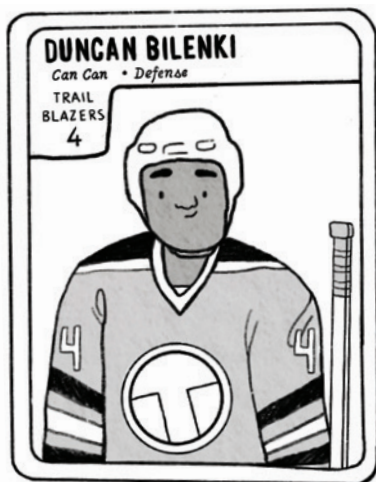
goalposts like Patrick Roy did, but I feel less alone in net when I remind myself the goalposts are there. Leaning back until I can feel the crossbar behind me, I take a deep breath, shake my head and narrow my eyes at Duncan to get focused. “I’m ready. Bring it on.”

“Want to switch?” he asks.

Both of us like playing goal, so we always split our time in net. I’ve already gone through my whole goalie routine, though. “One more. Then we’ll switch.”

Duncan nods to make sure I’m ready before pushing the tennis ball forward with his stick. I come out to challenge. He unleashes a slap shot. From my knees, I throw up a blocker. It looks like the ball’s going to beat me top shelf, but at the last second I snag it with my glove.

“Great save, Elliot!” Duncan’s dad stands at the bottom step, clapping. He’s still dressed in his Canada Post uniform. “You’ve got good hands.”



“Thanks, Coach Matt.” My tongue trips a little on the word *Coach*. I’ve known Duncan’s dad almost as long as I’ve known Duncan—since kindergarten, when he let me borrow a stick so I could play street hockey with him and his cousins instead of just watching—yet I still don’t know what to call him. He doesn’t want me to call him Mr. Bilenki. But it feels weird to call him Matt. Besides, my dad would kill me if he heard me refer to any adult by their first name.

When Duncan’s dad coached our hockey team last year, everyone called him Coach Matt. That felt right. Except now we’re in his basement, not at the rink.

“Sorry to interrupt you, boys,” he says, picking up the remote, “but the game’s on.”

The big screen flickers to life, and Coach Matt’s glasses explode with color. He rubs his hands together like he’s about to dive into a bowl full of candy. “Everyone at work was talking about this preseason matchup between Vancouver and Calgary. I bet the whole town will be tuning in.”

He’s probably right. Since Trail is halfway between Vancouver and Calgary, people who live here either cheer for the Canucks or the Flames. There’s the odd Oilers fan too, which keeps things interesting.

As the pre-game analysis cuts to commercial, Duncan’s dad mutes the TV and flops down on the couch. “So are you excited about hockey season starting, Elliot?”

“Course.” I try to sound casual as a bead of sweat trickles down the back of my neck. I’m actually a bit nervous about moving up to U13—where everyone will be even bigger and

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

faster than they were in U11—but mostly I’m pumped about getting a second chance to prove myself.

My mom and dad didn’t sign me up for hockey when I was younger. Mom was worried about concussions. Dad said it was too expensive. I think the real reason was that we were all too busy with other stuff. They were probably hoping I’d lose interest too. I never did. Last year—when things opened up after a year of no extracurricular activities at all—they finally caved and let me play.

I felt like I’d won the lottery.

But then I got on the ice.

Even though I was a pro at mini sticks and street hockey, there was a problem. Just a small one.

I couldn’t skate.

I worked to catch up, desperately trying to close the gap between me and my teammates (who could skate before they could walk). I went to every public skate I could. Most of the time the ice was too crowded for me to work on my edges and practice hockey stops. So I watched how-to videos on YouTube and practiced by sliding across my bedroom carpet in my socks. But no matter how hard I tried, I was always at the end of the line in every drill. And when it came to games, I was always in the wrong zone because I couldn’t keep up with the play.

This season things will be different. I’m sure of it.

An aerial shot of Rogers Arena appears on the screen, and Coach Matt unmutes the TV. “Come to think of it, I’m not sure I saw your name on the registration list, Elliot.”

“Huh.” My heart thumps so loudly I’m sure Duncan and his dad can hear it over the TV. My parents promised to sign

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
YOLANDA RIDGE

me up! And I wrote the early-bird registration deadline on the calendar in permanent red marker so they wouldn't forget. "I'll check with my mom," I say, trying to sound like it is no big deal.

Duncan pulls on his Vancouver Canucks jersey over his damp T-shirt and plunks down next to his dad. "Hey, Dad, did you order pizza?"

He nods. "Mediterranean and Pepperoni Classic. Enough for Elliot too."

My mouth waters as the opening notes of the national anthem flood the basement. "Thanks, but I told Mom I'd be home for dinner."

As much as I want pizza, there's no time to waste. I have to get home and convince Mom and Dad to sign me up for hockey before it's too late. Otherwise I'll be left behind. Again.

CHAPTER 2

When I get home, Mom's in the kitchen. She's talking into her headset as she makes dinner.

My sister's sitting at the counter reading a book—*How to Teach Your Dog Quantum Mechanics*. This makes no sense, especially since we don't have a dog. And even if we did, why would a dog need to know physics?

"Aislyn, where's Dad?" I ask. He's usually in his studio, but I don't hear any noise coming from downstairs.

She answers without looking up. "Meeting with some people who want him to do a special carving for their yard."

Perfect. This is my chance to ask Mom about hockey. But she's so deep in conversation, she barely notices me as I motion for her to hang up. The pot on the stove looks dangerously close to boiling over. I give the water a stir.

Waiting would be easier if I could watch the game. But my parents refuse to pay for the sports channel. Or any channel. The only *screen time* they allow is for video games, because Mom read somewhere that it helps kids with hand-eye coordination and problem-solving.

"Want to play *NHL All-Stars*?" I ask Aislyn.

"I'm reading," she replies. "Duh."

"That's a book? I thought it was your face."

We both laugh. Jokes about how much my sister reads are pretty common in our house. Before we adopted her, she had bounced from place to place in foster care with a suitcase crammed full of books instead of clothes.

Mom finally ends her call, takes out her earbuds and pinches the bridge of her nose. I know she only does this when she's really stressed.

"Need some help, Mom?"

Not that I would be much help. When it comes to cooking, none of us know what we're doing. The kitchen is Dad's domain. But I shred some cheese as Aislyn watches over the noodles, and after twenty minutes of total chaos, we sit down at the table with bowls full of something that resembles macaroni and cheese.

Now I can finally ask Mom about hockey. Just as I'm about to bring it up, she turns to my sister and asks her about school. Aislyn starts filling us in on every detail of her totally boring day.

I want to scream. Instead I start balancing my chair on two legs—practically daring Mom to interrupt my sister and tell me to stop. But Aislyn's bragging about acing the math test we had today, so Mom doesn't even notice.

"How did you do on the test, honey?" Mom asks, finally turning her attention to me.

Great.

My sister and I are the same age. And even though we're in the same grade, we're not in the same class. Aislyn gets

really good marks. Me, not so much. So Mom asked them to separate us after she and Dad had a big fight about whether being together was bad for my self-esteem (Mom's opinion) or a good way to motivate me to do better (Dad's opinion). But this year both sixth-grade classes are doing math together, so separating us wasn't an option, except when they divide us into groups of *needs more practice* and *ready to move on*.

I blow the air out of my cheeks. "Okay. I got 75."

"Aislyn got 100 percent and you only got 75?" Dad asks as he walks into the kitchen. "Did you study at all?"

My chair hits the floor with a thud.

"Let's not get into this now," Mom says as Dad lifts the lid to see what's left in the pot on the stove. "I was waiting for you to get home before telling them—"

Aislyn sets down her fork. "Telling us what?"

"Mom has good news." Dad puts the lid back on and grabs one of his premade smoothies from the fridge. "Go on, then."

Mom sits up a little straighter and grins at us. "I've decided to run for mayor."

"What? Why?" When Dad said "good news," I was hoping for something like a teachers' strike or an extra month of summer holidays.

"Perhaps you should start with congratulations, E?" I can tell by Dad's tone that he's disappointed.

Before I can react the way he wants me to, Aislyn jumps in. "Congratulations, Mom!" She waves pretend pom-poms in the air, acting like Mom's been nominated for president of the world. "Is this so you can fight the urban-farming bylaw?"

“Of course.” I hit my forehead with the palm of my hand. “The chickens.” Mom’s store sells all kinds of local stuff, including honey and eggs. For years she’s been fighting a bylaw that forbids beekeeping and backyard chickens.

“Yes, it’s partly about the chickens. But there are other issues I want to address as well.”

“This is a great opportunity for your mother. It’s going to take support from the whole family.” Dad takes a big gulp of his smoothie. As his words sink in, what’s left of my appetite vanishes.

“Which means there are going to be some changes around here,” says Mom. “To start with, you two can only sign up for one extracurricular activity each.”

Aislyn and I both speak at the same time.

“The Change Climate Change contest,” Aislyn says.

“Hockey,” I say.

Dad’s response is immediate. “Not hockey.”

The cheese in my stomach curdles. “*Why not?*”

“Too much time. Too much money—” By the way he’s using his fingers to list off the reasons, I can tell Dad’s just getting started. But I’m not going to give up just yet.

“Duncan’s dad will drive me,” I say. “And I’ll help pay. I can work at the store. Or apply for one of those grants Coach mentioned.”

Dad shoots me a look. “I’m surprised you want to play that badly, E. By the end of last year you had as good as given up.”

Heat pricks my ears. “I HAD NOT!”

Mom touches my arm. The weight of her hand calms me down. Sometimes I need to work on controlling what Mom

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

used to call my Big Bad Wolf emotions. Huffing and puffing never gets me what I want, especially since we adopted Aislyn, who's always so calm and *reasonable*. So I try counting to ten in my head and taking deep breaths like Mom taught me.

She turns to Dad. "We said one activity each, Jack. If this is what Elliot wants to do, we'll make it work."

"It's too expensive." Dad folds his hands on the table like a judge. "He will probably need new equipment. And we've already missed the early-bird deadline."

I can see the big red circle I drew on the calendar from where I'm sitting. I blink and it multiplies, rushing at me like a mob of angry emojis. They didn't *miss* the deadline. They *ignored* it.

My fists tighten into balls. Containing all the emotion bubbling inside me is like holding in a fart—I'm about to burst from the pressure.

"Besides, it's not just the registration fees," Dad continues. "It's the jersey deposit and the tournament costs and the team fees...remember how it all added up last year?"

Aislyn and I exchange glances. Things always get tense when Mom and Dad talk about money, especially since they lost their accountant. That's when Mom took over bookkeeping for both the store and Dad's wood-carving business and put Dad in charge of household expenses.

"I'm sure I can convince the league to honor the early-bird price," Mom says to Dad. "Is there enough money in the account to cover that for now?"

Silence settles over the kitchen. I cross and uncross my fingers behind my back like I always do when Mom and Dad

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
YOLANDA RIDGE

argue about me. I have to do it three times, starting with my right hand, or things won't go my way.

The clock above the sink ticks like a bomb. It feels like my life is on the line as I cross and uncross my fingers three more times.

Finally Dad clears his throat. "I'll crunch the numbers and let you know."

CHAPTER 3

I spend the next week waiting for Dad to crunch the numbers. It's so painful, he might as well be crunching my toes.

Just when I'm starting to feel as desperate as a free agent in a scoring drought, an email arrives. My registration has been accepted. Dates and instructions for evaluations are attached.

There are no tryouts in house league. Everyone who signs up gets to play. The coaches do their best to divide players so that all the teams—there's always at least three or four of them—are evenly matched.

"I guess your dad must've sold one of his big wooden bear carvings or something," Duncan says. I told him about the email as soon as it arrived, but we're still talking about it over lunch the next day—that's how relieved I am.

The cafeteria is unusually quiet, probably because it's finally sunny outside. I lower my voice. "Maybe. But I don't really think it's about money."

It's true we aren't rich, but it's not like we've ever had our electricity cut off. That happened to my old babysitter sometimes when her parents couldn't pay the bills. Mom's store doesn't bring in a lot of cash, but we do okay. I know I'm lucky

to have things like video games and an endless supply of books that I can read in my own bedroom that's decorated with all the hockey stuff my grandpa has sent me over the years. One time we even got to travel all the way to Montreal to visit my grandparents.

"When I thanked my parents for signing me up, Dad gave me a list of terms and conditions longer than one of those computer privacy things." I spread out my fingers and start pointing to each one as I try to imitate Dad's British accent. "Be a good sport, keep up your grades, pitch in around the house, listen to your mother, don't argue with your sister—I swear, breathing wrong could get me booted out of hockey." I throw my hands in the air. "My dad just hates sports."

Duncan stops laughing. "What do you mean? How can anyone hate sports?"

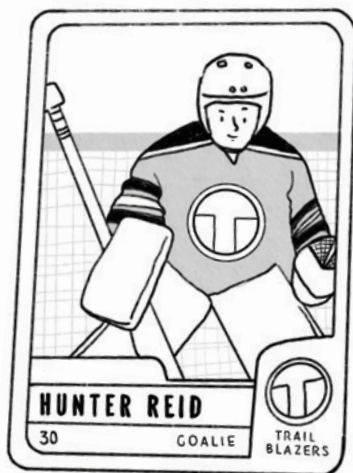
I shrug. "Mom thinks it's because his brother got so much attention for playing soccer."

"Soccer's a big deal in England. Was his brother any good?" Duncan asks through a bite of ham sandwich.

"No idea." I wish I knew the answer, but Dad never talks about his family. I've never even met them. I don't complain about it, though, because I get to talk to my other grandpa all the time over video chat. Duncan doesn't even get to see his mom.

"Why aren't you dorks outside playing b-ball with everyone else?" I turn to see Hunter Reid standing behind us, carrying a basketball.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE



Hunter's in seventh grade, so I don't know him that well. Not as well as Duncan anyway. Hunter played goal for Duncan's U11 team when he was a first-year and Hunter was a second. Their dads sometimes arrange extra ice time so they can have one-on-one practice; super shooter against great goalie.

Duncan points to the textbook sitting open in front of him. "We're cramming for a math test this afternoon."

Hunter spins the basketball between his palms. "Seriously? It's only September."

Duncan shrugs. "September marks count just as much as December marks."

"Whatever," says Hunter. "Why aren't you trying out for rep this season, Can Can?"

"You know me. I just play for fun," Duncan replies. "Are you trying out?"

“Just for practice.” Hunter stares at his basketball like it’s the most interesting thing in the world. He’s never been good enough to make rep—in Trail there’s only one team of all-stars for each age group—yet his dad makes him try out every year. I’m sure it’s good practice, but it must suck to keep getting cut. Embarrassed for him, I stuff the rest of my banana in my mouth and concentrate on chewing.

“So we’ll see you at house evaluations next week?” Duncan asks Hunter.

“Both of you?” Hunter turns his attention to me for the first time. “Didn’t you get enough of crawling around on the ice last season, Jelly?”

The nickname Jelly—short for Jelly-Legs or Jelly-Knees, referring to the general way I can’t seem to stand up straight on the ice—bugged me a lot last year. Still, it was better than Bambi or Feldner-Falls-A-Lot or any of the other nicknames they tried out on me. And in a way it made me feel included.

Being called Jelly now—by someone who doesn’t even know me—sounds like a curse.

“You’re the one who’ll be crawling on the ice after I roof the puck over your shoulder,” says Duncan.

Duncan’s comeback takes away a bit of the sting. I crack a smile and take a gulp of milk.

One of Hunter’s buddies comes up behind him and knocks the ball out from under his elbow.

My smile grows wider.

“Hey!” Hunter turns and chases after his friend or the ball—it’s not clear which.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

We turn back to our books. “Did you study at all last night?” Duncan asks.

I shake my head. “It’s bad luck to study the night before the exam.”

“Another superstition?” Duncan smiles. “Good thing you didn’t walk under any ladders or cross paths with a black cat either.”

I laugh. “Those are more like bad omens than superstitions.”

“You’re superstitious, huh?”

Darn. Hunter’s back.

“Elliot does lots of stuff to help him focus and bring him luck,” says Duncan.

I know he’s not trying to be mean. But I can tell by the look on Hunter’s face that Duncan has just given him something to chew on.

“My dad thinks superstitions are for losers,” Hunter says, his teeth bared like a vicious dog. “Only people with no skill believe in them.”

“Well, he’s wrong.” Duncan turns back to his textbook. “We gotta study. See ya, Hunter.”

Hunter gives his ball another spin and then strides away. “Later, losers,” he calls out.



I try to study, but Hunter’s words keep replaying in my head.

Loser. No skill. Jelly.

The numbers on the page swirl around. My right knee bounces up and down under the table.

Duncan looks up. “Dude, you’re extra fidgety today. You okay?”

“Just nervous about evaluations, I guess.” My excitement over finally being registered for hockey is gone, thanks to Hunter. All I can think about is the coaches up in the bleachers, watching us go through drills. I imagine them picking teams. *Who wants this Elliot kid? He can barely skate.* “I wish we could just skip them and get on with playing. Maybe we *should* skip them. Everyone knows you’ll be a one and I’ll be a four.”

“Evaluations are no big deal.”

“Easy for you to say. No one calls *you* Jelly. What would you know about being the worst skater on the ice?”

“Everyone on the team contributes something, Elliot. Not everyone can be the best. Even in the NHL, there are leaders and fighters and goal scorers and...guys who make you laugh in the dressing room—”

“But no one who makes you laugh when they’re actually trying to play.”

Duncan sighs. “You just need to keep practicing. You need to believe in yourself.”

If only it were that simple.

CHAPTER 4

I survive evaluations, and I get put on Coach Matt's team. I'm happy about that until our first practice. The coaches work us so hard, my feet are screaming when I finally take off my skates—hand-me-downs I got from Duncan last year. They're at least a size too small now, but I'm not going to mention that to my parents so soon after they paid the registration fees.

No one else in the dressing room seems as tired as me. Maybe because no one else fell as much as me. So much for this season being better than the last one.

Everyone's talking about some new player who just signed with the Smokies. People here may be die-hard Flames or Canucks fans, but we're all united in our love of the Smoke Eaters. Trail's Junior A hockey team won the Ice Hockey World Championships not once but twice. Everyone still brags about it, even though the last time they won was more than sixty years ago.

While my new teammates argue about whether the Smokies made a good trade, I look around the room, trying to figure out who's who. When we got the email welcoming me

to the team, I'd studied the list of names and recognized less than half of them. But at practice today there were more familiar faces on the ice than I'd expected. And a few people from the list that were missing, including the person I was least excited about seeing—Hunter Reid.

Coach Matt throws open the dressing-room door and looks around. "C'mon, guys! Hurry up and get changed! Katherine's waiting to come in. You boys are spending too much time folding your clothes and fixing your hair!"

Jerome Alcot bursts out laughing. "Good one, Coach!"

Jerry's got a voice so loud and deep it sounds like he's talking through a megaphone. He goes to my school, and even though he's a year older, I know him pretty well. Everyone does. We all call him Jerry-Horn.

"But no one calls her Katherine," he adds. "It's Kali."

In hockey, it seems like everyone has a nickname.

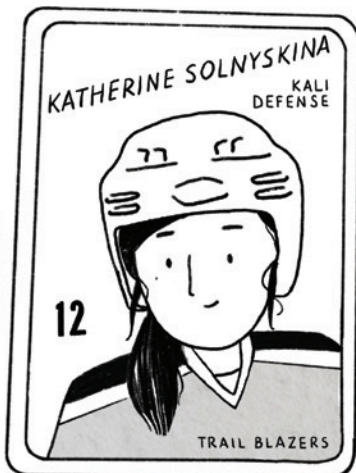
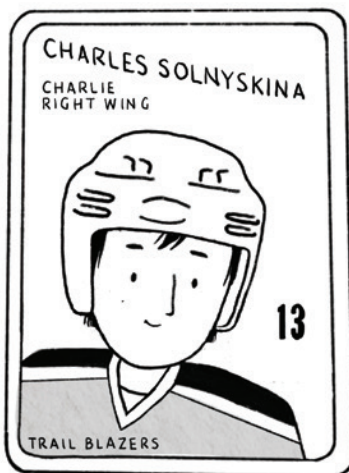
"Kali. Right. And it's a good thing we have her." Coach Matt taps his pen against his clipboard. "She's the only one who didn't trip over the blue line out there."

Some of the guys respond by trash-talking back. Coach Matt laughs off their comebacks like a pro. I find the insults hard to take—even when they're not directed at me—but Duncan and his dad are always reminding me that trash talk is part of the game. It means you've been accepted by your team. If they stop trash-talking you, that's when you should worry.

I rush to get out of my sweaty equipment so I'm not the last one to finish. I feel kind of bad for Kali. In U9 and U11, boys and girls share a dressing room. In U13, they split us up.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

As the only girl on the team, she's going to miss out on the fun stuff that happens before and after games and practices.



When everyone's decent enough, Kali comes into the dressing room and sits down next to her twin brother, Charlie. Both assistant coaches, Lisa and Tibor, are close behind. Coach Matt talks about his expectations for the season and then goes over the schedule. Last year this all seemed new and exciting. Now I know it's just part of the routine. We don't usually meet after practice—and especially not *after* everyone's changed—but at the first practice of the season, it's different.

While Coach Lisa and Coach Tibor talk about their times playing hockey, I glance around the room to see if anyone else is as impressed as me. They've both played on some really good teams. We're lucky to have them. Coach Tibor especially, since he doesn't even have a kid on the team. It's obvious who

Coach Lisa's son is, though, because she yelled at him a lot when we were on the ice.

"One last thing before we let you go," Coach Matt says after he's answered a bunch of questions. "Does anyone have any experience in net?"

"What? Why?" asks Jerry-Horn. "What's wrong with Hunter?"

"Well, unfortunately, Hunter hurt his knee fooling around on the trampoline." Coach Matt's nose scrunches up. "Not sure how serious it is yet, but he's definitely out for the first month of the season. Maybe longer."

"Can we borrow a goalie from another team? Or call up an AP?" There's a touch of panic in Duncan's voice. Hunter's injury must be very recent if Duncan hasn't talked to his dad about it yet. I don't really like Hunter and was relieved when he didn't show up for practice. But there's no getting around the fact that we need a goalie.

"There's only one goalie on each team this year," says Coach Tibor. "And we can't rely on bringing up someone from U11 because they're short on goalies as well."

"So we're going to play without a goalie?"

Everyone looks at the second-year player who asked this. No one says anything, though. My mind races as I struggle to catch up with what everyone else in the room has probably already figured out. If we can't call up an AP, which Duncan told me stands for *affiliated player*, from U11, what are we going to do? The season hasn't even started yet, and we're already out of the running.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

Coach Matt chuckles, then purses his lips. “No one has experience in net, eh? Is anyone interested in trying it out?” He sounds a bit desperate.

Looking down at my sore feet, I get an idea. Maybe, since we have no options, they’d be willing to give *me* a chance to play in goal. Then I wouldn’t have to skate as much. And it wouldn’t matter that I was always the last one to finish the drills.

I’d still get to play hockey. Plus I’d be an important part of the team.

“I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER 5

“Are you sure?” Duncan asks me for the zillionth time on the ride home.

“Sure, I’m sure.” Truthfully, I’m the exact opposite of sure. Mom and Dad are going to kill me when they find out I volunteered to be goalie. Mom’s going to be worried about injuries, and Dad’s going to be worried about paying for the equipment necessary to prevent those injuries. I worked so hard to convince my parents to let me play hockey—have I just blown it?

Coach Matt offers to come in and talk to my parents. “Duncan, you stay in the car,” he says as he cuts the engine. “This’ll only take a sec.”

I really, really hope he’s right.

“Hi! I’m home!” I announce as I open the front door. This is not something I usually do. I must’ve seen it in a movie or something.

Only my sister answers. “In here!”

Coach Matt follows me through the empty kitchen and into the den. Aislyn is hunched over her laptop. Several empty water bottles are scattered around her. “Hey, Aislyn.”

My sister looks up, surprised. “Oh, hi, Mr. Bilenki!”

“What are you working on?” Coach Matt sounds genuinely interested.

And Aislyn’s thrilled to be asked. “I’m trying to figure out how to make an algae bioreactor out of water bottles. It’s for the Change Climate Change contest. Did you know that some algae bioreactors can suck as much carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere as an acre of forest? This one won’t be that good. But if I can come up with a simple version, everyone could have one. Imagine what a difference it would make!”

Coach Matt whistles. “I only understood about half of what you said, but it sure sounds impressive.”

I’m so nervous about telling my parents about the goalie thing that I’ve twisted the zipper of my jacket around my finger so tight it’s cutting off the circulation. “Where’s Mom and Dad?”

“Mom’s at the farmers market,” says Aislyn, “talking to people about her election campaign.”

Please let Dad be out too, please let Dad be out too...

“And Dad’s in his studio, working on a new carving.”

Not good. I have to get out of this mess. “Sorry, Coach Matt. Maybe you should come back later? Dad doesn’t like to be bothered when he’s working.”

“I’m sure Dad won’t mind,” Aislyn says.

Easy for her to say. Dad never seems to mind when Aislyn interrupts him. But when I do, he always makes me feel bad.

“I hate to bother him, but we need to figure this out now,” says Coach Matt. “There’s an exhibition game this weekend, which doesn’t leave much time for practice.”

A boulder as big as the New Jersey Devils Jumbotron settles into my stomach. This is a mistake. Two mistakes. Both of them big.

Mistake number one: asking Dad if I can be goalie.

Mistake number two: me actually being in net, on skates, without much practice.

I take Coach Matt to Dad's studio, walking slower and slower as the boulder settles into my feet. They don't know each other well, but Dad acts happy to see Coach Matt. Until he gets to the part about me volunteering to be goalie.

"What does that mean exactly?" Corkscrew-shaped wood shavings fall from Dad's lumberjack shirt as he squares his shoulders. "Please tell me we don't have to pay more fees."

"No, fees are the same. In some leagues, goalies even get free registration..."

Dad's shoulders relax. Half a smile appears on his face.

"...because their equipment is so expensive."

The smile vanishes.

I stare at the stump Dad's working on. If I squint, I can just make out the crude outline of a bird perched on a log. The bird's wings are spread a little, like he's about to fly away—something I wish I could do right now.

"In this case, I'm pretty sure I can borrow almost everything he needs from the league," Coach Matt continues.

"Almost? Can't he use some of the equipment he's already got? Like his helmet?"

"Some of the undergear will work, but he'll need other stuff, including a proper mask to protect the old noggin." Coach Matt taps a finger against his head.

“Blimey.” I can’t tell if my dad is mad or just surprised. “The helmet we just bought him last year is top-notch.”

“A goalie mask is specifically designed to protect the player not just from impact but from all the pucks that come flying at them.”

I was already having doubts about whether I should try to play goal. Now I’m sure—this is a really bad idea.

“If it’s a problem, I’ll see what I can do. There might be some loaner ones floating around that are the right size. But most goalies have their own equipment at this age.”

That’s because anyone interested in the position would have been playing goal for at least three years by now. In U9, everyone gets a chance in net. By U11, you’re either a goalie or you’re not. What was I thinking? My brain must’ve been in zombie mode when I volunteered for this.

“I think he’s okay for now,” Coach Matt continues, “but if he sticks with it, you may want to think about getting him some goalie skates, for better ankle protection and mobility.”

Even without looking up, I know Dad’s burning holes through my skull with his glare. And I can’t help thinking about all those pucks flying at me. I cross and uncross my fingers. *Tell him I can’t do it*, I urge Dad in my head. *Help me out of this mess.*

Instead Dad thanks Coach Matt and asks him to let us know when he’s found the goalie equipment for me. “I’m not bothered by what position he plays, as long as it doesn’t cost too much extra.”

If there was ever a time for Dad to let me down, this was it. Why did he have to choose now to be supportive?

CHAPTER 6

Coach Matt scores all the equipment for me, as promised, including a goalie mask that smells like a cat peed in it (more than once). I also get an extra-large jersey with the number 1 on the back. I would love to see my last name floating there above the 1. But for some reason U13 teams stop wearing names on the back of their jerseys. In Trail anyway.

Since it took Coach Matt a while to scrape together my goalie gear, I didn't get a chance to practice being in net before the exhibition game. I didn't even get to practice putting on the equipment in the comfort of my own bedroom.

In the dressing room before the game, I struggle to figure out what padding goes where. My teammates are too hyped up to notice how baffled I am. Not that I want them to notice. Sure, I could use the help. It's just that I don't want to give anyone a reason (or another reason) to doubt my ability to pull this off. No one's said anything, but I can sense their fear that something bad's about to happen.

Grandpa once told me he can tell when a storm's coming by the ache in his bones. I don't know exactly what he means, but I think I feel something close to that now.

When the coaches come in for our pre-game talk, I'm not even half-ready. I had the same problem at the beginning of last year. Eventually I figured out a system that worked—jock, leg pads, socks, hockey pants, skates, chest protector, neck guard, elbow pads, jersey, helmet, gloves, stick (always in that order, with the right side first). Apparently, that system doesn't work for goalies. I'm going to have to start over.

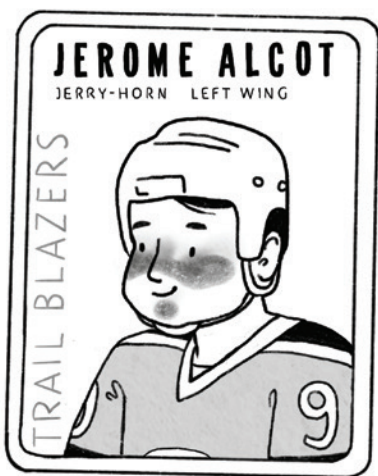
Coach Matt turns down the music blaring from Jerry-Horn's speaker. "Okay, team, we've got important stuff to discuss before we take the ice."

The "important stuff" isn't about tactics or attitude or even intel on our opponents. It's about picking a team name. We had talked about it before, and lots of suggestions got bounced around—Hawks, Predators, Destroyers, the usual stuff—but we hadn't picked anything yet.

"How about the Canadiens?" says Charlie.

The more I get to know Kali and Charlie the more different they seem—and not just because Charlie's so much shorter than Kali. I probably shouldn't be surprised. Dad tells everyone that my sister and I are as different as night and day. Except Aislyn and I aren't even biologically related, and Charlie and Kali are twins (something I wouldn't dare say around Kali—she'll clock anyone on the team who refers to them as "the twins").

"I hate names like that!" says Jerry-Horn. "Vancouver *Canucks*, Montreal *Canadiens*, Toronto *Maple Leafs*..." His voice trails off. "It's, like, we get it already, the teams are Canadian! Jeez."



"The Canadiens have way more Stanley Cups than any other team in the league." Charlie wipes his hands down his hockey pants like he's trying to clean them. "They have 24."

"Almost 25," says Duncan. I knew he was talking about their run for the cup that year when all the Canadian teams played in the same division. "Except that was such a short season it probably shouldn't count anyway."

Charlie nods. "Even with 24 they're far ahead of everyone else. The Leafs have the second most wins with 13. I don't think it's such a bad thing to be Canadian. Or Canadien."

This guy sure knows his stats. Even though I'm not allowed to watch much hockey, I'm pretty good with my NHL facts—mostly because of all the books Grandpa's sent me—but Charlie is like a walking Wikipedia page.

"Good suggestions, everyone." Coach Matt claps. "Let's focus. Time to vote. We've got to get on the ice."

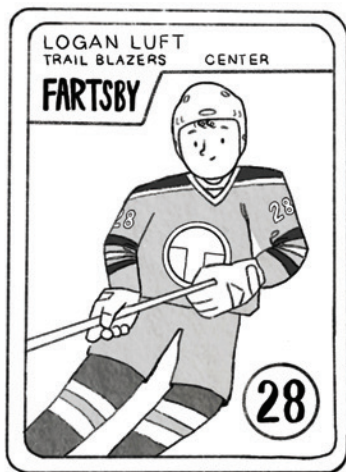
— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

I glance at the goalie pads lying on the floor in front of me. Panic ricochets through my veins, and I wonder if Grandpa's ever felt this jittery.

"How about the Blazers?" Kali suggests.

"Trail Blazers," says Coach Lisa. "Blazers. I like it."

"What's a trailblazer?" asks one of the second-year players whose name I've finally figured out. He punctuates the question with a fart.



Laughter fills the dressing room. Logan is known for this particular talent—and the smells that come with it.

"It's an expression, Fartsby," says Duncan. It's no secret that Logan's favorite player is Sidney Crosby—he wears a Crosby jersey to every practice and a Penguins cap with "Sid the Kid" written on the brim whenever he's not on the ice. That only explains half the nickname, though. He'd clearly earned the other half with his own talent. He didn't

seem to mind it though. “You know, like, ‘he was such a trailblazer?’”

“Or ‘she,’” adds Kali.

“And don’t forget the Portland Trail Blazers, who made it to the playoffs twenty-one years in a row, from 1983 through 2003.” Apparently Charlie’s got the NBA covered too.

“Enough chatter,” says Jerry-Horn. “Let’s just go with the Blazers so we can get this party started.” He stands up like it’s a done deal.

“All in favor?” asks Coach Matt.

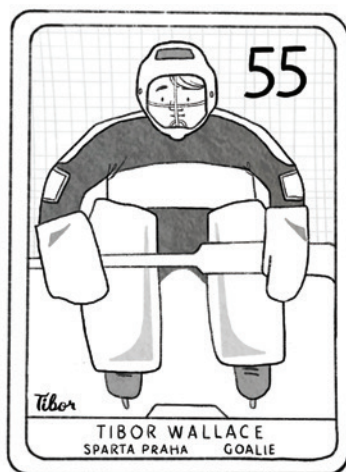
It’s unanimous. Or close enough. I don’t bother counting hands as I tug at the new-to-me neck guard strangling me to death.

“Elliot, Coach Tibor’s going to stay behind to help you finish getting your gear on,” Coach Matt says as the rest of the team files out. “We can start warm-up without a goalie. Plus it’s good to keep the other team in suspense.”

I’m sure everyone’s in suspense, not just the other team, waiting to see how I’ll do—including me. When we play street hockey or mini sticks, I’m pretty good in net. But as Duncan keeps telling me, there’s a big difference between goaltending on ice and goaltending on pavement.

“Can you do up your skates?” Coach Tibor’s voice echoes off the cement walls of the now-empty dressing room. I’d always thought it was nice of Coach Tibor to volunteer when he doesn’t even have kids. Since he started telling us stories about when he played for a team in the Czech Republic, I’m even more grateful. Especially since he was a goalie, and we need all the help we can get in that department.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE



“Yep. I can tie my own skates.” Mom bought me waxed laces when she heard that coaches don’t help kids with their skates in U13. Not that I need them. My skates are so small they’re tight enough before I even tie them up.

When I’m done, Coach Tibor strings my skates with extra lace and tells me to lie down on my stomach so he can help strap on my goalie pads. It’s a relief to have someone who knows what they’re doing talk me through it. I’m just glad my teammates can’t see me in this position.

“All you have to do is stay on your feet,” Coach Tibor says as he clips on the various straps. “Everyone’s going to be rusty after a whole summer off the ice. Stand strong and you’ll be fine.”

“Stand strong” sounds like good advice, but I need help just getting up off the floor. When Coach Tibor finally has me seated on the bench, he tugs the number 1 jersey over my head.

The rough fabric stretches across layers of padding, and suddenly extra-large doesn't seem so big anymore.

Next comes the mask, which I can't put on myself because my chest protector and arm pads are so stiff I can barely move. How am I going to stop the puck if I can't move my arms?

"This mask is a bit big for you. But I've adjusted it as much as I can," Coach Tibor says after fiddling with the skull and chin straps for a while.

"It's okay," I say quickly. It feels like my teammates have been out on the ice forever. If I'm going to do this, I better do it now. Before I totally lose my nerve.

"I think you're ready," Coach Tibor announces, doing one final check to make sure there's nothing left in the bag of borrowed equipment.

For one heart-stopping second I think I forgot my cup. But then I realize I put it on so long ago it might as well have been yesterday. "Thanks for your help. I'm never going to be able to do this on my own," I say.

"You'll get used to it," Coach Tibor assures me.

I walk out of the dressing room, certain I am going to fall on my face at any moment. But I don't. Because Coach Tibor is next to me, keeping me steady. "You got this," he says as he opens the gate and pats me on the head.

My mask slumps so far forward I can't see through the cage. Mom's going to freak when she sees how big it is—if she sees how big it is. She promised she'd be cheering me on from the stands. But she's been very distracted lately.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

I push my mask back into place. “I’ve got this,” I mutter. And for a moment, I really think I do. I take a deep breath and step out onto the ice.

And fall flat on my face.

CHAPTER 7

“We lost! No, we didn’t just lose. We got *crushed!*”

“I know. I was there.” Mom hands me a banana.

I take it. But only because bananas are my favorite food.
“Just for the first period.”

“Sorry, hon. I had to take Aislyn to an event at the maker space.” She glances at her watch. Aislyn’s still there and needs a ride home. Which means Mom had time to drop her off and come back to the game. But she didn’t.

“It doesn’t matter,” I mumble. “The second and third periods were much, much worse. I don’t even know the final score because the referees made them stop adding the other team’s goals to the scoreboard. I didn’t stop a single shot. I couldn’t even move without falling. And once I was down, I couldn’t get back up!”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Mom’s calm-down voice, meant to be soothing, sounds like sandpaper on metal to my ears.

I peel the banana and shove it in my face. Mouth full, I try to say more, but the words come out as a jumbled mess. I skip from one horror story to the next—how embarrassing it was (a thousand times worse than the time I accidentally went into

the girls' bathroom in third grade), how the game seemed to go on forever (and ever) and how little my teammates talked to me afterward (not even trash talk).

I swallow. Hard. A big lump of banana gets lodged in my throat.

"It was your first time in net," says Mom.

"Also my last. I'm not playing in goal ever again."

"Don't talk rubbish," says my dad. "You made a commitment to Coach Matt. And the team. You can't just quit."

I look up to see Dad standing there, his work pants covered in wood dust. I was already out of breath. Now I'm suffocating. "Yes, I can. Right, Mom?"

Mom glances back and forth between Dad and me a couple of times as I put my hands behind my back. I've crossed and uncrossed my fingers nine times when she finally answers. "The Feldner-Martels aren't quitters—"

There's no time to count to ten, take a deep breath or do any of the tricks I've been taught to calm me down. I hurl my banana peel at the sink. It makes a splat on the wall that does nothing to ease the storm raging inside me. "I never said I was quitting! I just said I wasn't going to be goalie!"

"Calm down," Dad orders in a voice that's the exact opposite of calm. "Throwing things is not an acceptable way of dealing with your frustration. How old are you? Three?"

"You're such a jerk! Mom and I were talking. No one asked you to butt in—"

"Don't speak to your father that way, Elliot."

"One more word and you'll be out of hockey for good, E," Dad snaps.

I can't quit being goalie but Dad can make me quit the team? The molten lava smoldering inside me erupts. I yank the baseball cap off my head. I'm about to throw it when Mom puts her hand on my shoulder and steers me toward the staircase.

"Why don't you go take a shower," Mom says. "We'll talk about this later, when everyone's calmed down."

I really want to kick the banister. I force myself not to, knowing it will only make things worse. And I really don't want to make things worse. Especially for Mom, who always has to work so hard to keep Dad and me from blowing up.

1, Calgary Flames, 2, Edmonton Oilers, 3, Vancouver Canucks, 4, Winnipeg Jets, 5, Ottawa Senators...

Clenching my fists, I take the stairs two at a time.



Replays of every goal I let in run through my head as I shower. Eventually I feel my shoulders start to relax, and my mind drifts to Dad and why I let him get to me so much.

Mom says I've always gotten upset easily. She took me to a doctor to talk about it once. The doctor made me answer a bunch of questions and ordered some tests to look at my brain.

I'll never forget how relieved I felt when the doctor told my parents there was nothing wrong with me. Speaking directly to me, she said that all kids deal with emotions differently and that it is okay to feel big things. Still, that's when Mom started buying tons of books about emotional regulation and anxiety management. She also taught me to count things to help me calm down.

By the time I get out of the shower, my skin's wrinkled and I'm sorry for how I acted. I know I have to apologize, but sometimes I wish Dad would apologize too. I'm not the only one in our family who gets mad.

Back in my room I pull on a pair of sweats. There's a knock at the door. When I open it, Aislyn's hovering in the hallway, holding the laptop and looking nervous. Now I feel even worse.

I bet Mom warned her that I was upset about the game. Sometimes when I'm mad—and especially when Dad and I fight—I take it out on her. I'm getting better, but Mom still tries to keep Aislyn away from me when she thinks I might snap at her.

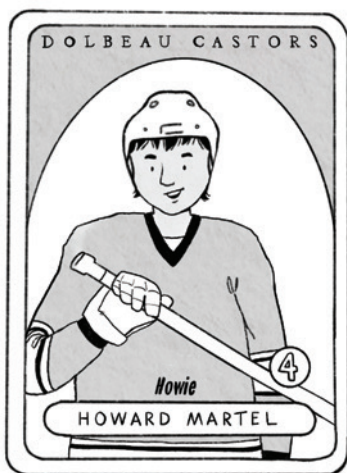
"Grandpa's on the computer," she says. "He wants to talk to you."

"Thanks," I say, taking the laptop from her. I add a smile, hoping she knows that means I'm okay, and close the door.

I sit down at my desk and open the computer. Grandpa grins at me on the screen. It's good to see him looking so happy. He's been having a bunch of medical tests lately. And last time we talked, he looked a bit green. I blamed it on Aislyn playing with the picture settings, but truthfully, it worried me.

"Heard you had a tough game, Sport," he says.

I tell him about it in much more detail—and with much less anger—than I managed with Mom. Besides me, Grandpa's the only one in the family who likes hockey. He played a few seasons for the Dolbeau Castors in the Saguenay Lac St-Jean Senior League. Even though I'm sure Grandpa has never stunk as bad as I did on the ice today, talking to him makes me feel a little better.



“You’re not going to like this, Sport, but I think your parents are right,” Grandpa says when I’m done. “You should give it another shot.”

The better feeling disappears. I wish they hadn’t been talking behind my back. Telling Aislyn about the fight is one thing. Telling Grandpa about it is another.

Twisting an elastic band around my finger, I try to stay *grounded*.

Grandpa moves his face closer to the screen, so close I can see his nostril hairs. “I heard you need a new goalie mask. I’m going to order one for you. I’ll pay extra for shipping so it gets there in time for your next game.”

Oh no. I’m grateful that he is being so generous. But if I accept this gift, I’ll have to stay in net.

Ignoring my protests, Grandpa keeps talking. “With a little luck, it’ll even be there for your next practice. It’s not

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ELLIOT JELLY-LEGS AND THE BOBBLEHEAD MIRACLE

safe to be playing with a mask that doesn't fit properly. I can't believe they put you out there like that. Without any practice."

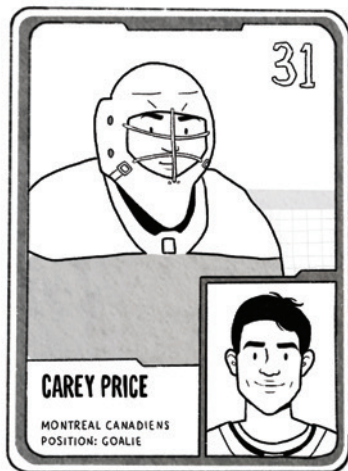
Snap! The elastic flies off my finger and across the room. Mom must've told him the loaner mask was too big. Did everyone else notice it too? And how much I struggled to see through the cage?

Maybe Grandpa's right. Maybe the loss wasn't all my fault. Without me, the Trail Blazers wouldn't have had a goalie at all. If I quit, we'll have to default our first game of the season. Nothing great about that. "But what if my second game's as bad as my first?" I ask.

"It won't be," says Grandpa confidently. "Because you'll have time to practice. And you'll have a mask that actually fits."

"I guess. Thanks, Grandpa."

"Did you like that book I sent you? I bet Carey Price has some good tips and tricks."



The book is called *How a First Nations Kid Became a Superstar Goaltender*. I loved reading about how Carey's dad built him a rink on the creek behind their house when Carey was only two. And how, when he was nine, his dad flew him to hockey games—in a plane described as a trash can with wings—because they lived too far away to drive to them. Now Carey is the goalie with the most wins in Montreal Canadiens history. How can a scrawny kid like me, who can barely skate, even dream of being a superstar like him?

After saying goodbye to Grandpa, I run my fingers over my collection of bobbleheads. I pick up the Carey Price one. Grandpa sent it to me so long ago that the paint on its blue jersey is starting to fade. "Could you really help me?" I ask.

The head bobbles back. It almost looks like it's nodding.

"Okay then...just give me one win," I whisper. "Or at least a tie. That's all I ask."

I give it another little shake so it has no choice but to agree.