

# TAKING THE ICE

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## FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW

Snow was falling when Aiden snuck out of the house early Wednesday morning. The ground was covered in a layer of white that made the streets look clean and fresh, like just-washed bedsheets. He could still feel the softness and warmth of his own bed as the cold penetrated his jacket, making him shiver.

He'd just have to run fast, he decided, to build up some body heat.

As Aiden ran, his footprints made a pattern in the snow behind him. He had to admit, the snow looked sort of magical as it sparkled through the darkness. According to last night's weather channel forecast, it was supposed to continue until around ten, then the sun was coming out. Aiden's mom kept saying the real snow was coming soon.

As usual, Ned was waiting for Aiden at the front door of the arena. He ushered him in quickly, then locked the door behind them.

"I'll go get ready," said Ned.

"Me too," said Aiden.

Half of the lights surged on as Aiden tied his skates. He snapped his helmet on, put on his gloves, and stepped onto the ice. Even though it was a horrible time to get out of bed, Aiden liked the quiet and stillness of the empty arena. To him it was peaceful. He didn't have to think about anything else, like school or Craig or his dad. He could just skate.

Ned clunked onto the ice in his full goalie gear, and their shooting practice began. They did the same drills over and over. Ned said practising the same thing was good, that it built muscle memory. Sometimes Aiden couldn't believe how smart Ned was and how much hockey sense he had. Ned knew hockey better than anyone Aiden knew, except maybe his grandpa.

Aiden was aiming for the top corner when Ned stood up straight and put up his blocker. "Don't shoot. Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Aiden asked.

"The door. It sounds like someone is banging on it."

Aiden stopped stickhandling to listen, and sure enough he heard it too. Then he heard someone trying to push the door open. His heart started to race.

"We . . . have to get off the . . . ice," said Ned. His speech was really slowing down. Aiden knew that wasn't a good thing. "I . . . have to turn off the . . . lights. We . . . have . . . to go!"

Ned skated so fast to get to the boards that Aiden trailed behind him.

“The net,” whispered Ned. “Get the . . . net off.”

As quietly as he could, Aiden put the net back where it belonged while Ned turned off the lights.

Aiden sat in the dark arena, his body shaking and heart racing, and tried to untie his laces. *Breathe. Breathe. He couldn't freak out. Not now.* His fingers were having a hard time working. *Who was at the door? Were they in trouble? What would happen if they were?*

Since he had moved to this town, all Aiden was doing was getting into trouble. First school, now this.

Once Aiden had his skates off, he didn't know what to do. *Should he leave?* He didn't want to run into whoever was at the door. Ned, now out of his goalie equipment, came over to the bench where Aiden was sitting.

“I think they're gone,” said Ned. “I heard a . . . car.”

“You sure?” Aiden asked. His heart was just starting to return to normal. His breathing was slowing down. He'd managed.

Ned nodded as if he was thinking. “You need to go out the . . . front door. Same door you came in. Let's sneak over and see if anyone is there. Go . . . behind me. It's okay if I'm in here but maybe not you.”

Aiden followed Ned to the doors and stood in the shadows as Ned peered out, his face pressed against the

glass. “No one,” he said. “No cars and it’s dark.” He turned to Aiden. “It’s nothing. Now . . . scoot home.”

Aiden just nodded. “Um, thanks, Ned.” His voice squeaked. “For the target practice.”

Ned opened the door, and Aiden slipped outside. He took a quick look around, and sure enough he saw footprints — bigger ones than his. And just his luck, Aiden’s old tracks hadn’t been covered by snow yet. *Had it been Mr. Ramos?* No. The president of the minor hockey association had keys. He wouldn’t have to bang on the door.

Aiden took off running. By the time he got to his house, he was panting like he did after the hardest shift of his life. His chest pounded and he bent over at the waist to catch his breath.

Aiden tiptoed up the back stairs and creaked open the door. Then he slid inside and slipped out of his soaking-wet sneakers and socks. He padded through the kitchen and over to the stairs.

He was about to go up the first step when he heard a voice. “What are you doing up?”

Aiden’s stomach flew to his throat. He whipped around to see his grandpa standing in the dark.

“Just getting a drink of water, Grandpa,” said Aiden.

“Oh, okay.”

“What are you doing up?”

“Heard a car,” he said. “And needed a drink.”

“I’m going back to bed now,” said Aiden.

“You do that.” Grandpa turned and headed to his favourite recliner in the living room.

At the top of the stairs, Aiden’s mother came out of her room, tightening the belt on her robe and brushing her tangled hair off her face. “What’s going on? It’s six thirty-five.”

“Nothing,” said Aiden. “Grandpa and I were just getting water at the same time.”

“Okay. I’ll go down and make sure Dad is okay, and you go back to bed for an hour.”

Aiden flopped on his bed and stared at the ceiling. His heart pounded through his skin. *Keep breathing. Slow and steady. In and out.* Through sheer will he slowed his heart down. Then he tried to sleep but instead just stared at his ceiling, thinking about what had happened.

*Could they get in trouble?*

\* \* \*

Fortunately, Aiden’s grandpa had a morning appointment, so Aiden’s mom dropped him off at school on their way. He yawned as he walked in and Manny came running over to him.

“Is your mom still going to pick me up tomorrow?” Manny asked.

“Yeah, no problem,” said Aiden. He’d still forgotten to ask her, but she said she would help.

“I should probably give you my address.” Manny rolled his eyes a little. “And my mom wants to call your mom so they can arrange it.”

“Sure, okay,” said Aiden. “I’ll make sure my mom calls tonight. Or your mom can call her. Whatever works.”

Manny bobbed up and down on his toes. “What time do you think you’ll come?”

“Like five forty-five? Practice is at six thirty. How far are you from the arena?”

“Ten minutes if my dad drives, but fifteen if it’s my mom.”

“My parents were the opposite,” said Aiden.

“That’s funny,” said Manny.

*Yeah, and my dad was the one who died in a car crash.*

Manny stopped laughing and shifted his gaze to Aiden’s right shoulder. “I gotta get in the classroom,” he said.

Aiden pivoted to see who had made Manny so nervous. He frowned when he saw Craig.

“I’ll walk in with you,” Aiden said to Manny.

“You will?”

“Sure,” said Aiden. They started walking and were almost at the classroom door when Craig caught up to them. “How’s it going, team?” he asked. He slung his arm around Aiden.



“I’m good,” squeaked out Manny. “I won’t miss practice tomorrow. Aiden’s mom is picking me up.”

Aiden was about to say something to Craig when Susie barrelled into the conversation. “Did Mr. Rowland want to talk about your outline?” she asked Aiden, breathless.

“Yeah, he did,” said Aiden. “I fixed it last night.”

“I got twenty out of twenty on mine,” said Manny.

“Good on you,” said Aiden.

“What did you write about that was so interesting?” Craig asked Manny.

Uh-oh. Aiden wondered how Manny would get out of this one. He was writing about bullying, and Aiden didn’t have to be a genius to know who he was talking about.

“I’m so pumped for our game on Saturday,” Aiden interrupted, before Manny had the chance to answer.

“Don’t get too excited,” said Craig. “We only have one practice this week. So brutal. Hopefully he can get some ice time out of town.”

“My mom says we have to pay extra for that,” said Manny.

“So?” Craig jabbed Manny in the upper arm. “You tell her to buck up. We need the practice.”

Manny put his hand to his arm. “Okay, okay.”

“One more practice tomorrow morning,” said Susie, “and then it’s time! I’m beyond pumped. I’ve never been

on a team that had this many practices before the first game.”

“And some of us are putting in even more practice.” Craig nudged Aiden with his shoulder again. “Right?”

“You’re lucky,” said Aiden. “My mom would never let me miss school to practise.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Craig.