

1 Team CAPTAIN

All Jill Kang could see was a giant, screaming eagle. It was headed straight for her.

The eagle was the logo on a North Vancouver Thunderbirds jersey. It looked like it was flying down to snatch her in its claws and take her back to its nest.

That's it, Jill thought, I'm lunch for a Thunderbird.

Jill was lunging forward for a loose puck. In that position she had to decide. She could slam on the brakes, bail out and hope the Thunderbirds defender would overskate the puck. Or she could grit her teeth and make a play.

She knew the second option would result in her getting crunched.

"Heads up!" someone yelled from the bench.

There, that settled it. Everyone on the bench could see she was about to crash into the bigger defender.

But Jill realized in that moment that she needed to go all-out. It was the last game of the playoffs. If her team won, the West Park Queens would bring home

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the first trophy since girls had started playing Bantam hockey in West Park.

Jill was the captain of the Queens. Her team, she decided, was more important.

She stretched out her stick one last time. She nudged the puck between the defender's skates and over the Thunderbirds' blue line.

The defender stopped suddenly, throwing a big rooster tail of ice and snow up into the air. Jill could not stop and the two players collided.

"*Oomph*," was the only sound Jill could manage.

"Ohh!" was all she heard from her teammates on the bench.

It did not hurt as much as Jill had expected. It hurt even less when she looked up and saw her linemate Alyssa skating hard on a breakaway.

Jill stopped hurting altogether when the referee skated past her with his hand in the air. He was about to call a body-contact penalty on the Thunderbirds defender who crashed into Jill.

Maybe, though, the Queens would not need the power play.

"Go, Alyssa!" Jill shouted.

Alyssa was about to shoot when the puck hit a rut in the ice. It dribbled off the blade of her stick. Alyssa pulled the puck back from the goaltender and tried a desperate backhand shot as the goalie came out to challenge her.

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Jill got to her knees just in time to see Alyssa's shot sail over the goalie's leg pad and into the net. Alyssa herself crashed into the goal at almost the same time.

The referee blasted his whistle and pointed to the net. His shout of "Goal!" set the Queens screaming from the bench.

Jill tried to hug all her teammates at once.

"What a pass, Jill," Coach Harrison shouted. "Great play!"

Jill turned to greet Alyssa and the three other girls skating toward the bench.

"That was awesome," Alyssa said. "I so thought you were going to get smashed, Jill."

"I totally got smashed," Jill said. "But I don't care. You scored!"

Jill glanced up at the scoreboard: Queens 1, Thunderbirds 0.

"Just one more period, and we've got this," Jill said to Alyssa on the bench.

"How did you know I was there?" Alyssa asked.

The truth was that Jill didn't know Alyssa was going to get the puck. What Jill did know was that she had missed an easy pass. If she had received the puck properly in the first place, she would have never been forced into that play. Not for the first time, Jill wondered why she had been named captain of the team. She'd been playing only a couple of seasons. And there were much stronger players on the team. Like her best friend Alyssa.

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But Jill did not want to show she was disappointed in herself. So she decided to laugh.

“Oh, we’ve been friends for so long,” Jill said. “I guess I can read your mind.”

Alyssa laughed right back. “Oh, no, don’t tell Jake that you can read my mind. He’s my twin. He’s the only one I’m supposed to have a mental bond with.”

Coach Harrison came up behind them and smacked their shoulder pads playfully. “We will call you the Crash Line from now on,” she said. “Jilly crashes into the defence, and Alyssa into the goal.”

Jill looked up and smiled. “I don’t think I want to make a habit of crashing into people.”

Alyssa laughed and nodded. “Yeah, shooting pucks into the net is way easier than sliding into it.”

“Good plan,” Coach Harrison said. “Take a breather. There’s just two minutes left in the period.”

Jill grabbed a water bottle from the bench. She squeezed a jet of water through the bars of her face mask into her mouth. She was still breathing heavily. The defender’s knee had caught her just below the hip as she fell to the ice. *It will probably hurt in the morning*, she thought. But by then her team could be champions.

As Jill rubbed her leg through her hockey pants, the buzzer sounded to end the second period.

She walked carefully back to the dressing room, plopped down on the bench and took off her gloves and helmet. Then she stood and flexed her leg a few times.

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“How you doing?” Alyssa asked.

“Fine. I’m fine,” she said. “It’ll be good. That’s why we wear pads, right?”

She sat again and looked down at her leg. She wished she had newer pads instead of the second-hand gear her dad had bought at the equipment swap last year. The pads were starting to get thin, and Jill did not have one of those fancy girdles with extra pads to wear under her pants and socks.

“You two good to go?” Coach Harrison asked them.

“Oh, we are totally fine,” Alyssa said. “No problems here.”

Jill smiled, but she did not want to sit for too long. So she stood up, grabbed the bottle carrier and walked over to the sink to fill the bottles for the third period.

Standing definitely feels better than sitting, Jill thought. She put her helmet and gloves back on and led her teammates to the bench for the third period.

“One more period,” Coach Harrison said as the referee called them to the ice for the faceoff. “Don’t stop working. Don’t stop believing in yourselves.”