

## Spitfire

### Chapter 1

Where Caroline Panski lived, everything was the same. All the streets in her neighborhood were the same. There weren't even any trees to break up the monotony. Instead, row upon row of the same brick houses, the same marble stoops. The same. It had always been the same, and it always would be. At twelve years old, Caroline was old enough to know that things would never change. So long as she was stuck in Baltimore in her Highlandtown neighborhood of brick rowhomes and marble stoops, it would always be the same. In Caroline's view, no fun.

Inside the Panski home on South Clinton Street, Caroline sat in the cramped space afforded by the bow window and stared miserably at the steady diet of rain and sleet outside. *If only it would snow*, she thought. In the modest house behind her, a clamor of mundane domestic noises competed with the radio: "It's twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit in Baltimore on this, the second day of December, 1952. Rain continues." There followed a blast of tinny music, followed by a deep, overly serious voice: "Now, Edward R. Murrow and the voices of President Harry S. Truman, Bernard F. Baruch, Senator Robert Taft, General George C. Marshall, Governor Earl Warren, and more than forty other men and women in this evening's performance of *Hear it Now* presented tonight, and every week, at this time. Later, an editorial: Children in Asia are dying of starvation and the bestselling books in America are how to get thin . . . First, we go to the cold battlefields of Korea, where our brave American men---

Caroline registered this, and listened closely. She was on the alert for information from Korea. But Caroline's mother turned off the radio, as she always did, just when there was a chance Caroline might hear some news from the warfront.

From the kitchen, Eloise Panski called out to her daughter: "You've completed your studies?"

"Mm-hmm."

Mrs. Panski, moving with a slight limp, appeared in the doorway and scrutinized Caroline. "You can't go out in this mess again," she said.

Caroline continued staring out the window, watching as two boys engaged in some rough horseplay out on the sidewalk as they passed. "I know," she muttered.

"Not while it's sleeting."

Mrs. Panski regarded her daughter and uttered a slight sigh of exasperation. "Supper in one hour," she said before retreating to the kitchen where the symphony of pots and pans resumed.

Beautiful, a decrepit miniature schnauzer, padded up to Caroline and nudged her leg. Caroline reached down and reflexively scratched Beautiful behind the ear.

Outside, what had been a barely perceptible change slowly became more noticeable: the sleet turning to fat snowflakes. Caroline's eyes brightened. She smiled and tore away, sending Beautiful to scurry best she could under cover of a nearby chair.

Caroline hit the narrow stairs running, squeezing past her seven year old brother Sam along the way.

"Hey! Watch it!" Sam yelled.

She ignored him and bounded into her tiny bedroom. She reached into her closet and pulled out a pair of ice skates. Next to the closet, a hockey stick leaned against the wall. She grabbed this, too, and started to run out of her room. But she paused, looking at the picture of a

handsome man in an Army uniform that rested on her dresser. She smiled at it, then took off again, skates tied together and flung over her shoulder, down the stairs, through the front door, and into the snow.

It was thick now, the snowflakes unrelenting and beautiful. With little regard to the slippery conditions, Caroline barreled through the snow, passing through an alley, and emerged onto an abandoned lot. It looked different here from her home—neglected. On all sides crowded rows of dilapidated houses, sentinels like cracked teeth huddling and chattering under the freezing weather. In the middle of the lot sat a large semicircle of frozen water, a temporary pond in a world of glass and brick and concrete.

Impervious to this gloom, Caroline plopped down into the snow and slush and laced up her skates. She raced out onto the ice and executed a perfect spin. She skated and skated, warming herself up. Not without a few stumbles but with a certain beauty and competence, as if on the edge of skating greatness. The coiled up tension of her athleticism bubbled forward, propelling her from one end of the pond to the other, her legs pumping, making quick work of the rough uneven surface.

She stopped, set her sights on the far end of the pond, and raced in that direction as quickly as she was able, her breath spilling from her mouth and nostrils in little puffs and plumes. Racing, skating, racing . . . until she tripped over a rock and sprawled headfirst onto the ice with an “oomph!” Caroline got herself up, wiped the ice crystals from her coat, and ran her mitten over her chin, where little droplets of blood began spreading like a rose.

She spotted the offending rock and scowled at it. She then retrieved her stick from where it had been sitting in the snow. She gathered momentum and took off with the stick in her hand. Her hands deftly cradled the stick, switching back and forth, letting it slide and bump over the icy surface until she reached the rock. Without breaking stride, she made contact, pushing the rock along the ice with the stick, racing and pushing, moving her way across the pond until she slowed, veered to the right, pushing the rock ahead, winding up the stick and letting loose a mean slapshot toward some crude netting that someone had set up to approximate a hockey goal. The rock skipped off the ice, shuttling through a hole in the netting and slamming into the rusted hood of an abandoned car with a ringing *thwap!*

Caroline smiled. She looked at the stick, at the cartoon figure imprinted there, and smiled again, wider this time. She was at first a bit self-conscious, but there was no one around to see her, so she leaned down and placed a soft kiss on the stick. For now, this was as close as she could get to her father, for he had given it to her, years earlier. It felt almost as if he was here, watching her, and not on the other side of the world on a cold battlefield in Korea. As if he was living through that very stick itself.