

ANY WAY YOU SLICE IT by Kristine Carlson Asselin

Chapter one

The rink is my own private island.

If I stretch out a hand, my fingers would just barely skim the half wall separating the ice from the viewing area. It's sanded plywood and the chance of a splinter is about 100 percent so I don't take the risk. Besides, it would slow me down too much. And I'm not planning on slowing down anytime soon. I glance at the giant clock on the wall. If I push just a smidge faster, I'll break my own record.

There are other people on the ice. But I'm like a satellite orbiting the earth. They all know I'm here, but I move too fast for anyone to really pay attention to the breeze that is Penelope Spaulding. I risk another quick glance at the clock.

It's not like I'm going to the Olympics in my dad's twenty-five-year-old beat-up hockey skates, but twice around the rink in under a minute is pretty damn fast, thank you very much.

The breeze from my speed whips my face and the momentum pulls me faster around the turns. It blocks out the world and lets me hide in my own little bubble.

I pick a spot at the far end, and I stare at it until it's a blur as I fly past. Then I focus on another spot on the opposite wall. And so on. And so on. Keeping my body close to the outer edge of the ice, pulling my arms tight to my torso, focusing on my speed, ignoring the burn in my legs. Intuitively, I avoid my company on the ice, even if I'm pretending they aren't there. There's a small girl in a pink tutu practicing a sit spin. A mother and her son, clearly on the ice for the first time. A couple of guys from school getting ready for hockey practice. But none of them matter right now. There are only a few precious minutes left of open ice time, and today's the day I'll crush my record.

If I squint, I can blur out the rest of the skaters and forget I have to be behind the counter at the restaurant in forty minutes, apron at the ready.

The twinge of pain in my left calf pulls me out of the zone for a second and the memory of my fight with Dad this morning breaks my concentration.

*"If I'm paying, you'll go to Johnson and Wales University for the culinary program. And that's the end of the conversation!"* It was at least the fifth time since Christmas that we'd had the same fight.

*"I never asked you pay!"* I grabbed my backpack off the chair and stomped across the kitchen. *"And I'm fine with never having this conversation again!"*

The look on my grandmother's face as the door slammed almost made me turn around. That and the fact I forgot my math book on the table. But you can't go back after stomping out of breakfast without losing all credibility.

I crouch and dig my blades into the ice, pushing myself faster. There's no room to think about anything else while I'm skating. No room for fights with parents, no room for thoughts about the stupid reality show Dad's trying to get us on, no room to think about money for college or the fact that I don't want to take over the family restaurant. No room for anything related to pizza.

Just me and the ice.

I lift my arms to celebrate, about to cross the imaginary finish line when out of nowhere something slams me into the boards. I land hard on my butt.

"What the H E double hockey sticks?" One of the guys who had been setting up the hockey nets stares down at me. It's hard to see his face from my position on the ice, so I can pretend I don't know exactly who it is.