

GHOST BLADE

*Cole loves hockey more than anything.
But does he have what it takes to be a champ?*

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His breath came in gasps. His skates dug into the ice as he turned, starting back up the rink. It took every bit of strength he had left to hold the hockey stick in his grasp.

“Dig deep! Go! Go! Go!” Coach Fraser’s shouts sounded far away in the cavernous arena.

His Milford Tankers sweater was drenched in sweat. His legs were dead. He had nothing left. Until he did.

His skates glided across the blue line and he churned further, cutting behind the net, skating back up the ice. “Come on,” he gasped. “Don’t stop now.”

He cast a quick glance at Coach Fraser, who gave two quick bursts on his whistle to end the drill. He coasted to a stop, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Cole loved hockey. He was the No. 1 ranked player in his age group in the state. At 14, he was already drawing interest from colleges. He dreamed of someday playing in the National Hockey League.

But there were days like today, when he didn’t know if he would ever make it that far.

Coach Swanson.

Their team was undefeated and ranked No. 4 in the country. They were favorites to win state. Which would give them a shot to make nationals. All of that didn’t

seem to please Coach. Every day he kept Cole after practice to run extra drills. Always talking about how “Champions stay late. Champions dig deep.”

Cole kept his head down, not wanting to make eye contact with Coach. The closer they got to state, the harder he pushed.

“Don’t get comfortable,” Coach said. “You’re not done yet. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Cole said. “Like a cake?”

“Pfft. No cake. Just somebody I want you to meet.”

He looked at his watch. “He should be here by now. I’ll go check. Maybe the door is locked. Wait until I get back.”

Cole skated in a slow circle and swept up a puck that was lying at center ice. He darted toward the goal, stick

handling. With a flick, he fired the puck into the goal. It felt good.

He turned around and was startled to find a man standing near the opposite net, wearing battered old-fashioned skates and an old Milford Tankers sweater.

“Ahhh!” Cole jerked, nearly falling to the ice.

“Sorry,” the old man said. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

His voice was deep and gravelly. His thick, white hair was swept straight back. His skin was lined with old scars. He must have played in the days before helmets were required. He’d certainly taken a few pucks and sticks to the face.

“How you doing, kid?” he said. He skated to center ice.

“Um. OK. Are you ... the surprise?” Cole asked.

He was struck by how familiar this man looked. He was certain he’d seen him before. But couldn’t **CONTINUED >**



say where. Maybe in the bleachers, watching games?

“You ready for state?” the man asked, skidding to a stop near Cole.

“Am I ... ? Uh. Yeah. I think so.”

“You don’t sound convinced,” he said.

“I ... am ... just, you know ... the puck bounces funny sometimes.”

“Sure. I’ve seen it many times,” the old man swiped the air with his stick, testing its weight.

He tipped a puck onto the blade of his stick, bouncing it up and down before dropping it to the ice. He fired a slapshot toward the goal. It bounced off the back of the net. It happened so fast, Cole almost didn’t believe it.

“Nice shot,” Cole said.

“Thanks. I used to play a little.”

“Cool. I should probably get back to work. Before Coach gets back,” he said.

The old man looked at him. “Drives you pretty hard, doesn’t he?”

“He drives me somewhere.”

The old man laughed. “That’s what coaches do. Even great players need someone to push them. Someday you’ll take the ice against somebody better than you physically. You can’t let them be better than you mentally. Your coach is pushing you to be great. It’s not personal.”

“Really? It’s that simple.” Cole tried to keep the snark from his voice.

He’d found a lot of people had “ideas” on what it took to win. Most were full of it.

“Sure is. I wish my coaches had pushed me a little harder. It’s the difference between winning and losing sometimes.” The man smiled, bouncing two pucks on his blade.

He shot both pucks at once. They hit the back of the net like they flew on a rope.

“That was impressive,” Cole said.

The old man shrugged. “Like I said, I used to play a little. Won a couple of championships in my younger days.”

“Which championships?”

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he shot the five remaining practice pucks. Each shot flew straight and true, into the back of the net.

“What’s your name?” Cole asked.

Still no answer. Instead, he gazed up at the rafters and the banners hanging there. The Milford Tankers were a junior hockey dynasty, and they had the laundry up there to show for it.

“There’s nothing like seeing one of those raised up there,” he said. His eyes had a wistful look. “Are you ready for yours to go up?”

“I am,” Cole said.

“Remember, your coach is just trying to get you to realize how good you are. You’ll play other good teams. Maybe even better teams. At some point, you won’t be the best player on the ice anymore. I think you probably already know that. Doesn’t mean you’re going to lose, though. I knew guys in our league who had more talent. They never won anything. Because they didn’t want it bad enough.”

Cole nodded. “I want it.”

Where had he seen this man before? He sort of liked the old guy.

“Will you teach me how to do that double shot?” Cole asked.

“Ah. I need to get going. ...,” he stammered.

“Just five minutes, that’s all I ask,” Cole turned and skated to the net and scooped out the pucks. As he turned to shoot them back to center ice, the man was gone.

“Mister? Hello?” he looked all around.

Gone.

“Well, that’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” It was Coach Fraser, walking out on the ice.

“Who was that guy?”

“What guy?” Coach asked.

“The guy you wanted me to meet?”

Coach Fraser raised his phone in his hand. “Didn’t make it. Got stuck at work. His name is Reggie Dunlop, used to play minor league hockey. I thought he might give you some pointers.”

“How old is he?”

“How old... ? He’s in his 40s, I guess. Why?”

“Nothing ... I ... it’s just ... did you see anyone else in here?”

“What? No. Are you OK?”

“Um. Yeah. I guess.”

“Hit the showers. We need to get home and fix dinner for your mom.”

“OK, Dad. ... I mean, Coach.” Cole had slipped. “Coach Fraser” was also his dad. He tried to refer to him only as “Coach” at the rink.

Cole thought about what the old man said. Maybe his dad just wanted him to be his best.

His dad was waiting in the lobby when Cole emerged from the locker room a few minutes later.

The walls were lined with photos of hockey teams and players who’d skated at the rink through the years. Some had gone on to play in college, a few in the NHL.

Then it hit him.

He hurried back down the hallway, scanning each photo. There he was. The same guy. Much younger in the photo, but definitely him.

“Tank Milford?” he whispered. “It can’t be. ...”

He felt dizzy. The gold plaque under the photo read: “Tank Milford, Founder of the Milford Tankers Hockey Club. Born 1925, Vancouver, Canada. Died 2015, Detroit, Michigan.”

“Dad. You’re not going to believe this.”

“Believe what?” he said. “Hurry up, kid, we need to get going.”

“I saw. ... I met. ...,” he looked at the picture. No. It couldn’t be. Might as well not say anything. Who would believe him?

“What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” his dad said.

“He loved the game,” he said.

“What? Who loved the game? Are you OK? You’re acting strange.”

Cole looked through the doors leading to the rink, to the patch of glowing white ice. For a moment, he thought he saw someone skating over the center line. But no. There was nothing there.

“Yeah. I’m good,” he said, as they pushed their way through the outside doors.

It was a brisk night. Snow swirled through the sky.

“Dad? I love hockey,” he said.

“I know,” his father said, smiling. “Let’s go home.” ❄️