

Beartown



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FREDRIK BACKMAN

Fredrik Backman grew up in Helsingborg, Sweden, a suburb of Stockholm. His first novel, [A Man Called Ove](#), originated in material he first published on his blog for Swedish magazine *Café*, and despite many initial rejections from publishers, it quickly became an international success, being made into a movie in 2015. At the time it was published, Backman, a college dropout, had been working night shifts as a forklift driver in a warehouse, writing during the day. His subsequent books include *My Grandmother Asked Me To Tell You She's Sorry*, *Britt-Marie Was Here*, and nonfiction title *Things My Son Needs to Know About the World*. Backman and his wife, Neda, have two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel's portrayal of the tremendous popularity of Swedish youth hockey is based on reality. Unlike in the United States, where young hockey players might try out for a variety of different teams or leagues over the years, Swedish youth hockey is strongly community-based, especially in smaller towns like the fictional Beartown. Athletes often grow up playing with the same group of friends, from their earliest skating classes until they reach the junior and professional levels years later. Because of its emphasis on developing strong playing skills from youth upward, Sweden has sent a disproportionate number of players to North America's National Hockey League, the dream destination of many young players in *Beartown*—about 10% of the NHL's players grew up in Sweden. It's also worth noting that, although *Beartown's* publication preceded it by a year, Maya Andersson's storyline calls to mind the #MeToo movement against sexual assault. The movement began virally on social media in October of 2017, as an attempt to spread awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. Sweden's own King Carl XVI Gustaf encouraged victims to share their stories, citing the movement as a positive step for Swedish society.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Beartown*, Laurie Halse Anderson's young adult novel [Speak](#) also features an artistic heroine who finds herself an outcast and summons the courage to tell the truth after a sexual assault. Daniel James Brown's 2013 nonfiction work, [The Boys in the Boat](#), also touches on the role of sports—in this case, rowing in the Depression-era United States—in building community identity and pride. The second novel in Backman's

Beartown series, *Us Against You*, was released in March of 2019; it continues the story of Beartown hockey's struggle to survive and its growing rivalry with nearby Hed.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Beartown* ([Björnstad](#) in Swedish)
- **Where Written:** Sweden
- **When Published:** 2016 in Swedish; 2017 in English
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realistic fiction
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Beartown, Sweden
- **Climax:** Maya confronts Kevin with a shotgun
- **Antagonist:** Kevin Erdahl
- **Point of View:** Alternating third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Björnstad on Screen. As of 2019, Swedish production company Filmance is adapting *Beartown* as a five-episode television series which will air on HBO Europe.

In Hockey's Heartland. Fredrik Backman shared with his fans that, although he tries not to care about bestseller lists, one of his biggest achievements as a writer is the warm reception of the *Beartown* books in hockey-obsessed Canada.



PLOT SUMMARY

One evening in late March, a teenager walks into the forest, puts a shotgun to another teenager's forehead, and pulls the trigger.

In early March, in the small town of Beartown, Sweden, everyone anticipates tomorrow's semifinal hockey game in the national youth tournament. Beartown's fortunes have been declining for years, with the town losing jobs, people, and even its position in the hockey standings. Now, thanks to a 17-year-old star, the wealthy Kevin Erdahl, their junior team finally has a chance at a title. A victory tomorrow could lead to a major economic reversal for the town.

The president of Beartown's hockey club is planning to fire the longtime A-team coach, Sune, and he's going to make General Manager Peter Andersson break the news, even though Peter idolizes Sune. Peter grew up in Beartown, became an NHL star in Canada, and returned to his hometown along with his wife, Kira, and his daughter, Maya, after their son, Isak, died of a childhood illness.

Sune discovered and mentored both Peter and David, who's the coach of the junior team. Sune is being replaced by David because the club hierarchy and sponsors prefer David's winning-obsessed coaching methods, whereas Sune prefers letting players develop gradually and encouraging them to play with heart. In particular, Sune refuses to promote Kevin to the A-team, believing he doesn't yet have the requisite maturity. He believes that hockey is about more than producing "boys who never lose."

On the eve of the semifinal, even Sune admits that the **Bears** are lacking something—namely speed. He notices 15-year-old Amat, a player on the boys' team, practicing sprints on the ice, and he urges David to consider the boy for tomorrow's game. Amat grew up in the poor section of town with a single mother, Fatima; despite being much smaller than his teammates, he has immense natural talent. That afternoon, David invites Amat to the juniors' practice. The juniors bully Amat, and David subjects him to a cruel one-on-one training exercise against a massive player, Bobo. However, Amat refuses to give up and is allowed to play in the semifinal.

Maya Andersson has a crush on Kevin, and Amat has a crush on Maya. While Maya and her best friend, Ana, are goofing around at the rink before the game, Amat approaches them and shyly attempts to ask Maya out, but Kevin smoothly preempts him, inviting Maya to the party at his house that evening. The Bears go on to win the semifinal in spectacular fashion, sending the town into raucous celebration.

The party at Kevin's house is filled with drunken teenagers. Maya soon gets drunk with Kevin, and Kevin quietly makes a bet with his friend Lyt that he'll be able to sleep with the General Manager's daughter. Maya accompanies Kevin to his bedroom and kisses him, but he rapes her a short time later. Amat, meanwhile, has wandered upstairs in search of Maya; hearing sounds of a struggle from Kevin's room, he opens the door and sees everything, interrupting the assault. Maya flees the party and later destroys all evidence of the rape.

With Ana's encouragement, Maya decides to tell her parents what happened the following Saturday, right before the hockey final. Kevin is arrested just before the team departs for the game in the capital. Though the Bears put up a fierce fight even without Kevin, they ultimately lose. Later that night, news gets around regarding Maya's accusation, and most people in the town turn ferociously against her. They claim that she's lying, that she wanted to sleep with Kevin, and that the accusation was deliberately timed so as to throw off the Bears' final game. Maya insists on going to school on Monday, even though she's ostracized and bullied by her peers. Meanwhile, most of the hockey players band together in support of Kevin, and his father, Mr. Erdahl, begins mobilizing sponsors and other hockey club supporters against Peter Andersson.

Mr. Erdahl talks to Amat and tells him that he didn't see what he thought he saw at Kevin's party. He also offers Amat's mom a

better job and money for expensive new skates in exchange for Amat's silence. Amat drops the money on the ground.

The hockey club holds a meeting to vote on firing Peter as General Manager. Teammate Lyt tries to intimidate Amat into joining the team outside the rink in order to show support for Kevin. When Amat arrives, however, he barges into the meeting and courageously reveals everything he saw at the party. Ramona, who runs the Bearskin pub and is a beloved local fixture, influences many people, including a group of ruffian hockey fans known as The Pack, to vote in Peter's favor, and he doesn't lose his GM job. It's later revealed that David has given notice and will move to the nearby city of Hed to coach the better-endowed professional team there, taking many of Beartown's best junior players with him. Sune will remain in Beartown as the A-team coach.

Amat's teammates beat him up for his disloyalty, and they also beat up Bobo, who has become Amat's friend and stands up for him at the last minute. A watching member of The Pack disrupts the violence and also returns the money Amat had dropped. Amat later uses the money to buy Maya a new guitar.

The rape case against Kevin is dismissed because of a supposed lack of sufficient evidence. Soon after, Maya takes a shotgun belonging to Ana's father and surprises Kevin while he's jogging. She holds the gun to Kevin's head and makes him believe she's going to kill him, though the gun is never actually loaded. She finds a measure of justice in the knowledge that, like her, Kevin will now be afraid of the dark for the rest of his life.

After the season ends, Sune helps start a girls' hockey team in Beartown—a first step toward challenging the town's sexist hockey culture. Amat, Bobo, and some of the others who remained in Beartown help teach the little kids. One of those kids, a four-year-old girl from an abusive home, will find refuge on the ice and become the most talented hockey star Beartown has ever seen.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Maya Andersson – Maya is the daughter of Peter and Kira Andersson and the older sister of Leo. She is 15 years old. Maya is a talented musician whose first love is playing the guitar, and she and Ana have been best friends since the age of 6. Maya loves her parents and often feels responsible for protecting them, having grown up in the shadow of her older brother Isak's death. Maya has a crush on Kevin Erdahl. However, at the **Bears'** victory party, Kevin rapes Maya. Maya later reports Kevin and is ostracized and accused of lying by most people in Beartown, though she remains strong and steadfast, refusing to stay home from school or consider leaving Beartown. After the case against Kevin is dropped, Maya gets a small measure

of justice by frightening him with a shotgun he doesn't know is unloaded. Later in life, she goes on to become a successful musician and performer.

Kevin Erdahl – Kevin is 17 years old, the most talented hockey player Beartown has seen in decades. In fact, the hockey club wants to promote Kevin to the professional A-team already, and he's had offers from bigger teams and inquiries from the NHL. Everything about Kevin's daily life is strictly regimented and controlled, in service to his hockey goals. His wealthy parents pour tons of money into Kevin's training—providing things like specially catered meals and a home practice rink—but they take little interest in watching him play; Mr. Erdahl, in particular, is only interested in Kevin's success. Kevin is a lonely person; Benji is his best friend and the only person who's really on his wavelength. Kevin is attracted to Maya, and at the victory party after the semifinal, they both get drunk and go upstairs to his room, where he eventually rapes her. He is arrested just before the final game, but is largely supported by his team and Beartown residents. Kevin often displays an entitled attitude and expects to get what he wants. In fact, after the case against him is dropped, Kevin still gets the chance to play for the A-team in nearby Hed. However, Benji knows the truth about what happened and severs ties with Kevin. Maya terrifies Kevin with an unloaded shotgun while he's jogging one night. Ten years later, he's apparently happily married with a child on the way, but after an unexpected sighting of Maya, he reveals everything to his wife.

Peter Andersson – Peter is Kira's husband and the father of Isak, Maya, and Leo. He is the General Manager of Beartown's hockey club. Peter was Beartown's most talented hockey player before Kevin Erdahl, and he was first discovered and mentored by Sune. He grew up with an alcoholic father who was sometimes abusive, and hockey became his refuge. Peter and Kira have a loving marriage, although their personalities are very different and Kira is the more dominant spouse in some ways. Peter is soft-spoken, socially awkward, and conflict-averse. Even when he was playing hockey, he avoided fights. Many in the hockey club are displeased with Peter's reserved leadership style and want him to fire Sune, even though the two of them were responsible for building up the junior team to its present success. Though he's dedicated to the hockey club, Peter is most devoted to his children and rethinks aspects of the club's culture after Maya is assaulted.

Kira Andersson – Kira is Peter's wife and the mother of Isak, Maya, and Leo. Kira has a forceful personality and is a fighter, both at her law practice and on behalf of her children. She balances out her more reserved and retiring husband and is fiercely devoted to him. Though she loves being an attorney, she struggles with guilt while away from her children and often feels like a fake as a parent. Ever since Isak's death, she is obsessed with protecting her children and lately suffers from panic attacks. Maya describes Kira as a "wolf mother," and Kira

almost runs down some teenagers with her car after they throw a rock in Maya's window.

Amat – Amat is almost 16. He has always been small for his age. He isn't as strong as other hockey players, but he's one of the fastest skaters anyone has ever seen. Besides being athletically talented, he is kind and perceptive. Amat lives with his mother, Fatima, to whom he's devoted. They emigrated from an unnamed country not long after Amat was born. Amat dreams of freeing his mom from her physically demanding job by becoming a professional hockey player. His best friends are Zacharias and Lifa. After Amat gets a chance to move up from the boys' team to the junior team just before the semifinal, he and Zach become temporarily estranged. Amat has loved Maya ever since they were children. At the party after the semifinal, he witnesses Kevin raping Maya. He tries to persuade her to call the police, and later, despite being intimidated by various members of the hockey team, he tells the whole town himself. He and Bobo become good friends and are both beaten up by the other hockey players after Amat breaks the silence about Kevin's crime. Amat ends up playing for Beartown's A-team and teaching kids' skating lessons.

Benjamin Ovich (Benji) – 17 years old, Benji is one of the mainstays of the junior hockey team, known especially for his fierce fighting and reliable defense of Kevin on the ice. Kevin is also Benji's best friend. Benji grew up with his mother and three older sisters, Adri, Katia, and Gaby, who adore him but are also quick to scold him when he messes up. Benji's dad, Alan Ovich, committed suicide when Benji was small, and Benji has never gotten over it. Like his father, Benji is a tormented soul with "sad eyes and a wild heart," and he often gets in trouble—smoking pot, cutting school, and ditching practice—but he's so important to the hockey team that he rarely faces consequences. Unlike some of his teammates, especially Kevin, Benji is quick to notice when other people are hurting, and he avoids going along with the crowd. He is kind to Maya after the rape, and his friendship with Kevin ends once he finds out what happened. Benji is gay, although only his family seems to know it; he has a brief romantic relationship with an unnamed bass player who performs at Katia's bar. Benji stays in Beartown at the end of the novel, joining the new A-team and teaching children's skating.

David – David, the coach of Beartown's junior team, is 32, with unruly red hair. Hockey is all he's ever cared about, and he is obsessive about it. Sune mentored him as a young coach, but David is now at odds with Sune in seemingly every aspect of coaching philosophy, and he also doesn't get along with Peter, seeing both men as insufficiently progressive to keep up with the evolving sport. He has coached the boys on the junior team since they were seven years old, and they look up to him as a father; he is especially close to Kevin and Benji. David's coaching philosophy could be summed up as simply "Win." He doesn't dedicate much time to developing elegant technique or

giving sentimental pep talks. After Kevin assaults Maya, David tries to stay inside the “hockey bubble” and let law enforcement deal with Kevin, believing the sport should remain a self-contained refuge for the boys. He later resigns from the Beartown club and becomes the A-team coach in the neighboring city of Hed, taking Kevin and other elite players with him. David also has an unnamed girlfriend, who is expecting their first child.

Sune – Sune is around 70 years old and coaches Beartown’s professional team. He has been a mentor and father figure to generations of Beartown hockey players, including Peter and David. A quiet, reflective man, he resists change in the sport and especially dislikes promoting talented players too quickly. He would rather see boys play with their hearts than become obsessed with winning. For those reasons, the club president and many sponsors hope to see him get fired. However, he remains A-team coach at the end of the book and even helps found a girls’ team.

Fatima – Fatima is Amat’s mother; her husband died in a war before Amat was born, and she and her son emigrated to Sweden from an unnamed country when Amat was a baby. Although she’s barely middle-aged, she suffers from back problems due to her arduous cleaning job at the hockey rink. Nevertheless, she’s grateful for her job because it gives her the chance to watch Amat practice. Though Fatima has a quiet personality and never raises her voice, she is proud and stout-hearted, and she expects Amat to be a strong, ethical person. On principle, she turns down Mr. Erdahl’s offer of a better job and encourages Amat to stand up to his teammates’ efforts to intimidate him into supporting Kevin.

Mr. Erdahl/Kevin’s dad – Mr. Erdahl is Kevin’s father. Having grown up poor, he is relentless in the pursuit of success and perfection and demands the same of Kevin. He is one of the hockey club’s biggest financial supporters, although he seldom watches Kevin’s games. After Kevin’s assault of Maya, Mr. Erdahl claims that Maya is a liar and that Kevin is really the victim. He tries to mobilize the town against Peter Andersson and fails, although he succeeds in making sure that Kevin’s hockey career can carry on as planned. Though he normally has a smooth, even demeanor, he can become ferociously angry when provoked.

Mrs. Erdahl/Kevin’s mom – Mrs. Erdahl is Kevin’s quiet, reserved mother. She runs a large company, where she’s seen as approachable and sympathetic, but she struggles to talk to her son, even as she longs for a closer relationship with him. Mrs. Erdahl begins to suspect her son after he is accused of rape, and when she confirms the truth, she makes an emotional apology to Maya.

Ana – Ana and Maya became best friends after Ana pulled Maya out of a hole in the ice when they were six years old. Ana is “a child of nature who went hunting and fishing but didn’t quite understand people.” She’s never fit into the usual mold for

a Beartown girl, though Maya is saddened that as a teen, Ana has begun to show more interest in makeup and guys than in hotwiring snowmobiles. She lives with her divorced dad, but spends more nights sleeping at the Anderssons’. Though she was hurt after Maya ditched her at Kevin’s party, she fiercely defends Maya after she finds out what Kevin did, and she is a loyal friend to the end.

Bobo – Bobo is the son of Hog and Ann-Katrin. He plays on the junior hockey team. An enormous, lumbering player, he repeatedly flattens Amat during Amat’s first junior practice, but he soon grows sympathetic, and the two become friends during Kevin’s party. Belying his awkward exterior, Bobo can be tender-hearted and even has a romantic streak. He defends Amat against his teammates when they attack Amat for disloyalty, showing how courageous he is at heart. He stays in Beartown to join the new A-team and teaches children’s skating.

William Lyt – Lyt is a prominent member of the junior hockey team. He is Maggan’s son. Lyt longs for Kevin’s approval and friendship and basks in the attention that association with Kevin brings. After Kevin assaults Maya, he is one of Kevin’s fiercest supporters and bullies most of the rest of the team into supporting him, too.

Zacharias – Along with Lifa, Zacharias, 15, is one of Amat’s best friends. Like them, he lives in the underprivileged Hollow of Beartown, and they have hung out together since they were children. Zach prefers video games to hockey and knows he’s unlikely to make the junior team next year. He is often bullied at school. He and Amat are briefly estranged after Amat joins the junior team. After they’re reconciled, Zach joins the new A-team and teaches children’s skating.

Ramona – Elderly Ramona runs the Bearskin pub in Beartown and is a beloved local character. Ramona drinks heavily, especially since the death of her husband, Holger, more than ten years ago; she has barely left the pub since. Ramona takes care of her “boys”—the men of The Pack who frequent the Bearskin—sometimes paying their bills when they lose their jobs, and they take care of her in turn, buying her groceries so she doesn’t have to venture into town. Ramona is skilled at listening to patrons and advising them on their struggles. She scolds Sune and the town as a whole for creating an unhealthy hockey culture, and she convinces The Pack to retain Peter as General Manager. Sune makes her a member of the new hockey club board.

Tails – Tails—so nicknamed because of his fondness for wearing fancy suits as a young man—is an owner of a large supermarket chain. He and Peter played hockey together as kids, and he is a staunch supporter of the hockey club. He sides with Kevin at first and goes along with the hockey culture’s misogynist humor, but as the story goes on, he shows more ambivalence about the situation and displays a softer heart. He ends up reprimanding his young son for telling inappropriate jokes,

saying he wants his son to be better than he has been. He sells his supermarket in Hed so that he can help the Beartown hockey club stay afloat, and he helps Robbie Holts get a job.

Club President – The president of the Beartown hockey club is a rather nervous figure who’s constantly trying to keep the various club stakeholders happy, while ensuring that hockey solves its own problems without outside interference. One of his decisions is to force Peter to fire Sune. He is known for making sexist jokes around the hockey club and letting others do the same, but after the blowup surrounding Kevin and Maya, he offers Maya a personal apology for not handling the situation better.

Leo Andersson – Leo is Peter’s and Kira’s 12-year-old son, and Maya’s brother. Leo doesn’t have a large role in the story, but he is devoted to his older sister and staunchly supports her after Kevin assaults her, even sitting with her at lunch when nobody else will. He loves playing hockey, but is probably more devoted to video games.

The Pack – The Pack is a group of about 30 or 40 angry young men who feel they’ve been abandoned by the local economy. They are sometimes violent hockey fans, intimidating rivals. The members spend much of their time at Ramona’s pub and are deeply loyal to her. Ramona accordingly convinces them to vote to retain Peter as club General Manager.

Robbie Holts – Robbie is an unemployed, alcoholic man in his 40s who was once believed to be a more promising hockey player than Peter Andersson. However, he advanced to the professional team too early and couldn’t handle the pressure mentally. He left hockey, started drinking, and got a job in the factory. Bitter about his failed career, he spends most of his days drinking in Ramona’s Bearskin pub. At the end of the book, however, Tails arranges for Robbie to get a job in the supermarket warehouse, and things begin looking up for him.

The bass player – Benji meets the bass player at The Barn, the bar in Hed where his sister Katia works. The bass player joined a band in Hed temporarily, having just gotten out of a bad relationship. He and Benji gradually begin a romantic relationship that breaks off when the bass player moves at the end of the book. Benji teaches him to skate.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lifa – Along with Zacharias, Lifa, 15, is one of Amat’s best friends. He rarely talks much. He quit playing hockey when he was younger because he couldn’t handle the locker-room banter.

Isak Andersson – Son of Peter and Kira and older brother of Maya, Isak died of an unnamed illness when he was very small, while the Anderssons were living in Canada. His death has haunted the family ever since.

Lars – Lars is Amat and Zacharias’s coach on the boys’ team; he

also assists David with the junior team. His coaching technique mostly consists of constant yelling and the occasional crude joke.

Jeannette – Jeannette is a teacher in the high school. The hockey players in her class often speak disrespectfully to her. Jeannette is a critic of the excesses of the town’s hockey culture and is perceptive; she sees that Benji has a good heart, for instance, despite his self-destructive behavior.

Elisabeth – Elisabeth is the wife of Tails.

Tails’s son – Tails’s son is 12. He only appears in one scene, where he insults his sister with a joke involving rape. At this, Tails ends up tackling him and tearfully telling him that he needs to become a better man.

David’s girlfriend – David’s girlfriend, who seldom appears in the story, is pregnant with their first child. She is often exasperated with his hockey obsession but accepts and supports him.

Hog – Hog is Bobo’s father. He is a car mechanic who owns a garage. He played hockey with Peter when they were boys, and they are still good friends. Hog is awkward in showing affection but is a good, loving dad.

Ann-Katrin – Ann-Katrin is Hog’s wife and Bobo’s mom. She works as a nurse at the hospital in Hed and cares for Maya after the assault.

Holger – Holger was Ramona’s hockey-loving husband, a former goalie, who died of cancer 11 years ago.

Adri Ovich – Adri is Benji’s oldest sister, who runs a dog kennel in the forest. She helps start a girls’ hockey team with Sune.

Katia Ovich – Katia is Benji’s second-oldest sister. She works at The Barn, a bar in Hed.

Gaby Ovich – Gaby is Benji’s youngest older sister, whose two children Benji adores.

Alan Ovich – Alan was Benji’s father, who committed suicide in the forest when Benji was a little boy. Benji routinely visits his grave in the cemetery, though his mom has never forgiven her late husband.

Benji’s mom – Benji’s mom is a widow, her husband Alan having committed suicide years ago. She’s never forgiven him for this. She is also the mother of Adri, Katia, and Gaby. She doesn’t appear much in the story, but is a quiet, loving, concerned presence in Benji’s life.

Maggan Lyt – Maggan is hockey player William Lyt’s mother. She is an outspoken, opinionated supporter of the team and is among the loudest spectators at games. She is also one of the loudest accusers of Maya after the rape.

The caretaker – The caretaker is a kindly, elderly hockey rink employee. Amat helps him with heavier chores in exchange for extra ice time.

Filip – Filip is the smallest player on the junior team.

Filip's mom – Filip's mother is also best friends with Maggan Lyt, though she is much quieter and more restrained. She trained as an elite skier in her youth.

Ana's dad – Ana's father is divorced, and he and Ana have a mostly silent relationship. However, he taught Ana to hunt in the forest when she was a little girl, and he still sometimes takes her along on hunting trips.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN AND INEQUALITY

Beartown is set in a hockey-obsessed, rural Swedish town that has seen better days. Fredrik Backman paints a gritty yet sympathetic picture of a community whose self-respect has withered: “These days almost everyone is asking themselves if it is actually possible. Living here any longer. Asking themselves if there’s anything left, apart from property values that seem to fall as rapidly as the temperature.” The one thing Beartown has left is its junior hockey team, which is poised to win a national championship. But Beartown’s hockey obsession isn’t totally benign; it seems to create as many problems as it solves, especially for those who are already down and out. By portraying Beartown’s struggle on both a community level and an individual level, Backman argues that when a community breaks down, its breakdown weighs heaviest on those with the least power.

Beartown’s self-image and survival depend on the hockey team’s success. If the junior hockey team wins the national championship, “the politicians might decide to spend the money to establish a hockey school here instead of over in Hed [...] [which would] attract the biggest sponsors once more [...] It would only be important to the town’s economy. To its pride. To its survival. It’s only so important that a seventeen-year-old in a private garden has been standing here since he got frostbite on his cheeks one night ten years ago, firing puck after puck after puck with the weight of an entire community on his shoulders. It means everything. That’s all.” Hockey, in other words, has become a stand-in for community survival—for Beartown’s self-respect in the midst of an economy that has left them behind. Thus, they’re banking everything on youth hockey’s ability to salvage a respectable future for the town.

A subset of angry young fans known as The Pack feels left behind by the rest of the world, too: “There’s a constant threat of violence hidden just beneath the surface of a certain type of

person in this town [...] Neither hockey nor school nor the economy ever managed to find a way out for these people, and they emanate a silent fury. [...] The Pack has scared their opponents away from coming to Beartown, but sadly the same thing applies to sponsors. The twentysomething men at the Bearskin [bar] have become the most conservative people in town: they don’t want a modern Beartown, because they know that a modern Beartown won’t want them.” In other words, The Pack are angry because they feel they’ve been let down by society in one way or another, and their violence is a complicated expression of that—they don’t fit into broader society, but they don’t have a stable place in Beartown anymore, either.

David, the junior team’s coach, reflects on the razor-thin distinction between “good enough” and “not quite good enough”: “A player who’s as good as Kevin is might turn professional. Might earn millions. And the players who are almost as good? They’ll end up in the factory just on the other side of the trees from the rink [...] As long as his team carries on winning, he’ll have a job here, but if they lose? How many steps away from the factory is he? What can he do apart from hockey? Nothing.” So, even for gifted players and coaches, there’s a narrow margin between success and failure. Success requires throwing oneself completely into hockey, as David has done; on the other hand, the trade-off is that if one falls short of the dream of playing professional hockey, they have no alternative to fall back on, and they find themselves struggling for survival just like everyone else. This tension only adds to the barely submerged angst that underlies Beartown’s love of hockey.

As The Pack’s fury hints, the town’s struggle weighs most heavily on those who already lack power within the community. Fifteen-year-old Amat is acutely aware of the differences between his immigrant household and the privileged homes of many of the other hockey players: “There’s an obvious difference between the children who live in homes where the money can run out and the ones who don’t [...] Amat knows his options are limited, so his plan is simple: from here to the junior team, then the A-team, then professional. [...] He just wants to lie in bed one single night without having to count [money].” Like Beartown, Amat sees hockey as a lifeline, but for him, it’s a matter of individual survival, too—and it’s the best hope for a better life for his downtrodden mom.

One day, Amat is approached by the father of Kevin, his team’s star player, with a possible way out of a dead-end job for Amat’s mother, Fatima. The catch is that Amat was the only witness when Kevin sexually assaulted a fellow student, and Kevin’s dad wants to give Amat the message that people in Beartown “take care of” one another—that is, the price of Amat’s family’s advancement is his silence. This exchange jarringly exemplifies the cost of the town’s us vs. them mindset. Beartown’s success rests on Kevin’s and the team’s success, and the weight of this

immense pressure largely falls upon those who already have less power—like Kevin’s victim, and Amat as well.

Although Beartown has many dysfunctional aspects, Backman makes the town sympathetic by offering the perspectives of a broad range of characters. Ultimately, as he explores the painful clashes between the characters with power and those who lack it, he suggests that Beartown’s long-term success or failure will depend not just on the hockey team, but also on the town’s ability to listen to and lift up those with less power. In the closing chapters, there are hints that this is beginning to happen—like when a girls’ hockey team takes shape in Beartown for the first time.



CULTURE, CHARACTER, AND ENTITLEMENT

Beartown starts out with an ironic reflection on the “unimportance” of hockey: “[I]t’s only a game. It only resolves tiny, insignificant things. Such as who gets validation. Who gets listened to. It allocates power and draws boundaries and turns some people into stars and others into spectators. That’s all.” These functions of hockey play out in various ways throughout the book. They are most evident, however, in the story of Maya’s assault and the town’s response, which largely invalidates Maya and empowers her attacker, star player Kevin. By tracing the ways that an obsession with winning shapes character, Backman argues that Beartown’s culture ultimately encourages the objectification of others, especially women.

Beartown loves winners. Sune, Beartown’s professional coach, is soon to be replaced by the more successful youth coach: “They’ll replace Sune with the coach of the junior team, for one simple reason; when Sune talks to his players before matches, he gives long speeches about them playing with their hearts. When the junior team coach stands in the locker room, he says just one word: ‘Win.’ And the juniors win. They’ve done nothing else for ten years. It’s just that Sune is no longer sure that’s all a hockey team should consist of: boys who never lose.” Though he’s being phased out of the hockey club’s leadership for this attitude, Sune suspects that the club’s emphasis on winning, even if it’s working on the ice, is also having a harmful effect on the players’ characters. Sune observes that obsession with winning can have a destructive effect on both players and their fans: “[P]erhaps it’s more noticeable in a small community. We love winners, even though they’re very rarely particularly likeable people. They’re almost always obsessive and selfish and inconsiderate. That doesn’t matter. We forgive them. We like them while they’re winning.” In other words, endless winning creates people who only focus on what they have to do in order to keep winning, not on other people’s needs; and because the watching community enjoys victory, they keep enabling that culture of winning.

A culture of uninterrupted winning creates boys who think of

themselves as untouchable and entitled to whatever they want. Jeannette, a high school teacher who is blatantly disrespected by the players in her classroom, observes that “One of the plainest truths about both towns and individuals is that they usually don’t turn into what we tell them to be, but what they are told they are [...] Those boys have been told that they’re **bears**, winners, immortal. Hockey wants them that way. Needs them that way. [...] No one stops to think about how to switch [aggression] off when they leave the locker room. It’s easier to pin the blame on her” for not being able to control them.

This observation is confirmed by new players’ intoxicating experiences. After Amat’s first victory with the junior team, he’s swept up in the adulation of the town: “Amat bounces around between the hugs and pats on the back [...] and he hears the others singing louder because he does, because they want to feel that they’re participating in what he represents now. The rush lifts him up, his endorphins are bubbling, and afterward he will remember thinking: ‘How can anyone possibly experience this without thinking he’s a god?’” Amat has never been in the center of the town’s adoration before, so it stands out more starkly to him: being worshiped changes the way a person sees himself, and, presumably, the way he sees others.

Beartown’s winning-obsessed culture ultimately allows its boys and men to dehumanize others. Not long after Kevin Erdahl rapes Maya Andersson, Mr. Erdahl chooses not to ask about the scratches he sees on Kevin’s face—marks Maya left during the assault—and instead tells him, “And the final isn’t just about hockey. It’s about what sort of man you want to be. A man who goes out and grabs what he deserves, or one who stands in a corner waiting for someone to give it to him.” This message, which Kevin has heard all his life, confirms his belief that he’s expected to take what he wants—even unconsenting women—if he wants to be a real man. While the message ostensibly applies to hockey, Kevin never seems to be taught to distinguish between dominating on the ice and relating to others.

When Maya’s best friend, Ana, is the target of degrading insults from a neighbor, she “feels like pushing her neighbor up against the wall and telling him that the locker room where those boys sit telling their stupid jokes ends up preserving them like a tin can. It makes them mature more slowly [...] so they learn that hockey only belongs to them, and their coaches teach them that girls are a ‘distraction.’ So they learn that girls only exist for fucking. She wants to point out how all the old men in this town praise them for ‘fighting’ and ‘not backing down,’ but not one single person tells them that when a girl says no, it means NO.” Ana identifies the heart of the problem with Beartown’s culture—it doesn’t teach its boys a healthy respect for women; in fact, it doesn’t really have a place for women at all. Until that changes, Beartown’s culture will tacitly encourage even more dehumanization of the kind that Maya and Ana experience.

At one point, General Manager Peter Andersson thinks about

the Beartown Hockey Club's motto: "Culture, Values, Community." Sune had once taught him that "Culture is as much about what we encourage as what we permit." Sune's instincts about Beartown's obsession with winning turn out to be exactly right. The culture of winning has encouraged players to view other people, especially women, as prizes to be conquered, not as fellow human beings to be respected.



PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Beartown is filled with stories of parents and children—stories of love, loss, disappointment, and failure. Even parents' best intentions for their

children can end up causing harm, both to their children and to others. Some of the deepest anguish in the story comes when parents face their failures to protect their children—not only do they usually fall short, but their efforts backfire. On the other hand, parents who encourage their children to break harmful patterns and become better people often see more hopeful outcomes. Through various stories of the struggles of parenthood, Backman argues that while overprotective, defensive parenting often sets up children for failure, encouraging children to take risks to better themselves often benefits both children and their communities.

Parents try to protect their children, but this often ends up hurting them more in the long run. Having grown up in the shadow of her older brother's death, Maya carries the burden of trying to protect her parents from pain—even trying to shield and comfort them after she has been raped: "Even then, in the police station in Hed, she knew she would survive this. Even then she knew that her mom and dad wouldn't. Parents don't heal. [...] And she could see in her parents' eyes how the story made the same terrible sentence echo through them, over and over again. [...] 'We can't protect our children.'" Paradoxically, the Anderssons' efforts to protect their children end up costing Maya dearly, as she feels responsible for protecting them from their own failure. This suggests that fixating on protecting one's children can actually end up harming those children.

In a far more sinister way, Kevin Erdahl's father tries to protect his son from the consequences of his actions, thereby enabling his son's own entitlement. After a hockey victory, Mr. Erdahl tells Kevin, "People in this town are going to try to stick to you more than usual now, Kevin, so you need to remember that viruses make you sick. You need to be immune to them. And the final isn't just about hockey. It's about what sort of man you want to be. A man who goes out and grabs what he deserves, or one who stands in a corner waiting for someone to give it to him." The result of Erdahl's efforts is to help nurture an entitled attitude in Kevin, who thinks he's above the rest of the town and "deserves" to use others as he likes.

By contrast, other parents in Beartown encourage their children to become better people, even when doing so comes at great cost. After Amat explains to his mother, Fatima, that Mr.

Erdahl has offered to provide her a better job in exchange for Amat's silence about Kevin's rape of Maya, she tells him: "I don't need a man to drive me in a big car to the rink each morning, and I don't need a man to give me a new job that I don't want. [...] I only need one man: my son. And you're not alone. You've never been alone. You just need to be better at choosing the company you keep." Fatima's words spur Amat to reject his teammates' demand that he fall in line and support Kevin. Instead, he eventually stands up to them and tells the truth about what happened to Maya, even when he's physically attacked and ostracized for it. In other words, Amat, like Kevin, becomes the man that his parent expects him to be—but unlike Kevin, he becomes a true leader instead of a predator.

The importance of teaching one's children to aspire to better things is also illustrated near the end of the book when Tails, a major hockey team sponsor, hears his son making a joke about rape: "Tails doesn't remember exactly what happened after that. [...] he lies there hugging his son. They're both crying, one out of fear and the other out of shame. 'You can't become that sort of man [...] you need to be better than me...' Tails repeats, over and over again, in his son's ear, without letting go of him." This scene also contrasts with Kevin Erdahl and his father. Backman suggests that, even though Tails's intervention in his son's behavior is awkward and shame-filled, it doesn't come too late; unlike Erdahl, Tails actually demands better of his son than the example he himself has set, giving his son—unlike Kevin—a chance to rise above the town's culture.

These are just a few of Beartown's many stories of parenthood; Backman also explores Kira Andersson's guilt about being a working mother, Benji Ovich's grief over his father's suicide, the fatherly dynamic between David and his hockey team, and many others. Each of these stories portrays parenthood as a complex, risky endeavor that doesn't just affect isolated family units, but also has repercussions for entire communities.



LOYALTY AND BELONGING

In *Beartown*, the youth hockey team's success revives a sense of community cohesion and loyalty for the first time in decades. However, this cohesion is shattered after Kevin Erdahl assaults Maya Andersson, leading people to quickly turn against one another—and most of them turn against Maya, blaming her instead of her attacker. By showing how this division plays out both in town politics and within individual relationships, Backman argues that loyalty can be a dangerous thing, and that it often has a damaging effect on those who cannot conform to group norms.

Beartown's hockey culture requires total loyalty, as well as rejection of anyone who does not conform. After Kevin's assault of Maya takes place, the town quickly splinters into divided loyalties. "The easiest way to unite a group isn't through love, because love is hard. It makes demands. Hate is simple. So

the first thing that happens in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that's easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. [...] [W]e dehumanize our enemy." In other words, hate is a simplistic, reductive form of belonging that depends on a neat division between people, and on ostracizing those who won't or can't belong. Maya ends up being dehumanized and scapegoated by most of the Beartown community, because believing her story would require them to question the norms of the town's hockey culture—which would shatter the basis for town unity.

Ultimately, Peter Andersson, Maya's father and General Manager of the hockey club, sees through the problems created by the town's idolization of hockey and must confront that hypocrisy in himself, too. When his wife, Kira, reminds him of a time when he rejected police intervention in a violent incident, he thinks: "[He] didn't want to say what he really felt: that he didn't think what had happened in the players' tunnel should have been reported to the police either. Not because he liked violence, and not because he was in any way trying to defend what the player had done, but because he wanted hockey to solve hockey's problems. Inside the bubble. [...] Now he's no longer sure he can even convince himself [of that position]. And he doesn't know what that says about him." In the aftermath of the assault committed against his daughter, Peter has to come to terms with his role in supporting the culture that allows such things—a "bubble" that tries to solve its own problems. Insiders aren't held accountable, and any victims outside the bubble—like his own daughter—are subject to the wrath of those inside.

The demands of Beartown culture are enacted on the level of individual friendships, too. When Amat's old friend Zacharias is bullied and Amat's new hockey teammate, Bobo, intervenes, it leads to a crisis in Amat and Zacharias's friendship: "'Everyone on the team always sits at the same table. Come and find us,' Bobo interrupts, then disappears. [...] When [Amat] turns around Zacharias has already taken his jacket and bag from his locker and is heading for the exit. 'What the hell, Zach? Wait! Come on, he HELPED you!' Zacharias stops but doesn't turn around. He refuses to let Amat see his tears when he says: 'No, he helped you. So run along, big shot. Your new team is waiting for you.'" As an elite hockey player, Amat has reached a new tier of social belonging that's unattainable to Zacharias, creating an unbridgeable chasm between them. In other words, Amat learns that in Beartown, loyalties can't be divided; he can't be both an elite hockey player *and* Zacharias's friend.

Later, after Amat sees Kevin assaulting Maya, Amat is included in the team's bonding: "Amat doesn't understand why [they've stopped] until Kevin opens the trunk of the car. They've got beer, lights, skates, and hockey sticks in the back. [...] They play hockey on the lake that night, four boys, and everything feels simple. As if they were children. Amat is amazed at how straightforward it is. Staying silent in return for being allowed

to join in." Now, Amat is not only feeling pulled between different social worlds; he's feeling pressured to transfer his exclusive loyalty to his new team. However, it's more sinister than that; the price of inclusion is not just simple, childlike loyalty, but also complicity in upholding Kevin's untouchable status in Beartown.

Backman does show positive expressions of loyalty, too. Amat and Zacharias's friendship is restored by the end of the book; despite a brief estrangement, Maya and her best friend, Ana, are a shining example of lifelong loyalty; and other friends and family members faithfully support Maya, too. These relationships stand out all the more strongly, however, because of the stories of how loyalty can go horribly wrong.



RESISTANCE AND COURAGE

In *Beartown*, Backman comments: "There are few words that are harder to explain than 'loyalty.' It's always regarded as a positive characteristic, because a lot of people would say that many of the best things people do for each other occur precisely because of loyalty." However, loyalty often has a dark side, too, when those who aren't "loyal" become targets. Backman explores this dark side through the resistance and courage of several characters, especially Amat. Though he's marginalized and longs to be fully part of the community, Amat puts everything on the line in order to resist the culture of silence surrounding Kevin's assault of Maya. Through Amat's courage and the quiet ripple effect it starts, Backman argues that resistance of powerful norms is always costly for those with the courage to try, but that it can nonetheless lead to positive transformations on a large scale.

Resistance comes with a personal cost. At first, it looks as though Amat's longing to be a part of the community will be stronger than his desire to confront its dark side. After he's threatened by his teammates, he joins them at the community meeting where the hockey club's future is decided: "He goes to the rink. Joins his teammates. He may have left his wartorn country before he could talk, but he has never stopped being a refugee. Hockey is the only thing that has ever made him feel like part of a group. Normal. Good at something." Backman uses this scene to underscore the cost of Amat's resistance and heighten dramatic tension—the reader wonders if he'll capitulate to the team after all.

But then, Amat walks into the meeting and tells the entire town the truth: "My name is Amat. I saw what Kevin did to Maya. [...] I'm going to go to the police tomorrow, and they'll say I'm not a reliable witness. But I'm going to tell you everything now, everything that Kevin did, everything that I saw. And you won't ever forget it. You know that my eyes work better than anyone else's in here. Because that's the first thing you learn on the Beartown Ice Hockey Club, isn't it? 'You can't teach that way of seeing. That's something you're born with.'" Amat's words

suggest that, ironically, his status as a born “outsider” allows him to see more clearly things to which other townspeople remain willfully blind. Amat’s speech also indicates that such resistance to the group mentality is costly, often requiring a person to sacrifice what little social capital they have for the sake of a higher principle.

Yet the courage displayed through such resistance often has ripple effects, even if those effects can’t be foreseen at the time. Predictably, after the town meeting, Amat faces consequences. “The only problem [with loyalty] is that many of the very worst things we do to each other occur because of the same thing. [...] [The team’s] hate now isn’t about what they believe Kevin has or hasn’t done. It’s about Amat going against the team. They’re an army, and they need an enemy.” Because Amat has refused to assimilate to the team culture, the team turns on him, showing up at his house to beat him up. At this point, it looks as if the outcome will be that Amat’s solitary resistance is thoroughly crushed. Just when it looks as though Amat is going to have to face the team’s hatred alone, however, someone else displays courage at the last minute. Although his teammate Bobo had bullied Amat when he first joined the team, he ends up rising to his defense. “All his life Bobo has wanted just one thing: to be allowed to belong to something. [His teammate Lyt] shouts and shoves Bobo, presses his index finger to his forehead, and even from the window his mother can read the word ‘betrayal’ on his lips. The young men pull their hoods over their heads, mask themselves with their scarves, disappear among the trees. [He] is left standing there alone, until he changes his mind.” Though it initially looks as if Bobo has decided to join the mob, he quickly turns on them and defends Amat until they’re both bruised and bleeding. The two become unlikely friends and seeds of a new Beartown team later on. Amat and Bobo’s friendship illustrates how one act of resistance like Amat’s can crack even a seemingly unshakeable façade.

By the end of the book, big changes are coming to Beartown—residents even start a girls’ hockey team, the first time many girls in the town can feel included in the town’s hockey culture on their own terms. Though Amat didn’t knowingly set out to bring about such things, his actions make unprecedented changes conceivable. This reinforces Backman’s point that individual acts of resistance can have broadly transformative effects.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BEARS

Bears are a multifaceted symbol in *Beartown*. On the one hand, they represent the small, hardscrabble town’s resilience and determination despite a declining economy. Because hockey is the town’s pride and joy, young players who show promise are said to “have the bear in them”—a fierce work ethic and a refusal to accept anything less than victory. On the other hand, there’s also a darker side to the “bear” ferocity. This is seen most glaringly when hockey star Kevin Erdahl refuses to hear “no” from Maya Andersson and sexually assaults her; then, when Maya reveals what Kevin did, most of the town turns against her. It’s also apparent in the violence of The Pack, a group of angry young fans who physically intimidate other teams and anyone else who threatens the Bears’ dominance. Overall, bears represent the idea of immense strength that, if unchecked, can turn toxic and dangerous.



CHERRY BLOSSOMS

The smell of cherry blossoms symbolizes the surprising emergence of rare talent. Veteran hockey coach Sune claims he can smell cherry blossoms—a scent one would not normally expect in the midst of a Swedish winter—the first time he sees a player of phenomenal talent on the ice. This exclusive roster has included Peter Andersson, Kevin Erdahl, Amat, and the little girl who starts playing hockey at the end of the book.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Beartown* published in 2017.

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● All the love this town could thaw out was passed down and still seems to end up devoted to [hockey]: ice and boards, red and blue lines, sticks and pucks and every ounce of determination and power in young bodies hurtling at full speed into the corners in the hunt for those pucks. The stands are packed every weekend, year after year, even though the team’s achievements have collapsed in line with the town’s economy. And perhaps that’s why— because everyone hopes that when the team’s fortunes improve again, the rest of the town will get pulled up with it. [...] So they’ve coached their junior team with the same values their forebears used to construct their community: work hard, take the knocks, don’t complain, keep your mouth shut, and show the bastards in the big cities where we’re from.

Related Characters: Kevin Erdahl, Maya Andersson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces the novel's setting: a fictional Swedish community called Beartown. Generations ago, the townspeople formed a hockey club, but in the intervening decades, both the town's prosperity and the club's position in the hockey standings have collapsed. This description captures Backman's ambivalence toward Beartown's hockey culture throughout the book. On one hand, hockey has instilled values of diligence, persistence, and pride in its players, and in turn has granted the town itself a self-respect belying its backwoods reputation. Yet, at the same time, hockey's all-consuming demands have allowed a culture of silence to crystallize in the town. Because hockey is viewed as Beartown's primary identity, anything that threatens that identity becomes a target. This becomes especially clear when star player Kevin's arrest for sexual assault causes the town to reject his victim, Maya, instead of Kevin. Until characters break the silence by beginning to speak up about the dark side of hockey culture, anyone who is perceived as a threat to the team's success will also be targeted as a threat to Beartown itself and be ostracized accordingly.

Chapter 4 Quotes

 His mom always says they must be grateful, the pair of them, and he understands her. No one is more grateful than her, toward this country, this town, these people, and this club, toward the council, their neighbors, her employer. Grateful, grateful, grateful. That's the role of mothers. But the role of children is to dream. So her son dreams that his mother will one day be able to walk into a room without having to apologize.

He blinks the sweat from his eyes, adjusts his helmet, and pushes his skates into the ice. One more time. One more time. One more time.

Related Characters: Fatima, Amat

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

15-year-old Amat and his mother, Fatima, emigrated from an unnamed, war-torn country when Amat was a little boy.

Fatima got a job as a cleaner at the Beartown hockey rink, where Amat trains. Their situation is one of the novel's many examples of a parent-child dynamic. While Fatima pours herself into securing a better future for Amat and is grateful for every good thing in their new life, Amat sees that his mother doesn't really have an equal social status here and longs for better things for them both. So, for him, hockey is not just a vehicle for personal success, as it is for a character like Kevin (whose wealthy parents provide everything possible to make him a star); it's also something Amat leverages in order to find belonging in Beartown society, and to get something better for Fatima. This quote also illustrates another side of Beartown's hockey culture. While it can have a stifling effect on anyone who doesn't fit in, it can also bring out the best qualities in people and offer them a way to broaden their horizons. Amat's relentless training eventually leads to a chance to join the junior team a year early, which puts him on a path to professional hockey and the ability to provide for his mother.

Chapter 5 Quotes

 Sooner or later any sports team has to decide what it really wants to achieve, and Beartown is no longer content merely to play. They'll replace Sune with the coach of the junior team, for one simple reason; when Sune talks to his players before matches, he gives long speeches about them playing with their hearts. When the junior team coach stands in the locker room, he says just one word: "Win." And the juniors win. They've done nothing else for ten years. It's just that Sune is no longer sure that's all a hockey team should consist of: boys who never lose.

Related Characters: David, Sune

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up one of the book's major tensions—the difference in coaching philosophy between A-team coach Sune, who doesn't make winning his top priority, and junior team coach David, who pushes his players to win no matter the cost. Because of this difference, Sune is viewed as antiquated and is about to be pushed into retirement, while David is poised to take over as coach of the A-team. Sune's doubts—whether a hockey team “should consist of [...] boys who never lose”—foreshadow the larger crisis the hockey team will face in the novel, as Kevin Erdahl's actions, and his teammates' and the town's reactions, show what happens to one's character when “winning” is all that matters. Thus, the

conflict between Sune and David is a microcosm of the battle for the soul of Beartown as a whole. Backman explores this conflict by asking who the losers are when winning becomes paramount, and what such an attitude costs the community as a whole.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ It's only a game. It only resolves tiny, insignificant things. Such as who gets validation. Who gets listened to. It allocates power and draws boundaries and turns some people into stars and others into spectators. That's all.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Beartown's complicated relationship with hockey. On the one hand, it really is just a popular pastime for a small, rural community without much else to distinguish it. On the other hand, hockey also functions in Beartown in much more complex—and even dysfunctional—ways. Because hockey is so central to the town's identity and even its economic success, human beings' value begins to be assessed in hockey terms, too. For example, on a relatively minor level, Amat's emergence as a star player leaves his best friend, Zacharias, behind socially, since Zacharias is simply not good enough to continue climbing the town's sports hierarchy. Likewise, Peter Andersson became an NHL star while his equally talented former teammate, Robbie Holts, burned out early and had to resort to factory work. But, most centrally to the book, Kevin Erdahl's star status means that he gets listened to and validated even after he rapes Maya Andersson. Because Maya's accusation threatens Kevin's status, it's seen as threatening Beartown as a whole, leading people to disregard and even dehumanize her. Thus Backman's line, "It only resolves tiny, insignificant things," is ironic. Hockey might be just a game, but its effects on people's lives are profound.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛ One of the plainest truths about both towns and individuals is that they usually don't turn into what we tell them to be, but what they are told they are. The teacher has always been told she's too young for this. Too attractive. That they won't respect her. Those boys have been told that they're bears, winners, immortal.

Hockey wants them that way. Needs them that way. Their coach teaches them to go hard into close combat on the ice. No one stops to think about how to switch that attitude off when they leave the locker room. It's easier to pin the blame on her: She's too young. Too attractive. Too easily offended. Too difficult to respect.

Related Characters: Jeannette

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

This quote captures the reflections of Jeannette, a teacher in Beartown's high school who has several hockey players in her class. The hockey players speak disrespectfully to her, and Jeannette has trouble commanding their respect in the classroom. In large part, Jeannette thinks, this is a product of the way the hockey players are raised—the culture that creates and encourages them. Elite players' lives revolve around their sport, which means that they're constantly encouraged in aggressive, self-centered attitudes and seldom taught to temper those attitudes in other environments. The end result is that the boys expect other people to accommodate and even celebrate them, and if that causes problems, it's other people's fault, not theirs or their sport's. Jeannette is one example of someone who's disadvantaged by this "bear" spirit that the town's hockey culture creates, but she isn't the only one. Her encounter with the insolent boys in a way anticipates the much more consequential encounter between Kevin and Maya, wherein Kevin doesn't accept opposition to his wishes. Indeed, it seems that the losers in Beartown culture are very often women.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞☞ Sune was like Beartown: a firm adherent of the old faith that no tree should grow too tall, naively convinced that hard work was enough. That's why the club has collapsed at the same rate that unemployment in the town has rocketed. Good workers aren't enough on their own, someone needs to have big ideas as well. Collectives only work if they're built around stars.

There are plenty of men in this club who think that everything in hockey "should be the way it's always been." Whenever he hears that, David feels like rolling himself up in a carpet and screaming until his vocal cords give out. As if hockey has ever been constant! When it was invented you weren't even allowed to pass the puck forward, and two generations ago everyone played without a helmet. Hockey is like every other living organism: it has to adapt and evolve, or else it will die.

Related Characters: David, Sune

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

This quote summarizes the differing attitudes of veteran A-team coach, Sune, and his younger counterpart, David, who coaches the youth team. Because this part of the story reflects David's perspective, the quote also represents a somewhat cynical take on Sune's philosophy of coaching. In short, Sune favors letting players develop alongside their peers, putting team above individual, and avoiding promoting young players to higher levels too quickly, lest they burn out. David, on the other hand, believes that teams must be anchored by star centerpieces, like the youth team's Kevin Erdahl. He sees Sune's attitude as a reflection of the fortunes of the dying down—both lack ambition and willingness to innovate. He believes that his own view, by contrast, is in keeping with the progressions in norms, rules, and techniques that hockey has witnessed over the years. The question David doesn't ask is whether his commitment to quickly advancing players and building "stars" is truly progress—he takes for granted that this is the case, but doesn't consider the resulting costs to the sport and its players. The novel's events suggest that these costs may be substantial.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞☞ There's a constant threat of violence hidden just beneath the surface of a certain type of person in this town that Peter never noticed when he was growing up, but which struck him all the more plainly after he came home from Canada. Neither hockey nor school nor the economy ever managed to find a way out for these people, and they emanate a silent fury. They're known as "the Pack" now, even if no one ever hears them say that themselves. [...] The Pack has scared their opponents away from coming to Beartown, but sadly the same thing applies to sponsors. The twentysomething men at the Bearskin have become the most conservative people in town: they don't want a modern Beartown, because they know that a modern Beartown won't want them.

Related Characters: The Pack, Peter Andersson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

This quote contains Peter's observations about "The Pack"—young, down-on-their-luck Beartown men and hockey fans who congregate at the Bearskin pub. These men are often underemployed and without many social bonds besides their shared love of hockey, so they throw themselves into fierce, even violent, support of their team—intimidating opposing teams, underperforming players, or investigative reporters who ask unwelcome questions. These tactics reflect the men's broader sense of social dislocation. Beartown's suffering economy has no place for them anymore, and they lack the means to carve out a better situation for themselves, or any outlet for their anger at being left behind. They also fear that if Beartown's economy modernizes, they'll still be stuck in the past. So neither the stagnant present nor the possibility of future change offers them much hope. The Pack's situation therefore reflects the novel's theme of community breakdown, which often weighs heaviest on those who already lack power, as well as the theme of loyalty, which often displays a dark side in Beartown culture.

When the kids were little she saw so many other parents lose control in the stands at the rink, and she couldn't understand them, but now she does. The children's hobbies aren't only the children's hobbies— the parents put just as many hours into them, year after year, sacrificing so much, paying out such huge amounts of money, that their significance eats its way even into adult brains. They start to symbolize other things, compensating for or reinforcing the parents' own failures. Kira knows it sounds silly; she knows it's just a silly game in a silly sport, but deep down she's nervous too, as well as feeling nervous on behalf of Peter and the juniors and the club and the town today. Deep down she could also do with winning at something.

Related Characters: Kira Andersson, Peter Andersson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Kira reflects on Beartown's excessive, outwardly silly obsession with youth hockey. As someone who wasn't born in Beartown but rather married into the town's hockey elite, she is often able to make pointed observations about the town from a comparatively distant position. Here, she recognizes that hockey becomes a kind of stand-in for parents' own guilt—something Kira knows personally, since she never feels she's able to give enough in order to be wholly successful as either a parent or an attorney. Like other parents, she believes that a hockey victory would offer some validation of all she pours into her children, as well as relief from the gnawing guilt that nothing she does is enough. Kira's complicated attitude towards hockey is thus another example of the way hockey symbolizes larger community aspirations throughout Beartown. It's also an example of the complexity of parent-child relationships, as children's dreams sometimes become identified with or even eclipsed by their parents' dreams.

Chapter 17 Quotes

The storm of laughter from all the juniors makes the room shake. In the end even David smiles, and he'll think back to that moment many times afterward: whether a joke is always only a joke, whether that particular one went too far, whether there are different rules inside and outside a locker room, whether it's acceptable to cross the line in order to defuse tension and get rid of nerves before a game, or if he should have stopped Lars and intervened by saying something to the guys. But he does nothing. Just lets them all laugh. He'll think about that when he gets home and looks his girlfriend in the eye.

Related Characters: David's girlfriend, Bobo, Lars, David

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In the Bears' locker room before the big semifinal game, assistant coach Lars makes a crude joke at Bobo's expense. The joke implies that Bobo rapes women. It's an incredibly tense moment for the team, and the inappropriate joke is an occasion for them to finally release all the tension. Several times in the novel, Backman shows how such locker room "banter" serves as a vehicle for both inclusion and exclusion among the hockey players. Laughing as a team allows bonding, but the nature of many of the jokes objectifies those outside the team culture, and—like when David makes an anti-gay joke on another occasion—silences those among the team who don't conform to the image of the typical hockey player. Coach David's own ambivalence about the joke shows that his policy of keeping things inside a hockey "bubble" has implications for those outside—telling such jokes certainly shapes the way players look at others off the ice, as he's reminded when he feels discomfort in facing his girlfriend later.

Chapter 18 Quotes

Robbie Holts is standing alone in the street, hating himself. [...] It's a peculiar sort of angst, the one he lives with, knowing that you had the greatest moment in your life at the age of seventeen. While he was growing up everyone kept telling him he was going to turn professional, and he believed them so intensely that when he didn't make it, he took it to mean that everyone else had let him down, as if somehow it wasn't his own fault. He wakes up in the mornings with the feeling that someone has stolen a better life from him, an unbearable phantom pain between what he should have been and what he actually became. Bitterness can be corrosive; it can rewrite your memories as if it were scrubbing a crime scene clean, until in the end you only remember what suits you of its causes.

Related Characters: Robbie Holts

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Robbie Holts played hockey with Peter Andersson when they were growing up together in Beartown. In fact, his

coach had believed that Robbie's talent surpassed Peter's, and he was promoted to the professional team at a young age. Then, however, he quickly burned out, unable to maintain the necessary mental strength to keep up with the more mature players. Now in his forties, Robbie drinks to get through hockey games and is consumed with bitterness over the success he missed out on. This quote gives several insights into Beartown's culture. First, it illustrates the ruthlessness of hockey culture—the pro who falls short of expectations ends up no better off than the amateur who never had a shot at the professional team, and both lack other opportunities to fall back on in struggling Beartown. Second, it elevates youth, to the extent that one is thought to have reached his peak while he still has most of his life ahead of him—leading to feeling useless while one is still in mid-life, like Robbie. Finally, Backman hints that hockey culture creates a sense of entitlement—that after being idolized in his youth, Robbie felt that success was owed to him, and when he wasn't successful, he chose to dwell on bitterness about the past rather than seeking other avenues.

Chapter 19 Quotes

Amat bounces around between the hugs and pats on the back, and hears himself join in a shouted rendition of "WE ARE THE BEARS FROM BEARTOWN!" so loudly that his chest stings, and he hears the others singing louder because he does, because they want to feel that they're participating in what he represents now.

The rush lifts him up, his endorphins are bubbling, and afterward he will remember thinking: "How can anyone possibly experience this without thinking he's a god?"

Related Characters: Amat (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

After the Bears' semifinal victory, Amat's first game on the junior team, Amat experiences the adoration of the fans for the first time. Not only is Amat part of the town's most popular circle for the first time in his life, but the people of the town want to be associated with *him* because of his role as a victorious player. This quote shows the ambivalent nature of belonging, which Backman explores throughout

the book. For Amat, who wasn't born in Beartown and has never felt a part of its dominant culture, being the object of fans' adulation is an overwhelming experience—for the first time, he's seen and recognized as the talent he is. On the other hand, Amat's description of the endorphin rush he feels also hints at the darker side of such recognition. The somewhat artificial rush makes him feel godlike—a feeling that each hockey player must learn to cope with in his own way. Amat's natural perceptiveness, as well as his long experience as an outsider, helps him distance himself from the euphoria somewhat. For other players, who've experienced this kind of praise all their lives, the euphoria could fuel very different reactions. Backman suggests that this is what's behind some players' entitled and even destructive behavior, like Kevin's later in the story.

Chapter 27 Quotes

Even in Hed people recognize them, and they get slaps on the back and congratulations. After the movie, when Amat thinks they're on the way home, Lyt turns off the main road just after the Beartown sign. He stops by the lake. Amat doesn't understand why until Kevin opens the trunk of the car. They've got beer, lights, skates, and hockey sticks in the back. They put their woollen hats down to mark the goals.

They play hockey on the lake that night, four boys, and everything feels simple. As if they were children. Amat is amazed at how straightforward it is. Staying silent in return for being allowed to join in.

Related Characters: Kevin Erdahl, William Lyt, Amat

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

After the semifinal game and the events at Kevin's victory party, Amat's new teammates invite him along to see a movie in a nearby town. Then they play a game of hockey on the lake, recapturing the feeling of simplicity Amat remembers from when he was a young boy. But this feeling is deceptive. Amat witnessed Kevin's assault of Maya at the party the other day, and Kevin knows that. Amat realizes that this seemingly innocent team bonding activity has a more sinister purpose, too. Kevin is signaling that Amat can continue to feel included as long as he doesn't threaten team unity by saying anything about what he saw. This is quite calculated on Kevin's part—he knows that Amat has always felt like an outsider and relishes finally being an object of the town's respect and admiration. With moments

like this one, Kevin is wagering that Amat will place acceptance over speaking out. For a while, it works, as Amat weighs the cost of resisting the culture of silence surrounding Beartown hockey; but eventually, Amat is willing to break through the façade of innocence, at great cost to himself.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☝ Even then, in the police station in Hed, she knew she would survive this. Even then she knew that her mom and dad wouldn't. Parents don't heal. [...] There will be days when Maya is asked if she really understood the consequences, and she will nod yes, and of all the feelings inside her then, guilt will be the greatest. Because of the unimaginable cruelty she showed toward the people who loved her the most.

They sat there in the police station. She told them everything. And she could see in her parents' eyes how the story made the same terrible sentence echo through them, over and over again. The one every mom and every dad deep down most fear having to admit:

"We can't protect our children."

Related Characters: Isak Andersson, Kira Andersson, Peter Andersson, Maya Andersson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Maya's thoughts after telling her parents that Kevin has assaulted her. She quickly realizes that, even though she is the victim of the assault, her parents will have a much harder time accepting what's happened to her than she does. This is even more true for the Anderssons than for the average parents, because they lost their eldest child, their son Isak, to an unnamed illness while Maya herself was very young. Maya has grown up in the shadow of that tragedy and has always tried to shield her parents from further heartbreak as a result. Now that she's told them about the rape, she carries the additional weight of her parents' sorrow. The Anderssons' grief reflects Backman's argument that, though parents feel a natural instinct to protect their children, they eventually learn that such protection isn't fully possible. This quote also exemplifies Backman's point that, unfortunately, victims like Maya often end up carrying heavy burdens of guilt, and often display greater empathy than they receive.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☝ Hate can be a deeply stimulating emotion. The world becomes much easier to understand and much less terrifying if you divide everything and everyone into friends and enemies, we and they, good and evil. The easiest way to unite a group isn't through love, because love is hard. It makes demands. Hate is simple.

So the first thing that happens in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that's easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. The second thing that happens is that we seek out facts that confirm what we want to believe—comforting facts, ones that permit life to go on as normal. The third is that we dehumanize our enemy. There are many ways of doing that, but none is easier than taking her name away from her.

Related Characters: Kevin Erdahl, Maya Andersson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is written in the voice of an unidentified first-person narrator, which Backman sprinkles throughout his predominantly third-person narrative in order to offer commentary on the events in Beartown. In this case, he describes typical human reactions in the aftermath of a community-shattering event, such as a sexual assault. He argues that, rather than facing ugly truths about ourselves, we generally choose the easier path of dividing into tribes, telling ourselves the stories we want to hear, and objectifying those who complicate the narrative. That's what happens in Beartown, when most people side with Kevin Erdahl because the image of a clean-cut, innocent young man reflects more kindly on Beartown as a whole than the darker image of a young man who's capable of committing rape. The latter truth requires the town to confront difficult questions about the culture that helped nurture Kevin; it's much easier to scapegoat Maya instead. Backman also gives examples of characters who push back against hatred, such as Amat, Ramona, and even members of The Pack.

Chapter 38 Quotes

☛☛ She will always be this to them now: at best the girl who got raped, at worst the girl who lied. They will never let her be anyone but that. In every room, on every street, in the supermarket and at the rink, she will walk in like an explosive device. They will be scared to touch her, even the ones who believe her, because they don't want to risk getting hit by shrapnel when she detonates. They will back away in silence, turn in a different direction. They will wish that she would just disappear, that she had never been here. Not because they hate her, because they don't, not all of them: they don't all scrawl *BITCH* on her locker, they don't all rape her, they aren't all evil. But they're all silent. Because that's easier.

Related Characters: Kevin Erdahl, Maya Andersson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

After Maya reports Kevin, she insists on attending school as normal, fully expecting the rejection and scorn she's likely to receive. It's even worse than she expects: she's greeted by vandalism, public bullying, and conspicuous silence. Maya realizes that her choice to speak up has fundamentally altered people's perceptions of her. She's now seen not as an individual, not even as a victim to be supported, but as a threat to the community. That's why most people choose to stay silent, even if they believe she was telling the truth; publicly standing with Maya would place others, too, on the wrong side of the community divide. This illustrates the interplay between loyalty and resistance which Backman explores throughout the novel. On the one hand, loyalty can be a precious thing—like Ana's steadfast defense of Maya. On the other hand, loyalty can also mask hatred and cause anyone who's perceived as a threat to be ostracized. Resistance to this status quo requires courage, which characters like Amat display—willingly placing himself in reach of the “shrapnel” that's often aimed at those who speak the truth.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☛☛ “It's never your fault, is it? When are you going to admit that it isn't 'hockey' that raises these boys, it's YOU LOT? In every time and every place, I've come across men who blame their own stupidity on crap they themselves have invented. 'Religion causes wars,' 'guns kill people,' it's all the same old bullshit! [...] YOU'RE the problem! Religion doesn't fight, guns don't kill, and you need to be very fucking clear that hockey has never raped anyone! But do you know who do? Fight and kill and rape?”

Sune clears his throat. “Men?”

“MEN! It's always fucking men!”

Related Characters: Sune, Ramona (speaker), Kevin Erdahl

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

Ramona is the foul-mouthed, beloved proprietor of Beartown's pub, the Bearskin; the town reveres her as a kind of amateur psychologist who can see right through people's problems. After the ordeal with Kevin Erdahl, veteran coach Sune stops by for a chat and mentions that Kevin's actions were shameful, and that hockey will unfortunately bear the blame. Ramona penetrates his rhetoric with characteristic clarity and chews him out, arguing that this very attitude is the problem with Beartown. Her point is that the Kevin Erdahls of the sport can't be blamed on some disembodied entity called “hockey.” Rather, they're the product of a specific culture, perpetuated by specific people, like Sune himself. Until the men who raise young hockey players confront their complicity in the sexist and entitled culture they've helped sustain, then tragedies like Maya's rape will continue to happen. Sune, who is a self-aware character willing to acknowledge his own failings, appears to take Ramona's scolding to heart. At the end of the book, he helps build a girls' hockey team and even appoints Ramona to the board of the revamped hockey club.

●● Ana feels like pushing her neighbor up against the wall and telling him that the locker room where those boys sit telling their stupid jokes ends up preserving them like a tin can. It makes them mature more slowly, while some even go rotten inside. And they don't have any female friends, and there are no women's teams here, so they learn that hockey only belongs to them, and their coaches teach them that girls are a "distraction." So they learn that girls only exist for fucking. She wants to point out how all the old men in this town praise them for "fighting" and "not backing down," but not one single person tells them that when a girl says no, it means NO. And the problem with this town is not only that a boy raped a girl, but that everyone is pretending that he DIDN'T do it. So now all the other boys will think that what he did was okay.

Related Characters: Kevin Erdahl, Maya Andersson, Ana

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

After Ana gets back from a hunting trip with her father, a once-friendly neighbor spits scornfully at her. This leads Ana to rage silently about all that's broken and corrupt about Beartown's hockey culture. Because this occurs in the same chapter as Ramona's speech to Sune, it provides a corroboration of Ramona's argument from the point of view of a younger generation. It also supports Backman's point that communities choose to encourage certain kinds of behavior, even if they aren't always aware of the fact. In particular, Ana sees that Beartown hockey isolates athletes from healthy interactions with girls, and it teaches them that hockey is exclusively a boys' domain. On that basis, they grow up thinking of their relationships with girls in terms of the same kind of dominance they're expected to display in the hockey rink. And when the wider community becomes invested in supporting such a culture, it ends up harming victims like Maya even more—and ensuring that there will be more victims.

Chapter 43 Quotes

●● My name is Amat. I saw what Kevin did to Maya. I was drunk, I'm in love with her, and I'm telling you that straight so that you lying bastards don't have to say it behind my back when I walk out of here. Kevin Erdahl raped Maya Andersson. I'm going to go to the police tomorrow, and they'll say I'm not a reliable witness. But I'm going to tell you everything now, everything that Kevin did, everything that I saw. And you won't ever forget it. You know that my eyes work better than anyone else's in here. Because that's the first thing you learn on the Beartown Ice Hockey Club, isn't it? 'You can't teach that way of seeing. That's something you're born with.'

Related Characters: Amat (speaker), Fatima, Kevin Erdahl, Maya Andersson

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

Up until this point in the novel, most of the characters who've spoken out about injustices have been women, like Maya, Ramona, and Ana. But one of the most dramatic moments is when Amat—ostensibly joining his teammates in support of Kevin—instead marches into the town meeting and boldly tells everything he saw when he walked in on Kevin's assault of Maya. This is a costly choice for Amat, who's only recently made his big break on the junior hockey team, and with that breakthrough has found unprecedented acceptance and belonging among his peers and the town. He also knows that, by speaking up, he doesn't just risk his own reputation, but possibly ruins his chances to help his hardworking mom, Fatima, escape her back-breaking job. However, Fatima's quiet fortitude shines through in Amat's courageous speech, making this an illustration of perhaps the strongest parenting in a novel filled with a broad range of parent-child dynamics. It also shows that, while Amat's ability to "see" is one of his assets on the ice, it's also an aspect of his ethical character.

Chapter 44 Quotes

☛ Inside the house his dad is sitting with a newly opened bottle of whisky in front of him. They didn't get everything they wanted this evening, but they haven't lost either. Tomorrow their lawyer will start to prepare all the arguments why a drunk young man who is in love with the young woman is not a credible witness. Then Kevin will start playing for Hed Ice Hockey, taking his team with him, almost all the sponsors, and all their plans for life will be intact. One day very soon everyone around them will simply pretend that this has never happened. Because this family does not lose. Not even when they do.

Related Characters: Mr. Erdahl/Kevin's dad, Amat, Kevin Erdahl, Maya Andersson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 366

Explanation and Analysis

After the town meeting, Mr. Erdahl fails in his quest to oust Peter Andersson from the GM position, but he salvages a future for Kevin by ensuring that the professional hockey team will survive, albeit in neighboring Hed instead of in Beartown. The next day, the case against Kevin will be dropped, thanks to the Erdahls' expensive lawyers. Here, Mr. Erdahl assesses all that's happened, and it's clear that while some characters have been forced to rethink aspects of Beartown culture, the Erdahls continue to benefit from it; in fact, they're as untouchable as they ever were. Because of Kevin's financial privileges and his position as a valuable asset to the town, he really can carry on his life uninterrupted. This contrasts sharply with the disruption and trauma that will persist in Maya's and her family's life, showing once again how Beartown's culture favors certain people and tramples on those who get in the way. The line, "This family will not lose. Even when they do," shows how the Erdahls' obsession with perfection and winning governs their whole outlook on life; in fact, their position as established "winners" helps ensure that their winning trajectory can continue, making others the inevitable losers.

Chapter 50 Quotes

☛ None of them sees the first skate of the child who's the last one out. She's four years old, a scrawny little kid in gloves that are too big for her, with bruises everyone sees but nobody asks about. Her helmet slips down across her eyes, but the look in them is clear enough.

Adri and Sune come after her, ready to hold the girl up, until they realize that there's no need. The four boys at the center circle will build a new A-team next season, but that doesn't matter, because in ten years' time it won't be their names that make the people of this town stand taller.

And they'll all lie and say they were here and saw it happen. The first skate of the girl who will become the most talented player this club has ever seen. They'll all say they knew it even then.

Related Characters: Adri Ovich, Benjamin Ovich (Benji), Sune, Zacharias, Bobo, Amat

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 415

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the book, Sune, Benji's sister Adri, and remaining members of the Beartown hockey club establish a girls' hockey team for the first time. This represents a significant pushback against the town's longstanding, male-dominated hockey culture. Even though it's a forward-looking moment, the scene also recalls the experiences of several older characters. For example, when the legendary Peter Andersson started playing hockey, he, too, came from an abusive home, marked by "bruises everyone saw but nobody asked about." People's future eagerness to associate themselves with the little girl's origins also recalls Sune's "cherry blossom" moments of discovering talents like Peter, Kevin, and Amat. So it's a point of continuity between older generations and the one to come, also hinting at a more hopeful future for Beartown as a whole. It's no accident that the hockey players teaching the class, especially Amat and Zach, are those who've experienced some degree of outsider status in Beartown. Along with the little girl and others like her, they now occupy a pivotal role in transforming Beartown hockey.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

One late March evening, a teenager walks into the forest with a double-barreled shotgun, puts the gun to someone else's forehead, and pulls the trigger. This novel is "the story of how we got there."

Backman reveals the story's climax at the very beginning of the novel, but he doesn't provide any context, thereby creating suspense—all the reader knows is that the novel will involve a crisis between teenagers, presumably leading to someone getting killed.



CHAPTER 2

It's a Friday in early March. Everyone in Beartown, Sweden, anticipates tomorrow's hockey game—the junior team is playing in the semifinal of a national youth tournament. In most places, something like that wouldn't be so important, but Beartown is different.

The story rewinds to several weeks earlier. Youth hockey is a big deal in this small town; it's embedded in the culture of the place. From the beginning, Beartown is like a character in itself, and its relationship with hockey is established here as a key to the conflict in the novel.



The town wakes early; it's cold and snowing. Lines of tired people wait to clock in at the factory; commuters head for bigger towns beyond the forest. In the distance, everyone in town can hear a "bang-bang-bang."

There's immediately a sense that Beartown's economy is somewhat depressed, only able to sustain limited jobs. The mysterious, recurrent "bang" in the background becomes like a soundtrack for town life, though its source is kept hidden for now.



When 15-year-old Maya wakes up, she stays in bed, playing her guitar. Her guitar is her first love and what helps her put up with Beartown life. Her father, Peter, is the general manager of the town's hockey team, and although Maya hates hockey, she understands her father's passion, seeing hockey as "just a different instrument from hers." She figures that life in a hockey town is predictable, at least.

Maya is immediately presented as someone who resists being assimilated into the town culture, though she sympathizes with her father's passion. Her apparent dislike of hockey, along with her status as the GM's daughter, suggests a conflict between Maya and hockey culture that will persist throughout the book. The idea that life is "predictable" also creates an expectation that the town's sleepy predictability will be shockingly overturned.



Beartown is losing—jobs, houses, population, and even the hockey team. Four generations ago, factory workers built a hockey rink here. Even now, the stands are packed each weekend, as "everyone hopes that when the team's fortunes improve once again, the rest of the town will get pulled up with it."

Hockey is an enduring part of Beartown's heritage—so much so that it's become identified with the town's success or failure. This identification filters down into personal relationships, not just institutions, and helps explain the conflicts that occur later in the novel.



Accordingly, the town places its hope in its young people. The junior hockey team is coached with the same values upon which the town was built: “work hard, take the knocks, don’t complain [...] and show the bastards in the big cities where we’re from.”

Amat is almost 16. His tiny bedroom is covered with posters of NHL players, with the exception of a photo of himself playing hockey at age seven, and a handwritten prayer that a nurse had whispered to Amat’s mother, Fatima, after his birth. It’s said to be a prayer cherished by Mother Teresa, and one of its lines reads, “All the good you do today will be forgotten by others tomorrow. Do good anyway.” Amat is not as tall or as strong as the town’s other hockey players, but nobody moves as fast as he does. Hockey skates feel natural to him.

More than 20 years ago, Beartown’s A-team (a step above the junior team) was second-best in the country, which explains why the juniors’ impending semi-final is so important to the town. Beartown is dominated by a neighborhood of expensive lakeview houses, mostly the homes of business owners or those who commute to bigger towns. People in those other towns don’t understand how anyone could survive in a small forest community like Beartown. Many Beartown residents are wondering the same thing. But when they wake up to the sound of a “bang,” they smile.

CHAPTER 3

The “banging” comes from the Erdahl family garden. Kevin Erdahl is shooting pucks. At age seven, Kevin scored all the goals in his very first hockey game, but he missed his final shot and was inconsolable. Late that night, Kevin went missing, and the entire town searched for him. Eventually, they found him shooting pucks on the frozen lake, trying to master the angle he had missed in the game earlier that day. He was carried home, sobbing, with frostbite. The whole town recognized that Kevin “had the **bear** inside him. That sort of thing can’t be ignored.”

After that, Kevin’s parents had a small rink constructed in their garden. At 17, he’s now the most talented player the town has seen in decades. He knows that hockey demands his all, so he goes running in the forest early every morning, practices on his rink before and after school, and practices with both the junior team and the A-team. He’s already had offers to move and play for bigger teams, but he and his dad are Beartown men.

Ironically, the town’s investment in its young people—its hope for the future—is expressed in terms of the town’s founding values. The novel will explore whether some of these values are outdated, or at least whether they’ve become unbalanced aspects of the town culture, with distorting effects on the town as a whole.



Amat isn’t the typical Swedish hockey teen, in a number of ways—he wasn’t born in a traditional hockey-playing culture, he lacks the economic privileges of some of his teammates, and he’s small. And unlike some of the other players, his biggest off-ice influence is his single mother. The values Fatima teaches Amat—summed up in the Mother Teresa prayer—will contrast with the winning obsession that characterizes some of his teammates, and these values prepare Amat to resist that obsession in important ways.



Beartown has a history of excellence that it’s never been able to match in the years since its last championship trophy. Because of the town’s decline since then, the approaching final has been invested with much more significance. Most residents themselves lack much faith in their town.



The mysterious noise is the sound of Kevin Erdahl’s relentless hockey practice. Just as hockey has come to represent a revival of fortunes for Beartown, Kevin himself, as star of the team, embodies that hope of success. That’s what is meant by Kevin “having the bear inside him”—the bear symbolizes the unstoppable ferocity it takes to win. That symbolism, however, will take on a more complex meaning as the story goes on.



Kevin’s life has been defined by hockey, and the town and his parents have enabled and encouraged that. He is completely dedicated to his sport and devoted to the town. This also means that Kevin has never made room in his life for anything that doesn’t support his hockey goals or would pose a threat to victory.



If Beartown’s junior team wins the youth tournament, the politicians might build a hockey school here, which would attract more talent and sponsors. In turn, that could lead to an economic revival for the town—better roads, more businesses, more jobs. It would rejuvenate the town’s pride. Because of all that, Kevin bears “the weight of an entire community on his shoulders.”

On the opposite end of town from the wealthy houses on the Heights, there’s the Hollow, which sits on the edge of an old gravel pit and consists of apartment blocks. Fatima and Amat live there in a two-room apartment. Early every morning, they take the bus to the rink, where she works as a cleaner and Amat claims extra practice time.

If Amat works hard, he might make the junior team next year, from there advance to the A-team, and finally turn professional. His goal is to someday take his mom away from her cleaning job and away from Beartown. He doesn’t care about money—he just wants Fatima to be able to rest her aching back, and to no longer have to constantly add and subtract money in his head.

Each morning, Amat helps the rink’s elderly caretaker with chores and then has an hour to himself on the ice before the figure skaters arrive. It’s the best part of his day. Repeatedly, he charges back and forth across the ice, as fast as he can go. When she gets a chance, Fatima watches Amat while she works. To her, having moved from a place without snow, Amat’s talent is a “divine mystery.”

In a small house in the center of town, Peter Andersson gets ready for work. He’s barely slept, and he’s been sick twice. He knows his wife, Kira, doesn’t fully understand why grown men get so worked up about hockey. He’s tried to explain to her just how badly Beartown needs a win. She’d just kissed him and told him he’s an idiot, which Peter already knows.

CHAPTER 4

This early in the morning, the rink is almost empty, but the upstairs offices are filled with loud men’s voices. The club president sweats at his desk, messily eating a sandwich. From the outside, the president seems to be in charge. He appoints the general manager (Peter), who recruits players and hires coaches. In reality, the president answers to board members and sponsors—many of them major investors and employers in the district. Right now, all these men are gathered in the president’s office for an “unofficial” meeting, agreeing on one thing—who should be fired.

There’s much at stake in the coming final—a victory would have both tangible and intangible residents for everyone in Beartown. It’s a massive weight for a single person to carry, but no one in the town seems to question whether it’s appropriate to place those burdens on a 17-year-old, or to foster such a culture more generally.



Amat’s life couldn’t be more different from Kevin’s. He doesn’t have any of the built-in privileges that Kevin has. On the other hand, he doesn’t carry the excessive expectations, either.



Though Amat has some of the same goals that Kevin has, his motivations are quite different. For Amat, it’s not about winning for its own sake, but about supporting his mom and relieving her of her own burdens. This difference in motivations will produce very different characters as well.



Arguably, Amat has as much natural talent as Kevin does and works even harder, since he helps out at the rink before he practices. Fatima’s expectations are different from the Erdahls’, too. Amat’s talent is a “mystery,” so she receives it as a gift rather than a burden.



The location of the Anderssons’ house hints at the fact that they’ll be caught in the middle of the town later in the book. Peter is scared to death about what Beartown’s loss could mean for the town and, like Kevin, he carries a sense of responsibility for the town’s success.



The meeting in the president’s office is a visible representation of not just the complicated hierarchy within the Beartown hockey club, but also the various stakeholders throughout the town as a whole. The town’s economic wellbeing is invested in the sport. Every personnel decision, therefore, has implications for the town as a whole—and the pending decision appears to be taking place behind closed doors.



Peter Andersson grew up in Beartown and has occupied most of the hockey-related roles in the town, from promising youth player to NHL star. But right now he's just hunting for the keys to his Volvo. He keeps getting texts from the club president about the meeting. As GM, he does just about everything—besides his official duties, he helps out with rink maintenance and arranges team travel, too. He was hired for this job by Sune, his own youth coach and father figure. Sune had explained to him that as GM, it's Peter's role to pull together all the hockey club's stakeholders. To Kira, Peter explained that his job is to "make sure no one catches on fire" from Beartown's burning passion for hockey.

When Sune and Peter set the goal of rebuilding the junior hockey team to become the best in the country, many people laughed, but no one is laughing about that now. As the club president and the other men wait impatiently for Peter to arrive, some of them joke that Peter's wife probably has a more important meeting than him, and that maybe they should hire Kira instead—stilettos suit a GM better than slippers. They all laugh.

In his kitchen, Peter finds Maya's best friend, Ana. She's making a huge mess while preparing a smoothie. She greets him cheerfully and explains that she's spent the night again. Peter tries to look pleased about this while shouting for Kira again. Kira, meanwhile, moves through the house much more calmly and gracefully. She urges Maya toward the shower and says that she's fine with Ana staying here as long as Maya teaches her how to clean a kitchen. She hears Peter yelling as she slips the Volvo's keys into her pocket.

Fatima comes into the club president's office while the men are still laughing over the joke about stilettos. She apologizes, but nobody looks at her. When she finishes emptying the wastepaper bin, she briefly clutches her painful back, not wanting anyone to notice and tell Amat, who would only worry. Downstairs, on the ice, Amat races across the rink again and again. He appreciates his mother's gratitude for Beartown, but his job is to dream—he dreams that Fatima "will one day be able to walk into a room without having to apologize."

When Kira finally appears in the kitchen, Peter desperately asks her about the car keys. Kira explains that she's taking the Volvo to work while he takes the other car to the garage; her morning meeting at the law firm is more important than his meeting at the hockey club. They play rock-paper-scissors, Kira clearly cheats, and Peter can only yell in protest as she takes the keys and leaves.

Peter's past is strongly tied to Beartown's hockey culture, and his role as General Manager places him right in the center of Beartown's intertwined tensions. His position as a former hockey star and lynchpin of the town contrasts with his somewhat hapless domestic life—he's having trouble even getting out of the house in one piece. This brief scene hints at the way that hockey success doesn't actually guarantee life success, even though many people in the town act like it does.



Peter has been one of the architects of Beartown's culture of winning, having successfully transformed its hockey record. His involvement will have major repercussions later. But he's also the target of derision because of his wife's career success. Sexist jokes are evidently part of the hockey culture, too.



Kira has a much more collected and commanding presence in the Andersson home—she's more on top of things, more unflappable, and better positioned to get the upper hand than Peter is. The contrast between Peter and Kira is actually used as an example of a well-balanced household throughout the book, even though it's fodder for sexist mockery at the hockey club.



The men's ignoring of Fatima, especially on the heels of their sexist joke, underscores her lower status in Beartown; she is a nonentity in their eyes. Ironically, even now Amat is training to become one of the greatest assets to the team, and one of his personal goals—in contrast to the more narrowly ambitious dreams of a privileged kid like Kevin—is to free Fatima from toil.



Kira's and Peter's exchange, which Kira deftly wins, shows more of the dynamics of their marriage, and suggests that Peter is feeling generally taken advantage of lately, both at home and at work. It seems here that Kira displays more of the characteristic Beartown "winning" drive than Peter does.



Back at the club, the president assures the sponsors that Peter always does what's best for the club and won't disrupt the sponsors' plans. The president is confident that this is true even though Peter is going to be asked to fire his mentor, Sune.

The president takes for granted that he can get Peter to do what he wants to please the sponsors. This shows how many stakeholders are jockeying for power in Beartown hockey; it's clearly more than a game to the town.



CHAPTER 5

Sune is so old that nobody remembers his age. He is short and wide, with “the proportions of a snowman.” Outside the rink, he watches the men leaving from the president's meeting. He knows perfectly well what their plans are. He knows that Beartown's wealthy men want to leverage junior hockey into economic survival for the town. That makes the hockey club a “kingdom,” the site of a power struggle that has no place for Sune. He's poured his whole life into the club and isn't sure what he'll do without it.

Sune is more detached from Beartown hockey culture, and from his veteran perspective, he tends to assess it more soberly and wisely. He readily sees, for example, what hockey has come to represent for Beartown, and that his own methods won't help sustain that approach.



Sune understands that Beartown's club is no longer content to just play hockey. When Sune talks to his players before their games, he gives speeches about “playing with their hearts.” When the coach of the junior team, David, talks to his players before games, he simply says, “Win”—and that's what the junior team has been doing for 10 years. Sune, however, is worried that a hockey team should consist of more than “boys who never lose.”

Sune's worry about the hockey team turns out to be prophetic. He sees hockey as instrumental in shaping character; therefore it's important to be intentional about what kind of attitudes are encouraged in young players. If players are constantly encouraged to win, they'll begin to expect nothing else out of life, even off the ice.



In the car on the way to school, Ana and Maya joke around, while up front, 12-year-old Leo tunes them out. He asks his dad, Peter, if he will make it to watch him train today. Peter says he'll try, but that Kira definitely will. “Mom's always there,” Leo replies, and it feels like an accusation to Peter. Then Maya pleads with Peter to drop her off before they reach school; she doesn't want people to see her dad and start talking to her about tomorrow's hockey game.

Peter feels pulled between various obligations—he's not able to be there for Leo (who indeed stays in the background for much of the story), and he's also an obstacle to Maya's social life. Maya wants to stay out of the hockey limelight altogether—a chilling hint of what will come later.



Kira is driving away from Beartown, on her way to work. She knows she isn't the GM's wife that the town was expecting. She quickly stopped getting invited to club functions because when the club president made a sexist remark, she insulted him in kind. Kira still feels guilt about continuing her law career full time. While Kira always says what she means, Peter always worries about what people think. But she puts up with Beartown because she loves Peter, who loves hockey.

Kira doesn't fit the Beartown mold, and in many ways, she exemplifies the complexity of being an ambitious woman in such a culture. She loves her job and resents others' criticisms of her career, yet she longs for more time with her family; she genuinely loves and supports her husband, but doesn't fit into his world.



As Sune walks into the rink, he thinks about the “moments of magic” he’s experienced, when he witnessed the birth of great talents. He likens it to “seeing a **cherry tree** in bloom in a frozen garden.” The first talent was Peter Andersson, more than 40 years ago—he was a scrawny kid with bruises from his alcoholic father, and “hockey noticed him when no one else did.” The second talent was Kevin, about 10 years ago.

Sune also took notice of David, who, at 22, had been a struggling A-team player. Sune saw not a failed player, but a potentially brilliant coach. He started David with the seven-year-olds, and now David coaches the junior team. Sune reflects on the irony: the three men he “discovered” will be his downfall, with Peter firing him, David taking his job, and Kevin the living validation of both those decisions.

Amat remembers Sune talking to his skating class when Amat was only five, telling the little boys that, no matter what their backgrounds, everybody is equal on the ice, and that “desire always beats luck.” And Amat has greater desire than anyone. Hockey was “a way into society” for him and Fatima, and now, he intends for it to become “a way out.” So he keeps training, despite the pain and fatigue.

These days, Sune feels as if nothing about hockey can still surprise him. When he enters the rink, he chats with the caretaker and notices the boy skating furiously back and forth, repeatedly changing direction without any loss of momentum. The caretaker explains that it’s Amat, who’s here every day. Sune sits in the stands and watches him for a while. Later, the caretaker glances up into the stands and is startled to see Sune laughing. And there are tears in Sune’s eyes—he thinks he can smell **cherry blossom**.

CHAPTER 6

Amat leaves the ice, sweating heavily, without having noticed that Sune was sitting there. Sune can’t believe he’s missed the emergence of such a talent and blames this on his “old heart.” He fears that once Amat is discovered, the hockey club will push him for results too quickly. The reason Sune is being fired boils down to the fact that everyone wants Kevin Erdahl on the A-team already, but Sune refuses, believing that “it takes more than hormones to turn boys into men.” Kevin doesn’t have the maturity for such an opportunity yet.

For Sune, hockey is all about improbable, unpredictable moments. The elusive scent of cherry blossoms symbolizes this throughout the book. Such moments can’t be produced or managed, especially in a results-driven hockey club like Beartown’s. This further illustrates why Sune sticks out.



Sune has an eye for potential that most people lack. This ability to see ironically ends up being his own downfall—something that will also prove true of characters like Amat, who see and speak up when others don’t, even when doing so leads to harsh consequences for themselves.



It’s not surprising that Sune’s perspective would encourage young Amat (or that a coach like Sune would take the time to speak to five-year-olds). Amat’s position in Beartown continues to contrast him with figures like Kevin, who have a stake in maintaining their position atop society; Amat just wants a shot for himself and his mom.



Years after he first inspired the young Amat, Sune recognizes the boy’s potential for the first time—as unlikely as a cherry tree blossoming in the dead of a Swedish winter. The scene suggests that unnoticed background characters often have much more to offer than those who are front and center.



Sune feels protective of Amat, for reasons that will become even clearer later on, with the stories of characters like Robbie Holts. Pushing young players for results often tends to lead to burnout and bitterness. It requires a maturity that goes beyond mere technical ability, and such maturity can’t be forced.



Sune figures that it's his fault that Beartown is made up of "bad losers." He taught them the "club comes first" attitude, and the club is using it against him now. If he had allowed Kevin to play on the A-team, it would have probably saved his job. He wishes he were certain he had made the right choice. Maybe they're right that he's old and stubborn, he thinks.

Sune is a perceptive, self-aware character who's capable of seeing his own faults and limitations. Now he can see how emphasizing the collective over the individual is coming back to bite him, and he has the humility to wonder if he was necessarily right. This supports Backman's theme that team loyalty is often a double-edged sword.



David, Beartown's junior team coach, is frantically doing push-ups under his kitchen table. He's just spent the night watching old training and game videos. David is "a simple man to understand and an impossible man to live with." He grew up with no friends and no other interests besides hockey. Tomorrow's match will be the most important in David's life.

In contrast to the contemplative Sune, David is frenetic and obsessive, with tunnel vision for hockey and especially for winning. The contrast between David and Sune allows the reader to look for similar parallels between players (e.g., Kevin and Amat) and consider how these differing approaches shape young men.



David's players don't play elegant hockey. David focuses more on strategy and defense. More than anything, he cares about results. He doesn't care about making friends. As far as he's concerned, the key to being liked is to get to the top of the podium.

David's attitudes about the game further illustrate his differences from Sune. He's not much interested in the inherent beauty of the sport, but rather in achieving specific goals on the ice in order to win.



David understands that just because Kevin Erdahl is the best player doesn't mean he's the most important. On the video he sees Benjamin Ovich. Like David, Benji is prepared to do whatever's necessary to win. Benji lives with his mother in a row house at Beartown's far end. It always takes several tries for his mom to wake him in the morning. Benji's mom worries about him. He "cares too little about the future and frets too much about the past," a fighter with sad eyes and a wild heart. Benji's dad, Alan, had been just the same.

David's hockey philosophy does allow for some nuance; for example, he sees the importance of nurturing players besides the star. Though Benji has persistence in common with David, in other ways he's a contrast. He's talented and stubborn, but also sensitive and complicated, and like Amat, he's been primarily nurtured by a strong single mom.



As David brews his coffee for the day, he watches the video of Benji hitting a defender with his stick to stop him from overtaking Kevin on the ice. This leads to a ten-minute on-ice brawl. David isn't bothered by Benji's temperament; he loves it. You can't teach someone to defend and protect the way Benji protects Kevin.

David appreciates Benji's dogged loyalty and doesn't try to make him something he isn't. Benji isn't a naturally aggressive person, but he will do anything to protect those he cares about—when they need defending. This will become a key distinction later.



Once Benji has biked out of sight of his mom, he stops to smoke a joint. David often compliments Benji's calf muscles and balance on the ice, but Benji knows this is because he cycles through deep snow every day while high. Benji knows David would never throw him off the team for smoking pot, because Kevin is so important to the team—"Kevin is the jewel, Benji the insurance policy."

Benji is not a health-obsessed athlete in the mold of his friend Kevin; he clearly does things his own way. He also has a realistic knowledge of where he stands. His security on the team isn't because he's inherently indispensable, but rather because Kevin is. This relative lack of entitlement will be an ongoing contrast between him and Kevin.



At the rink, Sune looks at the banner hanging from the roof. It bears the club's motto: "Culture, Values, Community." He thinks that "culture" is a strange word to apply to hockey, because ultimately, the only "culture" anyone cares about is the culture of winning. And winners are aren't usually very likeable; they tend to be "obsessive and selfish and inconsiderate." But people keep forgiving winners. Sune goes back to his office. His belongings are already packed up; he plans to disappear quietly. After all, the team comes first.

Sune's insight about culture is key to the books themes. "Winning" really isn't much of a culture; it doesn't help cultivate better human beings. But it does give people the superficial outcome they want to see. Sune himself is a casualty of such an outlook. His ironic observation that the team comes first shows again that he's aware of the way his own teachings have led to his current predicament.



Benji goes to Kevin's house. Nobody remembers how they became best friends, but they're inseparable. When Kevin's mom answers the door, both she and Mr. Erdahl are talking on their phones. Benji thinks that Kevin is both the most and least spoiled kid he knows. Kevin eats specially catered meals each day on a precise nutrition plan, and no hockey player in Beartown has had his parents invest so much in his career. Yet Kevin's parents have almost never attended Kevin's games. They're not interested in hockey; they're interested in success.

In contrast to Benji's far less regimented life, every detail of Kevin's life is carefully designed to promote his success on the ice. And unlike other parents like Fatima or Peter, Mr. and Mrs. Erdahl don't care so much about Kevin's passions as they do about his being the best. The culture of winning, it seems, has defined the way the members of the Erdahl family interact with each other



As Benji passes through the perfect living room, he subtly messes up a couple of photos on the walls and the fringe on the rug. Behind him, Mrs. Erdahl automatically puts everything back the way it was. Outside, Benji sits down by Kevin's garden rink. After Kevin's parents leave, Benji smokes another joint and eventually falls asleep. Kevin, on the other hand, admits that he's "shitting himself" over the coming semifinal. He keeps mechanically slamming pucks into the goal.

Benji can't stand the sight of so much bland perfection, while Mrs. Erdahl obsessively maintains the façade—a clue to her discontentment, which becomes apparent much later. While Kevin is wired to put in the maximum effort at all times, Benji is content to get by on raw ability.



David finishes his push-ups and gets ready for work. But before he leaves the house, he runs into the bathroom and turns on the taps so that his girlfriend won't hear him vomiting.

For David, as for Peter, the stakes of the coming game are very high and deeply personal. Until this point, it hasn't been clear that David has a girlfriend, showing how much hockey eclipses everything personal in his life.



CHAPTER 7

Kevin goes to the bathroom at home because the bathrooms at school stress him out. Home is the only place where he knows how to be alone and relax. At school or at the rink, he's always part of a group, but at home, being alone feels natural. Benji is waiting for Kevin outside the house. Kevin wants to hug him, but his impulse control is too strong.

Kevin's life has a heavily performative aspect—among his peers, he has to maintain a certain façade. Benji is the only person he can truly be himself around, but even with him, Kevin is reluctant to show his feelings. Being part of a group—feeling that he's a possession of the town, in a way—is costly for him, even though it's a status that many covet.



At the high school, Amat catches up with his best friends Lifa and Zacharias. They bonded from an early age over the fact that they're not like everyone else. As they walk into school, chatting, a hockey player named Bobo knocks Zacharias's cap off his head, then shoves him to his knees. He tosses back some flippant insults that he forgets much more quickly than the three boys do. Amat worries that someday, Zacharias's anger is going to explode.

Kevin remembers a time in primary school when he got lost after a game and was beaten up by the older brothers of some players he'd defeated. Benji showed up and took on all three of the older bullies. Later, when they rejoined their teammates, they discovered that, even when David offered to stay behind by himself, the entire team had refused to leave until Kevin was found. Kevin has always known that his team wouldn't abandon him. Now, in the high school corridors, the entire team congregates around him and Benji. As they walk through the halls, Kevin is momentarily distracted when his eyes meet Maya's. When Maya sees Kevin, she almost shuts her hand in her locker. Ana teases her mercilessly about it.

Amat and Lifa try to calm Zacharias down. Lifa is resigned—he quit hockey when he was younger because he hated the locker-room “banter,” and was told that this was “his problem, not hockey's.” Amat and Zacharias still play. Amat tries to reassure Zach that when they're on the junior team next year, things will get better. Zacharias knows he's not good enough to get a place on the junior team. Amat seems to be the only one who doesn't realize he's soon to leave Zach behind.

When Amat sees Maya in the corridor, he forgets everything else. He greets Maya too loudly, and she disappears distractedly. Zacharias mocks him about the fact that he's loved Maya since they were children. He's right; Amat loves Maya even more than hockey.

CHAPTER 8

David arrives at the rink and goes into his office. He resumes studying videos of the opposing team. He realizes that what's missing from his team is speed. The junior team's first line consists of Kevin, Benji, and a strong, slow player named William Lyt. David has always been able to compensate for Lyt's weaknesses, but knows that may not suffice in the semifinal. He goes to the bathroom to throw up again.

In contrast to Kevin, Amat and his friends don't fit into the culture of the school whatsoever. In one way, this deepens the bond between the three of them; but, at the same time, the pressures of high school render those bonds unstable, as later events (also involving Bobo) will show.



In contrast to Amat and his friends, Kevin has been valued and protected by a large group of his peers ever since he was a little boy. He's always known that someone will have his back, and that he'll even be buffered from the consequences of his actions to a certain extent. Less popular and privileged students don't have the luxury of that time of loyalty and belonging.



The idea that something “isn't hockey's problem”—in this case, the atmosphere of locker room talk—will come up many times in the story. Hockey is the norm around which everyone and everything else is expected to unify and conform. That norm has the potential to splinter even the most loyal of friendships, even if Amat doesn't believe that yet.



Though Maya seems only interested in Kevin, Amat has a longstanding love for her, which will inevitably complicate the dynamic between the three of them. The fact that Amat loves her more than he loves hockey also shows that he's not obsessed with the sport the way some other players are.



David continues to obsess over the coming game, realizing that they don't currently have what it's going to take to win the semifinal.



Two doors down, Sune is watching the same clips over and over. Sune no longer sees hockey the same way David does; they come to the opposite conclusions about everything. They're both too attached to their own perspectives to relate to each other's ideas. As he watches the videos, though, Sune has to admit that David is right about the junior team's lagging pace. Sune has always been opposed to moving younger players up to older levels, but now, facing a likely loss, he wonders, "what are principles worth if you don't win?"

Robbie Holts is a little past 40, with a graying beard. He walks through town, waiting for the town pub, the Bearskin, to open. He was laid off from the factory awhile back. He goes into the supermarket and buys some low-strength beers, then gulps them down in the bathroom to tide him over until the pub opens. When he goes outside again, he can't avoid seeing the roof of the rink. It reminds him of the fact that, once, he was more promising than Kevin Erdahl, even better than Peter Andersson.

After Peter drops the kids off at school, he feels his nervousness more keenly. He hopes the junior team is too young and naïve to realize how big the stakes are tomorrow. He remembers his dad's scorn when his team fell short of winning the final when Peter was 20. Then, when Peter got his NHL contract and was heading to Canada, his dad told him he wasn't "anything special." Peter left in anger, and the two never reconciled before his father's death.

After Peter returned from Canada to become the hockey club's General Manager, he realized that "a hockey crowd knows no nuances, only heaven or hell." Before, he'd been a professional hockey star. Now, he's just the manager of a club that's falling down through the standings. But Peter has never stopped loving hockey, not since it provided a refuge for him from his drunken father at the age of four.

Robbie Holts watches Peter drive through town. He remembers that, when he and Peter were 17, Sune had insisted that Robbie wasn't ready to move up to the A-team. But the club's board and sponsors had insisted, and Robbie quickly discovered that he wasn't ready for the mental demands of playing on a higher level. By the second time the crowds booed him, he was beginning to drown his pain in alcohol. He started getting worse at hockey while Peter got better. When Peter joined the NHL, Robbie started work at the factory: "There are no alms in hockey."

Despite their philosophical differences, Sune and David are converging on this point. The recognition of the team's insufficient speed even causes Sune, already smarting over his imminent firing, to question one of his foundational principles; maybe his risk aversion isn't as wise as he's always thought. The fact that even level-headed Sune is tempted to prioritize winning over all else shows how pervasive the emphasis on winning is in Beartown.



The transition to Robbie Holts's story is an intentional move, because Robbie is a cautionary tale for moving a talented player up the ranks too quickly. He's someone who might have attained the stature of a Kevin or a Peter, yet he's all but forgotten in the town's eyes. The line between success and failure is thin and unforgiving.



For Peter, too, hockey is deeply personal. Even though, unlike Robbie, he reached the pinnacle of the sport—playing in North America's National Hockey League—he never felt fully approved of by his own father. Outward success, Peter's story makes clear, can't compensate for private wounds.



Though Peter has tasted success, he's acutely aware of its other side; the rest of the world doesn't see the sacrifice that goes into success, so it quickly dismisses those who fail. Peter has endured because he loves the sport itself; it's been a safe place for him, regardless of winning or losing. The phrasing relating hockey crowds to "heaven or hell" again shows that for people in places like Beartown, hockey has supplanted even powerful institutions like religion.



Robbie's situation parallels Kevin's current situation and the situation Amat will later face; in Robbie's case, moving up quickly ruined his chances at long-term success. Unlike Peter, who has continued to love hockey despite his waning fortunes, Robbie is left with just bitterness and regret. He couldn't handle the rejection of the fans and has never gotten over it. Robbie's experience explains Sune's hesitations in this area and emphasizes how ruthless the sport can be.



Sune writes four words on a Post-It note and waits until he hears David step out of his office. He prays that what he's about to do won't ruin another young boy's life. When David returns, he reads the note: "Amat. Boys' team. Fast!!!"

Despite his fears, Sune takes a risky step that will prove life-changing for Amat. Where a similar move proved ruinous for Robbie, it will allow Amat to shine—suggesting that one's response to success or failure has much to do with the character already present.



CHAPTER 9

Kira still counts her family members while they're sleeping. Her own mother had done the same. Kira doesn't mind her long commute to work because it feels like it transports her to a different world where hockey isn't everything. Even though she doesn't love hockey, she understands the love of the fight. From growing up in a big family and working in the family restaurant, she lacked the privileges of many of her fellow law students. She knows what it takes to fight to the top and to fear falling once you get there.

Kira is a fighter—a result of her upbringing, which was underprivileged and challenging in its own way. She has a fear of failure in common with other self-made characters like Mr. Erdahl, yet she is far less obsessed with success for its own sake; she enjoys the battle without forgetting its relevance to the rest of her life.



When Peter gets to the club president's office, his stomach is in knots. The president forthrightly informs him that David is going to be appointed as coach of the A-team. Peter tells the president that he doesn't think David is ready, looking around the office uncomfortably and hating the conflict. The president cites the sponsors' "investment" and the fact that David gets results; now David has the chance to build something bigger, "using the products of the junior team." Peter says, through gritted teeth, that the youth team is not a "factory" and that the players are not "products"—it's their job to "nurture human beings." He thinks David is already pushing the juniors too hard, but the president disagrees, saying that pressure is necessary for the players to shine.

Peter's conversation with the club president about David clearly brings out the central issues in the town's hockey culture—particularly attitudes toward the formation of young players' character. If they're "products," they can be readily manipulated for the sake of success; if they're human beings first, they require much more careful nurturing. In this attitude, Peter reflects his mentor, Sune. Unlike Kira, Peter hates fighting and isn't at his best under such pressure. Meanwhile, the club president doesn't seem to consider the possibility that excessive pressure could crush people instead of producing something beautiful.



Kira constantly feels like a bad mother. No matter how many times she hears them, she can't let Beartown's whispered remarks run off her back—like the ones about the fact that she has a full time job. But going to work feels liberating to Kira. She always feels like a fake as a parent, but she never feels that way at work. At work, if she does everything right, things generally go as planned. But even if she does everything right as a mother, bad things can still happen to her children.

Kira is haunted by past losses as a parent—there's always a fear that she's going to mess up irreparably. This helps explain her conflicted attitudes as a mother; she feels guilt about working full time, but she can also be herself at work in a way she doesn't feel free to do at home.



The club president wants Peter to break the news to Sune after the juniors' final game. If they lose the semifinal, then David won't get the job, since nobody cares if the juniors merely put up a good fight; only winning matters. Peter gets the silent message that if he doesn't comply with the club's wishes, he, too, is replaceable. Peter leaves the office, depressed about the fact that he seems to perpetually disappoint people.

Ironically, David's advancement hinges on the results-driven approach he's helped cultivate—he'll only be recognized if he wins. Peter feels like a perpetual loser in this environment, which shows how this ruthless culture can harm even its biggest stars.



As Kira gets to her office and looks at the framed photos of her family, she remembers the early years of her marriage. Peter had twice broken his foot and had to work his way back up from the farm team to the NHL. Six minutes into his fifth game, he'd fallen and not gotten back up. Nine operations later, a doctor told Kira that Peter would never be able to play again, because they were afraid to tell Peter directly. For a while, Peter had drifted aimlessly, unable to master the structures of day-to-day life.

Peter is grateful to see that Sune's office door is closed. He thinks about something Sune had once told him about team culture: "Culture is as much about what we encourage as what we permit." He looks at a team photo from the silver-medal season in his youth. Hardly a day goes by that Peter doesn't wonder how things might have been different if Robbie Holts had gone to the NHL instead of Peter. After his hockey career had failed in Canada, Kira had helped him see that the children were his "team" now. So he'd gotten a part-time job, and they'd made it work. Then, just as they'd gotten settled, they'd realized that something was wrong.

Peter remembers the night he met Kira. After they'd won silver, the team had gone out to dinner at a small, family-run restaurant. Kira was tending bar. Peter cried in front of her as he felt the shame of facing Beartown after a loss, and Kira made him laugh. Later, Kira told him that that's when she had fallen in love with him. She knew a man who worried about disappointing the people he loved would become a good father and would protect his family from anything.

Kira remembers how their family had collapsed after their eldest son, Isak, got sick and died. She'd been so happy to move back to Sweden and start over. They became as happy as it's possible for a grief-stricken family to be. But she still can't fully face the grief. And to this day, Peter wonders what he might have done differently to protect his family—if he had given up his talent or offered to change places with his son, might the boy's life have been spared?

Kira's memories provide some background for Peter's struggles—despite having attained NHL fame, he never got his career off the ground there. After he finally gave up playing, he faced the same challenge that most elite athletes ultimately face—how to find meaning and purpose in a life that's no longer structured around training and competition. When winning is the goal, Peter's story makes clear, there's little space left over for everyday life.



The argument that cultures "encourage" certain behaviors continues to resonate throughout the book. Peter is well aware that his own professional opportunities were somewhat arbitrary; under different circumstances, Robbie might have had a different outcome. This makes the entire edifice of hockey culture seem questionable.



Peter's reaction to a silver-medal win shows the immense pressure faced by athletes on his level; there's minimal margin for success, and ample opportunity for shame. As an outsider to hockey culture, Kira was able to see other potential outlets for Peter's loyalty and devotion. However, in family life as in hockey, Peter and Kira will discover that the line between success and failure is thin.



Until now, the tragedy in the Anderssons' past has only been alluded to. Isak's death, it now becomes clear, has overshadowed the family and limited their happiness. This event also explains some of Peter's persistent feeling of failure—there's no area of life in which he has been fully successful; his dreams have always been cut off at an early stage.



CHAPTER 10

There's something odd about kids who grow up in the shadow of a dead older sibling—they're either scared of everything or brave about everything. Maya is one of the latter. Lately, Maya has noticed that Ana has changed. She doesn't do their complicated secret handshake as loudly in public, for example. She thinks that Ana is trying more and more to smooth herself out and fit in with the crowd.

Kira feels that everything in her life is a compromise. She used to dream of a dramatic job in criminal law, but now most of her working life revolves around contracts, meetings, and emails. She knows she's overqualified, but this was the only job within commuting distance of Beartown.

Jeannette, a teacher in the high school, is trying to get the 17-year-old boys in her classroom to quiet down. They don't seem to notice she's there. She's always been told that her students won't respect her. Her hockey-playing students have always been told "that they're **bears**, winners, immortal." That's what they have to be in order to win on the ice. The problem, though, is that they're never taught to reconsider that perspective when they're in the classroom. It's easier to blame *her* for being an ineffective teacher.

Jeannette tries appealing to Kevin. He calls her "my lovely" in reply, sparking laughter from the other hockey players. Bobo takes the chance to yell, "Just calm down, sweet cheeks!" Before too long, the classroom has descended into a chant of "We are the **bears** from Beartown," with the hockey players standing bare-chested on their desks—except for Kevin, who's calmly staring at his phone.

Kira gets swept into meeting after meeting, then a series of texts and calls from her family—Leo needs a ride in the afternoon, Maya needs new guitar strings, and Peter will be home late. Then her boss needs Kira for to come to another meeting. Kira doesn't have time, but she goes anyway—she's trying to be "the right kind" of employee, even though she doesn't feel like she can be a good mom at the same time.

Maya's upbringing, in the knowledge of what her parents suffered, has had a tremendous influence on her, making her both fearless and protective of her parents. She has always admired her best friend's differentness, too, so Ana's recent attempts to fit in sadden Maya all the more. Cultures tend to value conformity in one way or another, and the pressures to conform are hard to resist, even for someone as unique as Ana.



Like Maya's friend Ana, Kira has always resisted compromise, but has nonetheless found that the demands of family life have required her to lower her standards. She's capable of more, but she must balance her aspirations with Peter's commitment to Beartown; again, hockey culture affects everyone, even those who don't personally care about it.



Jeannette, too, is expected to conform to Beartown's expectations—the hockey players are expected to dominate even in the classroom, and it's her problem if she can't adjust. Jeannette observes the problem with the "bear" mindset—that it will inevitably overflow into other areas of life, too.



The misogynistic banter of the hockey club easily permeates life outside the club, and hockey dominates everything else. Even Kevin's nonchalance signals that, to him, this is just the way life is supposed to be.



Like Jeannette and Ana, Kira is constantly pulled between ideal and reality, and there doesn't seem to be enough of her to meet everyone's expectations. She always has to choose between being an ideal employee or an ideal mom, and she seldom feels she's succeeded at either. Yet she assumes this is her problem, not the problem of the surrounding culture.



Maya met Ana when they were six years old. Maya had snuck out to go skating on the lake without an adult. After dusk fell, she skated onto thin ice and found herself in the water, clinging to the edge of the ice. Soon, Ana was pulling her out of the water—she never understood how it was possible. Ana was “a child of nature who [...] didn’t quite understand people,” and Maya was the opposite.

Maya soon came to understand that Ana “was on thin ice in ways all her own.” Ana’s parents were always fighting, and Ana began to spend more nights at the Anderssons’ house than at her own. Maya loves the way Ana is a “jagged, hundred-sided peg” who has always refused to fit into the community’s usual holes. When they were 10 years old, they used to practice shooting with a hunting rifle in the woods. Now Maya watches Ana trying to look “as normal as possible” and feels sad—“we become what we are told we are,” and Ana has always been told that she’s “wrong.”

Benji is sitting in the headmaster’s office, being told off for being late so often, but he knows there won’t be consequences, because he’s so vital to the team and thus to the school and the town. Then Jeannette comes into the office, enraged, and Benji teases her, calling her “sweet cheeks.” Jeannette raises her arm as if to punch Benji. The headmaster grabs her arm and hustles her into the hallway. Benji knows he should have been the one the headmaster grabbed.

CHAPTER 11

Lars, the coach of the boys’ team, doesn’t have a leadership style—he just yells. Amat fears that Lars will replace David as coach of the youth team next year, and that he’ll never be free of the man. A year ago, after the juniors snuck into the locker room and threw Amat’s clothes into the shower, he almost gave up hockey altogether. But Fatima told him, “You might be playing with **bears**. But that doesn’t mean you have to forget that you’re a lion.” Later that morning, Amat returned to the ice. He realized that he had to start thinking of hockey in his own way if he wanted to be better than the other players.

David believes that Sune’s view of hockey shows why Beartown has collapsed economically, too. Sune believes that hard work is sufficient, and that no single player should outshine the others too much. David believes that someone needs to stand out—“collectives only work if they’re built around stars.” Hockey is constantly changing, and it has to evolve with the times.

Maya’s and Ana’s friendship started because of a rescue. Each continually rescues the other in years to come, complementing one another as each of them, in her own way, fails to fit in to Beartown’s culture. Their close friendship shows how refusing to conform can actually be a source of strength.



Like Kira feeling like an inadequate mother, and Jeannette like an inadequate teacher, Ana has always heard the message that she’s the wrong kind of girl for Beartown; her assets are derided as failings. Yet Ana finds acceptance and stability in the Andersson home, partly because no one there feels they’re living up to expectations, either.



Even Benji, though he’s often more sensitive than his teammates, isn’t immune to the effects of being on the hockey team—he can get away with things nobody else can, and it sometimes leads him to look down on others. This comparatively innocuous moment also hints that the hockey culture has far worse effects on less sensitive boys.



Fatima teaches Amat to think of his difference not as a failing, but as a source of strength. Perhaps he can’t measure up to the “bear” culture, but he can surpass them in a completely different way. This shows Fatima’s strength as a parent as well as a major reason that Amat will stand out among his hockey peers; he’s always known he can’t fit in, and though that’s difficult, it also frees him to do what he thinks is right instead of conforming to others’ standards.



While David readily sees the trade-offs involved in Sune’s approach to hockey, he’s less perceptive regarding the problems with his own. He doesn’t consider the costs of elevating certain “stars” and assigning the rest of his players to a supportive, like-minded “collective.”



Whenever David comes home from an argument with Sune, his girlfriend teases him, “fallen out with daddy again?” It’s true that Sune taught David how to be a coach. Sune had hoped that his two proteges, David and Peter, would complement one another, but instead they hate each other. David has always been jealous of Sune’s relationship with Peter and has feared exclusion. So he rebelled against his teacher, eventually coming to realize that the players are more important than loyalty to Sune.

Zacharias has performed the worst in the boys’ team practice, so Lars makes him collect the pucks and cones. Amat helps him. After they’ve joked around a while, Amat nonchalantly asks if Zacharias wants to do something together that weekend. Zacharias wants to play video games, but soon realizes that Amat hopes to go out and run into Maya. He starts teasing Amat about his crush.

David argues with Lars outside the locker room. After Lars leaves, Amat and Zach approach, and Amat is surprised when David speaks to him. David offers Amat some shooting advice—he’s fast, but needs some work in other areas. Then he tells Amat to get a jersey, because he’s training with the juniors in 15 minutes. Zacharias hugs him fiercely after David walks away. In the locker room, Amat is met by a chorus of swearing, but David silences them without a word. Lars tosses Amat a stinking jersey, while Zacharias is left standing in the hallway.

CHAPTER 12

Kira knows that sometimes she makes Peter feel browbeaten, because she calls him so many times a day to check whether he’s done what she’s asked him to do. At the rink, Peter’s office is filled with LPs he’s ordered. He has the records delivered to the rink so that Kira won’t know how much online shopping he does. The records remind him of Isak.

Kira recalls a terrible snowstorm that hit when they hadn’t been living in Beartown for very long. The children were off school, and Peter took Maya and Leo to go tobogganing. Watching them go, Kira felt “bereft” and cried all the way to the office.

David’s approach to coaching seems, to a certain extent, to be rooted in his fear of exclusion. If he fears that Sune will never fully accept him—never bestow fatherly approval on him the way he does to Peter—then David will create his own community where he’s the sought-after father figure.



Amat and Zach have always had a tight bond; unbeknownst to them, it’s about to unravel, thanks partly to Amat’s preoccupation with Maya, as well as his superior hockey skill.



Straight from a scene in which Amat and Zach’s friendship appears to be unbreakable, Amat walks into a situation that offers him greater belonging than Zach will ever find. He’s quickly mocked by the junior players, but even so, he has access to another world while Zach is literally left standing beyond its boundaries. This shows once again just how much hockey overshadows relationships in Beartown and makes or breaks people’s fortunes.



Both Kira and Peter keep secrets from one another. As the coming chapter will reveal, each of them tries to find ways to cope with lingering grief without encroaching on the other. Part of their grief is the knowledge that they’ve already failed to be the parents they want to be, and they can never fix that.



Relatively fresh from the loss of Isak, Kira’s regret at leaving the family was especially raw—a poignant image of being pulled between her aspirations and her family.



While Peter was injured in Canada and Kira was at work, Peter found himself home alone with a sickly Isak one day. None of his rocking or home remedies soothed the baby, so finally, in desperation, he put on a record. The baby finally grew quiet and fell asleep in Peter's arms, making him feel like a good father for the last time ever. He's never told Kira about that, but he keeps secretly buying records.

That long-ago snowy day, Kira kept calling Peter. Uncharacteristically, he didn't answer. Panicked about the weather, she sped home from work, finally stopping where she'd last seen them in the woods and clawing desperately at the snow. Ten minutes later, Peter called her—they were safely at home, and his phone had not been charged. Much later, she realized that this had been a nervous breakdown. She's never told Peter about what happened that day. But that's why she sometimes calls him multiple times a day.

The juniors' locker room is quiet; the players are beginning to feel nervous about tomorrow's big game. William Lyt asks Kevin if he has any chewing tobacco. Kevin says that he doesn't. Later, when Benji asks the same, Kevin willingly fishes out a can of tobacco and gives it to Benji. When Lyt returns, he boasts about his family coming to the game and asks if Kevin's parents are coming, too. Benji picks up on Kevin's body language and intervenes with a joke, telling Lyt that his family is coming to watch *Kevin* play, not him.

Amat is doing his best to appear invisible. Eventually, though, Bobo crosses the locker room and towers over him, smiling. He mockingly scolds the other guys for littering the locker room with pieces of tape—it's not as if their mothers work there. He reminds them that it's *Amat's* mother who works there. Pretty soon, pieces of tape are raining down on Amat.

As the rest of the locker room empties, Kevin hangs back and asks Amat if he knows Maya—does she have a boyfriend? At last, reluctantly, Amat shakes his head. He trails the juniors out onto the ice. As they all stand at center ice, he thinks that he's going to prove himself to these guys no matter what.

Peter's memory of soothing Isak is the peak of good parenting in his mind; after that, he's never been able to reach the same level. Collecting records is a way of clinging to that memory and retaining a connection to it in some way, even though he knows he can never recapture it.



Kira has a similar memory that she conceals from Peter. Her tough exterior hides the fact that, under the surface, she's constantly fearful of losing her family. So she does illogical things like counting her kids at night and repeatedly calling for no reason; better to seem like she's nagging Peter than to reveal how frightened she really is. Their parallel experiences emphasize how frightening and isolating parenting can be.



Kevin and Benji's locker room dynamic illustrates, with very few words, how tight their bond is. Kevin clearly favors Benji over Lyt, and Benji knows that Kevin is sad about his parents' neglect without needing to hear him say it. Just as he does on the ice, he leaps to Kevin's defense. This scene shows the positive side of the close bonds that hockey can foster.



Bobo zeroes in on Amat as the one who doesn't belong. The fact that Amat is the cleaner's son is just one convenient target for mockery, out of the many ways—his size, his socioeconomic status, his origins—he differs from his teammates.



It's worth remembering that Maya is Amat's age, so Kevin's interest in her would be especially galling to Amat—as well as the fact that, at this moment of Amat's clearly not belonging to the group, Kevin touches such a raw nerve as Amat's love for Maya.



Sune sees Peter sitting in the stands during the juniors' practice and reflects that he's never told Peter that he loves him. He knows Peter is driven by the fear of disappointing everyone, of not being good enough as a father, a man, or a General Manager. He watches Peter watching the junior players he's spent the past 10 years nurturing. When Peter finally notices Amat's presence on the ice, he laughs with surprise. Seeing this, Sune feels both joyful and sad, and he returns to his office. Deep down, he knows, he's not indispensable, and the team will carry on without him.

Later, after Peter returns to his office, Fatima comes in to empty the trash cans. Peter is surprised to see her. He asks her if she's heard about Amat. He gently guides her back to the ice. When she realizes her boy is training with the junior team, she weeps with joy and stands tall despite her aching back.

Sune is the nurturing father that Peter never really had, though even Sune is reticent about expressing it. He finds joy in watching Peter make new discoveries and succeed as a coach, but—just like a biological father might—he finds that doing so also reminds him of his own decline and the fact that he's not vital to the team's future.



Since Peter didn't have much when he started playing hockey, he recognizes how much Amat's breakthrough will mean to Fatima. Unlike parents like Mr. Erdahl, Fatima's joy has nothing to do with success in its own right, but rather comes from seeing Amat enjoy opportunities he likely wouldn't have had elsewhere.



CHAPTER 13

The juniors are playing at 75%, so as not to risk injury before tomorrow's game. But Amat has to give it his all. The juniors look for every chance to hurt him, and he hears them laughing behind his back. David decides that Amat and Bobo should do some one-on-one. He knows Amat is exhausted from almost two back-to-back training sessions, but, after all, "no stars are born without others [...] being sacrificed."

David sets up a narrow line of cones, within which a defenseman and a forward must face off. The forward must try to get past the defenseman within the very limited space. This time, the line is so narrow that it's obvious that Amat doesn't stand a chance of not meeting Bobo head-on. Sure enough, Bobo knocks Amat down with all his weight. David gestures for them to do it again, while Lars roars at Amat to get up, and the teammates laugh. At one point, Bobo looks at Amat with something like genuine sympathy, and Amat realizes that David is using him as a sacrifice to build up team confidence. Bobo whispers to him to just stay on the ice, but Amat yells, "Again!" until Bobo relents and flattens him once more. Despite the fact that he's now dripping blood, Amat won't give up—how could they do anything worse to him than what they've already done? He charges at Bobo at full speed, but at the last second, he folds double, watches the angle of Bobo's skates, slips the puck and himself out of Bobo's reach at the last second, then shoots and scores a goal. He is "a lion among bears."

Amat's situation in this practice session is emblematic of his position within the community—where others can afford to hold back a bit, he lacks that luxury. And David has his own reasons for singling out Amat—since his "stars" come first, he needs to see that Amat is willing to give everything to support the team.



The confrontation between Bobo and Amat, while painful to watch, provides Amat with the chance to prove himself that he's been hungry for. While he could give up or ask for mercy, he knows he has nothing to lose by throwing himself unreservedly into the exercise. His gamble pays off. At the last moment, he uses his ability to see better than most to outmaneuver Bobo. In other words, he puts his lion-like qualities up against the bears, demonstrating how an alternative approach can be just as successful as a conventional one.



Bobo pursues Amat in “blind fury,” but Benji stops him. David decides to include Amat in tomorrow’s game. It takes Amat half an hour to stagger to the locker room, where he finds that his clothes have been thrown in the shower. Nevertheless, “it’s the best day of his life.”

Benji admires Amat’s fighting spirit, and David sees enough to convince him that Amat will be valuable to the team as a whole. Even though the team still humiliates Amat, by now it’s more like hazing, signaling that he’s part of the group, than outright mockery. It’s telling that even this painful kind of inclusion is still valuable enough to make this the “best day” of Amat’s life.



CHAPTER 14

Saturday has come, “and everything is going to happen today. All the very best, and all the very worst.” Maya wakes up feeling feverish and fighting a headache and thinks she ought to spend the day in bed.

These words forecast that Saturday is going to be a consequential day for Beartown as a whole, and especially for Maya—though, had she decided to stay in bed, things might have turned out very differently for everyone.



Peter drives to the garage owned by his childhood friend, Hog, with whom he’d once played hockey. Peter feels inadequate dropping off his wife’s car for another man to fix. Hog says that his son, Bobo, will fix the car. Peter starts to protest that Bobo should have a rest before today’s game, but then remembers that the economy is unavoidable. Plus, he knows that Bobo isn’t good enough to play professionally someday. Peter walks home to try to calm his nerves.

Peter’s inability to fix Kira’s car reminds him of the ways he feels like an unconventional husband. As much as Peter wants to spare Bobo any strain before the game, he knows that Bobo will probably have to make a different living someday. This shows that he’s capable of living outside the hockey bubble—and that some people have no choice but to do so. Hog’s insistence on Bobo’s help also shows that Bobo hasn’t been spoiled the way Kevin has been.



The Bearskin pub has belonged to Ramona’s family since her grandfather’s days. The only difference nowadays is that she smokes outside. The boys who frequent the pub in the evenings call Ramona “The Marlboro Mom.” She and Holger never had any children. Hockey was the big thing they shared. Then he got cancer and “he left her,” as she always puts it. Now she gets through the day with the company of “the boys,” who love Ramona and are all she’s got left of Holger. She still lives in the apartment above their pub, and the boys who work in the supermarket buy her food so that she doesn’t have to venture out. She never goes to hockey games.

Ramona is a pivotal figure in the novel because, in some ways, she fits in to hockey culture—her pub shelters a whole community of ruffian fans—while in other ways, she completely avoids contact with the town. She has enough distance from the hockey culture to be able to see its various hypocrisies and dysfunctions at work, which makes her a valuable critic later on. In this way, she’s similar to characters like Kira and Amat.



Ramona sees Peter approaching and asks him if he wants some whisky for his nerves. Peter likes Ramona, who never seems to change. Some people in Beartown don’t like that Ramona shelters the town’s thugs and think that she’s antisocial, but she is comfortingly familiar to Peter. He asks for coffee instead. Ramona laughs that men whose fathers loved whisky either drink too much or not at all. Peter remembers having to carry his father home from this pub when he was a teenager; he’s rarely been back since.

Again, Ramona’s long history in the town and her comparative distance from it allow her to have insights on other characters that they themselves lack. She’s also especially sympathetic to those who don’t easily fit in or are scorned by others.



One of the reasons Peter doesn't frequent the Bearskin is because of "The Pack." The Pack consists of about 30 or 40 angry young men who've been left behind by the local economy. The Pack are known for scaring Beartown's opponents away, but they've had the same effect on sponsors. These men don't want Beartown to modernize, since they think that progress in the town will lead to even fewer opportunities for them.

Peter and Ramona sit at the bar and talk about hockey. Peter wonders if the town takes hockey too seriously—what, after all, can it give them? Just a few isolated moments of feeling immortal? But as Peter gets up to leave, Ramona says, "...[W]hat the hell is life, Peter, apart from moments?" Peter appreciates her insightful advice.

At home, Kira feels tightness in her chest—panic attacks. She stopped seeing her psychologist after that diagnosis, feeling ashamed. She doesn't know how she could explain it to her family, but parenthood "makes [her] feel like a blanket that's always too small." She can never cover everyone adequately.

Kira thinks about the demands of game day—all the rides she'll have to give throughout the day—and her work inbox, which never empties no matter how late she sits up answering emails. She hasn't felt like she's given her best at anything in a long time, because she simply doesn't have the energy. Nowadays, she understands those parents who lose their cool in the stands at children's games—as silly as it is, hockey starts to symbolize parents' own hopes and failings.

Kira checks on Maya and is surprised to find that her forehead feels hot. Later that morning, she'll be surprised when Maya uncharacteristically insists on joining her mother at the rink. And, in hindsight, she'll wish she had made Maya stay home.

The Pack are an embodiment of Beartown's precarious economic position. Many of them are bitter about it and express their anger through their extreme hockey fandom. And they're well aware that advances of the town will be unlikely to benefit them much, showing how even people who love hockey can be left behind by the town's relentless fixation on it.



Ramona's point to Peter is that, while it's possible to make too much of individual moments, it's also possible to overlook them; it's really about what one makes of them. This will be borne out later in the story, as small moments tend to reveal much about individual character.



Kira keeps her conflicted feelings about work, grief, and motherhood hidden, not wanting to burden her family with them, with the result that she's troubled with anxiety. Motherhood makes demands that she knows she can't perfectly fulfill. Backman suggests, later, that perhaps it's this focus on perfection—"winning"—that's misplaced; maybe Kira really does have enough to offer everyone, even if she doesn't feel that way.



As she often does, Kira is able to take a critical look at aspects of hockey culture. She's able to empathize with the way it consumes parents' lives and becomes a mirror of their own anxieties. Because she feels so inadequate herself, she understands the quest to project those feelings onto something external while also pointing out how futile that quest can be.



Backman sometimes foreshadows or hints at coming disaster. This goes along with his point, expressed elsewhere, that life is just a culmination of moments, individual choices whose outcomes can't be predicted.



CHAPTER 15

Benji wakes up early, bikes to the forest, and walks the last few miles to the kennels owned by his sister, Adri. His other sisters, Katia and Gaby, also arrive. Adri slaps Benji for calling his teacher “sweet cheeks”—she loves him, but she’ll kill him if he says such a thing again. The four of them eat a quiet breakfast together, surrounded by Adri’s dogs. This is a yearly custom in remembrance of their father’s suicide. They don’t tell their mother, because she’s never forgiven Alan.

Separately, Benji bikes to the cemetery and sits against Alan Ovich’s headstone. He smokes joints “until the pain is soft enough to let his tears start to fall.” Fifteen years ago, Alan took his hunting rifle into the forest and shot himself. Benji has grown up knowing that no matter how many times adults say, “It wasn’t your fault,” they’re lying.

Kevin is practicing in his garden rink at home. Mrs. Erdahl says it’s time to drop him off at the rink. Kevin can see that she’s falling apart as she tells him that they’ve gotten onto an earlier flight to Madrid and that they won’t be able to watch his game. Kevin knows that just means his dad wants to play a round of golf, but that there’s no point in arguing about it—his family always avoids talking about their feelings. Mrs. Erdahl is “approachable and sympathetic” at work, but has never learned how to talk with her son, especially now that he’s grown up. She promises that they’ll come to the final.

Ana and Maya are in the rink cafeteria, helping Kira prepare food for the hockey crowd. Ana keeps teasing Maya about Kevin, since Maya is clearly distracted by thoughts of him. Kira leaves the cafeteria when Ana’s jokes get too suggestive, feeling unprepared for her daughter to grow up.

Kevin rides to the game next to his father. Mr. Erdahl quizzes him on his upcoming English test. He’s always thinking two moves ahead, constantly pursuing perfection. Once, when Kevin complained that Benji’s mother always comes to the hockey games, Mr. Erdahl replied: “My job is to be your father, not your friend.” Kevin had gotten the message: Mr. Erdahl spends millions of *kronor* on the team every year; Benji’s mom doesn’t.

Benji is surrounded by a strong, loving, female support system—one that doesn’t hesitate to call him out on his mistakes. This will prove to have shaped Benji’s character in important ways. The same is true of Benji’s father’s suicide; his sadness and his tendency to act out are rooted in a childhood trauma.



Like other characters in the story—like Maya’s parents, and later Maya herself—Benji knows what it’s like to bear a heavy burden of guilt. He isn’t to blame for his dad’s death, but logic can’t outweigh the trauma of his memories.



Kevin, like Benji, bears burdens that aren’t talked about. He longs for his parents’ approval—not just of his success, but of him as a person. However, despite their constant efforts to promote his success in hockey, they’re much more absent than present in his daily life. Mrs. Erdahl longs for more than that, but it isn’t enough—Kevin, unlike Benji, lacks a loving, motherly influence in his life, and that lack may play a role in his actions in the later part of the book.



Kira recognizes that she has to give Maya space to grow up—a significant step, given her constant fears for her daughter. Unlike Mrs. Erdahl’s consistent absence from Kevin’s life, though, Kira’s stepping back is based on a foundation of love and trust.



Mr. Erdahl’s obsession with success crowds out any warm, fatherly touch; it’s not surprising that Kevin has sought that influence elsewhere. Mr. Erdahl’s view of fatherhood seems to be setting his son up for a superficial type of success in life, but doesn’t pay enough attention to Kevin’s formation as a person. This dynamic in their relationship is a something of a microcosm for the way that the town’s hockey culture shapes its boys more generally.



When they get to the rink, Mr. Erdahl just pats Kevin's shoulder and says that Kevin can tell him everything tomorrow. Their basement is stacked with notebooks full of statistics from all the games Kevin has played. Kevin's mom can't help looking back at him as they drive away. They've always tried to teach Kevin to be independent so that he won't become spoiled, but today, he looks like "the loneliest boy on earth." Soon, Benji finds Kevin and doesn't ask about the fact that Kevin has tears in his eyes. And Kevin doesn't say anything about the cemetery. Instead, they walk to the locker room, bantering.

Amat finds Ana and Maya goofing around in the kitchen and stammers out a question—he's wondering if Maya is free after the game. However, Maya is laughing so hard at Ana's antics that she doesn't hear him, and before Amat can repeat himself, Kevin walks in. In moments, he's making Maya laugh, and he invites her to the victory party at his house after the game. He invites Amat, too, but calls him "Ahmed."

CHAPTER 16

As Kira looks down at the ice, she thinks about the happiest time in her life—when Peter was selling insurance part-time and neither playing hockey nor working as a GM. After Isak died, Kira had to accept that Peter would need to be involved in hockey again. As she wraps herself in a Beartown scarf, she hugs other people heading into the rink and reflects that it's not necessary to understand everything about hockey in order to love it.

As Peter nervously walks around the rink, he blunders into Tails. Tails is a huge, loud ex-hockey player, so nicknamed because he liked to wear a suit with a tailcoat as a teenager. Today he owns a big, successful supermarket chain and is a major team sponsor. Though Peter tries to signal that he doesn't want to discuss it, Tails launches into an "off the record" discussion of the likelihood that a new hockey academy will be built in Beartown, if the juniors win the final. Then Tails grabs the club president and a bottle of whisky. Peter realizes they've ambushed him.

Kevin and Benji each know about the burden of grief the other carries, and they help each other through it by bantering. In a way, they have a lot in common—both deal with the pain of an unattainable father. However, Benji has something to compensate for that (his mother and sisters); Kevin simply doesn't, so he looks for meaning and approval in hockey instead.



This is an even worse moment for Amat than yesterday, when Kevin asked him if Maya has a boyfriend. He's summoned the courage to ask Maya out, but Kevin manages to smoothly slip past him and get Maya's attention—adding to the humiliation, he (willfully?) forgets Amat's name, driving home his outsider status.



Other characters, like Kevin, look to hockey to fulfill them in ways nothing else can; Kira recognizes that this is something Peter needs, too. Hockey can't overcome his grief, but it provides him with an arena for success. And while Kira doesn't really get hockey culture, she loves Peter so much that she's willing to make the most of it. This moment again reveals how hockey culture does have a positive side—it brings the town together and helps foster loving bonds between individuals, even though it's also a challenge to people like Kira.



As he's gearing up for the game, Peter gets pulled into the side of hockey he hates and resists—trying to make everybody else happy. Tails reminds him that there's more at stake in today's game than team pride; it could have major consequences for the town as a whole. Again, hockey might seem silly at times, but its stakes are often very serious.



Fatima has never been to such a crowded hockey game. She's only been to the more sparsely attended boys' games. As she navigates the throng of spectators, William Lyt's mother, Maggan Lyt, grabs her arm and asks her if she's going to pick up the pieces of a broken bottle on the ground. Fatima silently starts to stoop, when Kira interjects, explaining that Fatima isn't working today. When Maggan asks why, Fatima straightens up and proudly explains that she's here to watch Amat play. When Maggan is swept away by the crowd, Fatima quietly asks Kira if she can sit next to her. Kira takes Fatima's hand and says, "Oh, Fatima, I should be asking if I can sit next to you."

Maggan's rudeness highlights Fatima's outsider status, as well as the way that outsiders are treated harshly in the town more generally. But in one of her best moments, Kira comes to her defense and helps Fatima stand up for herself. It's a good example of how, though Kira may not understand Beartown hockey culture on its own terms, she can easily identify and confront its blind spots.



CHAPTER 17

Parents, especially Maggan Lyt, are pushing their way into the locker room with complaints and advice. Maggan demands to know what Amat is doing on the team at the last minute before the semifinal. David finally hisses angrily, "Look at him! Are you seriously standing here saying that your son deserves this more than he does?" He pats Amat's shoulder. Then he puts his hand on William Lyt's cheek and reminds him, "We play for ourselves, William."

In this scene, David shows why he can be such an effective coach and father figure. He stands up for rookie Amat, readily recognizing how much Amat has sacrificed for this moment; yet he also comforts an embarrassed Lyt, reminding him that an overbearing parent doesn't control his destiny.



Bobo can't stand the silence in the locker room. He's always been afraid of being forgotten and unacknowledged. He makes a few dirty jokes to break the silence. Eventually, Lars stands up and makes one too, at Bobo's expense. The joke suggests that Bobo is a rapist. The locker room explodes in laughter, and later David will look back on this moment and wonder if the joke went too far, if he should have intervened. But he doesn't. Even Amat laughs, enjoying the release and sense of inclusion—but he will later feel ashamed of doing so.

This is one of the book's clearest examples of hockey culture's misogynistic tendencies. While most see the joke as a way of breaking the tension before the big game, even David suspects that there's more to the joke than they're acknowledging. The fact that rape is the subject of flippant laughter says something important about what's tolerated for the sake of a unified hockey culture.



David tells the team he's not going to make a long speech—he only expects one thing from them today, and he doesn't want them to come back to the locker room until they've delivered: "win." The whole team erupts. Before he opens the locker room door, David whispers to Kevin that he's proud of him.

David makes his characteristic demand of the team, and they respond as expected. Winning is again shown to be a higher priority than anything else. However, even for David, there's also an element of paternal pride. Unlike Kevin's actual dad, David cares about more than Kevin's success on the ice.



CHAPTER 18

Ramona has become trapped in her own home, fearful of losing the memory of Holger's laughter if she ventures into the world again. She stands outside, smoking, and listens to the sound of the roar when Beartown makes the game 1-0. She tries taking a step closer to the street, but it makes her tremble, so she goes inside and clutches Holger's photo instead. Inside the rink, Kevin gets the first goal, but soon the technically proficient opposition catches on to how good he is, and they make the game 2-1.

Robbie Holts isn't watching the game, either. He lives with the knowledge that he peaked at age 17. He'd always believed everyone when they told him that he'd become a professional, so when he failed, he felt that everyone else had let him down. Every day he grieves the "phantom life" he believes he's lost.

Robbie goes into the Bearskin and is surprised to find Ramona preparing to leave. She tells Robbie she's going to a hockey match, and that he's coming, too. They make it as far as the outside of the rink, and Ramona can go no farther. Robbie comforts her. She insists that he go to the game himself—she'll wipe out his tab in return.

By the third period, Beartown is lagging, and the players' spirits are beginning to flag. William Lyt has the realization that he lacks the speed and strength to perform on this level. Benji, however, plows through a pile of players' bodies and manages a goal, tying the game. Then David taps Amat, pulling Lyt off the ice. Though Lars protests, David tells Amat he just wants the opposition to see how fast he is. He tells Amat this is his chance to show the town what he can be. Lars tells David that Maggan Lyt will "castrate" him for this move. David simply notes that the town will likely forgive anyone who wins.

On the ice, Amat charges full speed toward the opponents' goal after each face-off, even though he doesn't have the puck. Less knowledgeable spectators mock him, but others begin to notice his astonishing speed. The opposition's coach begins rifling through the roster, demanding to know who #81 is. Amat notices that, for the first time in his life, he has Maya's attention, too. Amat manages to feint and get past a defenseman with the puck, just far enough to pass it to Kevin, who quickly scores.

Ramona remains on the outskirts of the community; though this has much to do with her ongoing grief, it also symbolizes her resistance to the town's norms. She's more rooted in Beartown than most, yet she'll also prove to be more critical of its demands for loyalty.



Robbie is a casualty of Beartown's results-driven culture. Like Peter did, he has difficulty fitting in to "normal" life after peaking as an athlete, but unlike Peter, he has nothing to fall back on and chooses to wallow in bitterness. Robbie's example makes it clear just how destructive Beartown's hockey culture can be, even (or especially) for very good players.



Ramona can't fully confront her demons today, but, much like Kira did with Fatima in the previous chapter, she's able to support someone else in confronting his.



David is unapologetic in the choices he believes best for his team, like putting Amat onto the ice regardless of parental blowback. However, his flippant remark about forgiveness says a lot about his reasoning, too—he knows that winning will override everything else. This comment also foreshadows what's soon to happen with Kevin.



Amat has his shining moment in the game, vindicating David's (and Sune's) decision to put him on the junior roster. In this moment, success really is valuable for Amat; it's the deserved reward for all his hard work and persistence so far.



As the crowd raucously celebrates, Kevin climbs over the boards and throws himself into David’s arms, telling him, “For you!” David “holds [Kevin] like he was his own son.”

This tender moment between Kevin and David highlights just how lonely Kevin is, and how much hockey really is his whole identity; he doesn’t have a “real” parent there to dedicate his game to, so his coach takes on that role and makes hockey even more all-consuming than it would otherwise be.



For Amat, it’s both the best and worst moment of his life, as he realizes that everybody is now looking at Kevin—including Maya. But then Benji skates past and says, “She’ll notice you when we win the final.” As Kevin returns to center ice, he nods at Amat. Amat realizes he’s now part of the team, no matter what the crowd thinks.

Benji, with characteristic kindness, notices Amat’s pain and cheers him up with just a few encouraging words. And Amat realizes that his contribution to the team (and thus to Beartown) has put him on the inside for the first time in his life.



CHAPTER 19

Beartown is a “heavenly town” that evening, as people pour onto the ice after the game in a celebration they’ll remember forever. Peter finds himself embracing and laughing with Robbie Holts. Afterward, he asks Robbie to come by for dinner sometime. Robbie says yes, but they both know he’s lying.

The “heavenly” celebration contrasts with the decidedly different atmosphere that will soon descend on the town, and again emphasizes that for Beartown, hockey is essentially a religion. Meanwhile, Peter and Robbie’s awkward parting recalls their very different outcomes as hockey players and suggests that some memories can’t be overcome.



A little later, Peter is surprised to find Amat still in the locker room, picking up scraps of tape. Amat blushes and explains he wants to deal with the worst of the cleaning so Fatima doesn’t have to. Peter feels ashamed and fumbles for words to convey how proud he is; he doesn’t have David’s knack for making the players love him, and he envies that. Finally, he tells Amat he should walk into the parking lot, an experience Amat has never had after a game like this—Peter says that he’ll get the experience of walking out as a winner.

Amat’s concern about the tape reminds Peter of Amat’s differences from the other players—he’s never had the luxury of just basking in a victory before. It’s also a reminder of Amat’s differing goals; his mom’s comfort is always foremost in his mind, not his own success.



Amat isn’t sure what Peter means until he goes outside. People cheer when they see him, wanting to shake his hand. He gets hugs and pats on the back. Pretty soon, he’s swept up in shouting “We are the **bears** from Beartown!” and others sing along, following his lead. Later, Amat wonders how anyone could be part of such a scene “without thinking he’s a god.”

Amat’s experience of being adored by the town is visceral—he can’t help becoming the symbol of success that people want him to be. In keeping with his characteristic reflectiveness, though, his musing gets to the heart of Beartown’s deifying of its hockey players—what happens when players are routinely subject to such treatment? And how does that impact their treatment of others?



Peter goes into the president's office and scolds Tails for taking alcohol into the boys' locker room. Tails waves it off. Peter can't get used to the way the sponsors talk about the players as if they are "racehorses" or "products." He escapes back into the hallway and congratulates David, but David bitterly tells him that it's Peter's night; after all, he's always been the real star of the hockey club.

Kevin is being interviewed by the local paper. He is calm and professional, giving neutral answers to each question. When asked about Benji concussing one of the opponents, Kevin just says that he didn't see it happen.

Fatima happily sends Amat off to celebrate. As the popular kids begin streaming toward the victory party, the unpopular ones—including Zacharias—are blatantly left behind. Zacharias is never sure if Amat forgets to invite him or just doesn't care, but either way, things are never quite the same between them. Maya and Ana are among the crowd, too.

CHAPTER 20

There's a loud, drunken party taking place at the Erdahl house. Kevin is the only person who doesn't seem to be enjoying it. He's having trouble winding down, so he's firing shots in his garden rink again while Benji sits nearby, rolling joints.

When Amat gets there, he can't believe that a single family lives in such a big house. He goes into the kitchen with Bobo and Lyt, where everyone is doing shots. Lyt drunkenly explains that Amat can have any girl he wants tonight, since "they're all hockey-whores when we win." When Lyt lurches off, Bobo and Amat stay in the kitchen, looking uncomfortably at each other, both of them thinking about the fact that they're virgins and not wanting to admit it aloud.

As usual, Peter doesn't easily fit in anywhere. The environment in the president's office offends him, and David resents him, apparently feeling that Peter steals his thunder while David has put in the real work. All this goes to show that in every part of a society, especially one so focused on a narrow definition of winning, there are competing levels and various obstacles to belonging.



Kevin's comment about the incident with Benji foreshadows incidents that will come later in the book—and it reinforces the idea of loyalty at all costs, as well as the accompanying culture of silence that surrounds aspects of hockey.



Just as Peter found himself shut out of various celebrations, different members of the Beartown social structure find themselves included or excluded, depending on where they stand relative to the hockey team. It's already clear that the benefits of winning don't affect everyone equally.



Kevin has trouble switching from a competitive frame of mind to a non-competitive one—reminiscent of Jeannette's earlier remark that hockey players aren't taught how to turn off their aggression.



Amat is welcomed into a very different social tier for the first time. Despite Lyt's brash claim, Amat's and Bobo's reactions suggests that at least some of the sexualization of the hockey culture is just talk—but, as is soon demonstrated, that talk still enables certain players to take action in destructive ways.



As Ana and Maya walk to the party, Maya is sad when Ana repeatedly checks her makeup; it reminds her of when Ana was younger and cared more about hotwiring snowmobiles than fitting into the crowd. When Maya arrives, Kevin goes straight over to greet her. Seeing this, Benji irritably leaves, and all the older girls at the party look hatefully at Maya, too. Kevin calls to Benji, but Benji just says that he doesn't party with little girls, and he gives Kevin a joint to help him sleep that night. Kevin hugs Benji fleetingly, remembering when they were little boys who used to read comic books together under the covers.

In this scene, there are parallel instances of rifts between friends. Maya feels she's losing the Ana she loves, and Benji seems to feel the same way about Kevin—while also hinting that he finds Kevin's interest in younger girls worrying. In both cases, their friendships will be permanently changed by what happens tonight.



CHAPTER 21

Maya drinks a lot of shots with Lyt and Kevin. Maya is fascinated by the way Kevin seems to live on instinct. Kevin is fascinated by the way Maya seems to know exactly who she is. Each of them wishes they could be like the other. Ana stops drinking quickly. She's disappointed that Benji has left, and she feels that no matter how hard she tries to "sandpaper" herself, she's never going to fit in with this crowd.

Maya and Kevin have a strong mutual interest at this point. Ana, feeling left out and at loose ends, realizes she doesn't really belong to Beartown's popular set, no matter how hard she tries. Her choice of the word "sandpaper" also shows how fitting in can be a painful, arduous process.



Benji smokes in the middle of the lake for a while. The ice is getting thin at this time of year, but he's never been afraid of falling through. After Alan's death, he hasn't feared death himself, but has always wondered why his dad used a rifle when the natural environment can do so much to kill a person. Once Benji feels numb, he steals a moped and drives to Hed.

After the party, Benji feels hurt and alienated from Kevin. Benji's reaction suggests that he believes Kevin is better than the party culture he's taking part in, and that he doesn't belong in it himself. When Benji feels hurt, he tends to become self-destructive. Again, it's clear that hockey culture creates as many problems as it solves, even for members of a winning team.



Benji winds up at the bar where his sister Katia works, The Barn. Katia can see that Benji is in a bad mood. He usually comes here when he's feeling upset. Katia lets Benji tend bar while she goes back to the office, promising that the bouncers will take care of the moped for him. As Benji drinks a beer, he notices the bass player in the band that's playing onstage.

Even Benji's family sometimes enables his self-destructive habits. Meanwhile, Benji's interest in the bass player is the novel's first hint regarding his sexuality. After feeling left out at the party, he's looking for somewhere else to belong.



Back at the party, when Ana comes out of the bathroom, Lyt towers over her, saying drunkenly, "I got an assist today, don't I get anything for that?" Ana manages to slip past him and runs toward the kitchen, searching for Maya.

Lyt openly assumes that because he was successful on the ice tonight, he's entitled to sex—it's a somewhat shocking example of how on-ice aggression translates to off-ice entitlement. It turns out that this isn't the most brazen behavior of the night, however.



The bass player comes to the bar, and he and Benji talk a little. He tells Benji he's more interested in something smoking than in alcohol, and he's heard Benji could help him with that. Pretty soon they're smoking together out back. Benji doesn't usually smoke with anyone else. He wishes he were a bit more high, or drunk. When the bass player asks if he'll come back next Sunday, Benji walks away without giving an answer.

Bobo and Amat end up firing shots on the ice rink, since they're both out of their element in the party. Bobo apologizes for bullying him, and soon they're just chatting about hockey. They agree that hockey feels like work nowadays—not carefree, like when they were children. As they silently fire pucks, they forge a friendship.

Maya can't find Ana, and she's so drunk she's leaning on the walls for support. Lyt makes a whispered bet with Kevin—that Kevin will "NEVER get to fuck [...] the GM's daughter." They shake on a bet of a hundred *kronor*.

Later, the only thing people will ask Maya is how much she'd had to drink that night. She's been circling the house in search of a bathroom when Kevin offers to show her the upstairs. They wind up in his bedroom, where Maya smokes marijuana for the first time. She admires Kevin's old record player, and he puts some music on. She doesn't remember what music it is, but years from now, she'll still remember the crackling sound it made when it was turned on.

Maya and Kevin are lying on his bed, and they start kissing. But when Kevin starts forcing her jeans down, Maya stops him, saying, "I don't want to." "Of course you want to," he replies. Even when she becomes angry and insistent, he acts as if it's a game. He starts gripping her wrists painfully.

Benji is obviously attracted to the bass player, but he also resists committing himself to anything yet. He has difficulty letting himself experience strong feelings in another person's presence; he's used to dealing with his pain in solitude, perhaps fearful of being abandoned again after the loss of his father.



Despite his past bullying of Amat and his friends, Bobo and Amat become friends based on their shared love of the sport. It's the only fully positive, healthy interaction that occurs in this chapter, and indicates that despite all its flaws, hockey culture does have some positive influences on those involved in it.



Regardless of how seriously he takes the bet, this exchange says a lot about Kevin's character. A hundred Swedish kronor comes out to about \$10 in U.S. currency; it's obvious that to players like Kevin and Lyt, women are valuable mostly as sexual objects.



Kevin takes advantage of the fact that Maya is drunk. Their interaction starts out pleasantly enough, but in retrospect, it will trigger terrible memories for Maya—a hint that things are about to take a turn for the worse.



Even though Maya makes it clear she doesn't like what Kevin is doing, he doesn't accept her objection as serious and assumes that he knows better than she does. The fact that he sees her resistance as a game is significant; he sees it as something to be overcome, much as he would an opponent on the ice—not something to be heeded and respected.



Maya has been warned about sexual assault throughout her life, but she never imagined it could happen with someone she knew and trusted. Kevin touches her body as if it's "a thing he had earned" and not connected to her. He tells her to stop resisting, since after all, she came upstairs with him. She keeps telling him to stop. He holds her down effortlessly and doesn't seem to notice when she scratches his hand deeply with her nails. When Maya finally yanks her hand free and slaps him, his face changes, and he grabs her throat. Her mouth is covered, so she can't even scream, and she slips in and out of consciousness. She remembers odd details, like one of her blouse buttons flying off and landing somewhere that she'll never find it.

Later, people ask Maya about her consumption of alcohol and marijuana, but nobody asks her about the terror and panic she feels that night and never fully escapes.

CHAPTER 22

The older girls in Kevin's kitchen laugh cruelly when Ana asks about Maya, calling her a "second-rate bitch." Ana doesn't look for Maya or call her. She's hurt that Maya ditched her for a boy for the first time in their lives. As she leaves, she passes a drunken Amat, who sobers slightly when he hears Maya's name. Ana tells him to tell Maya she's gone, and to look for her in Kevin's bedroom. Amat silently shatters inside. Upstairs, even as she struggles to breathe, Maya tells herself that Ana will find her at any moment now.

Amat is never sure what made him go upstairs, or what it was he heard. But for some reason, he opens the door of Kevin's room and sees Maya's tears and torn clothes, and the marks on her neck. His rushing into the room is just enough to break Kevin's concentration, and Maya manages to push Kevin off of her and flee. She doesn't remember running out of the house.

As Maya walks down the street, she hears Amat calling after her. He says she needs to call the police. Maya tells him it won't make any difference; they won't believe anything she says. Both of them are crying as Maya adds, "Because this is a fucking hockey town."

Maya is unprepared for the idea that she could be assaulted in a scenario like this one—in a familiar, ostensibly safe environment. Her thoughts indicate how even the most commonplace parts of life—like hockey—can have dark sides. Kevin continues to act as if her willingness in accompanying him gives him permission to go as far as he would like. Not only that, but her continued resistance doesn't deter him. It only makes him angry and violent—his attitude of entitlement carried to a terrifying extreme.



Because Kevin's forcefulness in the previous scene makes him obviously the perpetrator, the questions asked of Maya appear laughable by comparison. Others will rush to blame her for what's happened, rather than showing compassion for the horrifying experience she's been through.



Because of the way Ana rescued Maya when they were little girls, the reader expects Ana to do the same here; tragically, she doesn't. Ana feels hurt and rejected by Maya, assuming she's ditched Ana for a boy. Meanwhile, the older girls' cruel responses to Maya indicate that it's not just the men in town who have misogynistic attitudes; the young women have also internalized that way of thinking.



Amat ends up being the one who stops the assault, albeit too late. However, his witnessing the event proves consequential later. He's already demonstrated his ability to take in small details quickly—to see what others don't, in part because he's an outsider—and that helps him here.



It's an indictment of Beartown that Maya already knows what's going to happen—that nobody's going to believe her because of the identity of her attacker. Protecting players like Kevin is embedded in the town's DNA.



Maya walks into the forest, not wanting to pass through the middle of town. When a car abruptly stops ahead of her, she braces as if to be attacked again. But then Benji gets out and comes within ten yards of her. He sees that she's crying and realizes she wants to hide. He gives her a nod and walks away.

Maya is traumatized by the attack. Giving Maya space, Benji is sensitive as ever, and though at the time he doesn't realize what he's seeing, he'll figure it out before too long.



CHAPTER 23

Later, Peter and Kira will hate themselves for waking up happy the next morning. They think Maya spent the night at Ana's and are surprised to find her in bed. Maya knows she can't tell them the truth; she knows they'd never get over it. When everyone else leaves the house, Maya showers and tries to hide all evidence of the assault.

Especially after having lost a child, Peter and Kira feel guilty whenever one of their children suffers. And Maya, knowing this, feels guilty for subjecting her parents to her suffering and so hides her pain. This shows how an excessive drive to protect a child can have unintended consequences.



Kevin has played through countless hockey injuries and they've never bothered him, but today, the scratches on his hand are throwing off his shots. When Benji comes over, Kevin is furious that Benji didn't answer his calls sooner. Benji asks him what happened last night and mentions that he saw Maya in the forest. Kevin continues to yell at Benji for abandoning him at the party, calling him an ungrateful "virus" who "can't live without some sort of host." He kicks Benji out.

Kevin is tense and on edge, his conscience bothering him about what happened last night. And Benji clearly has his suspicions. Though Kevin loves Benji, he displays a tendency to dehumanize people—here, in his language about "viruses"—when they pose a threat to him. In the aftermath of the assault, it's especially telling that he treats even his best friend this way.



Kevin's parents get home late that night to a spotless house. Mr. Erdahl finds the statistics Kevin has left him about yesterday's game and beams.

The Erdahl house displays no obvious signs of what's happened, reinforcing the silence that prevails in their home (and in the town). As usual, all Mr. Erdahl cares about is his son's success—and that success is conveyed to him through bare, depersonalized statistics. Their home is emotionally sterile as well as physically spotless.



CHAPTER 24

On Monday morning, a burglar alarm goes off at the school. Jeannette searches the school and discovers Benji sleeping on a couple of desks. He blearily recalls having drunk a lot the night before. Jeannette tells Benji that she should report him to the headmaster, but she thinks maybe that's what he really wants. She's not going to help him ruin his life. She tells him to go and shower. Benji apologizes for calling her "sweet cheeks" and promises that nobody else on the team will speak to her disrespectfully again. She knows he means it.

Benji is clearly troubled by the events of the weekend and trying to bury his emotions. Jeannette perceives the potential in Benji, and Benji offers a sincere apology. Benji's promise about his teammates—who do respect his leadership—also shows that hockey culture isn't monolithic. If someone makes the effort to speak up bad behavior, change is possible.



Kevin's dad comes outside and shoots some pucks with him that morning. He almost asks Kevin about the marks on his face, but instead he warns Kevin that people in Beartown will try to stick to him like "viruses." He needs to resist them. And the upcoming hockey final is about what sort of man Kevin wants to be: one who "goes out and grabs what he deserves, or [...] stands in a corner waiting for someone to give it to him."

Inside, Kevin's mom wishes she could talk to him. She was puzzled to find sheets and a bloodstained T-shirt in the dryer; Kevin has never done his own laundry before. She also found a blouse-button on the floor of his room this morning.

Kevin knocks on William Lyt's door and asks him if he's ready to walk to school. Lyt is overjoyed, since Kevin always walks with Benji. He pulls out a hundred-kronor note and laughs when Kevin takes it. He's delighted to share a secret with Kevin.

Maya burns her torn blouse in the shower. It takes forever to clean up the mess, and she cries, missing Ana. And even though the garbage bin is only ten yards from the house, she's too scared to walk that far alone.

CHAPTER 25

Ana walks to school alone. She thinks about calling Maya, but she doesn't. She feels like Maya abandoned her in the wilderness. She also feels jealous.

Amat and Fatima are waiting at the bus stop. Tails drives by and offers them a ride to the rink. Fatima can see how proud Amat is. Later, at work, when she empties the club president's trash, he stands up and shakes her hand.

Mr. Erdahl's words chillingly recall Kevin's earlier remarks to Benji. It's now obvious where Kevin gets some of his language and attitudes, and it's not just from the locker room. Mr. Erdahl's comment about "[grabbing] what he deserves" suggests that, regardless of Mr. Erdahl's intent, Kevin applies this idea not just to hockey, but to his relationships with others, especially women.



Even as Kevin's dad reinforces some of the attitudes that have made Kevin what he is, Mrs. Erdahl picks up on clues that undermine her perception of her perfect son. But at this point, her silence still overpowers her suspicions.



Lyt, who's hungry for Kevin's approval, gets promoted to Benji's usual spot in Kevin's circle. The crassness of the bet contrasts with the anguish Maya is feeling.



In contrast to Kevin, who's received little besides praise and tangible rewards (the cash) since the assault, Maya is literally left cleaning up the mess. It's a disturbing comparison of the lot faced by a perpetrator and a victim, and it also echoes the way that Fatima always has to clean up after the players, even when it causes her physical pain. Again, the players and their desires come above all else.



Ana doesn't know what happened, and since her position in the social hierarchy has always been more tenuous than Maya's, she feels especially betrayed by Maya's abandoning her at the party.



Much as Lyt's social status has been raised in the aftermath of the party, Fatima is received completely differently by those who ignored her before her son joined the junior team. It shows how precarious and superficial such social distinctions are.



Lyt finds it “dizzying” to be caught up in the attention Kevin receives as they walk into school together. Kevin goes into one of the school bathrooms, and Lyt doesn’t notice that this is unusual behavior for him. Kevin tears up the 100-kronor note and flushes it down the toilet without even turning on the light or looking in the mirror.

While Kevin might just want to destroy all evidence of what’s happened, his reluctance to look at himself in the mirror suggests that his conscience bothers him at least somewhat. Lyt, oblivious, just enjoys being in Kevin’s limelight.



Amat finds Zacharias by the lockers and realizes he should have called his friend over the weekend. Zach is clearly hurt; his dad has been bragging at work that Zach is friends with one of the hockey players. Before Amat can think of something to say, a bully knocks Zach’s hat off. Soon the bully and Zach are locked in a fight. Suddenly, Bobo appears and scares the bullies off.

There’s been a change in the dynamic between Amat and his best friend, too. Zach’s dad’s bragging would be especially painful to Zach, given that he’s not as strong a player and would probably never garner such praise himself. Zach’s fight ends much differently than his previous encounter with a bully, with Bobo swooping in.



Bobo tells Amat that he’s “one of us now. No one touches us.” He invites Amat to sit with the team at lunch. Then Amat notices Zach heading for the exit. He asks why Zach is upset, since Bobo helped him. Zach says, “No, he helped you. [...] Your new team is waiting for you.”

Because Amat is one of the team now, Zach benefits from the team’s status by association. But this is like salt in the wound for Zach. Bobo bullied him just days before, but now, because of a sudden change in Amat’s fortunes, he’s arbitrarily worthy of Bobo’s protection, and he feels he’s lost Amat on top of it all. Zach’s pain here shows how even when hockey culture brings outward benefits (like protection from bullies), it can still cause harm at the same time.



Benji is startled to see Kevin exiting a school bathroom. He and Kevin have always understood each other, and Benji has never been without his team. As he watches Kevin walk off with Lyt and the others, he realizes he’s about to learn what that’s like. Instead of joining them in class, he lights a cigarette, gets on his bike, and leaves school. While taking attendance, Jeannette sees him out the window and marks Benji as present anyway.

Unlike Lyt, Benji knows that Kevin normally avoids using the school bathrooms. This seemingly minor detail makes the estrangement between Kevin and Benji all the more pointed. Benji takes this hard and decides he doesn’t want to endure school without his team surrounding him, revealing what a protective presence the team has been for him so far.



CHAPTER 26

Peter sits in the locker room and thinks about his childhood. Sune and the sport had rescued him from a difficult childhood—his mom had died early, and his dad could be cruel when drunk. Hockey had given him something safe and solid. Later, when Peter’s career failed and his loved ones died, Sune had offered him the job in Beartown—a chance to “keep something alive.” Now he’s expected to tell Sune to quietly leave the hockey club.

After all that hockey has done for him, thanks to Sune, Peter feels guilty about betraying his mentor. Peter’s experience shows some of the positive aspects of hockey culture and its team loyalty—it can provide a safe environment for those who lack it elsewhere. It has also given Peter a place to shine when he feels like a helpless failure as a parent.



Sune wakes up in his silent, tidy house and walks through Beartown. He recognizes and greets most of the men over 30, but seldom recognizes any teenagers or young men. He ends up wandering into the forest, all the way to Adri's kennels. He sees Benji smoking but doesn't comment, just praises Saturday's game. He tells Benji he's thinking of getting a puppy, since he's about to have a lot more free time.

Benji tells Sune that just because the team loves David doesn't mean they wouldn't have been happy to play for Sune. Sune doesn't tell Benji that it's him, not Kevin, that he believes could be ready to play for the A-team. Adri comes out and chats about hockey with Sune, then insists on giving him a puppy as thanks for all he's done for Benji. Sune is moved. He asks for advice on choosing a puppy, and Benji immediately picks one out, "because he's a challenge."

David is sitting in the rink, thinking about an upcoming media interview. He knows he can never properly explain what makes a player like Kevin—it's an intangible desire to win, an inability to accept *not* winning, that can't be taught. A player like Kevin can turn professional and earn millions, but the ones who are *almost* as good—who've put in just as much training time and effort—will end up working at the factory. The same is true of him, he knows—if the team starts losing, he's not far removed from the factory, either. He can't do anything else.

David remembers Sune talking to him about the team motto when David was a new coach. Sune explained that "Culture" was "as much about what we encourage as what we actually permit." When David asked him to elaborate, Sune explained "that most people don't do what we tell them to. They do what we let them get away with." David puts these thoughts aside for now, deciding that this week is only about results.

Peter walks past the president's office and hears sponsors making sexual comparisons to illustrate the hockey team's achievement. Some laugh in response, and some stay silent, since the comments are just jokes. Later that day, Peter visits Tails in his supermarket office, and they end up chatting about Robbie Holts. Peter asks if Tails has any warehouse jobs for Robbie, since, as Tails always says, "we look after each other" in Beartown. Tails agrees to find something for Robbie.

The precariousness of Sune's job is shown by the fact that, while he's coached many of the older men in Beartown, he doesn't even know the younger ones; it suggests that he's out of touch, just as team sponsors would have him believe. Yet it also highlights the fact that Sune has been like a father to a large part of Beartown.



Benji, again showing his sensitivity, picks up on the source of Sune's sadness and quietly honors him by choosing a "challenging" puppy—one who's symbolic of Benji himself. This moment makes it clear that Sune and his values are still important to Beartown, even if there's widespread pressure to focus more on simply winning.



David's reflections about Kevin have a double edge, since Kevin's winning drive has served him well on the ice, but that same "inability to accept not winning" arguably contributed to his treatment of Maya, too. Because hockey is all-consuming in David's world, he doesn't consider the off-ice implications of these attitudes. Yet he's acutely aware of the unforgiving line between success and failure.



On some level, David is aware that aspects of the team culture might be unhealthy. But he chooses to put that consideration on the shelf, seeing the final as more urgent. Ironically, such a concern is more pressing right now than ever, and his negligence of it has likely contributed to the present dysfunctional culture.



Inappropriate jokes are ever-present throughout the hockey club. While not everyone appreciates them, no one is willing to say anything—which allows such jokes to continue unchallenged and creates an atmosphere in which misogyny and aggression are the norm. In the coming weeks, Tails's remark that people in Beartown "look out for each other" will be confirmed in some cases, but sadly disproven in others—it depends on who needs looking after.



At training that afternoon, Benji doesn't show up. The players are mostly silent as Lyt lies about a sexual encounter with a girl at Kevin's party. After the other players go out onto the ice, Bobo stays behind and picks up the trash the others left behind.

Silence persists in the locker room, too. Everyone knows Lyt is lying, and they don't encourage it, but neither do they tell him to stop talking that way. However, Bobo displays a quiet act of resistance by not leaving trash for Fatima to pick up. This shows he's sincere in his growing friendship with Amat.



During practice, Kevin says to Amat, "What you think you saw [...] you know what women are like." Amat wishes he had the courage to say something, but he doesn't. Kevin pats him on the back and says they'll make a great pair on the A-team next year.

Even Kevin's attempt to get Amat on his side is dehumanizing, relying on a generalization about women instead of treating Maya as a person. Amat, too, responds with silence. He doesn't accept Kevin's misogynistic implications, but he doesn't actively resist them, either, allowing Kevin to assume his loyalty.



CHAPTER 27

Kira fears something is the matter with Maya, but she's trying to be "the cool mom" and not say anything intrusive. Instead, she pours herself into the distraction of a case at work. She knows her firm will win this one, like always.

Kira buries her overprotective urge underneath her competitiveness. This shows the two sides of Kira's personality, too—always pulled between her children and her work.



Peter looks at the resignation papers awaiting Sune's signature. He thinks about the fact that, while most people want to consider themselves "a good team player," they rarely consider the cost of what that really means. It's Sune himself who taught Peter that "[accepting] the worst aspects of your teammates because you love the collective" is what really makes you a team player.

Unknowingly anticipating some of the conflict to come, Peter thinks about the fact that being a "team player" might not be an unambiguously good thing. "Loving the collective" without exception might require masking worse individual characteristics than one expects.



Peter is interrupted by a call from a Canadian NHL scout, an old friend of his. The scout asks about Kevin's recent progress and asks whether Peter would agree with his decision to include Kevin in the upcoming NHL draft—is Kevin "the right sort of guy?" Peter knows what that means—Kevin can't just be a good player; his private life needs to be above reproach, too. Peter assures his friend that Kevin's grades and family life are top-notch.

Just as he's thinking about being a team player, Peter is confronted with an example of the issues at stake. He doesn't know about what Kevin has done, but he accepts that the image Kevin projects is accurate; there's nothing that needs to be covered up. This moment shows how a collective devotion to loyalty can have unintended consequences.



After practice that day, Amat is invited to join Kevin, Lyt, and Bobo for a movie in Hed. Amat is amazed by how natural his inclusion suddenly feels. After the movie, they stop by the Beartown lake. They play hockey and drink beer, and it all feels "simple [...] staying silent in return for being allowed to join in."

Amat gets to experience being "a team player," including its dark side. He's always longed for this kind of inclusion, but now it comes at the cost of saying nothing about what he's seen—stifling his concerns about Kevin out of "love for the collective."



Peter has sometimes had to make moral compromises, like signing players to seven-month contracts and having Tails pretend that they worked for him during the summer months, in order to get by financially as a club. Kira has told Peter that the club has “an unpleasant culture of silence,” but Peter believes that sometimes this is necessary in order to “foster a culture of winning.” Peter signs the resignation form. He knows the form will make it look as if the resignation was Sune’s choice, but that in reality, “he’s just fired his idol.”

Lars wants to discipline Benji for ditching practice, but David says they can’t win the final without him. David picks up a puck, writes something on it, and drives to the cemetery.

Maya alternates between sleeping and reliving what happened in Kevin’s room. She wishes she could rewind to Friday, before everything happened. She even stole some of her mom’s sleeping pills and tried to figure out how many she’d have to take so that she wouldn’t wake up again.

Ana eats a silent dinner with her dad and then takes the dogs out. Her mom was driven away by the silence, but Ana is used to it. She walks along the illuminated jogging trail that the town built so that women could run safely. Later, she notices Kevin running ahead of her. He stops, as if startled by the dogs, but then she realizes that he looks scared.

Ana shows up at Maya’s, having run all the way there. Even though her parents didn’t notice the marks on Maya’s wrists and neck, Ana sees them immediately. Soon they’re both crying. Maya finally reveals all the details of what happened, and the friends sob in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER 28

Ana used to want to be a hockey player, but she got into too many fights, so her dad taught her to shoot and hunt instead. Ana felt ashamed of the fact that she was so different and couldn’t fit in. As a Beartown girl, she’s supposed to be interested in hockey players, not hockey.

Peter rationalizes certain choices, like only paying players for a portion of the year, for the sake of the survival of the club and the endurance of a “winning” culture. Firing Sune is the latest such a step. Kira, as a relative outsider, observes that such rationalizations and the silence surrounding them come with a price, foreshadowing the public torment that their own daughter will soon undergo.



Though it’s comparatively harmless, excusing Benji’s behavior for the team’s sake is one example of a rationalization like those Peter has been pondering.



While everyone considers various moral tradeoffs, Maya contemplates suicide. Backman uses this stark contrast to point out that often, victims bear the brunt of other people’s moral compromises.



The existence of the illuminated jogging trail is an example of a superficial compromise that doesn’t confront an underlying problem (the threat of violence against women). Because Kevin doesn’t know Ana except as Maya’s best friend, his fearful reaction is telling.



Ana puts together the clues and realizes that Kevin must have hurt Maya, and she sees what others have been unable or unwilling to see. Maya is finally able to reveal the truth, while Ana’s perceptiveness is another example of how outside perspectives can be necessary for revealing the truth.



Beartown hockey culture doesn’t have many outlets for girls—they’re mainly supposed to be fans, meaning admirers of the male hockey players. This would obviously serve to reinforce some players’ sense of entitlement, rather than lessen it.



Ana blames herself for abandoning Maya at the party, but Maya assures her that it isn't their fault. Ana and Maya argue about telling what Kevin did. Ana knows it isn't fair to ask Maya to do that. Maya explains that she can't tell—if she does, then Kevin will not only hurt her, but everyone she loves.

Benji goes to visit his dad's grave and finds the puck David left there. David started this tradition when the players were young boys, writing important advice or even jokes on pucks to encourage his players or make them laugh. He did other things, too—when the club had a “fathers against sons” game, David picked up Kevin and Benji and took them to the lake to play with him.

Benji remembers certain crude jokes that Lars told on the team bus, when David laughed along. One of them was a homophobic joke. Benji has never feared being targeted if everyone finds out about him. Rather, he's scared of the jokes his teammates and coaches will no longer tell around him—shutting him out of the “us and them” created by laughter.

The puck David has left for Benji only has one word written on it: “Win.” The next day, he returns to practice.

Saturday arrives—the day of the final. Early that morning, Maya watches three little girls playing in the street, throwing snowballs and fencing with sticks. Though she'd made up her mind not to tell what happened to her, the sight of the girls changes her mind. Even as she makes that decision, she already knows that the town will turn against her.

CHAPTER 29

Peter and Leo are preparing for the trip to the capital, where they'll stay overnight for the final game. Even in the midst of the preparations, Peter senses that something isn't right with Maya. Yet he can't bring himself to knock on her door. Meanwhile, Kira grocery shops and looks forward to a whole weekend alone with Maya. Her love for her daughter has always felt “unbearable” in its strength.

Again, Maya shows empathy for others, at her own expense. Unfortunately, her understandable reluctance to hurt others allows the toxic elements of hockey culture to remain entrenched.



Though David's obsession with winning makes him seem like a one-dimensional character at times, he does show empathy and kindness to his players that goes beyond the locker room and ice rink. He knows how much Benji misses his dad, and he tries to fill the hole in Benji's and Kevin's lives left by their absent fathers.



As more than one pre-game scene has shown, locker room jokes serve a defining, uniting function among the players. If his teammates knew Benji was gay, one frequent source of locker room jokes would be off the table, and Benji would stand out as no longer being one of the crowd. He fears the loss of that sense of belonging more than anything.



David's hockey puck message reminds Benji of David's core philosophy. Since Benji looks up to David as a father figure as much as a coach, he responds to that message. To win, and so please David, he has to remain loyal to the team, no matter the cost.



The little girls in the street remind Maya of herself and Ana when they were little girls. She's also reminded that telling the truth is ultimately not just about her, or even about the likelihood of hurting her parents; it's about others in the community who are vulnerable, too. As a result, she knows she has to tell, even though doing so will be costly.



Peter and Kira don't know how drastically things are about to change for their family. Yet even in these last moments of ignorance about what's happened, they're both thinking about their love and concern for Maya, demonstrating that their children are their top priority.



Kira gets home from her errands as Peter and Leo are getting into the other car for the trip to the capital. Just then Maya comes out onto the steps. She tells them everything. When she finishes speaking, the ground is littered with groceries and a broken coffee cup. Among the shattered pieces can be seen the image of a **bear**.

The sight of the shattered bear mug, while a fairly obvious image, indicates how catastrophic Maya's news is for the whole family, even for the town—Beartown's fragile sense of unity is about to be proven to be superficial.



CHAPTER 30

The police keep asking questions about what Maya did, not about what Kevin did. Questions like which parts were voluntary or forced, how much she drank or smoked, how “clear” she was, how loudly she screamed, and how hard she struggled. They also tell her she shouldn't have destroyed the evidence and shouldn't have put herself in such a situation to begin with.

The consequences of Maya's truth-telling seem tragically backward: it's as though she is the one being interrogated and Kevin the one being protected. Because her culture privileges young men like Kevin, she bears the heaviest consequences for having made the accusation.



Kira shouts and makes phone calls, while Peter holds Maya's hand and feels powerless. Having grown up in the shadow of Isak's death, Maya has always tried not to break her parents' hearts. Now, sitting in the Hed police station, she realizes she'll survive this ordeal, but that her parents won't. She feels guilt as she sees in their eyes the realization her parents have always feared admitting: “we can't protect our children.”

Kira and Peter both live up to their respective personalities in their reactions to the news, while Maya continues to feel responsible for the newfound sorrow she's bringing on her family. Ever since Isak died, the Anderssons have feared that the façade of safety surrounding their children will be broken, and now their nightmare is coming true.



Before he leaves for the capital, Amat's friend Lifa hugs him and tells him that he saw some little kids playing hockey in the street. They pretended to be their hockey idols, like Sidney Crosby and Patrick Kane. One of the little kids had yelled, “I'm Amat!” Lifa tells his friend to “kill them all. Show them you're one of us.”

Lifa means that Amat should represent kids like them who grow up in the Hollow without many of the advantages that wealthier kids enjoy. In that way, it's not primarily about beating the other team, but rather about showing younger kids that something like this is possible.



As the hockey team boards the bus for the game, a police car rolls into the rink parking lot and stops in front of the bus. David arrives late, in a confused and happy mood—last night, his girlfriend told him that she's pregnant. Then he sees the police car. When the police pull Kevin off the bus, Bobo and Lyt try to block their path. Kevin looks “vulnerable, defenseless. Perhaps that's why all the adults around react the way that they do, or perhaps there are thousands of other reasons.” Amat and Benji are the only players who stay quietly seated during the uproar.

When Kevin gets arrested, the players, coaches, and other adults instinctively flock to his defense. He represents the town's best aspirations, after all, so no one wants to believe that he could be justifiably accused, especially at a moment like this. It's telling that he's described as “vulnerable,” since that word indicates how, although he was the aggressor in the assault, he's also in some ways a victim of the toxic culture that raised him.



Peter, who feels completely incapable of violence, nevertheless wants to watch someone else harm Kevin. That's why he stands at a distance, watching the arrest. David notices he's there.

Peter doesn't have a fighting instinct and has been painfully reminded that he can't protect his daughter, but he still wants justice. His standing there, however, will send an unintended message to David.



CHAPTER 31

In the hospital, Maya calmly undergoes all the required examinations. Kira, meanwhile, is at her wits' end, calling everyone at her legal practice. On the team bus, everyone's still in an uproar. When David gets a text from Mr. Erdahl with the news of the charges against Kevin, he doesn't tell the team.

In contrast to the hockey club's outrage, Maya is calm and compliant. David makes the decision not to share the news right before the rest of the team plays the final game, believing that staying silent is the only thing that will hold the team together right now.



David has always believed that hockey must stay separated from the outside world. He's imposed that separation on his players for their sake, too—giving them a safe, secure place away from the struggles of their everyday lives. But now he wonders, “how far are you allowed to go to protect your universe?”

David sees the “hockey bubble” as a positive thing, a way to keep his players safe (and himself, too). But at a moment like this, he suspects that the bubble impinges on other people's wellbeing even as it protects those inside it.



The nurse, Ann-Katrin, is Hog's wife. She normally maintains a professional distance from patients and teaches her younger colleagues to do the same, but today, she touches Maya's cheek and tells her how brave she is.

Ann-Katrin, too, tries to maintain a professional bubble in order to fulfill her role effectively. However, she finds that Maya's pain and courageous act are worth making an exception, perhaps indicating that the rest of the town should demonstrate similar compassion.



When Peter arrives at the hospital, he wants to triumphantly announce Kevin's arrest, but when he sees Maya in the hospital room, all he can do is cry. He promises to get Ana and Maya's guitar. Then Maya reminds him that he needs to talk to Leo, too, who must be scared. Peter and Kira are horrified to realize that Maya is the only one who's thought of Leo at all.

Maya continues to think of others first—her little brother has been overlooked and kept in the dark through all this. She realizes that confronting reality is the best way to combat fear in this situation, showing a kind of insight that most people in Beartown seem to lack. Peter and Kira continue to grapple with the shame and sorrow of being unable to protect their daughter.



Before David can make up his mind what to say to his players, Benji stands up in the middle of the bus and speaks to various teammates in turn. He reminds them of the lessons David has taught them over the years, like focusing on the things you can change. He concludes by leading the bus in a chant of “WIN! WIN! WIN!” Then he spends the rest of the trip asleep in the back of the bus. David deletes Mr. Erdahl's text and pretends he hasn't heard any news.

Benji speaks up to encourage his teammates in the best way he knows how—reminding them of what David has already taught them over the years. This is sufficient pretext for David to delay breaking the news to his players—it won't help them win. In this moment, it becomes especially clear that winning doesn't just take priority over other parts of life—it can actually erase them all together.



CHAPTER 32

When the opposing team hears that Kevin Erdahl won't even be playing today, they can taste victory. They rush into the rink, but they discover that the corridor is completely dark. Soon they find Benji standing in the doorway of their locker room. He's not moving. Benji begins systematically punching, elbowing, and headbutting various players, causing chaos in the darkened hallway. Before they can mobilize a response, Benji grins at them and retreats to his own locker room, from which crazed shouts of "We are the **bears!**" can be heard. They try to laugh Benji off as a "head case," but they're shaken.

In the stands at the game is a mom who sacrificed her teen years to cross-country ski training. Her son, Filip, is now the smallest player on Beartown's team.

Tails is waiting for news from David about Kevin. Whoever it is who's "snatched [the team's] chance of victory away from them," Tails "already [...] hates them."

When the game starts, the opposing team is so scared of Benji, the "violent lunatic," that they brace for a collision when he skates toward them, and they don't realize he's aiming for the goal until it's too late. Lyt takes a big hit to give Amat enough space for a shot. Amat takes the chance before the other team has a chance to realize how fast he is and quickly gets the goal, causing the arena to erupt.

Maggan Lyt is Filip's mom's best friend. They're a team, even though Filip's mom usually stays quiet while Maggan screams at the referee. She also stays quiet when Maggan defends the homophobic slurs another parent aims at an opposing player. The mother who protested takes her two children to sit further away. After Benji gets a goal in the third period, he immediately skates over and tosses the puck to the children; it turns out that the mother and children were Gaby and her kids.

Knowing his team won't be at their best without Kevin, Benji continues taking matters into his own hands by launching an insane solo attack on the opposing players and throwing them off their game mentally. It's a way of leveraging the team's reputation for fierce loyalty to advantage, sowing doubt and fear in the other team's minds.



Filip and his mom aren't introduced until this late stage in the story, and their role isn't as clear as that of some other characters. Filip seems to represent a younger athlete who hasn't fully assimilated into all aspects of the "bear" culture yet and still stands a chance of resisting the more questionable parts.



Tails prejudices the situation, seeing it in terms of the team being unfairly harmed rather than thinking that perhaps Kevin himself is at fault. This is a preview of how the town as a whole will receive the news.



Benji displays his leadership ability here. When he crazily attacked their opponents before the game, he had more in mind than just intimidation; he's taking advantage of their hesitation to create opportunities for the team to shine. His tactic influences other players to think similarly. It's another example of the positive side of team loyalty.



Various community dynamics are at work in the stands, too. Many spectators assume that certain language and jokes are appropriate during a game that they might not say outside—an example of the harm of "bubble" thinking. By using a slur like this, though, they don't realize who they're unknowingly hurting—in this case, the family of one of the players they idolize.



CHAPTER 33

When Maya gets home from the hospital, she goes straight to sleep; she's always coped with pain that way. Meanwhile, the **Bears** are fighting as hard as they can. Amat blocks shot after shot with his helmet. Bobo collapses in exhaustion. Benji seems to be everywhere at once, playing through pain. But at the end of the game, it's 3-3, and in the overtime period, they can't hold out against their opponents or break through their defense.

The **Bears's** locker room is crushed and silent. Eventually, David appears with a bag full of pucks. He hands one to each player. Some smile when they see what's written on the pucks, and some cry: written on each puck is "Thank you."

Benji lingers on the ice for a long time and, once he makes it back to the locker room, he can't get his skates off. Bobo comes out to the parking lot to find Gaby. When she comes inside to help, she discovers that Benji skated the entire third period and overtime with a broken foot.

While Maya naps, Ana sits by her bed and anxiously scrolls through social media, waiting for the moment when everyone finds out what happened.

Though the team has the option of staying overnight in Hed, they all decide to return to Beartown to be there when Kevin is released. On the way home on the bus, people begin hearing the news about what happened. They protest that Maya was clearly the one who'd been going after Kevin; the accusation is "bullshit." Back in Beartown, Leo awakens to the sound of Ana smashing a computer against the wall.

CHAPTER 34

Kira and Peter are sitting on the front steps of their house. The feeling of distance between them reminds Peter of the barrier of grief they felt in the aftermath of Isak's death. Peter blames himself; his club is responsible for the way Kevin was nurtured. Kira feels nothing but the desire to kill Kevin.

Everyone is enduring pain in their own way. Maya continues dealing with the pain and weariness of her assault and its aftermath. In a much different way, the Bears end up confronting an insurmountable barrier in their opponents. No matter how fierce their effort, they ultimately can't overcome them.



Even though David is all about winning, that doesn't stop him from honoring an admirable effort and expressing his love for his players in his own reticent way. This moment hints that hockey culture doesn't have to be as toxic as it often is.



Benji's effort in the game becomes even more astonishing when everyone realizes he'd been skating with an injury, literally bearing pain for his teammates' sake.



Ana is bearing a burden for Maya, too—waiting to do battle for her against the town, anticipating what kinds of things will be written about her once the news is out.



Once they hear what happened, the players quickly rally to Kevin, again emphasizing how being a hockey star makes an individual seem completely faultless. Meanwhile, The nature of the town's comments about Maya can be guessed from Ana's violent reaction.



Maya's tragedy is reminiscent of Isak's death for the Anderssons, if only in the sense that it reminds the parents how little control they really have. Peter recognizes that hockey plays a likely role, which only increases his sense of responsibility.



Kira kisses Ana, who's crying and ashamed over the shattered computer. She explains to Ana that she loves her, but that the Anderssons need to be together as a family right now. Peter drives Ana home, wishing he could say something comforting, but unable to lie. After she gets home, Ana takes her dogs into the forest and cries into their fur.

Ana belongs to the family in a way, but the Anderssons need space to process their grief separately for a while. Ana's reliance on her dogs shows that the animals can offer her more comfort than humans; in a way, the town's obsession with being "bears" has made everyone a little less human in times of crisis.



Back at home, Peter and Kira cry together, unable to figure out how to help Maya through this, suspecting that she's already stronger than them. Kira says it isn't Peter's fault or hockey's; after all, "it takes a village to raise a child." Peter says that maybe they picked the wrong village.

While Maya is the victim of the tragedy, Peter and Kira carry the additional burden of their helplessness and the shame of not having been able to do something to spare Maya. Peter fears that the particular culture of this town is to blame, which indicates just how much the town will unravel in the aftermath.



Early the next morning, the members of the hockey team march through town as a group, feeling as if they're under attack and searching for an enemy. Amat doesn't join them. He just skates furiously around the rink, crashing himself into the boards and waiting until he's sweating profusely so that no one can tell he's crying.

Even as the Anderssons search for a way to deal with their grief, the hockey team, too, looks for an outlet; an attack on Kevin is an attack on them. The fact that they just want an enemy shows how the town's fixation on insiders vs. outsiders will inevitably lead to conflict.



CHAPTER 35

Hate is a simple and satisfying emotion that neatly divides the world into friends and enemies. It's easier to choose a side than to accept that a situation is complex. Once you choose a side, you seek out facts that confirm what you want to believe. And then you dehumanize the enemy.

This is one of Backman's numerous asides commenting on the general human dynamics at work in the story. In crisis, people try to simplify things and eliminate information that complicates a narrative—which often means ostracizing a person.



The easiest way to dehumanize is to take someone's name away from them. People do that by refusing to call her "Maya," instead calling her "the young woman" or even "the slut." Nobody uses the word "rape"; they talk about "the allegation." Discussion starts with the claim that "she started it," and progresses, before long, to "she deserved it."

People cope with the situation by making Maya an abstract person they can blame, not a real person they know and care about. Backman shows how the chain of rationalization progresses until the victim is thoroughly blamed, and he also indicates that the language people use to discuss incidents like this plays a large role in shaping the ongoing consequences.



Benji goes to Hed to see the bass player. After they've drunk beer together for a while, Benji tells the bass player he wants to go somewhere. The bass player goes off into the woods, and Benji follows 10 minutes later. They smoke together for a while, but Benji's impulse control is too strong, and he ends up telling the bass player he's made a mistake. The bass player calls after him that "big secrets turn us into small men."

Benji drowns his pain over the situation by leaving Beartown behind altogether. The bass player is completely removed from the situation, so he's a refuge for Benji. However, Benji is harboring his own secrets, which, the bass player hints, will only cause him more pain in the long run.



Kira tries to talk Maya out of going to school on Monday morning. Maya explains that if she hadn't been ready for what people would say, she wouldn't have reported Kevin. After all, this is only going to get worse before it gets better. After Kira relents and drives off into the forest, she screams until her voice gives out.

Maya knows exactly how bad things are likely to be at school. However, she knows that hiding would just be another way of silencing the truth and perpetuating the town's attitude of accepting hockey players' entitlement.



CHAPTER 36

David asks his girlfriend if she thinks he'll be a good dad. She teases him that he'll take a tactical approach to the birth and be an annoyingly competitive, but great, father. He wonders aloud what to do about the situation with Kevin. She just tells him to do his job—he isn't a policeman or a lawyer.

David's girlfriend encourages him in limiting himself to the hockey bubble. It's striking that this conversation occurs against the backdrop of impending parenthood. Functionally, David understands that there's more to life than hockey, but he's never found a way to let the different parts of his life mix.



Hog and Ann-Katrin watch as Bobo goes off to meet with the other players for an optional training session. Lyt, Bobo explains, has demanded that the team pull together for Kevin's sake. Ann-Katrin says that she saw Maya, and they've got to say something to Bobo about that. Hog says they can't get involved; it's none of their business.

Bobo's parents weigh the costs of breaking their own silence and intruding on their son's own social bubble. The team is trying to put up a united front, with Lyt filling the leadership vacuum, and it will only become harder for everyone in town to resist that.



At school, Lyt tells the other players that the accusation is a jealousy-fueled "conspiracy" to bring down the team. They all have to stand together in support of Kevin. Later, Bobo approaches Amat and tries to explain that it's important for them to go to Hed later to support Kevin.

People are trying to spin Maya's accusation as a convoluted attempt to harm the hockey team. It's an illustration of Backman's earlier remark about people's tendency to seek comforting interpretations rather than confront the truth.



Maya's locker is covered in black ink: "Five letters. All she is to them now."

Later, it's made clear that the letters spell "Bitch." It's the last step Backman described—dehumanizing Maya by refusing to call her by her name.



In Hed, Kevin emerges from the police station, surrounded by his parents, smartly dressed lawyers, members of the hockey club hierarchy, and most of the junior team. Kevin's mom wraps a blanket around him as he gets into the car, and men pat his cheek. It's all as if Kevin is the victim.

In sharp contrast to Maya's lonely, exposed position, Kevin is surrounded and protected, ensuring an image of a united, irreproachable team. This also lets Beartown's self-image remain intact.



Benji isn't among the group of junior players. He's sitting on a wall about 20 yards away with a hood hiding his face. The adults don't notice, but Kevin makes the briefest of eye contact, and then looks down. Amat, too, lingers outside the station. He puts his headphones in and walks all the way back to Beartown.

Benji and Amat, each with their respective suspicions and secrets, don't conform to the group narrative, although neither one is willing to openly challenge it yet, either.



In the cafeteria, Ana sees Maya sitting in an isolated corner. She starts to walk toward her, but Maya shakes her head. Head down, Ana finds a seat elsewhere—the shame follows her for the rest of her life. Meanwhile, a group of older girls from Kevin’s party dump a glass of milk on Maya, saying cruelly that no one would want to rape her. They also break the glass on her head. But Maya doesn’t do anything. Soon, Leo comes over and sits with her, despite her warnings, and helps Maya clean up. When Maya asks why, Leo says, “Because [...] we aren’t the **bears** from Beartown.”

Maya’s classmates react with cruelty, showing how the town’s extreme emphasis on loyalty makes people turn on each other instead of offering compassion. Leo explains his actions by saying that they don’t fit in here, anyway, so they don’t have anything to lose—a telling remark from the son of Peter, who’s been enmeshed in Beartown hockey for more or less his whole life. Hockey culture, it seems, makes everyone an outsider sooner or later.



CHAPTER 37

Kevin’s mom is shaking. She wonders who you save in a sinking ship scenario, and decides you always start with your family. She’s cleaned the house, gotten rid of Kevin’s bedding, and donated the recently laundered clothes to faraway charities. She’s flushed all the marijuana she could find and “vacuumed up all potential blouse-buttons.” Kevin’s mom is waiting for the police when they arrive, insisting that there’s nothing for them to hide, so there’s no reason to delay the search. But she still can’t stop shivering.

Mrs. Erdahl suspects there’s more to the whole story than she’s ready to admit, but she’s a mother, and she feels her first duty is to protect her son—similar to the Anderssons’ thinking, which Backman suggests is flawed and not actually the best way for parents to ensure their kids’ flourishing.



Kevin’s dad is sitting in the “command center,” the Erdahls’ kitchen, making phone calls. All the men in the house are upset and ready to fight. William Lyt’s father, Mario, is among the loudest, arguing that the Anderssons could have sought to “resolve this privately,” but instead went to the police right before the final—clearly out of “jealousy.” He claims this is what happens when you give a GM too much influence. Now, Peter thinks he owns the club and is losing his power with Sune’s firing, and so he decided to get his family involved.

Much like the hockey team surrounding Kevin as he emerged from the police station, the older generation is aggressive, seeking both rationalizations and a target to blame. Peter provides an easy one, since his situation with Sune and the club is an open secret. Everyone assumes that hockey and winning are the motivations here—ignoring the idea that Maya could simply be telling the truth.



When David arrives at the Erdahls’, there are several middle-aged men seemingly standing guard; among them is Tails, who explains that they’re just showing that they stand united with the family. David doesn’t respond. David goes into Kevin’s room and asks him to just look him in the eye and say he didn’t do it. So Kevin tearfully looks him in the eye and insists that he slept with Maya because she asked him to—“You seriously think I could rape someone?” David hugs Kevin and tries to tell himself that if Kevin isn’t protected, others on the team will suffer, too.

David acts like Mrs. Erdahl—protective, wanting to believe the best about Kevin, but not asking too many questions. He rationalizes this in terms of his responsibilities to the team as a whole—without asking what it would end up costing the team if he’s wrong and Kevin is indeed guilty. Kevin’s response also indicates that his very identity protects him; he successfully appeals to David’s biased belief that a star hockey player couldn’t possibly do anything wrong.



All Mr. Erdahl’s life, he’s striven for perfection as a “survival strategy.” He knows what it’s like to be poor, so he can’t afford to cut himself any slack. Any little crack in the façade of perfection risks bringing it all down. On the ride back from the police station, he roared at Kevin for getting drunk the week before the final, focusing on the cause of the situation rather than the problem itself. And now that survival is at stake, it’s no longer a question of right and wrong.

This is the first time insight is given into Mr. Erdahl’s background. He grew up underprivileged, and, much like Kira Andersson, fears losing his hard-won position. For that reason, Kevin’s reckless behavior is a threat to his survival. It’s not about Maya, but about his own life remaining intact. Again, hockey and economic realities are revealed to be intimately intertwined.



Mr. Erdahl comes in and talks to David and Kevin. He explains that it's a choice between the two of them and Peter Andersson—somebody will have to leave the club. Maya lied, for some reason, and it doesn't matter why. Now it's their job to force Peter out of the club before he does the same to them. Hearing this, David remembers seeing Peter standing in the parking lot. And Kevin remembers that somebody needs to talk to Amat about what he saw.

Mr. Erdahl breaks the whole situation down into a neat “us and them” scenario. David remembers Peter’s presence at the arrest and interprets it in a way that’s favorable to this scenario—making him the enemy. Here it becomes clear that anyone can become a casualty of hockey culture’s rigid focus on winning and loyalty.



CHAPTER 38

As Amat walks slowly home from Hed, an old Saab stops in front of him, and two men in black jackets get out. Amat knows they're members of The Pack. They speak pleasantly to him, admiring his play during the semifinal and saying what a great A-team he, Kevin, and the others can build next year. Amat knows they're watching his facial expression when they say Kevin's name. He gives the slightest of nods in response.

The Erdahls don't waste any time in moving against their perceived enemies. The members of The Pack are trying to get a sense of where Amat stands, threatening him in the vaguest of ways. The message isn't lost on Amat, though—he knows his whole standing on the team, and thus in the town, is in jeopardy.



Peter sits at his office desk, thinking about “the right sort of guy”—a phrase that suggests that your off-ice life says something about your playing. When you love something like hockey, you wish that it could exist in a bubble, untouched by the outside world. He remembers a time when Kira criticized him for believing that the police shouldn't be involved in an off-ice scuffle between a player and a team sponsor. He didn't like or want to defend the violence, but he “wanted hockey to solve hockey's problems. Inside the bubble.” He realizes now that he's a hypocrite.

Peter thinks about the “bubble” attitude that so many have been guilty of. He realizes he's been complicit in sustaining such attitudes. When someone learns that their status on the ice is going to be protected at all costs, it naturally affects how that person will behave off the ice.



The club president has been fielding angry phone calls all day. He's always loved representing hockey as a movement that rises above class, politics, and other things that divide—society no longer has many of those. He's tired of hearing that when something bad happens, it's “hockey's problem.” Finally he goes and tells Peter that maybe he should go home until the controversy dies down. Peter is already packed. The president tries to explain that the club can't take a position on this situation, since “it's her word against his.” Peter tells him that the club has already taken a position.

Peter indicates that by not taking a position, the hockey club is actually taking the position that behavior like Kevin's is acceptable, and that players will continue to be sheltered from consequences for the team's sake. The club president, however, doesn't see it this way; to him and others loyal to the club, hockey always seems neutral, when it's actually the most powerful force in the town.



Maya sits in class, knowing she'll always be nothing but “the girl who got raped.” Even those who believe her story will be afraid of her, choosing silence because it's easier than getting mixed up in something so explosive. In the middle of class, she gets up and goes into an empty bathroom, then smashes the mirror with her fist.

Unlike Kevin, Maya has no one to stand up for her at school. Doing so would threaten other people's standing, too, so everyone keeps silent. What's more, she knows that her name is permanently lost—echoing Backman's earlier point about dehumanization.



Benji sees Maya go into the bathroom and hears the sound of shattering glass. He goes in and stands there quietly while Maya cries that she knows Benji thinks she's lying about his best friend. As Maya starts to leave, Benji moves aside so she doesn't have to touch him, which she'll later recognize as a kind gesture. Quietly, he replies that Maya's wrong; Kevin isn't his best friend anymore.

Jeannette is on her way into the bathroom when she sees Maya emerge with bleeding knuckles. A moment later, she hears an explosion of noise from the bathroom as Benji rips a sink out of the wall, destroys a toilet, and throws a trash can through the window. This incident is later attributed to Benji's problems with aggression, but Jeannette meets Benji's eyes as he's escorted off, and she realizes he did it to protect Maya from getting in trouble for smashing the mirror.

Kira is in warrior mode at the office, researching sexual assault cases, but when Maya texts her to come home, she's quickly there, holding Maya as Maya finally releases her emotion. Maya has tried to protect her loved ones from her own pain, but she can't bear their sorrow as well as her own. Kira says that the town might have to see Maya's pain "to understand that you're a real person."

Benji is sensitive and sympathetic to Maya, taking care not to make her feel more uncomfortable. He lets her know that he's not on Kevin's side and that she isn't completely alone. Kevin's behavior has crossed a line that Benji can't accept, showing how not everyone in the town is willing to conform to expectations of loyalty.



Benji uses his aggressive reputation to shield Maya from further harm, subtly indicating that reputation and status can be tools for helping others as well as hurting them.



Kira switches quickly from fighting mode to comforting her daughter. When Maya finally allows herself to fall apart, Kira understands that, in a certain way, Maya's strength allows the town to continue to objectify her and not face the reality of what's happened.



CHAPTER 39

A town councilor is on the phone, explaining to Tails that they can't build a new hockey academy in Beartown in light of the accusation against Kevin. Tails knows what that loss would likely mean for the town—an economic collapse. He's always believed that hockey allows the town to dream, but if the town stagnates, it will die. Peter comes into Tails's supermarket then, but he shakes his head when Tails starts to approach him. Soon Tails goes shamefacedly into his office.

Kevin's dad drives to the Hollow in his expensive car. He picks up Amat. He tells Amat that he grew up in an apartment block much like these, with a single mother. He knows about Fatima's back trouble and says that he could arrange for her to see a good physiotherapist. After all, people in Beartown are supposed to look out for each other. He also offers Amat the business card of a personnel manager in Hed. Fatima can interview for some office work there. Then Mr. Erdahl falls silent, "as if that were the whole purpose of his visit."

The explosive situation is already having potentially devastating consequences for Beartown as a whole, again highlighting how the fate of the hockey club affects the entire town. Peter reacts to Tails like Maya did to Ana. He's scorned in the town right now and tries to protect his friend from being stained by association.



Mr. Erdahl uses his disadvantaged upbringing as a way to establish common ground with Amat. He also uses Fatima's challenges as a way to manipulate Amat into staying silent about what he saw at the party. The irony of his attitude is that nobody in Beartown is looking out for Maya, and really, Mr. Erdahl isn't looking out for Fatima either; everyone is just looking out for the interests of the hockey club.



Just as Amat is about to get out of the car, Mr. Erdahl tells him that though he might have thought he saw something at Kevin's party, drinking puts strange ideas in people's heads. He also asks abruptly if Amat is in love with Maya. Amat's eyes fill with tears. Mr. Erdahl tells him that girls do strange things for attention, and that someday, when he turns professional, he'll understand that girls like Maya aren't to be trusted; "they're like a virus." Mr. Erdahl gives him five thousand-kronor notes for new skates and tells him the team needs to stick together. He growls like a **bear** and drives off.

Amat watches as the expensive car drives off. He doesn't notice the cheaper Saab parked some distance away. Amat stands there for a long time, then wipes his eyes, drops something in the snow, and walks away. Eventually, the young man who's tinkering with the engine of the Saab walks over and picks up a handful of crumpled, sweaty kronor notes from the ground. He puts them in his pocket. Amat goes home and looks at his too-small, peeling skates.

The hockey team is having an optional training session in the forest. Mr. Erdahl drops Kevin off there, and his teammates cheer. David shakes Kevin's and his dad's hands. The club president is standing at the forest's edge, and he meets David's eyes briefly before going back to his office. If Kevin had come to the rink to practice, they would have had to say something about "principles and consequences," but the president can't stop a training session in the forest—"that's what they all tell themselves."

Kira takes the garbage out, a chore that used to be Maya's, but it's different now. Kira smells coffee from a neighbor's house and wishes someone would invite her over—shared coffee being the customary gesture of hospitality in Beartown. But no one does. Meanwhile, across town, Mrs. Erdahl takes out the trash. One neighbor's door, then another and another, opens as people invite her over for coffee.

CHAPTER 40

Peter comes home from the grocery store and hugs Kira, promising her that he can get a job anywhere—she moved here for him, so he'll move for her. Kira notices that Peter has taken his keys off the **bear**-shaped key ring he's always used.

Mr. Erdahl continues to manipulate Amat, appealing to his feelings for Maya. It's also clear where Kevin gets some of his misogynistic views from, as Mr. Erdahl echoes the earlier language about how other people act like viruses. Mr. Erdahl concludes the interaction by attempting to buy off Amat for the price of a new pair of skates—something he knows Amat can't afford and that could make a big difference to his playing.



A member of The Pack is keeping an eye on the situation. Amat rejects the money Mr. Erdahl offered him—it's a small act of resistance, but it shows that Amat isn't going to capitulate altogether, even though doing so would help him and his mother. Here, Amat begins to show what it means to genuinely look out for other people.



The hockey club is trying to get around the moral questions by training on neutral ground, but the reality is that there is no neutral ground in Beartown, and it's abundantly clear that Kevin is being welcomed back on the team, literally with no questions asked. The adults all sense that they're glossing over something, but no one has the courage to break the silence.



It's clear from this scene that Kira is being ostracized by the town, while Mrs. Erdahl is showered with sympathy and support. Contrary to what Mr. Erdahl told Amat, people in Beartown obviously don't look out for each other when doing so might be risky.



Although getting rid of the bear keychain is a small gesture, it speaks to something much bigger—Beartown hockey has meant everything to Peter, and he no longer wants to identify himself with it.



Ana is at her dad's house. To her surprise, he knocks on her bedroom door, looking sober and sad. He explains that the hockey club has called a meeting; a group of parents and sponsors are insisting on holding a vote about Peter. They want the club to fire him. Ana is furious—how could people be acting as if Kevin is the victim, and Peter is deliberately trying to bring the club down? The club president rings the Anderssons' doorbell to report the same news. Maya follows her dad into the hallway and stares the president in the eye.

Maya cries and apologizes for causing Peter all this trouble. He reassures her that it's not her fault and that, somehow, they'll get justice. Maya asks if they can go out to the garage and play Nirvana. Kira sits at the kitchen table, playing cards with Leo and listening as Maya plays her guitar, matching Peter's off-beat drumming so that he won't feel bad.

Ana's dad wakes her up that night. He's been asked to hunt down an injured animal in the forest, and he asks if "the second-best hunter in Beartown" wants to join him, as she often did when she was younger. Ana wants to hug him, but she doesn't.

Benji goes to the bass player's rehearsal space in Hed. They spend hours singing drinking songs and laughing. They talk about their respective passions, and the bass player asks Benji to teach him how to skate. But when the bass player touches Benji's hand, Benji gets up and leaves in tears.

A window breaks in the Anderssons' house. A rock has been thrown, landing on Maya's bed. Everyone rushes into Maya's room to see the rock, which has *BITCH* written on it in red letters. Before Maya or Peter can react, Kira has run out to the Volvo. Four young teens are walking down the street. Kira's car flies down the street, smashing into one of the kids' bikes and sending the rider flying. She grabs a golf club from the trunk and starts toward the terrified boy, but Maya races down the snowy street in her socks and tackles her mother before she can attack. Maya comforts Kira and fondly calls her a "wolf mother." Peter takes them both home. Though everyone on the street must have witnessed it, nobody ever talks about the incident.

Thanks to Mr. Erdahl's efforts to mobilize the town against Peter, Beartown's issues will come to a head at the upcoming meeting. Maya forces the club president to look at her like she's a real person—it's all she can do in this situation.



The family draws together in light of the crisis, having been effectively isolated by others' rejection and the town's vitriol. It's noteworthy that while they're technically outsiders at this point, they're still secure with each other—demonstrating that being an insider in Beartown isn't necessarily crucial after all.



Just as the Anderssons are bonding over various activities, Ana and her dad, who've seldom spoken to each other for a long time, bond over a favorite activity, too.



Benji finds comfort in hanging out with the bass player, but he's still frightened by the possibility of the relationship progressing, perhaps because letting it go further would mean carrying the weight of too many secrets at once.



The ostracization of Maya escalates to an act of violence, and Kira almost responds in kind. Maya intervenes before things spiral out of control, with violence sparking more violence. Maya's whole family is being scapegoated by the town now, as if driving them out will allow the problems to be neatly erased.



CHAPTER 41

Early the next morning, Ramona sees Sune walking toward the Bearskin, trailing an eager puppy. They go inside and talk about Sune's dismissal over coffee and whisky. Sune says that Kevin's actions were "utterly damn shameful," but that he's worried the town will try to blame Kevin's actions on hockey. At that, Ramona slaps Sune across the ear and snarls, "When you are going to admit that it isn't 'hockey' that raises these boys, it's YOU LOT? [...] YOU'RE the problem!" After she calms down, she says that if Holger were here, he'd tell Sune that he already knows what's the right thing to do.

Ana is cleaning elk blood off her dad's pickup truck. Last night they gave an injured elk a humane end. A neighbor notices Ana. He used to go hunting with her dad and was always kind to Ana. Now he "spits derisively." A little boy down the street sees this and mimics the old man.

Ana's dad tries to calm her. She rages inside—girls in Beartown aren't allowed to like hockey; only hockey players. And because hockey players spend their lives in locker rooms, they're isolated from girls and believe that girls' only purpose is for sex. The players are never taught that when a girl says "no," she means it. Ana wants to scream all these things, but she stays silent, and she hates herself for that.

Someone breaks into the school early that morning. Jeannette discovers acrid-smelling solvent on the floor and later sees Zacharias's hands covered with ink. She realizes he snuck into the school overnight to scrub the word BITCH off of Maya's locker, because he knows how it feels to be targeted unfairly. It's his "silent protest."

CHAPTER 42

As Maya stands in the garage that morning, playing her guitar, she realizes that the thrown rock has done something to her. She's no longer feeling destroyed by fear. She's realized that "the only way to stop being afraid of the darkness out there is to find a darkness inside yourself that's bigger." She knows that Beartown will never give her justice, so she'll have to get it for herself.

As usual, Ramona sees to the heart of things where other people might try to avoid or rationalize issues. She tells Sune that talking about these things as "hockey's problems" is a dodge that tries to exonerate the people who built up the town's hockey culture. Until that's confronted, nothing will fundamentally change.



This cruel reaction to Ana is doubly upsetting—never having felt that she fit in to the town to begin with, now she's being targeted for her association with Maya, even by people she trusted. It's also significant that the little boy mimics the older neighbor, demonstrating how dehumanizing treatment of women can be passed down through generations.



Like Ramona, Ana sees what the problem is with Beartown—there's no place for girls in its culture, which harms boys, too, because they aren't taught how to have healthy relationships with female peers.



Sometimes, acts of resistance come from people one wouldn't expect. Zacharias has been bullied throughout the book, though, and he knows how much Maya means to Amat. It's an example of someone pushing back against the town mentality in an unobtrusive way—suggesting that perhaps others could band together to do the same.



Maya begins to shift from passive fear to the desire to act for herself. For now, Backman leaves it ambiguous as to how she will do this—only hinting that her action will originate from "darkness."



Maya shows up at Ana's house, and they have an emotional reunion. Maya has just been trying to protect Ana, but Ana tells her how silly that is. Maya asks if they can go out into the forest to practice some shooting, the way they used to. She thinks it would help her relax. Ana looks at Maya and knows she's lying, but she doesn't ask any questions. They go into the woods and shoot for hours, laughing together again. When they get home, Maya sees a double-barreled shotgun at Ana's and asks Ana to teach her how to use it.

Because of the opening lines of the novel, and because of the violence that's been prevalent elsewhere, the reader begins to get the impression that Maya plans to kill Kevin.



Mr. Erdahl shows up at the Bearskin to talk to Ramona, Tails accompanying him. Ramona gives him a glass of her worst whisky. Erdahl says that the Bearskin is one of the hockey club's longstanding sponsors, and he tells her about the upcoming meeting and the need to vote Peter out as GM. When Ramona says that Erdahl is making it sound as if his son is the victim, Erdahl loses his composure and screams that Kevin really is the victim. He's angry that Ramona is trying to "blame this on hockey." Ramona says that if Erdahl had played hockey himself as a kid, then he might have "learned to lose like a man" and taught his son to take some responsibility for his actions. Erdahl leaves in fury.

Erdahl continues his campaign to get people in the town on his side, voting against Peter. However, he underestimates Ramona—everything from her bad whisky to her matter-of-fact estimation of Erdahl shows she can't be bought and that she has him figured out. Interestingly, Ramona's words here show both the positive and negative sides of the town's hockey culture; she indicates that while being on the hockey team is part of what made Kevin entitled, she also notes that hockey can sometimes teach its players valuable lessons.



Later Tails comes back into the Bearskin and shamefacedly tells Ramona that he's trying not to pick a side. Ramona tells him his father would have been ashamed of him. Then he asks if Robbie Holts still visits the pub. He tells Ramona to make sure Robbie calls the store, and Tails will make sure he gets an interview.

Tails is trying to play both sides at this point, which Ramona plainly sees. Still, his kindness toward Robbie Holts indicates that Tails, like some of the other characters, is starting to confront the negative consequences of the town's relentless emphasis on winning and loyalty.



That night, during the hockey club meeting, Maya stands in the shelter of the woods and watches Kevin running around the illuminated jogging track. She times his laps and holds an imaginary rifle, even though she's shaking: "One of them is going to die. She still hasn't decided who."

At this point, it's unclear what Maya's plan is—if she really does intend to murder Kevin, or if she's going to commit suicide instead.



CHAPTER 43

At the meeting, Peter waits until everyone else has gone inside before entering himself. It feels like the whole town is there. The meeting quickly devolves into a debate. As Maggan Lyt is speaking, claiming that everyone knows Maya lied and that Peter's just "playing politics," everyone looks up and realizes that Peter is standing in the doorway. He says that he doesn't mean to interrupt. After Maggan calls for an open vote, Peter turns and leaves.

Because Peter isn't a fighter, it's not surprising that he avoids the meeting. However, he stays long enough to hear all he needs to hear, and his darkly polite appearance in the doorway speaks volumes.



William Lyt comes to Amat's apartment and threatens him, saying Amat has to join the team at the rink to show a united front for Kevin. Later, Fatima goes into Amat's room. Amat shows her the business card Mr. Erdahl gave him. He repeats Erdahl's words, saying that "you're nothing if you're alone in the world." He starts to cry. Fatima says that she isn't alone, and she doesn't need a rich man to give her a job she doesn't want. She only needs one man—her son. She also reminds him that he's not alone either; he just needs to be more careful about who he allies himself with.

Amat walks through town. Hockey has always been "the only thing that has ever made him feel like part of a group." When he reaches the rink, Lyt slaps his back approvingly.

Ramona is standing in the rink hallway, having ventured out for the first time in a decade, and she sees Peter. She tells him that someday, the town will be ashamed for blindly believing a boy's word over a girl's. Then she bursts into the meeting, in a drunken rage. She shakes her walking stick at the men and tells them she's ashamed of this town. When someone threatens Ramona, a member of The Pack quietly gets up and tells the man that if he doesn't shut up, then *he* will shut him up for good.

Amat looks his teammates in the eyes, then walks past them, ignoring Lyt's shouts. He enters the rink and walks into the meeting, pushing his way to the front of the room. He looks at everyone, staring especially at Erdahl, then speaks: "My name is Amat. I saw what Kevin did to Maya. I was drunk, I'm in love with her, and I'm telling you that straight [...] Kevin Erdahl raped Maya Andersson. I'm going to the police tomorrow." He goes on to describe what he saw in unforgiving detail. Then he quietly leaves.

When Amat gets outside, Lyt immediately charges at him, but suddenly Ann-Katrin, Bobo's mom, pushes between them and stares down the massive hockey player. Bobo stands by, feeling proud. Amat walks straight to Zacharias's house. Zacharias lets him in, and they wordlessly start playing video games together, as if nothing ever came between them.

Ramona talks with a member of The Pack. The guy admits he doesn't know if he can get the others to vote in Peter's favor. The man gazes at Mr. Erdahl and thinks about seeing Amat in the Hollow the other morning. In his pocket are the *kronor* notes Amat had dropped.

As she's done elsewhere in the story, here Fatima shows how strong she is, and that she demands the same from her son. She reminds Amat that he's exactly the same person he was before he joined the hockey team, and that those same values will help him make the right decision. He doesn't need to gain special perks for her; he just needs to be the boy she's raised him to be. Fatima's support of Amat here shapes his coming actions and shows how crucial parent-child bonds can be in shaping entire communities.



Amat's thoughts as he walks through the town are ambiguous. It looks as if he might be conceding to Lyt's demand for loyalty.



Ramona's emergence from isolation into the world shows how important this occasion is—even though she's quite drunk at the time. Somehow, an old woman's scolding helps shock the male-dominated town out of their tribalism, and prepares them for what they're about to hear. And it's clear, too, that The Pack's loyalty to Ramona serves her well.



Amat's intentions are clear as he bypasses the team and confronts the town with what he knows. It's an especially moving scene because he knows exactly how much he might be sacrificing—his whole future, even—by speaking up in this way. On the other hand, as a relative outsider to the town culture, he's perhaps in a better position to see its flaws.



Amat's action seems to encourage other unlikely voices to speak up. Notably, after his big scene, Amat doesn't wait for the town's response, but goes back to his own neighborhood to spend time with his old friend—suggesting that he knows the place and people that have made him who he is today.



It turns out that the Pack member talking to Ramona is the same one who was keeping an eye on Amat. The combination of these factors—Amat's actions and Ramona's influence—will be highly consequential for the town.



CHAPTER 44

At Zacharias's house, Amat gets a text. It's from Maya, and it simply says, "Thanks." He texts back, "Sorry." He apologizes for taking such a long time to take action.

Sune and his puppy have a visitor. David has come to tell Sune in person that David has an A-team job now. He also says that he "can't accept what [Peter] stands for." He explains that he saw Peter standing by and watching as Kevin was arrested and claims that Peter caused the arrest as a form of revenge. When Sune presses him, he admits that in Peter's position, he would have done the same. But hockey needs to operate within a world of its own. Peter should have waited until after the final to act, but instead, he "chose to impose his own punishment," thereby damaging the team and the town. He says it's not up to him to decide what Kevin did or didn't do; he's a hockey coach. Sune says he can't respect such an attitude; would David have thought differently if any other guy besides Kevin had committed a rape? David admits he doesn't know. Sune just lets the words sink in, and he invites David to stay for coffee.

As David and Sune drink coffee together, it's revealed that David hasn't been promoted to A-team coach of Beartown after all. He's the new coach of the A-team of Hed Ice Hockey Club.

The club president shows up at the Anderssons' house. He explains that David has given notice and is moving to Hed, and that the best junior players will be going with him—they've never played for the club, after all, but for David. Beartown will forget about building up its own A-team, since all the sponsors had invested with the expectation of a Beartown A-team. Peter still has his job. So it's good news for Peter, except that within a year's time, there might not be a financially sustainable club left. Then the club president looks down the hallway at Maya and offers her an apology.

David tells Sune that he's going to be a dad, and they talk about parenthood and coaching. David says that he believes Peter doesn't just want justice for Maya; he's looking for revenge. Sune tells David that when he has a 15-year-old child, he'll feel differently.

The exchange between Amat and Maya sums up the situation well. Amat has shown great courage, but at the same time, he could have acted sooner.



This scene is somewhat misleading—while the reader might assume that Sune has been fired, that's actually not the case (the A-team job David has accepted turns out not to be Sune's). Sune presses David regarding his blind spots—David's based his assessment of the whole situation on faulty assumptions about Peter's motives, as well as his own loyalty to Kevin. Though they're pointed comments, Sune still makes them as a kindly father figure who's invested in David's success as a coach, demonstrating that it's possible to be honest and supportive at the same time.



Surprisingly, David will be moving out of Beartown altogether, taking a coaching role in a rival town. This adds to the suspense, since it's not clear if Beartown will have a team at all.



The club president comes to break the unexpected news to the Anderssons. Ramona has evidently succeeded in swinging the town to Peter's side (though whether Beartown hockey, or the town, will survive is an open question). Even more surprisingly, though, the club president reveals that he has at least a trace of a conscience regarding what Maya has endured.



Sune points out that fatherhood will alter David's perspective on a lot of things—perhaps even piercing his carefully preserved hockey bubble and showing that all aspects of life in the town are interconnected.



As Benji, his mom, and his sisters are getting ready to eat dinner together, the doorbell rings. It's Kevin's mom, asking to have a word with Benji. As they sit outside, Mrs. Erdahl recalls when they were little boys who loved to hang out together in their secret island hideout. She tells him that she knows how much Benji's family has done for Kevin over the years, and that she knows Benji messes up her house to make it look as though Kevin has slept there while she's gone. She tells him that she knows Benji isn't a troublemaker because of a lack of good role models—his sisters and mother have clearly provided that. She also knows that Benji has often taken the fall for Kevin over the years. She hugs him tightly and says that she knows Kevin has never been able to lie to him the way he does to his parents. Then she gets in her car and leaves.

Kevin's dad didn't get everything he wanted, but it's not the worst outcome for the Erdahls, either. Their lawyer is preparing arguments to discredit Amat's testimony. Kevin is going to move to Hed ice hockey, along with most of the players and sponsors, allowing the Erdahls' lives to remain intact "because this family does not lose. Not even when they do." Soon Mrs. Erdahl gets home and wordlessly sweeps up some glass from a family photo Mr. Erdahl has smashed. Then she goes out to the garden rink, takes Kevin's face in her hands, and stares at him until he lowers his eyes, and she knows the truth.

The Anderssons are sitting at the kitchen table, playing a silly card game together, when the doorbell rings. When they answer, they're shocked to see Mrs. Erdahl. Mrs. Erdahl has been told that there's no reliable evidence to use against Kevin. But even as she stands there, she still sees lingering bruises on Maya's neck and wrists. She sinks to her knees in front of Maya, shaking and crying. Maya gently strokes her hair as Mrs. Erdahl tells her she's sorry.

CHAPTER 45

From Zacharias's bedroom window, Amat sees his teammates congregating outside. He knows this is no longer about what Kevin has or hasn't done, but about the fact that the team is looking for an enemy, and that Amat is a convenient one. He goes outside.

Ann-Katrin watches the hockey team speaking to her son outside the house. Lyt is giving Bobo orders. Bobo has only ever wanted to belong to something. Now he stands there alone as the rest of the team angrily disappears. She and Hog say nothing as Bobo picks up a hoodie and scarf to match the rest of the group and leaves.

Mrs. Erdahl has been largely in the background, which makes her appearance—especially at Benji's—all the more surprising. She shows an apparently genuine appreciation for Benji, for his friendship with Kevin over the years, and for his strong family. She's more perceptive than she's let on previously, and much more tender-hearted than her husband. It's not clear what the purpose of her visit is—if she expects Benji to tell her what Kevin has done, or if she suspects that Kevin's and Benji's friendship won't last much longer. Perhaps it's just an appeal to Benji to get Kevin to do the right thing.



Meanwhile, in contrast to Mrs. Erdahl's personal connection with Benji, Mr. Erdahl just cares about the outcome of the meeting—namely, that Kevin will be able to fulfill the plan they've set for him all along. The broken glass is evidence that he's taking the "loss" hard nonetheless. As it turns out, Kevin's mom doesn't have to do any further digging to get to the truth; she just needs to take a good look at her son. Ironically, that's something Kevin has longed for all this time.



When Mrs. Erdahl learns the truth, she comes straight to Maya's, shattered by what she's learned. Now that she's seen the truth in Kevin's eyes, it's easier for her to see the evidence of what he's done. Here, Mrs. Erdahl is an example of how confronting the truth can lead to compassion and healing—a lesson many people in Beartown are reluctant to learn.



Regardless of what they believe about Kevin, the hockey players are angry about Amat's disloyalty. Feeling more secure in who he is, Amat doesn't hesitate to confront them; he doesn't have anything more to lose.



Like Amat, Bobo has never really felt like a part of the crowd, either—perhaps it's why he's fallen back on bullying kids with less power than him. At this moment, it looks like he's going to capitulate to the team's expectations.



Amat knows he stands no chance against the guys, but somehow he's no longer frightened. Pretty soon he's being assaulted by several teammates at once, one of them holding a metal pipe. Bobo, ever slower than the rest of the group, catches up after they've started attacking Amat. He steps forward and starts throwing punches, sending Lyt to the ground. Eventually, though, they overpower him.

A car stops a short distance away, illuminating the boys with its headlights. They take off running. Amat and Bobo lie there in silence for a while, then slowly assess their injuries. They start joking about their first encounter on the practice ice a few weeks ago, until Amat's broken rib makes laughter too painful.

Two men get out of the Saab that's still parked a short distance away. It turns out that Ramona sent them. One of the men says that he still doesn't know if he trusts Amat, but he trusts Ramona. He hands Amat five thousand-kronor notes and tells him to make sure he really does become a great hockey player.

Bobo soon reveals that he's on Amat's side after all. It's obvious that he and Amat can't hold out against their entire team, but they give it a valiant attempt anyway. It's a shining moment for Bobo, showing that his character is better than the jokes he's told and the fights he's started.



Amat and Bobo survive the attack, although they're badly beaten up. The ordeal cements their friendship even as it puts them permanently outside the inner circle of Beartown hockey.



It turns out that The Pack has intervened to stop the fight. Amat gets his money back, as well as winning some respect in the eyes of The Pack. There's nothing he'd like better than to prove himself as a hockey player.



CHAPTER 46

Hog and Bobo are working together in Hog's garage. Hog is struggling to have a heart-to-heart with his son. He tells Bobo that he should have talked to Bobo more about girls. He explains that Bobo's immense strength brings responsibility with it. It's also important to not keep one's mouth shut about inappropriate behavior. Patting Bobo's bruises, he tells him that Bobo is already showing more courage than he's ever done. Pretty soon the conversation turns into a fumbling, awkward conversation about Bobo's virginity and his sincere desire to wait until he gets married before having sex. Ann-Katrin listens outside the garage door and feels proud of those "idiots."

Amat and Kevin both give the Hed police their testimonies that day. Later, in her office, Kira gets the news that the investigation is being closed for lack of evidence. When Kira gets home, she and Maya cry together, but Maya tells Kira that she doesn't want to "live in a permanent state of war." They have to move on.

Hog has a belated conversation with his son about how to treat girls properly—implicitly acting as a model for what should have been going on in Beartown homes all along. But the scene avoids being too heavy-handed; Bobo's naiveté and unexpected romantic streak are an amusing touch, a reminder that people aren't always what they seem.



As expected, the case against Kevin doesn't progress very far. Though Kira wants to keep fighting, Maya isn't willing to keep living that way; she implies that in Beartown, standing up for herself is the same thing as fighting a war. Clearly, the town isn't yet ready to confront the truth of what happened to Maya.



Benji is about to go to Hed to meet up with the bass player, whom he's recently kissed for the first time. Then he gets a text from Kevin asking him to meet on their favorite childhood island. Benji limps all the way there on his broken foot. Kevin happily tells Benji that they can still get everything they want. Benji replies that Kevin *always* gets everything he wants. Then he turns and limps away, quietly telling his former friend that he hopes he finds “the Kevin you're looking for.”

The break between Benji and Kevin is final. Presumably, if Kevin had shown any remorse for what happened, Benji might have relented; however, Kevin only seems to care that he's gotten out of the situation untouched. He's the same entitled Kevin and appears unlikely to learn anything from the situation. Benji's loyalty to Kevin has its limits, and his parting words suggest that Kevin's entitled attitude may eventually harm Kevin himself as well.



Later, Peter gets home and cries from shame that they've had to give up the case. But Maya confesses that she loves hockey and wants Peter to stay in Beartown and build a better hockey club, making the sport better for everybody.

Maya doesn't want the family to feel pushed out of Beartown. She sees that hockey has been part of the town's brokenness, but there's still hope for it to be fixed.



CHAPTER 47

Kira comes into the Bearskin to ask Ramona a question. She thanks her for convincing The Pack to vote in support of Peter, but she doesn't understand why she did it. Ramona just tells her that people in Beartown know the difference between good and evil. Someone in the bar gets Kira a beer. Kira knows it's a gesture showing that people are capable of “more than one thought [...] at the same time. That you can want to punch a man in the face but still refuse to let anyone hurt his children.”

In the end, Beartown is a more complicated place than it sometimes appears on the surface. Though conflict brings out the worst in people, many people are also still capable of discerning between overlapping loyalties and making the right judgments in the end.



Outside, Robbie Holts passes the Bearskin without going inside—he has to go to work the next day.

Robbie Holts has succeeded in getting a job, presumably in Tails's supermarket, and is turning his life around; perhaps the same can be true for other struggling men in the town.



David stops at Katia's bar in hopes of finding Benji there. He's decided he wants to pass down his own father's heirloom watch to him. The bouncer points him toward the pond in the woods. When David approaches, he sees Benji and the bass player kissing and begins to shake. Driving home, he remembers how many anti-gay jokes his dad used to make, how “gay” was always a slur. Now he feels disgusted with himself. He's helped raise Benji like his own son, but Benji apparently didn't trust David with his biggest secret. He feels like a failure knowing that Benji must have thought David would be care about him less if he knew he were gay.

David's fatherly love is clear for Benji especially because of his sense of failure; he recognizes that he hasn't been fully trustworthy for Benji. It's another moment in which David finally recognizes that what happens in hockey—like “harmless” banter—has repercussions elsewhere.



After tossing around ideas with her old hockey friend, Jeannette, Adri goes to Sune's house and asks him how to set up a hockey team. Skeptical at first, Sune ends up walking through Beartown with Adri, stopping at home after home and asking each time whether any young girls live there. At one house, the door is answered by a four-year-old girl covered with bruises. Heartbroken, Adri asks the little girl if she wants to learn how to play hockey. The little girl nods.

The beginning of the girls' hockey team is significant in a few ways—for one, it shows that Sune has something new to offer to the town even now. For another, it suggests that Beartown hockey really can be transformed for the better. Finally, the bruised little girl—reminiscent of a young Peter Andersson—will become the next Beartown hockey legend.



David longs to drive back to Hed and embrace Benji, but he knows he can't force him to tell him something he doesn't want to share. Years from now, he'll fulfill all his dreams of coaching success, but he'll never let anyone else wear Benji's #16. For now, he goes to the cemetery and leaves a puck on Alan Ovich's grave, on which he's written, "Still the bravest bastard I know." He also leaves the heirloom watch.

David leaves another message for Benji, making it clear that Benji is the player who is most like a son to him.



CHAPTER 48

Tails gets home from work, thinking about the fact that he's the only sponsor who doesn't seem to have quickly switched his allegiance from Beartown to Hed. As he comes into the house, he hears his son and daughter arguing over a phone charger. Then his 12-year-old son yells at his sister that she doesn't have any boys to call anyway, saying: "Everyone knows you WISH you'd been raped." Before he realizes what's happening, Tails has tackled his terrified son, and they're both on the floor crying. Tails keeps repeating, "You can't become that sort of man [...] you need to be better than me."

Tails's extreme reaction suggests that the connection between the hockey club culture and the events of the past few weeks have fully gotten through to him, and that he wants to break that cycle, starting with acknowledging his own failure to teach his son adequately. The fact that such a young boy would make this offensive statement also shows how widespread the toxicity of the town's hockey culture has become.



Fatima drives Amat to Hed in a car she's borrowed from Bobo's parents. Amat goes inside and spends the stack of kronor. Later, when Maya gets home, she finds a beautiful new guitar waiting for her.

Instead of hockey skates, Amat gets Maya a gift. It's an especially touching gesture because Amat doesn't have any reason to think that Maya would be interested in him—he just wants her to have something meaningful.



Tails goes to visit Ramona in the Bearskin. He tells her that he's selling his store in Hed in order to help save the Beartown hockey club, and he wants Ramona to sit on the new board. She gets herself a cup of coffee, saying that if she's going to do that, it'll take her a few months to sober up.

Tails has had a turnaround over the course of the story—showing that not everyone in the hockey club is stuck in their ways. The appointment of Ramona also represents a fundamental shift in the governance of Beartown hockey.



CHAPTER 49

Ten years from now, in a faraway city, a 25-year-old woman is loading the car with groceries. She's pregnant and happy, laughing along with her perfect husband. There's a hockey rink nearby, but neither of them even looks at it.

Kevin is jogging on the illuminated track. When Maya emerges from the woods, there's no time for him to escape. She tells him to get on his knees. He does, and pretty soon he's crying and wetting himself in terror. But Maya is calm. She doesn't even second-guess herself. With her eyes wide open, she pulls the trigger.

Ten years from now, the couple will be leaving the store parking lot when the man will spot a woman getting out of another car. She's carrying a guitar she's refused to replace for the past 10 years. Their eyes meet for a terrible moment.

Kevin collapses, convinced that he's dying. He's crying like a baby. Maya lowers the shotgun and pulls a cartridge out of her pocket—the gun was never loaded. "Now you'll be scared of the dark, too, Kevin," she tells him.

In that parking lot 10 years from now, Maya could walk over and tell Kevin's wife exactly what he did, but she doesn't. She lets him live with the knowledge that she's spared him. As they drive away, Kevin tells his wife the whole truth. And Maya walks into the sold-out rink with her guitar to give her performance.

The story jumps to the future, with an interlocking series of scenes that begin ambiguously and are gradually clarified. Here, for instance, it's not clear who the couple is; the woman could be Maya.



Regardless of what her intentions have been all along, Maya is now perfectly clear about what she's doing, as the identities of the two teenagers from the book's opening scene are finally revealed.



The scene in the future becomes clearer. The second woman is Maya, with the guitar Amat gave her. The man is Kevin.



In the story's climax, it becomes clear that Maya didn't intend to kill Kevin—just to make him taste the same fear that Maya now carries everywhere she goes.



While Kevin could have chosen to stay silent, he actually tells the truth and presumably has to deal with the consequences, giving some hope that he's learned something in the years since he raped Maya. Meanwhile, Maya fulfills her dream of becoming a professional musician, demonstrating that her choice to speak out did not preclude a bright future.



CHAPTER 50

Ana wakes up suddenly and realizes that both Maya and the shotgun are missing. In panic, she races through the woods. When she gets to the jogging track and takes in the scene, she hugs Maya, and they go home. The next morning, Ana goes back and recovers the dropped cartridge. If anybody ever asks her about what happened that night, she just says, "Sorry, I didn't see that incident."

Ana's closing remark is an ironic reference back to the neutral "no comment" offered by Kevin to a sports reporter. There, it was an indication of Beartown's culture of silence. Here, it's a marker of the two friends' enduring loyalty to each other.



Benji limps into the Beartown rink on his crutches and finds Peter. He tells Peter that his foot should be healed in time for the first A-team game, as long as Sune agrees that he's ready to play. Peter admits to Benji that they might not be able to pay the A-team any wages next season; and, anyway, Benji would have much better opportunities in Hed. Benji just shrugs and answers, "But I'm from Beartown."

Later that year, four teenagers are teaching a kids' skating class: Amat, Zacharias, Bobo, and Benji. Ten years from now, two of them will be professional hockey players, one will be a father, and one of them will be dead.

The last child onto the ice is four years old, scrawny, and covered bruises. Although the boys at center ice will build a new Beartown A-team, nobody will remember that 10 years from now. They'll be talking about the girl "who will become the most talented player this club has ever seen." Everybody will claim they knew it all along, "because people recognize the **bear** around here," and "**cherry trees** always smell of cherry trees."

Beartown is attempting to rebuild its A-team, and loyal Benji, despite his talent, is happier to play for free than to join the Hed team. Here, the positive side of the town's deep commitment to loyalty outshines the negative side.



Backman doesn't reveal the individual destinies of the four players. Significantly, though, the "outsiders" have stuck around Beartown together, while others have sought more substantial fortunes elsewhere. Because of the way Beartown has shifted in the wake of the town meeting, even lower-ranked players like Zach get more opportunity to shine. Plus, the revelation that two of the players become professionals shows that sticking with Beartown didn't actually limit their careers in the way some people feared.



The little girl discovered by Adri and Sune starts playing hockey—again reminiscent of the young, bruised Peter Andersson. She, too, "the bear" in her, but now it's a symbol of complex progress as well as simple power. Though no one realizes it at the time, she symbolizes Beartown's future—both the ways it's changing as well as its long legacy of fierce, promising hockey players.





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