

THE NECESSARY HUNGER

CHAPTER ONE

In December of 1984, when Raina and I were sophomores, my high school held its first and last annual girls' winter basketball tournament, the Inglewood Christmas Classic. The next year, an hour before the first-round games were set to start, a light fixture fell from the ceiling and left a six-foot hole in the floor, and the indignity of having to cancel the tournament once convinced my coach we shouldn't host it anymore. This was a shame, because the first Classic was the only tournament we ever actually won. It was also the place I met Raina. I was running the clock on the first day when my coach came over and told me that Raina Webber had just walked in, and that I should pay attention to her. He didn't add—he couldn't have known—that a few months later, our parents would meet and fall in love, and that eventually the four of us would live together. All he knew then was that Raina and I were two of the top sophomores in Los Angeles County. That day, when her game began, I sat and watched her in awe, so dazzled by the way she slashed through the other team's defense that I kept forgetting to add points to the scoreboard. Midway through the second quarter, Raina dove for a loose ball and landed smack on the scorers' table. She'd knocked the scoreboard control box into my lap, and she lay facedown, her head between my hands where the box had just been and her legs trailing onto the floor. Dazed, she looked up into my face for a moment. Then her eyes began to focus.

"Hey," she said smiling. "You're Nancy, right? I'm Raina. That was a hella sweet pass you threw against Crenshaw yesterday, and I know their coach called you a hot dog 'cos you passed behind your back, but shit, there was a defender kinda standin in your way, and besides, if you got it, you should use it, don't you think?"

She stood up, pulled the box off my lap and placed it on the table, and then ran back onto the court before I had time to answer. To me, that first encounter would repeat itself in various forms through all the years I knew her—Raina would land in front of me, and I would flounder.

Basketball, for Raina and me, was more a calling than a sport; it was our sustenance; it underpinned our lives. Every Sunday morning, as I drove the twenty-eight miles from our house in Inglewood to a gym in Cerritos, I saw well-dressed people on their way to the churches, mosques, and synagogues that were scattered throughout Southern California. I was en route to my Junior Olympic team's weekend practice, but my intention wasn't really so different. That drive to Cerritos was my weekend ritual, but

it made up just a fraction of the time I gave to my sport. I was reverent and devout. The only differences between my faith and theirs were that I wore workout clothes instead of my Sunday best and that I worshipped every day.

Los Angeles was a great place to live if you were a basketball fanatic, because the sport was all around you. Besides being the only city that had two NBA teams—the Lakers and the Clippers—it was the home of half a dozen major colleges. Better yet, the players were part of the scenery. In the mid-eighties, when I was in high school there, it wasn't unusual to run into Magic Johnson at the mall; see Byron Scott drive through the neighborhood on his way to visit his mother; or spot Cheryl Miller, the great USC star, dancing up a storm at a local nightclub. Each August, Magic, Isiah Thomas, and other NBA stars would play pickup games at UCLA, and I'd go watch them as often as I could. The world was perfect on those summer afternoons. If Jesus himself had finally shown up, I wouldn't have noticed unless he'd worn sneakers and had a dangerous jump shot.

In our own small way, we high school players were celebrities, too. For one thing, we weren't subject to the same rules as other students. When my teammate Telisa got sent to the principal's office our junior year for calling her physics teacher an asshole (well, he was an asshole—he called Telisa a wench, because he referred to all women as wenches, and she finally got sick of it and told him off. All the girls in the class applauded when she did it, too), the principal just laughed and let her off without even listening to her side of the story. We were picked to win our league that year, and he refused to punish one of the people responsible for wresting glory away from the schools around us.

For another, we were always being recognized. This was especially true once our pictures started appearing regularly in the papers, and, in my case and in Raina's, after we'd been named third-team All-State our sophomore year and had begun to attract the attention of college scouts. I'd be shopping, or getting gas, or hanging out at the beach, and someone would come up and tell me that they'd seen me at such and such a place playing against this or that team, and that I'd scored however many points that day. Once, when I was with Raina at the movies our senior year, some little freshman who'd seen her play in a tournament somewhere started screaming and asked for her autograph like she was a rock star.

The admiration was occasionally more ardent. I received a couple of suggestive fan letters, some players were given flowers or candy, and sometimes I even got phone calls from people who seemed impressed by things other than my skills on the court. After Raina moved in we got twice as many calls. She dealt with this better than I did. She talked to all her callers politely and said that she was

sorry, but she already had someone and so it was impossible for her to meet them for a date. I, on the other hand, was not as composed—I always just got nervous and hung up.

If my teammates had ever heard me say I wasn't comfortable with being a big-time college recruit, they have laughed long and hard, but it was true. As an only child, I lacked the social skills to shift easily into the role of semi-public figure, and I wasn't even gifted physically, except with height. Once, after a summer league game, I found a scouting report that a college coach had left in the bleachers, and so I discovered that the official word on me was this:

Nancy Takahiro, Senior Forward—6'0", 155 lbs. Doesn't have the best athletic ability, but a great scorer and effective rebounder. Smart, consistent, tremendously hardworking, and can be counted on to get the little things done.

I always wondered what my father would have thought about the "getting little things done" part, since refrain throughout those years was that I never cleaned my room. Still, it was the textbook portrait of a type-A only child. Takahiro means "tall and wide."

It wasn't easy being big. It seemed to me that the world had a grudge against big people, especially Asian ones, like me, who were supposed to be small. A few houses down from us there lived an old widow named Mrs. Cooper, a lady whose skin was both the color and the texture of a walnut shell, and every time I passed her on the street she clutched her purse a little tighter, although we'd lived on the same block together for the past eleven years. Short adults glanced up at my face suspiciously, even when I was being polite. Babies looked at me and burst out crying.

Maybe that's why I was drawn to Raina, because she was compact, her body well-proportioned and economical. At 5'7" she wasn't tiny, but she was still five inches shorter than me. Tougher, too, or so I believed—and I felt qualified to say that because I watched her more closely than anyone else, with the possible exception of the scouts. The day she landed on the table and introduced herself, her team, which was seeded eighth, was going up against the number one seed. Raina was the shooting guard on that underdog team, and she was making all the other players look like they were standing still. She moved around the gym as if it had been built for her—not arrogantly, but with the casual assumption that everyone knew it was hers and wouldn't mind that she'd come there to claim it. She was always the first person up the court, always weaving through people like they were rooted to the floor, not because she was so much quicker than everyone else, but because it didn't seem to occur to her that she could fail. When she stood at the free throw line, she stared at the basket and held the ball at her waist as if she'd forgotten she had to shoot it, as if she could score the point just by concentrating hard

enough. This attitude, I learned later, was typical Raina—she approached every aspect of the game as if it were a matter of will.

And who's to say it isn't? Over the years coaches and parents have encouraged kids to participate in sports on the grounds that sports build character. I've always thought it was more accurate to say that they show it. You live the way you play. A kid who blows an easy lay-up in the last few seconds of a close game is going to choke ten years later on the witness stand. A kid who can kick a field goal to win the state football championship could be trusted to land a plane in a tornado. If there is something to be known about a person, it will become evident on the court, or on the field. People with no experience in competitive sports don't understand how revealing they can be. Or how serious. Anyone who thinks that traders on Wall Street are under pressure should try shooting a free throw in a packed gym with the game on the line.

When I saw Raina play that day, saw the way she stamped her foot against the floor in a stubborn refusal to give up, I knew my own devotion to basketball was just a shadow of what I was witnessing then. She played the game the way that it was meant to be played—as if her life depended on it. And she seemed driven by some need, or struggle, or fundamental resolve, that preceded the basketball and made it possible, and that I could never have accurately explained or described except to say that I myself didn't have it. The immediate effect of this resolve was that her team came back from ten points down that day to beat the top seed, which had finished second in the state the year before. Two days later, in the semifinals, her team would lose to the team we went on to beat for the championship, but that day, the day of the first-round games, was Raina's. As I sat at the scorers' table watching her team celebrate at midcourt, I wondered about the guts and will that had led to that improbable charge from behind. And later, when I noticed her strong, broad cheekbones, her suddenly hesitant step, the shy grin that flashed out of that smooth coffee-with-cream face, I wondered about the person who owned them.