

STOPPING THE SHOTS

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To Ollie, Matteo, Easton and Camdyn — my great-nephews
who love hockey as much as I do.

LATE

Mike paced from the sink to the wooden table and back again, practically wearing a path on the faded beige linoleum. The little bird popped out of the kitchen clock, bleating that it was two o'clock. *Cuckoo. Cuckoo.* Enough already. Mike's hockey game with Team Chaos started in less than an hour, and he was supposed to be at the arena forty-five minutes early. Except the drive was thirty minutes and Dad was still outside somewhere.

Obviously he was going to be late.

His stomach did a huge flip. Coach Ira was not going to be happy. Would he put Audrey in net instead of him? Mike stopped pacing and glanced out the kitchen window. What was taking his dad and Liam so long in the barn?

Mike checked his phone, hoping that the old cuckoo clock — a relic from his Krieger grandparents — was finally breaking down, but the time on the phone and the clock was the exact same. He had to do something. Since he'd already loaded his bag and goalie stick in the back of his dad's pickup truck, Mike decided to step

outside to see if he could spot his dad anywhere. Had he lost track of time?

Mike snatched his parka off the hook in the mud room. Rocky wagged his tail, thwacking it on the side of the bench. Dad wouldn't be happy if he knew Rocky was in the house.

"Come on, Rocky," said Mike. "Let's go find Dad and Liam."

Mike jogged down the snow-covered path to the big old red barn where they stored some of their hay, the farm equipment and their two horses. They didn't have a modern barn like the cattle farmers in the surrounding area because Mike's dad was a small crop farmer. Rocky, a border collie crossed with a German shepherd, followed close behind Mike.

Mike looked around just in case his dad was outside. All he could see was their few cows in the field, and the chicken coop beside the barn. No Dad. No Liam.

Mike was all ready to go in his game-day suit and dress shoes, so he ended up slipping and sliding as if he was skiing instead of running. A few times he had to right himself so he wouldn't fall flat on his butt. Rocky barked beside him.

"It's okay, Rocky. I'm fine."

Mike opened the big barn door, and the familiar musty-sweet smell of hay and horses greeted him.

Their buckskin, Henry, whinnied while their other horse, Beatrice, flicked her ears. Cats skittered around. Mango, a super-tame orange tabby that had been born in the summer, swished by Mike's legs.

Finally there was his father, dressed in coveralls, holding a wrench and trying to fix something on the tractor that was up on boards. Liam was sitting on a round hay bale with a Rubik's Cube, spinning it around and looking at the colours. Liam looked over at Mike, smiled his huge broad smile, and waved. Mike waved back. Even if he was in a hurry, he had to give Liam the wave.

"I got it," said Liam, holding up the multicoloured toy. Liam, who was born with Down syndrome, was Mike's older brother by two years. Mike was what everyone in the family called the in-between brother — the middle child.

"That's great, Liam!" said Mike. Liam had one blue row, more than he had done before.

"Hey, Dad," said Mike, trying to keep his voice calm. Liam picked up on emotions super fast. "We need to get going."

"Something's wrong with the powertrain. I hope it's not the transmission. I can't have such a big expense right now." Mike's dad blew out a puff of air. "How did I get a lemon?"

“Nope,” said Liam. He shook his head. “Lemon.”

Their dad kept staring at the green cab tractor as if it was miraculously going to fix itself. Mike tapped his fingers on his thigh. His stomach was rolling.

“I have a hockey game today,” said Mike. “Mom’s already left with Eric, so she can’t drive me.”

Eric, the hockey star of Prairie Field, was two years younger than Mike. He always wanted to be there hours early. Sometimes he demanded it. And because he was the “best,” he often got his way. Why did Mike get stuck with Dad driving him? Because he was on Team Chaos, the third team out of the four U13 teams. His parents considered Team Chaos recreational when it wasn’t really. His teammates were committed, and Mike didn’t want to be late, to disrespect his coach and his team. No way.

Mike’s dad stood, took off the green John Deere ball cap he wore for barn work, and pushed his brown hair back before settling the cap back on his head. Then he gave a nod. “Right. I remember that now.” He squinted at Mike. “You got your suit on. Must be time to go. Your mom told me not to forget. I don’t want you boys playing near this tractor. It’s only up on boards right now. It could fall and someone could get injured.”

“Stay away,” chirped Liam.

“Got it, Dad. Now, can we move it? I’m kind of late.”

“Did you boys fix that flat tire on your quad yet? I told you it’s your responsibility.”

“Dad, I have a hockey game.”

“Are you in net today?”

“Yes.” Mike shared the net with Audrey, alternating games for equal playing time.

“Okay. Get your gear in the truck.”

“Done.”

“Let’s go then.”

“Let’s go then,” repeated Liam.

Mike headed down the path with Liam, who was walking slowly. Sometimes he moved fast and other times he went slow. That’s just who he was.

“You want to run?” Mike asked, wanting to speed him up. Liam loved playing the chase game.

“Yes!” Liam almost squealed.

Liam took off, and Mike started to chase him, slipping again in his dress shoes. Liam turned around to see if he was winning.

“Shotgun,” Liam called out.

Mike tried to laugh, because Liam got so excited when he won the shotgun game, but he didn’t feel like laughing — he felt like getting to the arena. Mike caught up to Liam, but Liam touched the truck first.

“Shotgun!” Liam, all smiles, got in the front seat.

“You stop lots of shots, okay?” said Liam. He was Mike’s biggest fan.

“I will, Liam,” said Mike. “But I might not get to play if Dad doesn’t hurry up.”

When Dad finally got there, he was dressed in clean jeans and a red-and-black flannel jacket. He’d washed the grease off his hands. He wore a plain, but clean, black ball cap. He got in and started the engine.

“Are you going to watch me today?” Mike asked from the back seat.

His dad dodged potholes in their long gravel driveway. “I was hoping to, but I should head to Ben’s Mechanics.”

Mike nodded. If his dad went to Ben’s, he would end up talking and miss the game. Even though his dad played hockey when he was younger, he didn’t watch many of Mike’s games. In the winter he also worked at the seed plant as an operator, so he didn’t have much spare time.

Eric, who was only ten, played on the top team in Mike’s U13 age group because if he played in his own U11 division, he’d score ten goals every game — he was that good. Other parents got upset with that. Everyone talked about him like he was a celebrity. Dad always seemed to have time for Eric’s games.

The truck rumbled down the road, and Mike wished

his father would go over the speed limit for once. Liam sat in the front clicking his Rubik's Cube. *Click. Clack. Click. Clack.* Mike ran his finger along the window in time with the noise. He found it mesmerizing, so he squeezed his eyes shut and pictured himself in net, stopping shots.

Since he'd started seventh grade that fall, Mike had been working hard to get better as a goalie. He'd read that Carey Price didn't start playing on a hockey team until he was nine. Sure, Mike was twelve, but it's not like he wanted to make the NHL like Carey Price had. He wanted to go to university and maybe be an engineer or a scientist or even a lawyer like his Uncle Jerry, Dad's brother.

Why did everyone always think that making the NHL should be the end goal if you played minor hockey? Some good players got their university paid for by playing hockey. Mike imagined how much that would ease the money stress his family had been under lately.

When they arrived at the arena, Mike said, "Just drop me off out front."

"Good luck," said Liam. "Stop the puck."

"Thanks, Liam."

Mike jumped out of the truck and grabbed his stuff from the back. Lugging his big goalie bag, he tried to sprint to dressing room two. Mike could hear the

pump-up music blaring from inside the room. “I Like to Move It” played loud and clear, even in the hallway. Coach Ira was standing outside the door.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Mike.

“You had one more minute and then Audrey was going in.” Coach Ira held up one finger, his dark hair bopping with the movement. Coach Ira was still in high school, and as much as he tried to look like a coach, he always came across more like a member of a boy band.

“I’ll move it,” said Mike, doing a little movement to the music to ease the tension.

As soon as Mike entered the dressing room, Jory said, “Tree, nice of you to show up.”

At home, Mike was Mike, but at school and hockey he was Tree. He had grown so much at the end of fifth grade that he became the “tree” of the class, with a trunk for a body and long limbs like branches. He liked being called Tree because goalies always had nicknames.

Since he didn’t have time for hellos, or singing to the music, Mike found a spot to sit down between Manny and Aiden. He had to dress fast, but goalie equipment was a bit of a challenge to get on in a hurry. Jock, socks, pants, chest protector, throat guard, skates, then finally his pads. He stood to do up the straps.

“Tree, do you want help?” Aiden asked.

“Sure.” At this point help would be great.

Aiden pulled a leather strap at the back of Mike’s leg and hooked it in the clasp. Mike reached behind him and did up the ones on the other leg.

As Mike was doing up the last strap, Manny said, “Those pads hardly cover your thighs. What happens when you get hit in the sweet spot?” Manny patted just above Mike’s knee, at the gap where his pads and pants didn’t meet. “I’ve been watching so many NHL games,” continued Manny, “and their pads are huge. Like massive. Sometimes when I get sick of doing homework, I read NHL history stuff. And for years they mandated widths and lengths. And it kept changing, so obviously they couldn’t make up their minds. Oh, and for a bit of trivia, way back in the 1930s, they stuffed the pads with deer hair. And they were modelled after cricket pads. Okay, back to you, Tree, and those pads. The NHL now goes with anatomical measurements of the player, which makes way more sense. I mean, you’re way bigger than me, Tree, so your pads should be bigger, but those pads look like they *aren’t* anatomically correct.”

“My pads are good,” said Mike. Manny talked non-stop, but in a good way.

Mike knew his pads actually weren’t the right size because his knees didn’t fit properly in the knee pads,

which was brutal now that he was learning how to do a butterfly. Every time he hit the hard ice, it killed. But goalie pads were so expensive.

“Anyway,” Mike said to Manny with a grin, “I stop the shot before it hits me.” Although he tried to sound confident, his hands were shaking and his stomach heaved.

He leaned back against the concrete wall, shutting his eyes, the pump-up music beating in his head. Then he heard the dressing-room door open, and he wished he had had more time to mentally prepare. He opened his eyes and saw Coach Ira and his assistant, Coach Ben. Audrey and Susie had joined too. The music turned off.

“Listen up, Chaos,” said Coach Ira. “The Bear River Bruins are fast and tough. They pass and shoot a lot, and they love to make sneaky hits when the ref isn’t looking.”

“They won their last game 12–1,” said Manny.

The coaches finished and left the room to head to the bench. Aiden stood and said, “Let’s do this, Chaos. Let’s play our game. Hands in the middle.”

Everyone in the room stood, put their hands in the middle, and yelled, “LET’S GO, CHAOS!”

PEPPERED IN THE NET

Mike got in his net and started making snow so his crease wasn't slippery. The sound of his skates grating the ice soothed his nerves. The back-and-forth movement put him into his goalie zone. Nothing else mattered for the next hour but stopping shots. He liked that. Liked the feeling of being one with his net, protecting it from something small but hard: the puck.

Mike hadn't started playing recreationally until he was nine. In the beginning he had been a skater, but the first time he'd gone in net — a real net, in a real game — he'd felt completely at home. Maybe it was because he had played a lot on the pond they had on the farm, helping Eric practise. He spent hours facing Eric's shots. When they were younger, Eric liked to call him a "sieve." Now, Mike could stop five out of ten. The goalie pads he wore were ones his father had bought for cheap to use on the outdoor ice. But Mike kept using them when he joined a team.

Jory, the team's captain, skated over and said, "Tree, you ready for your warm-up?"

Mike nodded.

The team lined up with players on either side of the ice. They passed back and forth and shot at him from the right. Then they switched to the left side. After that, they lined up in front of him and rapid-fired. This was the drill he liked best. He shuffled and darted to make the saves until Coach Ira called everyone to the bench. Mike left his net for the pre-game chat.

“Let’s play our game. Keep your heads up and on a swivel,” said Coach Ira. “It will be important with this team because they are fast and sneaky.” Then he looked at Mike. “Keep your eye on the puck and your paddle down, and you’ll be fine out there.”

Mike nodded. Words weren’t something that came easily to him once he had his metal cage lowered over his face. Maybe one day he’d have his own mask, something he designed himself. He took a deep breath, then skated to his net, placed his water bottle on top of it, and faced forward. He crouched in his crease and stared, seeing the entire ice. The only part he couldn’t see was behind him, a definite danger zone. He wished he could move his head all the way around like an owl.

The game started. Off the faceoff, the Bruins nabbed the puck and raced toward Mike. He tracked the puck. *Where was it going? Don’t look at the body because it could shift. Look at the puck.* He anticipated the pass, slid across

his net. The puck flew toward him. He dropped down to make the save, his knees banging against the ice. The shooting pain made him gasp. He slapped his glove on the puck. The whistle blew.

“Great coverup,” said J.J., tapping Mike’s pads with his stick.

Now, with a faceoff in his own zone, Mike had to really watch the puck from the moment the ref dropped it. The Bruins centre won the faceoff and fired the puck back to a huge defender on the blueline.

Uh-oh! Mike saw him wind up for a booming slapshot. Suddenly there were too many bodies in front of him! He craned his neck to get a better view and saw the puck flying toward him. He blocked it, then let out a rebound. Another shot. He stuck out his arm. The puck hit it and bounced back down. He pounced. *Bang.* Knee against ice. Shooting pain. But did he have it underneath him?

The whistle blew, and Mike uncurled his body to see the puck under his pad — but it was over the goal line. *Oh no.* The ref signalled that there was a goal. Mike shook his head. He’d already let one in.

“It’s okay,” said Jory. “We’ll get it back.”

Manny slapped Mike’s pads with his stick. “No worries, Tree.”

The shots kept coming, and when the whistle blew

to end the first period, the score was still 1–0 for the Bruins. Team Chaos regrouped at the bench.

Coach Ira touched Mike's shoulder. "Just keep covering it," he said.

Mike nodded. He'd seen twenty shots that period — a record for him.

As Coach Ira talked to the rest of the team about shooting more, getting open and skating, Mike thought about making saves.

In the second period, the Bruins peppered Mike with shots. There were times when he felt as if he was in a paintball game, getting blasted over and over. Halfway through, when the play went to the other end, he inhaled and caught his breath. But then there was a turnover.

A Bruins player sped toward him. Mike crouched. The forward blasted a shot. Mike threw up his blocker. The puck hit it and bounced out. Another Bruins player picked up the puck. Mike saw her stick going back. It was going to be a shot from the slot. He had so many bodies blocking his sightline. Again. He peeked around to see the player with the puck. A blistering wrist shot sailed toward him, and he made a pad save. Players wrestled in front of him, trying to free the puck. He poked at it, pushing it out to the side. A Bruins player wound up and Mike hugged his post. The puck shot toward him, and he shoved his glove hand down on it.

He exhaled and gave the puck to the ref.

This time, right off the faceoff, Team Chaos got the puck. They hadn't been winning many faceoffs, so this was a good thing. Mike watched as Susie sent the puck back to Manny. Manny skated with it, then dished off a pass to Jory. Jory put on the jets. But so did Susie, her legs stretching out with long strides. She was probably the fastest Chaos skater. As Jory carried the puck across the blueline, the Bruins defender caught an edge and went down. Aiden flew to be with Jory and Susie. They had a three-on-one!

"Get it to Aiden," Mike said to himself. "Pass the puck!"

Jory sent Aiden a perfect pass.

"Now to Susie," said Mike under his breath. From his net he could see the entire ice, the whole play unfolding. It was like a chess game.

Aiden faked a shot, then passed to Susie, who was hovering around the corner of the net. She rifled it top shelf and the red light went on. Susie jumped in her skates like she was a diver on a springboard.

Mike's heart raced. They'd scored! Now it was a tie game: 1-1. He left his net for a celebratory skate to one side of the boards and then the other. He had only moments before he had to be back in his net for the second half of the period. For the first time all game he looked

to the stands, at the sprinkling of parents watching. He saw Liam with Aiden's mom, cheering like he'd just won a million dollars. Dad must have asked Mrs. Mallory to look after Liam while he went to Ben's. Mike wanted his dad to show up and watch at least one period. The team was playing well, and so was Mike. It was his best game yet.

For the rest of the game, Mike darted around his net. Right side. Left side. High. Low. Throwing his body on top of garbage shots. With five minutes left, Susie scored again. Yes! Then Aiden scored, and Chaos had a 3-1 lead.

In the last minute of the third period, the Bruins pulled their goalie. Now they had six players on the ice ready to shoot against Mike. They moved the puck from player to player. Tracking it became hard. Mike's eyes grew blurry. Manny stuck out his stick and tried to pick off a pass in front of Mike, but he redirected the puck instead.

Mike wasn't ready for the angle. He slid over to nab it, but the puck flew into his net.

3-2. The Bruins players pumped their arms in the air.

Mike glanced at the clock. Forty seconds left. Manny hung his head.

"No worries, Manny," Mike said.

He could do this . . . couldn't he?