

STOPPING THE SHOTS

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“I wish I could have seen it,” said Dad. He glanced at Eric. “Next time I’ll make sure I’m there, bud.” Then he looked at Mike. “Sorry I missed your game too. I did mean to get there. It’s great you were MVP.”

“It’s called the top corner, Mom,” said Eric, laughing and ignoring Dad’s comment to Mike.

“Okay, okay.” She laughed along with him. Her hockey terminology wasn’t the best. “I got it on video.”

“Top shelf,” said Liam.

Eric held up his hand, and Liam slapped it. “That’s right, bud. Top shelf,” Eric said.

“I’ll send the video to Grandpa and Grandma,” said Mom. She smiled at Eric. “Can I show Dad now?”

“Sure,” said Eric.

“No phones at the table,” said Liam.

Mike picked up his garlic bread and took a huge bite. His dad had made a rule that no one could bring their phones to the table. He wanted there to be good conversation, like in the olden days. But Mom got her phone out anyway.

“This is a special occasion,” she said. She pulled up the video and Dad watched, holding up his hand to high-five Eric when it was done. Mike continued to eat. No one had ever videoed Mike’s games. Ever. Or sent it to Grandma and Grandpa.

* * *

The next morning, Mike's phone alarm went off at six o'clock. He rolled over and turned it off, not wanting to wake up Liam. Liam wouldn't go to sleep if he didn't have a person in the room with him, so Mike had agreed to share. The house only had three small bedrooms, so Eric got his own. And there was only one bathroom. Now that was a challenge.

The house was silent except for the heat blasting through the vents, and the wind outside making branches swish and groan. No one else was up yet.

Mike quickly got dressed and tiptoed out of the room. He listened for any rustling in his parents' bedroom, but all he heard was his dad's snores. No worries. They had a few minutes before they'd have to leave. He'd eat first. On early practice days, he only did chores in the afternoon.

Rocky greeted him downstairs, and Mike was happy he'd stayed quiet and hidden in the mud room all night. Mike opened the door to let him out. Then he ate a banana and some toast with peanut butter as he listened for footsteps or the flushing of a toilet upstairs. Nothing.

He padded back up the stairs and stood outside his parents' bedroom door. There was no movement under the duvet cover. He tiptoed in and shook his mom's shoulder. Better to get her up instead of Dad because she

drove faster. Practice started at seven and he didn't want to be late.

"Mom," he said. "I've got practice."

She opened her eyes and quickly sat up. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I must have slept through my alarm." She brushed her hair off her face. "I'll get up right away."

Ten minutes later they were in the car, driving down their long gravel driveway, headlights shedding light on the potholes. Neither of them talked very much, which was normal for an early morning practice.

"Have a good practice," she said, as they pulled up to the arena. "I'm going to get a coffee, but I'll be back. And more awake. I promise." She smiled at him.

Prairie Field had just opened a Tim Hortons, and it had lineups from the moment it opened to the moment it closed. She'd probably miss most of the practice waiting in line.

"Sounds good," said Mike. He got out of the SUV, shivering in the cold morning air, and got his bag from the trunk.

Mike was about to enter the dressing room when Coach Ira stopped him. Coach Ira looked as if he had just rolled out of bed a minute ago. His eyes were half-shut, and his hair was not combed.

"Morning, Tree." Coach Ira's voice croaked. He cleared his throat. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

“Sure,” said Mike. *Was this about being late yesterday?*

“I really think you need new pads. You’ve got so much potential, and properly fitting equipment could make a difference in your game. I can talk to your parents about it if you want.”

“No,” said Mike quickly. “It’s okay. I’ll talk to them.”

“There’s lots of used ones for sale.” Coach Ira pulled out his phone. “Here’s a link where you can look.” He showed Mike a website.

Why did everyone care about his pads? Everyone but his own father?

Mike looked at the prices as Coach Ira scrolled. His insides bubbled. His parents didn’t have that kind of money. He headed into the dressing room knowing there was no way he could ask again.

SCIENCE PROJECT

“When are you going to get your new pads?” Manny was walking down the school hallway with Mike after practice, bopping along like he usually did, his massive mop of black curls bouncing with every step. Aiden and Jory were right behind them.

Mike knew he shouldn’t have mentioned the site to Manny. But he didn’t have data on his phone, and he had wanted to look at it again. He’d asked Manny to pull it up. He had no idea why he had even bothered, because there was no way it was going to happen, not after what his dad had said on the ride home last night.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” said Mike to Manny. “My parents might think they’re too expensive.” Mike knew this was more than a “might.”

“Gotcha,” said Manny. “Parents ruin everything. My parents already think that hockey is expensive. They whine all the time, meanwhile my one sister is in dance and the outfits for her competitions cost a fortune, like so much money, but my mom says she can help the dance studio make them so it’s less money. I think she’s

lying. They buy them from books. Last year she was a hippie and a goat herder and so many other things.”

Jory playfully checked Mike against the wall. “Get Susie to organize a bake sale to pay.” He laughed. Then he snapped his fingers. “Or do one of those GoFundMe pages. People do them for everything.”

“My parents would never allow that,” said Mike.

His dad had a thing about being a “charity case.” Uncle Jerry was a lawyer and really rich. Mike’s dad said he hated taking things from him. He also said the farm would provide them with everything they needed. Hardly, though. Mike couldn’t even get new goalie pads.

“Bake sale it is then,” said Manny. “Susie’s last bake sale did make a ton of money for ice time and the arena lights — even if she did kick the snot out of us by being so infuriatingly bossy. I have a little sister like that but she’s annoying. I love that word. Infuriatingly. My mom says it about me. And when she puts it with ‘Emmanuel,’ she means business. At least Susie isn’t annoying.”

“She did make a lot of money,” said Mike. It made him think. Could he make money somehow?

“My mom said she did the job no one wanted to do,” said Aiden. “Even if she did boss us all around.”

“Who bossed who around?” Susie had just appeared. She did that all the time — slipped in and out like a high-speed ghost.