

HITTING THE TARGET

A Team Chaos Book

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EQUIPMENT TROUBLE

Crash!

Manny shook his head at the noise coming from the basement. His younger siblings had probably done something they shouldn't down there. What else was new? He could hear their squeals and laughter, which was way better than crying. As Emma, who had just turned two, shrieked like a howler monkey, Manny wondered if their neighbours could hear her from half a kilometre down the road.

The noises from the basement got louder and louder, and Manny tried to ignore them. At least he was getting out of the house for his hockey game soon.

Since no one was watching, Manny spun on his toes a few times and tried to move his arms, dancing. He had to practise just in case he won the team's MVP hat. He'd only won it once before, and then he had danced like an octopus with no rhythm.

Manny bashed into the counter and clutched a hand to his throbbing hip. But then he tried again. Practice made perfect, after all.

As he spun, his stomach did a few flips. It was nerves, but good nerves jangling in a good way.

Jangling was such a cool word. Manny loved different words and recently had been asked to be on the school's spelling bee team. Of course, being on Team Chaos was still his favourite. Who would have guessed at the beginning of the season that he would love playing hockey as much as he did?

Crash!

Manny's mom came rushing out of the kitchen, looking frazzled.

"Manny—"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, knowing exactly what she was going to ask. "I'll go check on them."

She blew out a breath and smiled at him. "What would I do without you?"

Manny shrugged and smiled back at her before heading to the basement. He had to dodge toys and clothes on the stairs leading down. There was always stuff everywhere in their house, but his mom worked, and his dad was gone so much — on the road driving a truck — that it was what it was. Manny tried to help organize things, but it was one of those jobs that never ended.

When Manny finally got down to the unfinished basement, his eyes opened wide.

“That’s my hockey equipment!” he yelled.

The twins, Noah and Mia, each donned pieces of his equipment as they battled with plastic swords. Mia wore Manny’s shoulder pads, and Noah had his hockey pants on, hanging to below his knees. Of course nothing fit them right — they were only nine years old, and way smaller than Manny was.

“I have a game today,” Manny said loudly. “Take that stuff off.”

They kept batting away at each other, not listening.

“I said take my gear off.” Manny raised his voice even louder.

Nope. The sword fight continued. They didn’t even look his way.

Ethan, who was the second youngest at four and small for his age, held up a doll. “Look, Manny!”

Manny turned to see a baby doll wearing his jock-strap on its head like a hat. “That’s gross,” he said.

“It’s not gross,” said Ethan. “She’s going to a party and needs a hat.”

“It needs clothes too,” said Isaac. He was six and had started grade one this year, so he thought he knew way more than Ethan. “It can’t go to a party *naked*.” He covered his mouth, giggling.

And just like that, Manny started laughing too. He couldn’t help it. His siblings were a pain in the butt,

but they were sometimes really, really funny.

"Clothes would be good," Manny said.

"I don't care if she has clothes," said Ethan. "Clothes are itchy." Ethan did have a habit of taking his clothes off all the time. He hated tags and certain fabrics, almost as much as he hated his food touching.

"Ouch!" screamed Noah, from the other side of the room. "That hurt!"

Manny turned to see Noah barrelling toward Mia like a charging bull.

Manny sprinted over and stepped in the way. "Party's over," he said. That's what his dad always said when things looked as if they were going to turn into a mess of tears and fighting. "I need my equipment. My game is soon."

"Can we come watch?" Mia asked.

"Yeah, we want to come," said Noah. "I want fries from the concession stand."

"I'm getting a ride with Aiden, so none of you are coming this time," said Manny. He held out his hands. "Shoulder pads, Mia."

Mia took off the shoulder pads and handed them to Manny. Next, he did the same thing to Noah. Grumbling, Noah stepped out of the bulky pants and reluctantly gave them to Manny.

"You're no fun," said Noah.

“Too bad. It’s my gear.” Manny snatched the pants back from Noah. Of all his siblings, Noah was the biggest pain in the butt, always challenging Manny when he had to babysit, which was often.

“You better not have wrecked these,” said Manny.

Noah rolled his eyes. “They don’t fit me anyway. They’re waaaaay too big.”

“That’s not nice,” said Mia. “Manny can’t help it if he’s a bit chubby.”

“Enough, both of you,” said Manny. Dad’s words again. Manny wanted to say something back to Noah, but he didn’t dare. He’d run upstairs and tell Mom, even though Manny always told his siblings not to be tattletales. Plus, Manny didn’t want any altercations before his game.

Manny grabbed his hockey pants and checked to make sure all the pads were in the right place.

“You’re lucky you didn’t lose any padding. I need those to block shots,” he said.

Lately, Manny had been getting better at blocking shots, a skill he’d watched NHL defencemen do all the time. They were so good at it. He mimicked them in his room sometimes, visualizing a puck hitting the thigh of his pants and bouncing to the side.

“And, by the way.” He looked directly at Noah. “My size helps me block shots and hit targets too.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “But it doesn’t make you skate faster. If you’re so hockey obsessed, you should know that.”

“I am, and I love that I am.” Then because he couldn’t help it, Manny said, “So there,” and stuck out his tongue. He knew it was kind of babyish, but whatever — they were all his younger siblings.

Manny turned and walked over to his hockey bag. He’d shoved it out of the way, against the wall and under a bunch of hooks his dad had put up for Manny to hang his stinky gear. Obviously it wasn’t out of the way enough because Noah and Mia had found it.

Manny squatted and went through his bag piece by piece, doing a mental checklist of his equipment. He started from the top and worked his way down: helmet, neck guard, shoulder pads, elbow pads, pants, socks and skates. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his skates were still in the bag. If they had walked on the concrete floor of the basement in them, they’d be so dull.

The last time that had happened, Ned, who kept things running at the arena, had helped get them sharpened, but it had been such a rush and given Manny anxiety about being late getting on the ice. Manny had almost barfed while he waited. He must have asked Ned a hundred times if they were ready yet.

“Do you need this too?” Ethan handed Manny his jockstrap.

“Thanks, bud. I do need it.” Manny said, as he threw it in his bag.

“Are you going to score a goal today?” Ethan asked softly.

“I hope so.”

Ethan smiled. “I hope you do too.” He wrapped his arms around Manny.

Manny was tousling Ethan’s hair when he heard their mom calling down the stairs.

“Aiden’s mom will be here soon, Manny.”

“I know,” he stood and called back up. “Just getting my equipment together.” Ethan was still glued to him, so Manny bent back down. “I have to go, bud.”

“Okay.” Ethan put his head on Manny’s stomach. “I love that you’re like a pillow, all soft and squishy.”

Manny pulled away and said, “Go play with Isaac.” He tried not to let his voice squeak. He didn’t want to be soft and squishy. He wanted to be hard and strong, like a hockey player.

Ethan skipped over to play with Isaac, who was building something with blocks. Noah and Mia were back to playing with their swords, Mia wearing something around her hair to make her look like a warrior and Noah with his shirt pulled up over his head for

whatever reason. Emma was sitting on a small toy bike.

Manny zipped up his bag, slung it over his shoulder and headed to the stairs.

Suddenly, Emma screeched loud enough to pierce an eardrum. She'd fallen off her bike. Manny dropped his bag and raced over, picking her up and putting her on his hip.

"Let's go see Mom."

"I want my bubba." She sniffled, then flung her head back and screamed like a howler monkey again.

Manny took her upstairs and quickly passed her from his hip to their mom's.

"You get dressed," Mom said to Manny, kissing Emma and quieting her down. "I washed your shirt and put it with your suit."

Manny hurried back to the basement, grabbed his hockey bag and huffed it up the stairs. He got to the top and plunked it down by the back door, then he quickly took the cluttered stairs of their old farmhouse up to the second floor.

He passed the bedroom he shared with Noah, Isaac and Ethan, and the smaller one Mia and Emma used. As usual, clothes were strewn everywhere and none of the beds were made.

Manny rushed down the hall to his parents' room to

get his game-day suit. He'd insisted they keep it in their closet so the boys wouldn't do something drastic — like cut it up with scissors — and wreck it. He pulled it out from where it was neatly stored at the back of the closet and took it to his room, getting dressed while pretending he was a comic book character who could transform in a nanosecond. He'd been teased before at school for talking about superheroes, but at home he could think and pretend all he wanted.

Manny sucked in a big breath to zip his pants and do up the top button. The suit felt like it was getting small, even though he'd just gotten it.

Minutes later, he was in the kitchen and ready to go.

His mother kissed him on the cheek. "I wish I could come watch," she said.

"It's okay. It's hard when Dad's gone. I get it." Manny got that he had to be away, but still wished he didn't and could come to his game. His parents had been so happy when his dad got the job with a trucking company so soon after getting laid off from his job on the oil fields.

Out of the corner of his eye, through the archway leading to the living room, Manny saw the chess game in the living room. He and his dad had been playing together since he was little. They often battled hard but

had to pause their matches whenever his dad was out of town.

“I’ll be there for your next game,” said his mom. “Did you have enough to eat?”

They were interrupted by the crunching of wheels on the snow-covered gravel road.

“I gotta go,” said Manny. “They’re here. And, yeah, I ate enough but save me some dinner.”

“Play hard.” His mother kissed his cheek. “But more importantly, have fun. Text me after the game, okay?”

Manny had a flip phone his parents had given him to keep in touch with them and his friends. They were okay with him using text messages and group chats, but he wasn’t allowed any social media.

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll text. And I always have fun at hockey.”