

WHEN HOCKEY STOPS

LEE MJ ELIAS
CHRISTIE CASCIANO BURNS

Illustrations by Rose Mary Casciano Moziak

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This book is dedicated to my dad, who, through countless car rides and miles to get to hockey, graciously bestowed his wisdom, humor, and love. I will pass it on.

— Lee Elias

To my sister Teresa Marzec, hockey mom, coach and physical therapist who has helped countless children and adults conquer physical and emotional challenges.

“Do something scary every day!”

— Christie Casciano Burns

CHAPTER 1

León lined up for the faceoff in the offensive zone. Everything seemed the same—the choppy ice; the tangy smell of the rink; his mom, dad, and younger sister Eve in the stands; his white and maroon jersey tucked into the back of his pants—but something didn't feel right.

León's team, the Philadelphia Hawks, were playing their archrivals from across the river, the South Jersey Sharks. The winner of this game would be in first place in the AA U12 division. Both teams were favorites to be in the league championship this season, and because this was León's final year as a U12, he wanted to win more than anything.

There were five minutes left in the third period, and the score was tied 3 – 3. The referee dropped the puck. León battled with the opposing team's center and won the faceoff back to Casey, his defenseman.

León quickly moved to the front of the net and positioned himself in front of the goalie. The net-minder looked like the Hulk in net, especially since he was wearing a seaweed-green jersey.

Casey quickly passed the puck to Ray, the right wing, who was standing alone at the top of the right circle.

“RAY!” León shouted while slapping his stick on the ice.

Ray laced the puck past the Sharks’ defenseman, right onto León’s stick. Without hesitation, León shot the puck into the top left corner of the net. The Hulk in the net slammed his stick and gave out a roar of anger.

“YEAH!” León put his hands in the air to celebrate. The goal, his second of the game, made the score 4 – 3 with just under five minutes left to go in the third period. Within seconds, his linemates joined in the celebration.

“Nice goal, León!” Katelynn said, giving him a fist pump.

“I give that goal a seven out of 10!” Ray quickly added. “Of course, I give the assist a 10 out of 10.”

León laughed. “Is that because you’re the one who passed it?”

“Of course it is!” said Katelynn.

The three friends finished their quick conversation and headed back to the bench for a line change. As they skated across the ice, a player on the opposing team got in their way.

“That’s the last goal you’ll score today,” he said. The boy was Matthew Westman, and he was one of the top players in the league. While León relied on his teammates and skill to succeed, Westman relied on his size. He was at least five inches taller than the other skaters in the league and probably 15 pounds heavier because of it. As a result, he barely lost battles for the puck, and he barely fit into his jersey, making him look even meaner than he already was.

“Only if you catch him!” Katelynn retorted as she pushed by Westman. León and Ray smiled at Katelynn’s remark and followed her to the bench as Westman lined up for the next faceoff.

“I think you made him mad,” León said with a chuckle.

“If my jersey fit like that, I’d be mad too,” Ray said, loudly enough for Westman to hear at center ice.

León sat down on the bench and took a big chug of water. He felt a tap on his back. “Nice goal, León.”

“Thanks, Coach Mike!” León replied.

“Be ready; your line is going back out there to

finish the game,” Coach Mike instructed.

León nodded. He was having the best season of his life so far, and Katelynn and Ray’s playmaking skills were a big part of his goalscoring success. Together, their line was unstoppable.

As the clock wound down to two minutes, León looked into the stands to see his family. Janet, his mother, watched the game action intently while Lee, his father, was wrangling León’s younger sister Eve.

Always a troublemaker, León thought.

“K.L.R. line, you’re up!” Coach Mike shouted. León jumped onto the ice as soon as the previous line’s center reached the bench. He was ready to finish this game.

He quickly skated into the defensive zone and positioned himself in the slot in front of his goalie, Adam. Howie, another of the Hawks’ defensemen, was in the corner digging the puck away from one of the Sharks players. As soon as Howie had control, he passed the puck up the boards to Ray, who positioned himself perfectly to receive the biscuit.

Ray charged up the boards with the puck while León sprinted up the ice past several Sharks players. As the Sharks’ defenseman slowly backed out of the zone, Ray banked the puck off the boards right to León.

León accepted the puck in stride and moved quickly past the red line. He looked across the ice to see Katelynn streaking toward the offensive zone with him. One Sharks defenseman was the only player in their way. León strung a quick pass to Katelynn as they both crossed the blue line.

Katelynn patiently waited for the defenseman to get a stick length away and then sauced a pass across the ice back to León.

Time seemed to slow down, and León swore he could see the “Made in Canada” written on the side of the puck as it spun perfectly toward him.

As the puck landed, León swung his stick into a perfect one-timer shot that lasered the puck past the Sharks’ goalie into the top right of the net.

“YEAAHHH!!!” León’s excitement exploded from his chest and out of his mouth as he put his hands in the air. He had just scored his first hat trick of the season.

As he turned behind the net to celebrate, he was met with a full-force cross-check across his chest.

León flew uncontrolled toward the boards behind the net. His reflexes took over, and he put his left arm up to try to break the impact.

As he hit the boards, a massive pain flashed through

his arm. He fell to the ice hard and dropped his stick.

León knew two things: His goal had sealed the victory, and he couldn't move his hand.



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