

## ONE

The two things a guy can never take back are the oversized baby blue sweater his aunt gives him for his birthday — and the promise he makes to a friend.

Right about now I wished I had the itchy sweater Big Auntie gave me last year, because I needed it to protect me from my promise to Remi Boudreau. I told my best friend I'd help him with slapshot practice. Little did I know this meant I had to stand in net while pucks flew at me like angry hornets. I reminded myself that Remi wanted to get the puck past me, but I also knew that the goal counted if the puck went *through* me.

If I'd had real goalie pads, I wouldn't have been so worried, but I couldn't afford hockey equipment. Remi loaned me his helmet, but the rest of my gear came from my parents' grocery store. I stuffed U.F.O.

magazines into my knee-high athletic socks. The edges of the magazines dug into the tops of my feet and left temporary tattoos of smudgy alien faces on my shins. Still, they gave me more protection than my short-sleeved T-shirt or my oven mitt hockey gloves. Remi's slap shots created the kind of heat even the oven mitts couldn't handle. Instead of catching the pucks, I tried to bat the blistering biscuits out of the air with the fly swatter I used as my goalie stick. I felt more like a sitting duck than a goaltender.

"You ready, Marty?" Remi yelled from the other end of the street.

"Another minute," I squeaked. More like another year.

He stick-handled the puck and worked himself into position about fifty feet from the net, but from where I stood it looked more like he was right in front of me. He wound up. My face shield fogged up from my panting breath and wiped out my vision. I rubbed the outside of the shield with my oven mitt until I realized the fog was on the inside. I couldn't see anything. In that horrible moment before the shot, I realized I'd forgotten to protect the most important part of my body. Where was my jockstrap and cup? Too late. *Ker-rack!*

"He shoots! He scores!" Remi yelled.

I breathed a sigh of relief and flipped up my face shield. The maple leaf on Remi's blue and white hockey jersey flapped in the breeze as he lunged forward and speared the air with his stick. Behind the pop can goalposts, about halfway down the street, the puck rolled to a stop and fell over.

"Good shot, Remi," I said.

"I could have snuck a dump truck past you," he teased. "Move the posts closer together so it's harder to score."

"Um, do you have a cup?" I asked.

"Why? Are you thirsty?"

"No. For my... You know."

He scratched his head. Then he realized what I wanted. "Oh. Just stick one of the magazines down your pants."

The magazine was already killing my feet. I could only imagine what it'd do to the other bits of my body.

"Get the puck and let's go," Remi barked.

Every inch of my tender skin screamed "run away," but I couldn't let my pal down. I recovered the puck.

"Hurry up, Chan." He used my last name whenever he wanted to play serious hockey.

I shambled back to the net and rolled the puck to my pal. Then I stepped between the pop can goalposts, squeezed my legs together and imagined very thin things: *sign post, a pencil, kite string*. . . My face shield fogged up again. I waited for the loud crack, but nothing happened. Instead, a bicycle bell rang from somewhere behind me.

“Car!” yelled a girl’s voice.

The best word in the entire English language! “Car” was better than “Christmas present,” “video game” and “bacon-rolled shrimp” crammed into one super word. I opened my eyes. A gold Cadillac had stopped behind Remi. He kicked the puck off the road and stepped aside. I grabbed the pop cans and walked to the grassy curb.

Once we were clear, the car lurched forward. The oldest driver in the world, Mrs. Johnson, gripped the top of the steering wheel, her head barely high enough to see the road. Her golden slug-mobile stutter-rolled past me. Halfway down the street, balanced on her mountain bike, Trina Brewster waved at us.

Once my mortal enemy, Trina was now sort of a friend, but not the way Remi was a friend. The only time she’d hang out with me was when she said her other pals were busy and she was bored. I was like the

armless doll she kept in the bottom of her toy box and brought out only after she'd lost her cool toys.

She climbed off her black bike and took off her red helmet. Over the summer holidays Trina's long hair had turned sunflower yellow. She was also a few inches taller. Most important of all, Trina's semi-permanent sneer — the one she usually showed me and no one else — had been replaced with a smile that drew my eyes to her face like a kitten to a sunbeam.

“Did you miss me?” she asked.

Remi's mouth hung open, but he didn't say a word. He stared, his eyes wide with kitten wonder. I wasn't the only one who had noticed the change in Trina.

“You look different,” I said.

“Different?” Her smile dropped.

“Good. He meant good,” Remi said, jumping to my defence.

I nodded. Her warm smile returned. My kitten head bobbed up and down in silent approval.

“Do you want to watch me ride my new bike?” she asked. “I spent all summer practising my 180 endo.”

Remi waved her off. “We're in the third period of game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals. Marty promised to play out the series.”

Trina pouted. She was used to getting her way.

So was my best friend. “Set up the net, Chan.”

Torn between my promise to Remi and the chance to avoid his slap shots, I wasn’t sure what to do. He must have sensed my hesitation because he yanked off his hockey gloves and tossed them to me.

“Here, these’ll protect your hands,” he said. “And use the oven mitt for your . . . you know.”

I blushed, grinning sheepishly at Trina.

“Why are you guys playing *here*?” she asked. “Don’t you know you’re on crazy street?”

Remi squinted at the street sign. “No, we’re on Riopel Road.”

“*Hel-lo*. I’m not talking about addresses. I’m talking about that house.” Trina pointed past her bike at the two-story red brick house surrounded by a lush green hedge. The sheer curtains in the top window flapped gently in the breeze. “That’s the Asylum House.”

Remi tilted his head to the side. “Asylum? What’s that mean?”

“It’s a place for crazy people,” I explained. I remembered many of Batman’s enemies ended up in an asylum.

Trina pulled us away from the curb. “Shhh! They’ll hear you.”

“Who?” I asked.

“The maniacs,” Trina whispered.

“Go on,” I said.

She led us across the street. “In 1983, a family moved into the house. The dad worked in Edmonton while the mom stayed at home with their twins, a boy and a girl. As soon as the dad left for work, weird things started to happen. Appliances broke down. The dishwasher made a horrible squealing noise; the washing machine sounded like a drum solo. The noise was so bad that the mom made her kids play outside while she called a handyman to fix the problem, but he couldn’t fix the appliances. Ever.”

“My dad’s an electrician,” Remi said. “I bet he could have fixed them.”

She ignored him. “The parents fought about the weird things happening in the house. The mom wanted new machines and the dad blamed her for hiring a terrible handyman. The twins stayed in the playground while the parents argued. Then one night, the dad came home early. There was a lot of screaming and when the twins came home there was no mom. No dad. But the washing machine was making a horrible banging noise, so they went downstairs to check it. When they lifted the lid, what the kids saw was so gruesome that their hair turned white and they both went insane. People say the sister stayed locked in the attic, while her brother lived

on the main floor and picked his nose for a snot collection. People say that if you get too close to the house, the twins will drag you in and feed you to the washing machine.”

The house looked much different now. The hedge’s tiny brown claws reached out for me. The air went still and the curtains stopped moving. A strange metallic groan came from somewhere deep inside the house. We said nothing until the sound died. I backed away from the hedge.

“So do you guys still want to play hockey by the Asylum House, or do you want to go to the park and watch me ride my brand new mountain bike?”

“Show me that endo,” I said, walking toward her.

“No way,” Remi grabbed me by the back of my shirt. “She made up the story to scare you.”

Trina’s lips melted into a handlebar grimace. “Did not,” she muttered.

“Remi, I’m tired,” I whined. “And I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Don’t quit on me, Chan. Coach says quitting is what cowards do. Coach says facing your fear builds character. Don’t you want to build your character?”

“No. I want a cup.”

Remi crossed his arms over his Toronto Maple Leafs jersey. “Grab the goalposts. Let’s play.”



I didn't want to let him down, but I also didn't want to be a human target any longer.

"Maybe Trina wants to play."

Her smile widened like the Cheshire Cat's. "Against Remi? I'd love to."

"She might get hurt," he muttered.

"Practise your wrist shot instead of the slap shot," I suggested.

"Coach says go all out or go home."

Trina grabbed the fly swatter from me. "You can go all out. I don't mind."

I handed her the hockey gloves. "You'll need these. He shoots pretty hard."

She sneered as she donned the gloves. "We'll see."

I set up the net several houses away from the Asylum House, placing the cans very far apart. I didn't want Trina to be hurt by Remi's slap shots.

"Are you cheating?" she accused. "Push the cans closer together."

"No, it's not what you think. I was moving them so —"

"Chan, I don't need your help," Remi said.

I nodded and moved the cans closer together.

"You ready, Brewster?"

She slapped one of the gloves against her leg and bent low, like a second baseman about to field a grounder. Remi wound up and fired. The crack of his stick hitting the puck rang out like he'd hit a home run. The puck whizzed toward the net. She snatched the black biscuit out of the air.

"I thought your coach said to go all out or go home," she said, tossing me the puck to take back to Remi.

I whispered, "Thanks for taking it easy on Trina."

He growled, dropped the puck on the pavement and fired a blistering slap shot. She whipped her glove beside her hip and caught the puck. She blew on her glove like she was blowing out a birthday candle.

He fired shot after shot, but Trina stopped them all. Every time she made a save she did a little goalie dance to taunt Remi. Sometimes, she raised her arms. Sometimes she stuck her butt out at Remi. Most times, she laughed.

He banged his stick on the pavement. "Okay, Brewster, you asked for it."

Instead of winding up, he charged the net. He deked left, then right, then left again. Trina crouched low and slammed her feet together, watching the Remi rocket hurtling toward her. She barely budged

from the centre of the net. About ten feet away, he skidded to a halt and wound up.

“That’s too close!” I yelled.

Too late, he brought his stick forward. Trina ducked. But the puck sat on the ground beside his feet. He had faked her out. He cracked a smug grin and tapped the puck past her and the pop can goalposts.

“He shoots! He scores!” Remi yelled as he lunged forward and speared the air in victory.

Trina threw the gloves on the ground and grabbed the stick.

“My turn,” she said as she stick-handled the puck down the street and turned around. “Or are you chicken?”

He picked up the gloves from the pavement. “Coach says when you talk trash, you shoot garbage.”

I wondered if his coach taught hockey or just came up with weird sayings.

“Ready?” she asked.

Remi yawned and waved her forward. She swung the stick back and took the shot. The taped blade jammed into the cement like a pelican diving for fish. The puck catapulted into the air, over the net and bounced down the street.

“She shoots! She scores!” yelled Trina.

“No way. Too high.” He waved off the goal like a referee.

“Goalposts stretch to infinity,” Trina claimed.

“Since when?”

“Since always,” she said. “Isn’t that right, Marty?”

My friends walked toward me.

“Marty, tell her it wasn’t a goal,” Remi ordered.

Trina smiled sweetly as she grabbed my arm. Goosebumps popped up all over my flesh. She whispered in my ear, “If you make the right call, I’ll let you ride my bike.”

“I heard that. You can’t bribe the referee,” Remi squawked.

I told the truth. “We play with regulation nets. No infinity posts. No goal.”

She dug her fingers into my arm like a cat stapling its claws into a couch. Gone was her sweet grin.

“Think about your call.”

I pulled away from her death grip. “The call stands. No goal.”

Remi whooped and threw his arms up in victory. Trina booted one of the pop can goalposts as hard as she could. It clattered down the street. She stomped after it.

“Sore loser,” he said. “She reminds me of Kyle’s dad.”

“You had more than one shot on goal. Shouldn’t she have a few more tries?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No way. Game over.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“Coach says life’s not supposed to be fair.”

“Did he really say that?”

He didn’t answer.

“Remi, you owe Trina a fair chance,” I said. “Or else people will say you’re scared of losing to a girl.”

He sighed. “Just because you’re right doesn’t mean you’re getting out of playing net for the game seven finals. Hey, Trina, you get one more shot.”

I nudged him in the ribs.

“A few more shots,” he corrected himself.

If she heard us, she didn’t look like she cared. She paced around the street, searching for something. Remi and I jogged after her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Someone,” Trina said, “stole my bike.”