

1

ANGER MANAGEMENT

The muffins were impossible to resist. Charlie reached out —

“Not before a game,” his mom said, slapping his hand.

“But I’m starved. It’s either this or I chew off my arm.” He took a few pretend bites.

“I just gave you a sandwich,” she said.

“That was hours ago.”

“Actually, it was forty-five minutes.”

She had a point, but he wasn’t going to give up. “I think the sandwich was a bit thin, Mom. Coach Hilton specifically said he wanted us stoked for the Wildcats game, and a growing boy can’t be stoked when he’s starving to death.”

She threw her hands up in the air. “I give up. Let me run to the bank first before it closes and then I’ll fix you something.”

Charlie looked at the clock. “It’s getting kind of late. Coach wants us at the game an hour early, and I . . .”

“I can’t go to the game with all this money on me. Let’s do this: Can you close up? I need you to sweep behind the counter, and put these muffins in the fridge,

and stack the rest of the chairs on the tables — and lock the door and set the alarm when you leave. Here are the keys.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know the procedure.” He had closed the café a bunch of times.

His mom leaned over and gave him a kiss. “I know you do,” she said. “I’ll take the van and double back and pick you up. Listen for the horn. In the meantime, get yourself something in the kitchen — without making a mess, please. And try to keep it healthy. I don’t think you can get stoked on muffins.”

“You’re wrong, Mom, but I’ll do it for you.”

“I’m sure William and the Rebels will appreciate your sacrifice.”

William Hilton coached Charlie’s major bantam rep team, the Rebels. They were defending league champs, and with some newly added talent, the team looked good to repeat. Injuries were a huge problem, however. Four players, all good friends of his, had been badly hurt in a bus accident — not to mention he had nearly drowned! Charlie worried whether the new guys on the team could carry the load until they got back.

“No worries. I’ll meet you at the corner so you don’t have to make the turn,” he said.

“Thanks. I’ll see you in about ten minutes.” She gave him another kiss and left the café, but not before spinning the sign in the door from *Open* to *Closed*.

Charlie decided to focus on the most important task: food. He really was hungry. Sure, he had promised his mom not to eat a muffin, but would she ever find out? They were sitting there on the tray, helpless, waiting to be eaten. His mouth began to water.

He heaved a sigh and covered them in plastic wrap. She was right. So what else? Charlie went into the kitchen. Bread was always a good start. He took a loaf from the shelf. He could go in the meat direction, but that might sit in his stomach, and they were playing soon. He opened the fridge and a brick of cheddar caught his eye.

“Joyce. Don’t be stupid. Rule One. Make the simple play. Go grilled cheese.”

He laughed out loud, and wished Pudge, his best friend, had heard that. Hilton had been teaching them a new style of play, inspired by the rule changes in the NHL, a game of constant motion, quick decisions, and aggressive attacking strategies all designed to break an opponent down. It was an intense learning experience, and challenging, and they made lots of mistakes, but every so often it clicked, and then it was hockey magic. To make things easier for them Hilton had created the Five Golden Rules of Hockey. Rule One was Keep it simple.

He turned on the range and added some butter to a pan, and then buttered the bread quickly before sliding in a few slices of cheese. He grabbed a package of napkins from a drawer. Charlie had been bugging his mom lately to let him help cook at the café. He did it all the time at home, but she said he was still too young. At least this once he could feel like a chef. He popped a white cap on his head. After a minute he cut off a piece and took a test bite. He figured it could use more time, so he put it back in the pan.

He heard the shuffling of feet. “Don’t tell me you forgot the money,” he called out, poking his head through the swinging doors.

“Of course we brought our money. How else could we expect to purchase your mother’s delicious treats?”

Charlie’s jaw tightened and he steeled his nerve. The four kids he despised most in the world, all players on the Wildcats, the Rebels’ archrivals, walked toward him.

“We’re simply famished, Chuckles, my good friend,” Liam said. “So make yourself useful and serve us.”

Charlie locked eyes with Jake, the leader of their crew.

So much had happened since he had come to Terrence Falls with his mom and sister after his dad’s accident. But one thing had stayed the same — his feud with Jake.

“Not sure how you missed the big sign in the window. We’re closed,” Charlie said.

“You don’t close until six o’clock. We still got two minutes,” Thomas said.

“Don’t you have a game tonight?” Charlie said. “You’ll be late.”

“We’ll be late if you don’t hurry,” Roscoe said. “My dad’s waiting for us out front.”

“Besides, we ain’t worried about the game,” Liam said. “We’re only playing the Rebels. Total joke of a game.”

“Be a good boy and give us a few muffins,” Jake said. “Nice lid, by the way. It’s a good look for you.”

Charlie cringed. He had forgotten about the stupid chef’s hat.

Jake nudged Roscoe. “The dude can’t deprive us of a snack, can he?”

“That would be wrong,” Roscoe said.

“Pure evil,” Thomas said.

“You’re a bad boy,” Liam said, wagging a finger at Charlie.

“He doesn’t mean it,” Jake said. “Help yourselves, lads.” He ripped off the plastic wrap and took a muffin.

Charlie grabbed the end of the tray, Roscoe took hold of the other end, and for a brief moment they were locked in a ridiculous game of tug-of-war.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Liam said, reaching around Roscoe and grabbing three more.

Roscoe let go. Charlie fell back into a table, knocking two chairs off and spilling the remaining muffins onto the floor. His tormentors roared.

“I was wrong about you, Joyce,” Jake sputtered. “You really are funny.”

“Do it again. Do it again,” Liam chirped.

Charlie grabbed the tray tightly with both hands. “Put those back — now!” he said slowly.

“But we’re hungry,” Liam whined, waving his muffin in Charlie’s face.

Charlie slapped it from his hand

“Look what ye did,” Liam said in a fake Scottish accent. “Ye broke me snack. I’m gettin’ me another right quick.” He picked one off the floor and dusted it off with his hand. “Thirty-second rule,” he declared, and took a bite.

Charlie gritted his teeth. Four against one — the helplessness hurt more than Liam’s taunts. “I knew you were jerks, but I didn’t know you were criminals.”

Jake put a hand to his mouth and gasped. “Why, Chuckles, that hurts. It really does. You don’t know me

at all. All we wanted was a quick snackeroo. We didn't want any trouble, and the last thing I'd want is to hurt your mom's muffins. We love the Rainbow Café. Right, fellas?"

The fellas agreed wholeheartedly.

Jake crumpled a bill and threw it at Charlie. It bounced off his chest and rolled under a chair. "Keep the change, *garçon*."

"I don't want your money," Charlie said.

"Use it to buy some breath mints," Thomas cracked.

"He should buy more of those ladies' panties he likes so much," Liam said.

"Maybe he should get some anti-loser spray," Roscoe said.

"No," Jake said. "What he should do is buy some deodorant for his girlfriend, Julia. Ever smelled that girl?" He plugged his nose and waved his hand in front of his face.

Their laughter echoed off the walls.

"She's not my girlfriend..." He regretted the words the second they came out.

"He admits she stinks," Liam roared, doubling over.

"Get out or I'll call the cops," Charlie yelled.

"Ain't we touchy today," Liam said. "Mental note. Don't tell Chuckles that his girlfriend stinks. Gotcha!"

Jake pretended to fire a handgun at Charlie. "See you later . . . and you might want to keep your head up. I wouldn't want to give you another concussion. I really felt bad about that."

"Enjoy your muffins," Charlie said. "They're the last ones you'll ever have from here."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "You're so serious, Chuck."

“Besides, it’s not Julia’s fault,” Liam said.

Roscoe and Thomas were laughing too hard to add a diss.

“You’re out of here or I’m calling the cops,” Charlie said.

“You said that already,” Jake said. “Don’t matter much. Not sure I like the Rainbow Café anymore. It’s not very friendly.”

He turned to leave, followed by Thomas and Roscoe.

“Later, alligator,” Jake said as he opened the door.

Liam looked back. “In the second period I’ll introduce you to my buddy here,” he said, tapping his elbow. “He’s very friendly and loves to give kisses.” He took another bite of muffin.

Charlie gripped the tray so hard his fingertips hurt. He had told himself a thousand times not to let those idiots get to him, and somehow they always did. Jake had this unbelievable talent of saying just the right thing to get under a person’s skin. Charlie could never understand why so many people looked up to him. He was practically the most popular guy in their grade, and he even had a ton of friends in grade 11 and 12.

He quickly scooped up the muffins. What a waste. His mom was going to freak. And when he thought about it, he could have just sold them the muffins and it would have been over. All they had really wanted was something to eat. Now he had made a total fool of himself, ruined the muffins, and given Jake that idea about Julia. One comment on Facebook and it would spread like wildfire.

A car horn blasted. He looked out the window, then

up at the clock. His heart started pounding. He was going to be late — again. Coach Hilton had warned him. The captain was supposed to set the example. But he hadn't even finished closing up. The horn blasted again, this time even louder.

He would have to finish later. He rushed to turn off the lights, punched the numbers into the alarm, locked the front door and raced to the van.

"Sorry, Mom," he said, slamming the door shut. She drove off.

"Was there a problem?"

"No. Nothing. I just got . . . distracted."

"My goodness, Charlie. I waited five minutes for you at the corner. Cars were honking at me like crazy."

He punched his thigh. "I forgot my knapsack. How dumb can I get? I have my homework in it."

"Do you want to turn back?"

He shook his head. "We're late as it is."

"We can swing by after the game," she said. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Sure . . . thanks."

"So who did you say you're playing tonight?"

"The Wildcats — Jake's team."

"Sounds 'epic.'" His mom flicked her eyebrows. When he didn't respond, she peered at him closely. "Isn't that what you kids say?"

"Sorta," he said. "It's just that when you say it sounds a bit . . ."

"Are you suggesting I'm too old to say 'epic'?"

"Not too old . . . just maybe not young enough anymore."

"How about if I added 'Okay, dawg,' or 'Got ya, dude,' or how about 'Awesome, bro'."

“Not really helping, Mom. But I think you’re cool.”

The light changed. “Thanks. But somehow I doubt that,” she said, laughing.

Charlie looked at a street sign. They were still at least twenty minutes away. Hilton was going to kill him. “Do you mind if I listen to the radio?”

“Sure. Just not too loud.” She slapped the wheel. “Another red light. We must have bad luck tonight. We might be a few minutes late, Charlie.”

It felt like it took forever to get to the rink. He practically jumped out of the van before she had even come to a stop. He ran to the back to get his gear and sticks.

“Charlie,” his mom called out.

“What is it?” he snapped. Didn’t she realize he was late?

“I forgot to thank you for closing up,” she said. “You’re a great help, and I don’t tell you often enough.”

Did she have to say that? If she only knew what a mess he had left: muffins out, crumbs on the floor, half a sandwich on the counter. If he told her she’d probably race back and do it herself, and then he’d never hear the end of it. Best to tell her after the game. “No big deal . . . It was nothing . . . Thanks.”

Her window rolled up and she drove to the parking lot. He pushed the door open and shuffled as fast as he could to the dressing room.

Hilton had his Five Golden Rules. Charlie was going to add one: Don’t let Jake and his crew get to you. Never again!

2

HOCKEY RULES

The Rebels' dressing room was at the end of the hall. As he got closer he heard Scott and Nick's voices. It brought a smile to his face. Hanging with his buds and joking around in the room was almost as much fun as playing the game. His smile quickly faded when he noticed Hilton and his assistant coach, Jeffrey, off to the side. Hilton did not look happy.

Charlie ducked his head and reached out to open the door.

"Charlie, can I have a word?"

He let the door close and dropped his bag against the wall.

Hilton pursed his lips and glanced at his watch. "I can't imagine why you enjoy being reprimanded for lateness, and I can assure you I find it equally unpleasant. But you really need to make more of an effort. The other boys get here on time, even the ones who are injured."

Charlie lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry, Coach. I was helping at my mom's café and . . ." His shoulders slumped. That wasn't an excuse.

"I'm at a loss as to what to do. We've had this dis-

cussion too many times. I'm not going to bench you, but I am starting Brandon's line, and on that first shift please give a thought to how important this is."

Charlie was tempted to tell him the real story but stopped himself. Better to accept responsibility. "I've promised before, but this time I mean it. I know I'm messing up and letting the guys down."

Hilton sighed and a brief smile appeared. "It's also not the end of the world, Charlie. I'm just asking you to focus on this. You're a terrific captain; much of our success is the result of your hard work, on and off the ice. Think of this as another part of your game you need to improve."

Charlie looked his coach in the eye. "I will. It'll never happen again."

Hilton put a hand on his shoulder. "That might too much to hope for. How about we aim at being on time once in a while and go from there?"

Charlie let himself laugh. "That sounds good."

"Great. Now, hustle up. I'll be joining you in ten minutes."

He held up his whiteboard to Jeffrey. It was full of diagrams, with arrows going every which way. Charlie looked forward to hearing what he was planning; learning about hockey from Hilton came in a close third after playing and hanging with his teammates.

"Joyce is in the house," Scott proclaimed as he came in, "which must mean the Zamboni is on."

Charlie dropped his bag next to Pudge. He and Pudge always sat in a corner together, one of their crazy superstitions that had started last playoffs when they won the championship, and it had become a hard-and-

fast rule — and there was always a one-in-a-million chance it made a difference!

“To be honest, I didn’t expect you so early,” Pudge said.

“Mr. Late is done,” Charlie said. He unzipped his bag and pulled his pants out. “From now on I’ll be opening the dressing room door for you when you get here.”

Nick hopped over on his crutches. The big cast was scheduled to come off in a couple of days. “What’s this absurd thing I hear about Charlie coming on time?” he said.

“Ridiculous,” Scott said.

“The earth would cease to spin on its axis,” Nick said.

“The sea would turn to Jell-O,” Scott said.

“Oreo cookies would lose their creamy filling,” Nick said.

Scott gasped. “Not that. Anything but that. Charlie, please — don’t change.”

“You guys need to get healthy,” Charlie said. “You’ve got too much time to think.”

“Totally untrue. I haven’t had a thought since grade three,” Scott said.

“And that wasn’t really a thought,” Nick said. “It was a burp.”

“There’s a difference?” Scott said. He forced out a burp. “I guess you’re right.”

“Stop distracting the players,” Zachary said. He leaned his cane against the wall. He was also recuperating, from knee surgery.

“But if I do that, what’s my purpose in life?” Scott said.

“You don’t have one,” Nick said. “That’s why you should be spending your free time in a cardboard box.”

“Let’s get dressed, guys,” Spencer Wicken said. “We gotta get focused on this game. The Wildcats ain’t gonna be fooling around.”

Charlie felt himself flush deeply. Spencer shot him an intense look from across the room, and then went back to taping his socks.

Spencer was one of the new players who had joined the Rebels at the start of the season. He was proving to be a formidable D-man, and his defence partner, Philip, was a solid, stay-at-home type like Scott. The Rebels had also acquired a new goalie, Andrew, and now he and Martin represented the best 1–2 goaltending tandem in the league. Three other players, Nazem, Brandon and Will, formed a complete forward line, and their scoring was going to be needed until Zachary and Matt got back.

When the season started, Charlie had been too pre-occupied with the campaign to save his high school to really get to know his new teammates, and now he sensed a rift forming. He suspected that was why Hilton was on him for being late. It obviously bothered Spencer, and maybe the other new Rebels also. At the same time, Spencer could cut him some slack. Sure he was late, but dissing him was not going to make it better.

His buddies all exchanged glances. Charlie shook his head slightly as a sign to let it pass. He reached into his bag and pulled out his shin pads.

Scott wandered over to the door leading to the washroom, a mischievous smile crossing his face, and picked up a cardboard sign. It had become an old friend

and constant companion — Hilton’s Five Golden Rules of Hockey. Their coach made sure it was displayed before every game and practice.

THE FIVE GOLDEN RULES OF HOCKEY

1. Keep it simple.
2. Forecheck, backcheck, paycheque — outwork the opposition.
3. Never stop moving your feet.
4. The puck travels faster than you — pass.
5. Support your teammates.

“Hey, Nick. I’m thinking that Rule Five is dumb,” he said.

Spencer’s face darkened.

“I’d go with ‘Eat more bacon,’” Scott said.

“I really don’t understand why Hilton doesn’t let you do more coaching,” Nick said.

“It *is* puzzling . . .” Scott said. “Of course, he wants me to focus on rehabbing my shoulder so I can come back and save the team — as usual.”

“Team doesn’t need to be saved,” Spencer said. “The team needs to worry about Rule Two.”

Spencer was most definitely not going along with the joke. The dressing room had gone quiet.

“Anyone got some sock tape?” Charlie said. “I’m out.”

The twins, Robert and Christopher, a stalwart defence pair, each tossed a roll his way.

“Thanks, dudes,” Charlie said. “I’ll use one roll for socks, and the other to tape Scott’s mouth shut.”

“Not a problem.” Scott shrugged. “I’m studying to

be a mime.” He pretended to be trapped inside a box.

Charlie figured he should keep talking to lighten the mood. “Matt told me he might be able to play in the next couple of weeks. That’ll give us a bit more jump up front.” Matt had been out with a concussion for over a month.

“It’ll throw off the lines, again,” Brandon said. “We’ll have eight forwards.”

Matt was a total energizer on the ice, and he had a sweet touch around the net. Why would Brandon care about the lines compared to that?

“You haven’t seen him play much,” Charlie said. “We gotta get him back. He’ll be our third centre, and create another scoring threat. Then when Zachary, Scott and Nick get back, we’ll be ready to roll again.”

“One scoring threat ain’t enough, I guess,” Brandon muttered. He leaned forward and began to retie his skates.

“Yeah — it’ll be *awesome* when our best players come back,” Spencer added. He also began to retie his skates.

These guys were so sensitive; they always took things the wrong way. But Charlie let it go.

“May I have your attention?” Scott declared dramatically. Charlie prayed he wasn’t going to respond to Brandon and Spencer’s comments. “Dalton, our beloved manager, has an announcement. Everyone, please, please, please, be quiet and let the poor boy speak.”

Charlie relaxed and pulled his socks over his shin pads.

Dalton turned red. “You really do add humour to the dressing room atmosphere,” he said.

“Scott’s definitely a big joke,” Nick said.

“Yes. Well, I do have a brief announcement,” Dalton said.

Charlie had recently invited Dalton to be the team manager, and he was perfect for it. He might be a bit fussy over details, and he had a funny way of talking, but he was a good guy and had thrown himself into the job. The team had never been better organized.

“Steve Roberts, who runs our league, has some news he would like to share. Come in, Mr. Roberts.” A short man with large, black-rimmed glasses and intense eyes walked into the room. Hilton followed him in.

“Boys, as you know, everyone is concerned about concussions. You can’t open a newspaper without a sports reporter writing about it, and look at what’s been happening in the NHL. Superstars missing dozens of games; some of them even retiring because of it. Anyway, my mom did some research and some doctors believe a concussion at an early age could be even more serious.”

Charlie listened closely. He had suffered a concussion last season, and had a Jake Wilkenson crosscheck to thank for that. He had missed more than a month of hockey.

“We’re instituting a new rule from here on in. Absolutely *no* hits to the head will be tolerated. Any head shot gets you an automatic game misconduct. You get two misconducts for head shots and you’ll be suspended for five games. Get another, and you’re gone for the season. So we’re serious about it. Okay?”

The boys nodded. Charlie thought it was a good idea. Hilton held a piece of paper up. “I’ll review these

rules with everyone. Thanks. It's a good idea in my view. Hockey's a physical game, and that's why we love it. At the same time, there's no place for head shots."

Roberts shook Hilton's hand and waved to the team. "Good luck, Rebels."

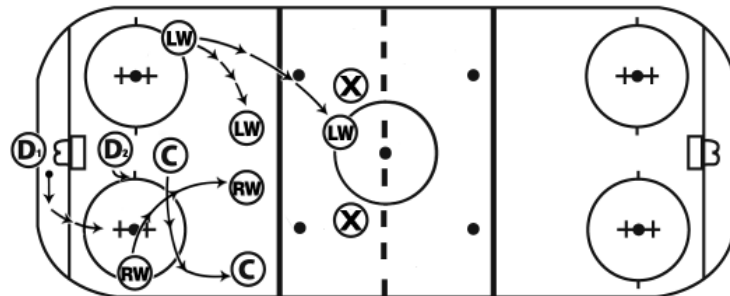
"He should have this talk with the Wildcats, not us," Charlie whispered to Pudge.

"I see some suspensions in their futures," he said.

"Let's finish dressing," Hilton said, "and while you do, can you all listen up."

Charlie flushed and began to tie his skates. He was the only one not fully dressed.

"We've struggled recently with some of the new ideas I've introduced, but be prepared to keep struggling. We'll make mistakes, give up goals, and even lose some games. But the important thing is to get better every game, to commit to improvement. Our biggest problem right now is Rule One. We're overcomplicating the game, and that's what I want to talk about." He took the whiteboard from Jeffrey. "Here's the new break-out." He quickly sketched the play.



“When there’s no pressure on the D behind the net, take it up the side. Centre and right wing cross, and the D can hit either player with the puck. The left winger cuts deep behind the opponent’s defence, or goes underneath if a passing lane is not available.”

“What if they forecheck us hard?” Spencer said.

“Who can answer that?” Hilton said.

Scott put up his hand. A twitter arose among the guys.

“You need to make a quick decision before the pressure gets you,” Scott said. “Pass to the right winger or centre, but if you’re in trouble, ice it or lift it in between the two defenceman and the left winger can fight for it.”

It was not the wisecrack his teammates expected. Charlie was not surprised, however. Scott was serious about two things: hockey and the not-so-secret love of his life, Rebecca.

“Easy to say when you’re in the stands watching,” Spencer said.

Scott and he locked eyes for a second.

“You’re right,” Hilton said. “It looks easy, but I know it’s hard. Quick decisions are the key, along with Rule Three: Keep the feet moving. Remember, the puck carrier is not the only one making quick decisions. The forwards have to anticipate and get to open space, at pace. And now that I think of it, Rule Four comes into play. Pass the puck rather than carry it yourself. We need to think of every breakout involving all five players; it’s not about one guy making the right pass or stickhandling past five opponents.”

“The Zamboni has finished, Coach,” Dalton announced.

Charlie reached for his gloves. They were beginning

to look a bit sad. The Rebels' sponsor, Brent, who owned a great hockey store in town, had given them to him last season. Charlie had played a lot of hockey since then. Two fingers had split and were being held together by tape, and the stitching on the side of the other glove was unravelling. He probably needed new ones, but even though his mom never said anything he could tell money was tight. He quickly added a little more tape.

"Give me Brandon's line to start, with Spencer and Philip on D. Andrew is in goal today," Hilton said.

Charlie knew his friends were looking at him. This was not the routine; he usually started. But it was his own fault. He would have to show Hilton that he was worthy of being captain.

"I disagree with one thing, Coach," he said. "We might give up some goals, and we will make mistakes, but we ain't gonna lose any games!"

The boys let out a roar and rose to their feet.

"Re-bels! Re-bels! Re-bels!"

"Rock 'n' roll time, dudes," Zachary said.

"Fast feet — no slowing down," Spencer said.

"Play hard every shift," Brandon said.

"Rule Two, dudes. We win every shift," Charlie said. He slapped his tattered gloves together.

"Re-bels! Re-bels! Re-bels!" they chanted, and followed Andrew out to the ice.

Charlie and Pudge held back. It was part of their pre-game ritual. After everyone had gone, Charlie tapped Pudge's shin pads twice with his stick, and Pudge did the same.

"Gotta win this game," Charlie said.

“Only reason to play,” Pudge said.

“Then let’s do this,” Charlie said.

They punched gloves and together they headed out. Brandon and Spencer could think what they wanted. Until his friends got healthy the Rebels would have trouble winning games, especially against the league’s two powerhouses, the Snowbirds and the Wildcats. Charlie jumped through the door and took off the instant his skates hit the ice, carving deeply as he stormed across the blue line and curled down the boards toward the Rebels’ net.