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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!