

1

CLOSE CALL

Charlie readied himself for the shot.

“Eat some yellow tennis ball,” the shooter said, and he launched a blistering slapshot.

Partly screened by two players, Charlie threw out his arm in desperation. The ball nicked the blocker and deflected up over his shoulder.

Clunk!

It hit the crossbar and bounced back in front of the net. Four players scrambled madly for it. Charlie dropped into a butterfly to protect the lower half of the net. The shooter got control of the ball and cut hard to the far post. Out of position, Charlie sprawled on his back and held up his catcher.

Whack.

The shooter banged his stick on the pavement. He’d fired it right into Charlie’s glove. Charlie laughed as he got to his feet. Talk about lucky saves!

“Admit it — that was highway robbery,” the shooter demanded.

“Not my fault you can’t score on an open net, Scott,” Charlie replied.

He took off his goalie mask. He was tired — they’d

been playing for two hours — but he wasn't about to stop. It was tough enough to even get his friends to play road hockey. The hockey season had started a week ago, and now they were all too busy to hang out. That was life, he supposed. It wouldn't be so bad if he played for a team too, but he hadn't arrived in Terrence Falls until the beginning of the school year, so he'd missed the spring tryouts.

"I'll give you dudes one more chance to score on me," he said.

Charlie curled his stick around the ball and flicked it down the driveway. The ball bounced between Scott's legs and rolled down the driveway all the way to the other side of the street.

Scott rolled his eyes. "Great, Joyce. Now someone has to get it back."

"I'm just trying to get you in shape for the hockey season," Charlie said. "So be a good boy and fetch."

Instead, Scott walked over to the front lawn and flopped to the grass. "I'm starving. Any of you hiding a burger and fries in his pocket?" he said. "Pudge, did you bring any goodies from your dad's restaurant?"

"Sorry, Scott. I thought you might last a few minutes without eating."

"A few minutes — are you insane?"

"Does your new coach know about your weight problem?" Nick asked.

"What weight problem?"

"You'll see," Nick said.

Scott threw a clump of dirt in reply, which Nick avoided by dropping to the ground.

"I have an old sandwich in my knapsack," Nick said.

“It’s from two days ago and I might’ve dropped it on the ground a few times, but . . .”

“I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me,” Scott said. “I thought we were friends. Fork it over.”

“Make me.”

“We’ll settle it like men — thumb wrestle! Two out of three.”

“I got my money on Nick,” Zachary called out.

“Ten bucks on Scott,” Pudge said.

They obviously didn’t want to play street hockey anymore. But Charlie wasn’t in the mood to joke around.

“I’ll see what we’ve got in the kitchen,” Charlie said quietly.

When he went inside, he found his mom washing the floor.

“Stop right there, young man,” she said. “I don’t want you dragging your dirty shoes all over.”

“Sorry, Mom. Just wondered if there was something to munch. Some of the guys — well, Scott, actually — are kind of hungry.”

His mom laughed. “I swear that boy eats enough to feed ten people.”

“He won the school hot dog eating contest — ten in only five minutes, including the bun. A new record.”

“Very impressive. Give me a few minutes for the floor to dry and I’ll dig something up.”

“Thanks, Mom . . . and we don’t need anything special. Chips or something would be cool.”

“Charlie, I have a reputation to uphold. It wouldn’t look good for a café owner to serve junk food.”

“Don’t worry about it — keep it simple.”

“Leave it to me.”

He knew there was no point arguing, so he left. He was proud of his mom. She’d only opened her café a month ago, and it was already doing great. She was a really good cook. Still, it was embarrassing when friends came over and she baked cookies or a cake, as if he was still a little kid.

When he went outside, Scott and Nick were balancing on their heads. Zachary and Pudge were cheering them on. “What’re they up to now?” Charlie said.

“Thumb war didn’t settle it,” Pudge said. “They’ve moved on to a headstand competition.”

“Hey, Zachary, how was practice today?” Charlie asked.

“Kinda cool. A power skating coach who once tried out for the Chicago Blackhawks had us doing all sorts of intense drills. Major tempo. I was totally wiped out by the end.”

“How’s the team look?”

Zachary shrugged. “We have a solid crew. The Snow Birds won the championship last year, and I guess we’re favoured to win again. The Wildcats are supposed to be good too.”

He couldn’t help feeling a bit jealous. Zachary made it sound as if playing for the Snow Birds was no big deal. But that was Zachary — he was laid back about everything.

“What about you, Pudge? You changed your mind about the Wildcats?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? No way I’d play with Jake — not to mention Liam and Thomas. And Coach Schultz is too over the top. He was always on my case, ranting

about something or other. I was on that team for two years — two years too many, as far as I'm concerned."

He understood about not wanting to play with Jake and his friends. They'd bullied Pudge for years, and had made Charlie's life miserable from the first day of school. He was one happy camper when they transferred from his homeroom. He did owe them one thing, though. He had become friends with Pudge because of their bullying. They had stood up to them together. Charlie thought of Pudge as his best friend, though he doubted Pudge thought the same — they'd only met a month ago. Pudge wasn't funny like Scott, or a terrific athlete like Nick, or cool like Zachary. He was just someone you could trust. At least he and Pudge could hang together a bit since neither of them had a team.

"I've called around to all the triple-A and double-A teams — I couldn't even get a tryout," Charlie said. "Have you heard of anything lately?"

Pudge reddened slightly. "Forgot to tell you. The Tornadoes invited me out. My dad knows the coach . . . from the restaurant . . . and . . . well . . . I signed with them." He cleared his throat and looked down at the ground before continuing. "I asked if they had a spot for you." He shrugged. "Coach said they were full up."

"Great. I'm the only guy without a team."

Charlie instantly regretted his words. He sounded angry, and Pudge was clearly embarrassed. But Pudge hadn't done anything wrong. He had a right to play.

Scott ran over with his arms over his head.

"All hail the headstand champion of the world. Bow before me, mortals."

Nick was right behind. “He lies.”

Scott flashed a grin. “Maybe I didn’t exactly win. But Nick cheats and everyone knows it.” He put his arm around Charlie’s shoulders. “So where’s that grub?”

“It’s coming. My mom’s on it.”

“Awesome. I hope she brings those chocolate chip cookies,” Scott said.

“I’m hoping for the raspberry tarts,” Nick said.

“The ones with the whipped cream around the edges?” Scott said. “Those babies rock.”

“Tell me about your team,” Charlie said, “to take your mind off your stomach.”

Scott stretched out on the grass, and put his hands behind his head. “The Hornets will be the team to beat, no doubt. We’ve got two good goalies. And, with me on defence, the blue line is solid — naturally. And we got a couple of guys up front with skills.”

“You told me you’ve got practically the same lineup as last year,” Nick said.

“We do.”

“The Hornets finished three points out of last place.”

“New season — new attitude.”

“Same players — same results.”

Pudge interrupted. “I bet Charlie would be able to help you guys.”

Scott’s tone grew serious. “I asked the coach. He told me the league only allows him to sign seventeen players, and he’d already committed back in April. He did say that if someone drops out he’d love to have you. Tough spot to be in, Joyce. I mean, after how well you played in the Champions Cup last month for our school

team, I figured you'd be a lock for a triple-A spot."

"I'm not sweating it too much," Charlie said bravely. "I bet something will come up. I may not play competitive hockey this season, but that's cool. I'll just be ready for the spring tryouts for next season."

It killed him to think that — but he wasn't going to be a whiner.

"I'm here for you if you need a good cry," Scott said.

That earned him a clump of dirt from each of the guys.

Charlie stood to take off his pads. His father had given them to him two years ago. The insides were all worn, and the lining at the bottom was coming apart. They were also too short. Scott had blasted a shot off his ankle, and he could feel the bruise coming up. He'd never think of getting new ones, though. He'd rather suffer a thousand bruises. He didn't have many things left to remind him of his father.

He fought a wave of bitterness. It was still hard to think about his father dying in that car accident.

"No better feeling than taking off goalie pads," Charlie said, holding one up.

Scott grinned. "It's a good look for you. Gives you that ultra-dope waddle when you walk."

"Show me." Charlie tossed the pad at him.

"Chawie! Chawie! Josh have ball. Josh fwo ball."

Charlie looked up and felt his heart rise to his throat. His three-year-old neighbour from across the street was standing in the middle of the road, holding a ball and giggling — totally oblivious to the car racing towards him!

“Josh, car!” Charlie screamed.

Josh froze and dropped the ball. Charlie felt things happen in slow motion, as if he were watching himself in a movie. With one goalie pad still on, he ran towards Josh, scooped him up in his left arm and catapulted himself towards the curb. They tumbled to the road. Josh began to shriek, thrashing and kicking.

“You’re okay,” Charlie said. “It’s over.” A wave of relief washed over him.

“Joshie! Joshie! Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

“I think he’s good, Mr. Hume,” Charlie said.

Josh ran to his father and jumped into his arms.

Charlie hadn’t known his neighbours long, but he’d noticed how Mr. Hume doted on his son. They were always together. It had been like that with his own dad.

Josh stopped crying.

By this time Charlie’s friends had surrounded them.

“You guys good?” Pudge asked.

Charlie nodded.

“That was fun,” Josh said, which made everyone laugh.

“Hume! What kind of parent are you?”

It was the driver. Charlie got to his feet and slid over to join his friends. He found the guy kind of intimidating. He was tall and well built, and his eyes had dark circles underneath that gave him a menacing appearance. His clothes looked expensive. Charlie couldn’t stop looking at his enormous gold watch. It covered almost his entire wrist. He’d never seen a watch like that.

He looked over at Mr. Hume, whose face had flushed deeply. Mr. Hume lowered his eyes and shrugged.

“I was washing the car,” he said weakly. “Guess I took my eyes off Josh for a second, Mr. Dunn.”

“Pay attention,” he replied. “Little kid like that — you can’t let them out of your sight. Lucky I hit the brakes in time. Not many drivers have my reaction time.”

“I’m grateful,” Mr. Hume said.

Charlie didn’t buy that. Dunn was speeding — and he hadn’t hit the brakes fast enough. In fact, Charlie was pretty sure he’d been talking on a cell phone.

Dunn crouched down in front of Josh. “You watch yourself, little buddy. Promise me there’ll be no more running onto the street.”

Josh hid behind his dad’s legs.

Dunn grunted and stood up. “That reminds me,” he said. “Hume, get to the store early tomorrow, around seven. We have a new shipment of hockey gear to organize.”

“I’ll be there, Mr. Dunn.” He cleared his throat. “See you then. I think I’ll take Josh inside.” He picked up Josh and turned to go. “Thanks,” he whispered as he passed Charlie.

“Bye, Chawie,” Josh said over his dad’s shoulder.

The boys gathered together. Dunn put his hands on his hips. Charlie wished he’d leave. He made things weird.

“Don’t some of you attend Terrence Falls High School?”

No one answered for a few moments.

“We all do,” Charlie said finally.

Dunn swung around and looked right at Charlie.

“My son goes there — Mike Dunn. You know him?”

Charlie nodded. “We’re all in grade nine with Mike.”

“Any of you hockey players?”

This time they all nodded.

“Are you any good?”

Charlie exchanged looks with his friends. How were they supposed to answer that? Fortunately, they didn’t have to. Dunn continued without waiting for a reply.

“You’re all minor bantam age, so this may be of interest — that’s if you can really play. The triple-A division of the East Metro Hockey League is about to change forever. The Aeros lost their sponsor about a week ago and had to pack it in. They’ve never done much anyway. I don’t think the league was too heart-broken that they folded. Anyway, the league went looking for a replacement team — and yours truly answered the call.”

Charlie had spoken to the Aeros’ coach. At least this explained why he’d been so vague about a tryout.

Dunn continued. “I’ve always thought about taking over a team — grabbing the helm and building a winner — a powerhouse. So that’s just what I’m gonna do. And believe me, when I decide to do something — I do it. Nothing stands in my way. That’s what got me where I am today.”

Charlie had never heard anyone speak with such confidence.

“How many players are you looking for?” Charlie asked.

“I’ve already signed a few. But I need at least ten more solid players — guys with real potential and the right attitude. If you guys think you fit the bill, give it a

shot. Tryouts start in two days. Team's called the Hawks. Take my card and give me a call if you're interested."

He gave a bunch of cards to Charlie, flipped his keys in his hand, winked and went back to his car. The engine roared and he set off at high speed, the tires screeching as he pulled away. No one said a word until he was out of sight.

He looked at the card: *Tom Dunn, President, Dunn's Sportsmart.*

"Charlie, I have one question," Scott said. "When did you have time to find a phone booth and change into your Superman costume before saving that kid?"

He didn't answer.

"Joyce?" Scott prompted.

"Umm . . . I don't know." He was too excited by the news to listen. It was perfect — a AAA team in Terrence Falls with ten open spots. That meant he had a shot at playing competitive hockey this season — or, better yet, they could all play for the Hawks! That would be way cool. Hockey was practically the most important thing in his life. It was the only thing that had made things bearable after his father died and they moved to Terrence Falls. And now, out of nowhere, some guy decides to sponsor a brand-new team. It was like a miracle.

"Can you believe it?" Charlie said. "Isn't it too bizarre for words?"

"Is what too bizarre for words?" Pudge asked.

They were all staring at him. Didn't they get it?

"The Hawks . . . the new team. We could all play together. It would be like the school team — only bet-

ter, because instead of just playing a weekend tournament, we'd be on the same team for a whole season. We almost won the Champion's Cup — we could even give the Snow Birds a serious battle."

No one said a word. He wondered what they were thinking.

"I never thought of it that way," Pudge said. "It's an interesting idea, I guess."

"It's more than interesting," he responded. "It's, like, totally interesting. It's, like, over-the-top interesting. What could be—"

Nick interrupted. "What about the commitments we signed? It seems a bit bogus to quit two weeks before the start of the regular season."

They walked back to the lawn. What could he say to that? He searched his brain for an answer.

"Nick, I see your point. On the other hand, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Sure, we can all play on separate teams, play it safe this year. But I say, take a chance and play together. Think about the school team. Pudge and Zachary, we could be on the same line again. Scott and Nick, you could be defence partners again."

"My dad would kill me after he made all those calls to the other coaches," Pudge said.

Scott and Nick seemed deep in thought. Charlie turned to Zachary.

"I know giving up a spot on the Snow Birds is tough. They've got an awesome lineup. But that team is stacked. You'd just be another player. On the Hawks you'd be a star and get twice the ice time. It'd be cool to have you on my wing. I bet we'd lead the league in goals."

Zachary nodded, but didn't say anything. He looked away.

This was going nowhere. Maybe Pudge . . .

“How about my left winger?”

Pudge returned his gaze for a moment. Charlie grew hopeful. There was something about the look in his eye.

“It is an interesting idea, I guess,” Pudge said.

Not exactly an over-the-top reaction — better than a no, at least.

“Maybe you guys can think about it. I'm gonna take a shot and, well . . . it'll be cool either way. We can play on the same team or against each other. I wouldn't mind dangling Scott with the puck a few times.”

“Science fiction, Joyce,” Scott said. “I'm too inside your head to fall for your bogus moves. But wait till you play Nick. He tends to wet himself and get distracted.”

Nick pretended to be horrified. “I thought you weren't gonna tell the boys about that . . . problem.”

“No secrets among friends — although I kinda put that on Facebook,” Scott said.

Nick shrugged. “As long as it's only all the kids at school.”

They started cracking jokes about how their teams stacked up against each other. Charlie couldn't really join in. The Hawks weren't even a team yet. The conversation gave him a chance to think about it, however. The Hawks gave him a real chance to play in the top league after all, and maybe Pudge would switch since he didn't know guys on his team. Matt was also looking for a team. He used to play for the Wildcats, and since the school tournament he'd become a friend. Matt didn't

like Jake any more than Charlie or Pudge did. He had to accept that Scott, Nick and Zachary probably wouldn't leave established teams — especially Zachary. The Snow Birds were a dynasty.

“Anyone hungry?” his mom called out.

Scott leapt to his feet.

“There's enough for everyone,” his mom laughed.

“Not if I eat it all first,” Scott replied, racing up the steps into the house.

“I'll give you a call later to talk about the Hawks,” Charlie said to Pudge as they followed.

Pudge nodded, but didn't say anything.

Charlie could have punched himself. The guy was obviously not into it. It was stupid to expect anyone to quit a team just to play with him. Plain dumb. He needed to be cool about it. It would be enough just to make the Hawks.

Charlie forced himself to grin, and he laughed along with the others as Scott struggled to stuff two bananas into his mouth on a dare from Nick.