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THE LETTER

Charlie Joyce held the letter up. “But Mom, an NHL coach will be there. Only eighty players are invited. It’s a chance in a lifetime.”

“I’m sure it is,” she answered softly.

He couldn’t understand. Two weeks at the Youth Elite Hockey School — a dream come true — and the perfect way to start the summer. And that after the perfect finish to the hockey season. His team, the Rebels, had won the league championship. And now this!

“Pudge told me all about it. Some of the guys have been talking about it, but I never believed I’d actually get invited. They have a real coaching staff — like I said, we’re talking guys who’ve coached in the NHL — and we’re on the ice four hours a day, and there’s dry land training and fitness testing . . .”

“It does sound fun.”

“And the camp’s only two weeks. I’ll be back before you know it, and I’ll help out at the café every day, I promise. You won’t even have to pay me.”

His sister Danielle came into the kitchen. “What are you two arguing about?” she said.

“We’re not arguing,” his mom said.

As if he needed to deal with his irritating kid sister now. “Don’t you have somewhere to go?” he snapped.

“I can go wherever I want. It’s my house too.” She stuck her tongue out.

“You’re so lame,” he said.

“Stop picking on your sister,” his mom ordered.

He couldn’t hold his anger in. “This is totally unfair. Danielle gets to go to drama camp, and you won’t let me go to the best hockey camp in the wor— ”

He stopped — his mom looked like she was about to cry.

“Real nice, Charlie,” Danielle said.

“I didn’t mean to . . . You don’t have to cry, Mom.”

His mother sighed and wiped her tears away with her fingers.

“Charlie, I’d like nothing better than for you to go, believe me.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

She put her hand on his. “I’ve tried to keep things normal this year, as much as possible. I know you two have been through a lot. After Dad died it was so difficult, what with moving to Terrence Falls, new schools, new friends. I’m so proud of both of you — and Dad would be too. But opening the café was very expensive. Money’s really tight right now. If we had two incomes coming in, it would be different . . .”

Her eyes clouded. Charlie felt himself tear up now.

He missed his dad so much sometimes his chest hurt. He couldn’t believe it had been a whole year since the car accident. So much had happened since then. He’d gotten through grade nine at his new school and survived the bullying of Jake and his crew. Actually, if it hadn’t been for Jake, he probably never would have had the courage to try out for the school hockey team, where he’d met his friends. It was only then that he had started to feel like Terrence Falls could really be his home. It was still so hard to think about his dad, though.

His mom squeezed his hand. “I’m really sorry, Charlie. I want the world for you. Only I’m really stretched financially right now.”

He looked at the bottom of the letter. Total cost: \$1,450.

“Danielle’s got her drama camp in August,” she continued. “I’ve had to replace the vents and the hood for the range at the café, plus replace the grill because I was too stupid to get the extended warranty.” She banged her head with her hand.

“That’s not your fault,” Charlie said. “How were you supposed to know it was going to break down so soon?”

She leaned back in her chair. “Thanks, Charlie. It was a bad decision, however, and one that cost me dearly. I simply can’t ask Grandma and Grandpa for more money, either. They’ve been incredibly generous already. Hockey camp is a bit of a luxury. I’m . . . I’m . . . sorry, Charlie.”

She seemed ready to cry again.

“Forget it, Mom. It’s cool. Of course I wanted to go. There are more important things.”

“What about next year?” Danielle asked.

Charlie took a deep breath. His sister was really bugging him lately. He didn’t feel like talking about it with a ten-year-old. But his mom was looking at him with that “be polite” expression.

“The camp is only for fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds. I’ll be too old next summer.” He pushed his chair back. “I’m gonna watch TV for a bit.” His mom looked really upset. “It’s okay,” he said. “I know you’d send me if you could. There are worse things than hanging out here this summer.”

If his mom could have read his mind she’d have known that wasn’t even close to being true. He looked at the letter lying on the table in front of him. This was going to be a brutal summer.

“I don’t have to go to drama camp,” Danielle said suddenly.

Their mother sat up in her chair and looked at her in surprise. “You’ve been dying to go to that camp for months. I had to beg to get you in. It’s all arranged. And Hannah’s going with you. I was on the phone for an hour to get you into her cabin.”

“I know, Mom, and camp would be good . . .” She squeezed her eyes tight and nodded at Charlie. “But I can go next year. Charlie can only go now.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. His irritating little sister, who’d been driving him insane about that stupid

drama camp for so long that he thought his head would explode, was actually doing this for him?

He was incredibly tempted to let her go through with it too . . . but obviously he couldn’t. It wouldn’t be right.

“That’s totally awesome of you, Danny. But you’re too good an actor to miss the camp. You have to go. Besides, Hannah would miss you.”

She shook her head. “Mom can use the money from my camp to pay for your hockey. I’ll go next summer. I want you to go.”

They both looked at their mom. She had tears in her eyes.

“Why are you crying so much today?” Danielle asked.

“You’re such wonderful kids,” she said. “That’s an extremely generous offer, Danielle. Are you sure about this?”

“Totally.”

“Really?”

“Really, Mom.”

His mom raised both hands into the air. “What do you have to say about that, Charlie?”

He didn’t know what to say. “Why don’t you think about it for a day or two, Danny. I have until the weekend to accept the offer.”

“Don’t wait, dude. Live for the moment!”

Charlie laughed and put his arm across Danielle’s shoulders. “I think I might have the most totally awesome kid sister — like, in the entire universe.”

“What do you think about that?” his mom asked Danielle.

A mischievous look crossed her face. “I think the most totally awesome kid sister in the universe might like some ice cream.” She pointed to the fridge.

“No chance,” Charlie declared. “The most totally awesome kid sister in the universe does not deserve store bought ice cream. She deserves a banana split with chocolate sauce and sprinkles from Dutch Dreams — on me.”

“What about whipped cream?” Danielle exclaimed.

“That’s automatic, Danny.”

His mom pushed her chair from the table and stood up. “That’s simply too tempting. I might have to join in.”

Charlie pointed his finger at her. “Don’t think of bringing your purse. I’ve been saving up for this.”

In truth he’d been saving for a new long board by doing deliveries for his mom at the café. This occasion definitely called for dipping into his savings, however.

“Let me grab some ice cream money — and then let’s do this thing,” he said, punching his fist in the air.

He charged out the kitchen, his fist still held up. He felt like flying up the stairs.

The YEHS was legendary. He had to call Pudge.

Charlie slowed down suddenly. How was he going to tell him? Pudge was a solid player, and Charlie loved having him as his left winger, but he probably hadn’t received an invite. It might be a bit awkward.

A worrisome thought crept into his mind. He took

his money from the shelf and went back downstairs. He went back to the kitchen and looked at the letter, and his heart sank. The camp started on the same weekend he was supposed to go to Pudge’s cottage. Now it was going to be even harder to tell him. Charlie forced that out of his mind. Danielle deserved her banana split, and a few other presents besides that.

They were already outside waiting, and so, with no one around to see, Charlie couldn’t help himself — he raised both arms over his head and did a quick victory dance.

The camp started in three weeks — and he’d thought his summer was going to be boring!