

Chapter 1

This is a story about my father. His name is Nikolay Breznikov. Nikolay is a Russian name, and it's pronounced Nee-kol-eye. Almost no one here knows that his first name is Nikolay. Come to think of it, almost no one here knows that his last name is Breznikov. People in America were mostly afraid to pronounce his name, and so he shortened it to Brez, and people just called him 'the Zamboni guy,' or 'Zamboni Brez.' Even today, when I'm out with my father, we run into people who light up when they see him, and say, "Zamboni Brez, how ya doin!"

I can't really tell you about my father without talking about the rest of my family, because our stories are all pretty connected. If it weren't for Yuriy, Katya and me, and our youth hockey, my father might still just be known as 'the Zamboni guy.' I'll start the story two years ago, back when I was a Pee Wee.

For those of you who only know about youth hockey in Russia or in Canada, a Pee Wee in the United States is a hockey player who is twelve or thirteen years old. It's the level after a Squirt and before a Bantam. I was thirteen that season, which means that I was a second year Pee Wee. My name is Stas, but that didn't mean as much to me as being a second year Pee Wee, and being a Shark.

"*How was practice?*" my father asked in Russian as I stepped into the door of our apartment.

"English!" my mother said as she followed me into the front hall.

My father just grunted and walked away. He didn't even wait to hear me tell about my first practice with the Sharks. He

always did that when my mother made him speak in English, which meant that he pretty much never completed a conversation, never mind a sentence.

Even speaking in Russian, my father never had too much to say. "A man is what a man does," he used to say. In America, they say that actions speak louder than words. That's what my father believed. If the words had to be in English, actions did all his speaking. I wondered why he even came to this country if he didn't want to try to learn the language. Actually, I think that he understood English enough, but he just refused to speak it.

My English wasn't perfect back then, but it was okay. We had moved to America three years earlier, when I was ten. We used to live in Moscow. I still had a heavy Russian accent, but I could say whatever I needed to say in English, and people understood. I was pretty proud of the way I could talk after just three years in this country. My brother Yuriy could speak better than I could, and he was only eleven, but he didn't have as many years of Russian to undo. We also had learned English in school when we were in Russia, something my father never did. My sister Katya was seven, and sounded as American as any kid I knew. Sometimes I was jealous of the way she spoke. Other times, I was proud of my accent.

My father had worked the early shift that day at the rink, so I wanted to tell him all about the Shark's practice, but the conversation was clearly over. Instead, I lugged my hockey bag back to my bedroom, where I stacked it on top of my brother's bag at the foot of our bunk beds. It was just as well I hadn't talked with my father. He would have criticized everything I told him. He used to play on the Red Army hockey club in Moscow, and American hockey was never good enough for him.

"How was practice?" my brother Yuriy asked in his high pitched voice which contained just a hint of a Russian accent.

"Great," I said without enthusiasm.

“How were the kids? Were they any good?”

“Yeah, they seemed really good,” I said, getting a little more excited. “There were some huge kids. We even have a girl on the team, and she’s pretty big. I wasn’t even the biggest guy on the team!”

“That’s unbelievable,” Yuriy said, and it was. I had always been the biggest kid on every hockey team I had played on. But this was the Eastern Massachusetts Select Hockey League. Everyone just called it E Mass. All the best kids from Boston to Hartford played in this league. And the top teams in the league got to play for the Montreal Cup, which was the best youth hockey tournament in the world. Everyone said that the E Mass teams won it a lot. E Mass coaches liked size, and if two kids trying out for a team were about the same in skill, they always picked the bigger guy. I had heard that the Shark coach especially liked big guys, which is one reason I tried out for that team. They also practiced at the rink my father worked at, in Hingham, which made it easy for me to get there.

“You’re lucky,” Yuriy continued. “My team’s gonna stink this year. It’s not fair that you can play E Mass hockey and I have to play town hockey.”

“You never know. Maybe all those kids moving up from Mites are really good.”

“But they’re tiny!” Yuriy said. “You should have seen them in the tryouts!”

“So what? You’re just a Squirt, and Squirts can’t check in your league, so being little doesn’t matter that much.”

“I still wish I was playing in your league.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Mama and Papa said that you can play E Mass when you’re thirteen. That is, if you’re good enough.”

“Good enough?” Yuriy bellowed. “I’m much better than you were when you were eleven! That’s why they should let me play E Mass this year.”

“It’s a ton of money. They can’t afford it.”

“I could deliver papers like you do.”

“I only do that in the summer, when Kenny, the regular paperboy, is on vacation. I fill in for him. And that only pays for part of the cost,” I said. “We barely have enough to pay for the rest.”

“So, how will they have enough money in two years?”

“I don’t know. They said you could play then, so they’ll figure out a way to pay.”

“So these kids on your team, Stas, are they good, or just big?”

“Both,” I said, and grinned. Yuriy grinned back. While size did not mean as much in his league, it made all the difference in the world in Pee Wees. Yuriy was a big fan of college and pro hockey, and understood the importance of size. A lot of coaches would rather have a big guy who’s slow than a little guy who’s fast.

“Are they nice?” Yuriy asked.

“I guess,” I said, though I didn’t really think so. Not a single kid had said a word to me the whole practice. Of course, I never said a single word to any of them, either. But I was the new guy. It’s a lot harder to be the new guy. I didn’t even know the names of all the other kids yet.

“What about your coach?” Yuriy asked.

My coach. Oh, god, I thought. All the guy did was yell. I just hoped that he knew more hockey than my town coaches the past two years. Even though I was glad to live in America, my coaches in Russia had been much better. The main reason my parents had let me play in the E Mass league was so that I would get better coaching. I just hoped that Coach Murphy was

like my fourth grade teacher two years before. Mr. Kavikola had seemed really scary the first month of school, but by the end of the year, I loved him. He was pretty strict, but he was also a great teacher. Maybe I'd feel that same way about Coach Murphy by the end of the season.

"I think he'll be good," I said. "He wants to win. He's going to take us to the Montreal Cup."

"What's that?" Yuriy asked.

"You don't know what the Montreal Cup is?" I asked, rolling my eyes in disgust.

Yuriy shook his head no.

"It's only the top youth hockey tournament in the whole world. Teams from every serious hockey country come and play for a week. They're all Triple-A select teams, and the winner is the world champion."

"Wow!" Yuriy said.

Yeah, wow, I thought, still not quite believing that I was on an E Mass team with a shot at playing for the Montreal Cup.

Chapter 2

“Stas, tell your father about your new team,” my mother said as she filled my bowl with *borshch*.

“They’re called the Sharks, Mama.”

How could she not remember that? She always called it my new team. Everyone knows about the Sharks. Papa’s been making their ice ever since he started working at the Ice Forum!

My mother leaned over me to pour the soup into Katya’s bowl.

“No!” my little sister shrieked.

“Katya, what is it?” my mother asked with a trace of alarm in her voice.

“I hate *borshch*!”

“You are hungry enough, you will like it,” my father said.

“I don’t want it! I don’t like the beets.”

“Tatiana, pour it!” my father said. “What kind of Russian does not eat *borshch*? She will eat it.”

My mother hesitated, then filled Katya’s bowl with the bright red cabbage and beet soup. When my father spoke like that, people obeyed him, even my mother.

“What was I saying before?” my mother asked.

“You wanted Stas to tell Papa about his new team,” Yuriy said.

“Oh, yes. So, tell your father about the kids, and the coaches. They have a new head coach. Your father does not know of him.”

I looked across the table at my father. He continued to eat, as if ignoring my mother, but I saw him secretly eyeing me. I knew that he wanted to hear about my hockey team, even if he did not ask.

“One kid, Peter Donohue, his father used to play on the Kings. But Peter is the alternate, which means he only plays if one of our regular guys is hurt. Peter knows tons about hockey, though. He’s like a walking CD of hockey facts. Our goalie is Mac, and he’s unbelievable. And this kid, Eddie, he’s huge and he loves to hit. And all the kids are really good, Papa. None of the kids on my town “A” team last year would have had a chance of playing on this team, except maybe Jimmy Duval. And that’s just because Jimmy is a goon, and I think this coach likes goons.”

“*You’re big, but you’re no galavarez,*” Papa said to me in Russian. A *galavarez* is a thug. It actually means ‘head chopper’ in Russian.

“What did he say?” Katya asked. Katya was my seven year-old sister.

“Nikolay, look! Your own daughter cannot understand you when you speak in Russian. You must learn your new language.”

“*O bozhe!*”

“Nikolay! Do not curse!”

“*It’s very sad,*” he went on to say in Russian. “*My own little girl, and she can’t understand her papa. She hates borshch. The only thing Russian about her is her name.*”

“Mama,” Katya whined, pinching her nose between sips of the soup, “tell me what he’s saying!”

“If he cares for you to know,” my mother said coldly, “he will speak it in English.”

She stared across the table at my father who stopped chewing and stared right back at her. His huge hand tightened around his spoon, but he said nothing. My mother held his stare for a few seconds longer, then she looked down and continued to eat. My brother and I stopped eating, and exchanged fearful glances. I peeked at my father, and he finally

moved his eyes away from my mother and looked at my sister. As soon as his eyes touched upon Katya, his whole face softened and a sad smile crept to his lips.

"I am sorry, Katya," my father said slowly, in English. "I will try more hard to speak in the English. It be not easy for me, but I know it be important to do."

"So what were you saying, Papa?" Katya asked.

"I do not remember. Something is about hockey."

"You said that Stas was not a goon," Yuriy said. "You'd never know that if you saw him play street hockey with me in the yard. He nailed me yesterday, and I have this huge bruise, right on the butt. Let me show you."

Yuriy stood up and began to unbutton his pants.

"Yuriy," my mother said, "there is no need to show us."

"I want to see it!" Katya said.

"Katya!" my mother said, throwing her a stern look.

"*No respectable girl wants to see -*," my father began in Russian.

"Achh!" my mother cried.

My father continued, in English. "My wife scream every time I speak in my native tongue, my son is *galavarez* and my daughter is tramp. America is great country." He shook his head in disgust.

"Nikolay," my mother said. "*Tikho!* Be quiet! You speak foolishness!"

"At least he's speaking it in English," Yuriy said.

"Aargh!" Papa cried, as he put down his spoon and got up from the table.

"Yuriy, apologize to your father! Nikolay, please do not leave the table. We must eat together! We are family!"

"Papa," Yuriy began.

My father was out of the room, and the silence at the table was deafening. Finally, my mother spoke.

“I try to keep our family together, and see what happens? I spend forever driving you boys to hockey and waiting in cold rinks. Stas, in the summer I drive every morning to get your papers. I spend money on hockey skates and sticks when I can barely afford to buy groceries. I do all this for family, and no one is happy. What can I do?”

Tears welled up in my mother’s eyes, and my heart grew heavy.

“It’s okay, Mama,” I said. “American families fight at the dinner table. It’s normal in this country.”

“How do you know it’s normal? You are from Russia.”

“TV! American families are always arguing at the dinner table on TV shows. You should watch *Malcolm in the Middle*. So don’t feel bad.”

My mother smiled at me and said, “Thank you for saying that, but Russian families do not act that way. Russian children respect their parents. My hope is that in some ways you will be American and in some ways you will be Russian.”

Chapter 3

I eyed the guy next to me as Coach Murphy put the whistle to his mouth. I thought the kid's name was Billy, but I wasn't sure. The coach's head moved forward, and the whistle shrieked, and then he tossed a puck into the corner.

I moved my legs as fast as I could, but my large frame could only go so quickly. The other guy, who did turn out to be called Billy, was one of the few small guys on the team, and his short legs were lightning quick. Halfway to the corner, he was a step ahead of me. *O bozhe*, I wanted to get to that puck first!

Instinct kicked in, and I slowed up a hair, giving me just enough time to see which way he would turn with the puck. I saw him cut to the inside, and then I accelerated. Just as Billy had the puck on his stick, I lowered my shoulder and slammed into him.

Boom! His shoulder pads and helmet crashed into the boards, making a sound that echoed throughout the curved-ceiling rink. Billy went down and I picked up the loose puck and took it toward the goal. Mac was out of position, and I fired the puck into the half-empty net.

Score! I raised my stick, and then noticed that Mac was skating away from me, heading toward the corner. Billy lay crumpled on the ice, not moving. A wave of guilt shot through me. I hadn't meant to hurt him. I was just doing what I was supposed to do. I followed Mac over to see how Billy was. As I edged my way in, Mac turned around and pushed me away.

"Get out of here!" Mac said, poking me in the ribs with the fat knob at the butt end of his goalie stick. "Give him some space! What's wrong with you anyway? This is a practice! Billy is your teammate!"

A number of the other boys skated past me toward Billy. Most ignored me. Some gave me dirty looks. As I was standing alone near the face-off circle, feeling like a total dork, one of the boys skated up to me.

“Don’t feel bad. The kid slipped as he pivoted, otherwise he wouldn’t be hurt. It’s not your fault.”

“That’s not what they think,” I said, pointing the butt end of my stick toward my teammates, who were still surrounding Billy.

“Billy’s their friend. They’ll get over it. You’ll be their friend, too, soon.”

“Thanks. By the way, my name’s Stas,” I said to the boy.

“Stas?”

“Yeah, is there something wrong with that name?” I said defensively.

“Uh, no,” the boy said. “It’s just that I never heard of that name. I’m Ben. I’m a new kid, too. I know two of the other guys from my school team. Sully and Bake. They’re pretty nice, and you’ll like them, too, when you get to know them. Some of the kids are mad because their friends got cut so we could make this team. They’ll be fine when they get to know us, especially if we help this team win more games, and I think we will.”

I smiled at Ben. “I hope so.”

As I spoke, my eyes moved back to Billy. He moved his left leg. Phew! I had been afraid he was dead. My mother always sighed in relief when a kid who went down finally moved. She always worried that he might be paralyzed like Travis Roy, a guy who played for BU and got paralyzed in his first college game. My mom says that if you move, then whatever’s broken will eventually heal. Billy moved, and so I knew he’d be okay. I prayed that he was not seriously hurt. I never wanted to really hurt anyone, especially a teammate, and especially on the second day of practice with a new team. If Billy missed a couple

months of the season with a broken bone, all of the other kids would hate me.

Slowly, Billy pushed himself up to a sitting position. My teammates all tapped their sticks on the ice as Coach Murphy helped him to his feet. I touched my stick to the ice a couple of times as well. Billy skated slowly toward the bench while Coach Murphy skated toward me.

Uh oh, I thought. I'm in real trouble now.

"Stas," my coach said, "I like your attitude."

I smiled nervously.

"A lot of very talented players did not make this team, as you know. Now you, you have your share of talent, but you have something else that those other boys do not have. You know what that is?"

I wasn't sure what to say, and so I said nothing.

"Stas, you have size, and you know how to use it. I know that you weren't born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and you play that way. I like it. Got it?"

My short, muscular coach winked at me.

"Just take it a bit easier on our own boys. You hit like that every practice, we won't have a team to compete with. Let's save most of that for the other team. Okay?"

I nodded.

"Now, get in line for the next drill!"

He patted me hard on my shoulder pad, and I skated off. As I approached the other players, I didn't know how I felt. I was relieved that Coach Murphy hadn't yelled at me. In fact, he liked what I had done to Billy! The problem was, I didn't really like it. I felt bad about hurting him. Was my coach going to want me to hurt kids on the other team in games? And then he had talked about talent. Was he saying that I didn't have as much talent as the other kids? I had lots of talent, but never had a coach to really bring it out in me. My father always said that I was loaded

with ability, but I was still a little rough around the edges. An unfinished product, he called me.

That's why he signed me up for E Mass hockey. It was the best there was. The best players. The best coaches. My father wanted me to play for the Sharks because the old coach used to coach a college team, and his teams always played a well disciplined game. But that coach got transferred to Toronto in his regular job, and so the Sharks had this new coach. My father didn't know Coach Murphy. His uncle used to play in the NHL, for the Red Wings, and the team hired him, and so my father and I figured that he'd be great. So far, though, I wasn't too impressed. The first few practices on any team are mostly just boring skating drills, and so I wasn't too worried. He'd be good, I was sure.

I stood in line for the next drill, full ice figure-eights, forwards and then backwards. I felt the guy behind me pushing at me, and I moved forward, bumping the kid in front of me.

"Hey, cut it out!" the boy said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Yeah, sure you are."

I *was* sorry. I didn't want to cause any trouble, but none of the kids would talk with me, except that new kid, Ben.

"Sully, move up," a big kid two places ahead in line said. "I'll move back there. He can push me all he wants."

Sully and the big kid switched places in line. Was this guy going to fight me? I was almost afraid to stay in my spot in line, but I was more afraid to move. He'd think I was a wimp, and that's the last thing you want to be in hockey. I'd rather have kids hate me than think I'm a wimp.

Waiting in line, the big guy turned his head, and spoke over his shoulder, "You're the Ruskie, right?"

"Huh?"

"The Ruskie. The Russian kid. You're from Russia, right?"

“I used to live in Russia. But I’m American now. My mother is going to be a citizen soon, and then I’ll be a full American, too.”

“I’m Eddie. Eddie Germano. Don’t be embarrassed about being Russian. I love the Ruskies. They’re the nastiest hockey players. They’ve won a ton of Olympic gold medals. They would have beaten team Canada back in the 70’s except Bobby Clarke broke the ankle of their star player. I saw it at the Hockey Hall of Fame.”

“My name’s Stas. You’ve been to the Hockey Hall of Fame?”

“Twice.”

“Where is it?” I asked.

“Toronto.”

“Toronto! That’s in Canada! That’s where the old Shark coach moved!”

“O’Neil, right. Coach O’Neil played wuss hockey. My father would have yanked me from the team if O’Neil had stayed. But this guy Murphy is supposed to be one tough dude. Murphy never made the NHL. My father had heard about him from Juniors. I guess he ended a few careers there.”

I didn’t want to ask Eddie what he meant by that. Did he hit people so hard that they never recovered? Did he ever paralyze anyone? Did he kill anyone? I shuddered.

“Well, Stas, I’m on this team, you’re on this team, and that’s Murphy’s kid over there.”

Eddie pointed to a short kid in a red practice jersey.

“Little Murph is not that big, but he makes up for it with his checking. I saw him play for Southie Pee Wees last year, and the boy can hit. It was his first year ever playing check hockey, but man, could he hit. Because he’s not so tall, the refs let his elbows come up higher. They say that he sharpens his elbows each time he gets his skates sharpened.”

I looked nervously into Eddie's eyes, and saw him laugh. He was just kidding. Of course he was. No one would actually sharpen their elbows.

And then the whistle blew, and Eddie took off down the ice. He moved pretty well for a big guy. Seconds later, the whistle blew again and it was my turn. I worked as hard as I could, even if it was a boring drill.

Chapter 4

“Man, you reek,” Ben said to me as I was pulling off my black jersey.

“You don’t exactly smell like roses yourself,” I said.

“Thank God,” Ben said. “If my mother had her way, she’d wash all my stuff after every practice.”

“My mother makes me wash everything at the end of the season.”

“Just once a year?” Ben asked as he stepped out of his hockey pants.

“People don’t wash clothes as much in Russia. Yuriy wears a shirt once and puts it in the hamper, and my mother has a fit. When she first came to this country, she couldn’t believe that most Americans washed their clothes after each time they wore them.”

“Who’s Yuriy?”

“My brother,” I said, as I tossed my cup into my hockey bag.

“Stas, don’t do that,” Eddie said from the bench across from me.

“Do what?”

“Toss your cup through the air. If that gets washed just once a year, it must collect a pretty nasty bunch of germs. Makes me want to hold my breath.”

“So, what should I do? Should I wear my cup home?” I asked.

“No, stupid. Just place it in slowly. Cuts down on the waft factor. In another month you won’t even have to throw it. It’ll be so ripe it’ll be able to walk to the bag itself. It can just follow its nose.”

I smiled, then looked toward Lizzy, the one girl on our team. Suddenly, I felt embarrassed. Should we be talking about cups

and stuff in front of her? Our eyes met, and she must have read my thoughts, because she said, "Don't shut up because of me. I have four brothers. You can't say anything I haven't heard before, and there's nothing I haven't seen, either."

"Don't be so sure," Eddie said, grinning.

"Eddie, you're a loser," one of the other kids said, tossing a tape ball at him.

Eddie ignored the kid, and continued to take off his equipment. The guys all got undressed down to their boxers. Obviously, with Lizzy there, that's as far as anyone went. But I don't think it would have been different even if Lizzy weren't there. No one ever got naked the year before when I played Pee Wees for Braintree. Next year, it would be different. Lots of Bantams are in high school, and they say that everyone actually takes a shower after practice there. And at Braintree High, there's just one giant shower with all the guys in it at the same time. At least that was what I'd heard. That sounded pretty gross to me. And what they say about towel snapping sounded even worse. I was in no hurry to go to high school

"Hey, Stas," Ben said quietly to me, "where do you live?"

"Braintree."

"Any chance you can drop me off in Quincy on the way home? I live right off the highway. Otherwise, I have to wait an hour for my mother to get out of work."

"Sure, I'll ask my father. Hey, wait a sec. I'm not leaving for a while. My father's working here for another hour. He's driving me home because my mother is with Yuriy."

"That's okay. We can hang out together while we wait."

"Sure," I said.

"So, your father works here?" Ben asked. "At the rink?"

"Yeah, he drives the Zamboni."

"Your father drives the Zamboni?" the kid on my other side asked.

“Uh huh.”

“Brez? Is your last name Brez?”

“Breznikov. It’s Breznikov.”

“Your father is Zamboni Brez!” another boy said.

“Is that what they call him?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s the best. The ice used to bite at this rink until he came here two years ago.”

“How long have you been playing here?” I asked, stepping into my slippery black sports pants.

“I played Hingham Youth Hockey here before the Sharks. I started when I was three. My parents tell me I was skating before I was walking, so I know this ice.”

“What’s your name?”

“Dan. Dan McPhee. But everyone calls me Moose.”

I could see why. He was huge and hairy! He looked like he even shaved!

“I’m Stas.”

“I know.”

Just then, Eddie Germano walked across the skate room mat. He strutted bare chested, while below his waist he was still wearing all his equipment. Eddie’s bulging pecs and beefy upper arms were huge! I quickly put my own shirt on, covering up my less developed upper body.

“Hey, Eddie, watch it!” one boy yelled. “You almost cut my freaking toes off.”

“Chill,” Eddie said. “I’m good with these skates. I haven’t removed any body parts with these blades yet, at least not any toes.” Eddie flashed a big grin at me.

“Hey Stas, move that big butt of yours over a bit. I need to sit down here. That’s my bag there under the bench.”

I moved over and Eddie sat between Ben and me.

“Oh man, I’m tired,” Eddie said loudly. “That coach, he’s crazy! I never had a coach make us do suicides up to nine before. At least not the second day of practice!”

“Looks like you enjoyed your off season a bit too much,” one of the other kids said to Eddie, patting his own stomach.

“Drew, are you trying to tell me that this is fat?” Eddie said, jiggling his own bare stomach.

“Either that, or you bought a little extra protective padding.”

“Hey,” Eddie said, flexing his muscles, “this here is rock solid. This is a body by Boyd. You’re talking to next year’s poster child for Rick Boyd’s Fitness and Training.”

“Yeah, Eddie,” another boy called out, “you’re the ‘before’ picture.”

All the boys on the team laughed. I glanced at Eddie, who was smiling.

“Just jealous, boys, especially Drew, our resident ninety-nine pound weakling. Some of us are *men*,” Eddie said, then paused, and continued in a very high, almost girlish voice, “and some of you are still *boys*.”

“If you’re a man,” Mac, our goalie, said, “then I’m in no hurry to grow up.”

“You don’t hurry to do much, especially in the net. My mother always hated to come to my games because she couldn’t see the play without slow motion, that is until you joined the team last year.”

“That’s all right, Eddie. I don’t need to be quick. With you on defense, all you need to do is to stand near the net and there’s no room for the puck to possibly get in. I can just nap.”

“Nothing new about that, Mac.”

The kids on the team were all smiling as they packed their bags full of wet, smelly clothing and equipment. Just then, Coaches Murphy and Regan walked into the team skate room.

“Good practice, boys,” Coach Regan said. “It was awful hot out there, and there were a lot of summer fries and milk shakes that needed working off.”

“Eddie!” one of the kids whispered loudly.

“Hey,” Coach Murphy said, “for his size, Eddie skates as fast as anyone out there. I already feel bad for the other guys this year. He’ll be like a freight train heading for them in the corners.”

Eddie stood up, bare-chested and still wearing his hockey pants. He flexed his muscles and took a bow. The other boys all smiled.

“I can see it’s going to be a fun season this year,” Coach Murphy said. “You guys have unbelievable talent. If our physical game is half as good, no one’ll touch us. Montreal, here we come.”

“And guys,” Coach Regan added, “remember we have three new players with us this year. We had a good season last year because we really pulled together as a team. Make sure you guys all get to know Ben, Stas and James over there, James Murphy. Bring them into the fold.”

I looked around at the other kids on the team. A few glanced at me and nodded. Most just sat there. A couple, including Mac, flashed me dirty looks.

“Next practice, Thursday, at six,” Coach Regan said. “Let me know if any of you need a practice schedule.”

The two coaches left.

“Hey Billy,” Mac said sarcastically, “let’s welcome these new players to the team, especially the Commie.” He looked at me.

“Come on, Mac,” Woody said. “Forget about it. Billy’s all right.”

“Yeah,” another kid said, “Billy goes down once a day anyway. He either likes to scare his mom, or he finds the ice comfortable, like a mattress.”

“Myself, I like a nice warm waterbed,” a different kid said. “But everyone likes their own thing. Uncle Fester used to sleep on a bed of nails. Billy likes hard ice. Billy, you didn’t really get hurt, right?”

“Right, Will,” Billy said. “I’m fine.”

“No thanks to the little Red over there,” Mac said, looking right at me.

“Mac, lay off him,” Sully said. “Nobody got hurt. Stas is on our team, and I don’t know about you, but when these games get nasty this season, like they always do, I’ll be glad to have Stas on my side.”

“What about me?” Eddie asked, with a trace of a hurt expression on his face.

“Eddie,” Drew said, “you know that we’re glad to have you.”

“Yeah,” another boy said, “you protect us on the ice, and make us all feel smarter when we’re talking off the ice.”

“How do I do that?” Eddie asked.

“Figure it out. I’ll give you a hint. You’re doing it now.”

The whole team laughed.

“What do you mean?” Eddie asked.

Everyone laughed even harder. Even I laughed.