



BLUE*ice*

AND OTHER STORIES *from the RINK*

FRANK EWERT

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In deference to his Canadian heritage, all words in this book have retained the spelling of the author's native language.

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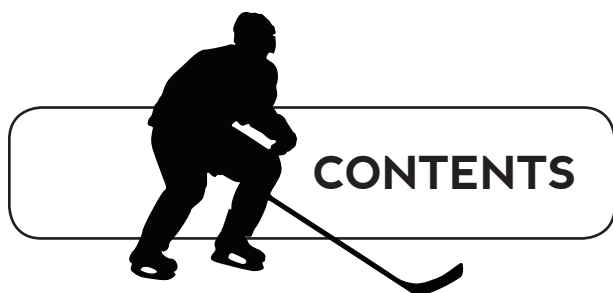
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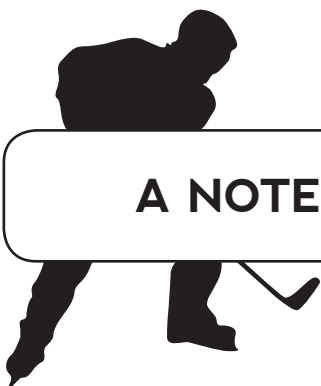
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To my dad,
who taught me
to love my wife,
work hard,
and play hockey.



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A NOTE TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

In Canada we have this thing called “hockey literature.” It might be hard to imagine, but it’s true. Walk into any Canadian bookstore, and you’ll find a whole assortment of them readily available in all shapes and sizes.

The stories in this book have been written with this heritage in mind. As a result, those who know a thing or two about hockey history may find that some characters or events feel familiar. This is deliberate. My goal from the beginning has been to capture hockey, to present it to all readers—hockey fans or not—as I see it. The allusions you will find in these stories are my way of accomplishing this.

Some of the characters in these stories are bad people. Sometimes, even the heroes are less than perfect. They may say or do things that you and I wouldn’t. I don’t ask you to condone them; simply love them like you would any other sinner.

Thanks for picking up these stories.

Frank Ewert.



1. THE PROTECTOR

On every good hockey team there is someone like me: a player who stands six-and-a-half feet tall, weighs about two hundred twenty-five pounds, and earns enough penalty minutes a season to match his weight. We rarely score, almost never set up good plays, and to be honest, spend a lot of the game sitting on the bench. You won't see us on the ice in clutch situations, and if the game goes into overtime, you won't see us at all.

What is our job? Well, we're the protectors. We're there to make sure that the other team doesn't take liberties with the players who can actually score and make things happen. In my case the player to protect is Brian Graves. Not only is he our leading scorer, but he's probably the only guy on our team (and maybe even the entire junior league) who has a legitimate shot at making the big-time. He's been skating since he was three, playing hockey since he was five, scores more goals in a season than I'll score in my career, and until the last game of the regular season, he was my best friend.



Brian and I both joined the Thunderbirds at the start of the year. For Brian, this was just another stepping stone on his way to a successful career; for me, this was the last chance to have some fun on the ice before finally settling down and starting a real life.

Our paths first collided—literally—during tryouts. We were running some two-on-one drills, and thanks to my size, I ended up playing defence against Brian. As he and his partner came down against me, I realized that I didn't have a chance on this go-around. Skating backwards has never been one of my strengths, so I decided to make do as best I could and look for a chance to flatten somebody. As it happened, Brian was that somebody.

I've delivered a lot of hard hits, but that one was one of my best. Brian was choking on air before he hit the ice. As he tried to get back on his feet, one of the coaches blew his whistle and yelled at me to knock it off, that this was not the time to be crunching bones. But I knew that that hit was my best shot at getting on the team, so I just smirked at Brian and skated off.



Two days later I got a call from Marc, the head coach.

“Wade, you're on the team,” he began. I started to thank him, but he interrupted me. “You're on the team to do a specific job. I want you to play with Brian Graves and make sure that all the other teams know he's off-limits. And that means that if he gets hurt, you might as well turn in your jersey. Is that clear?”

It was. All too clear. The one guy I'd managed to piss off in tryouts was not only going to be my linemate but also my charge. Wherever he went, I would have to follow. Whenever the other team so much as looked at

Brian, I'd have to be there throwing my weight around to make them think twice about lining him up. And for all this to be possible, the two of us would definitely have to become friends.

The first time I walked up to Brian in the dressing room and tried to apologize, he told me to "piss off." And though I'm not really intimidated by smaller guys, the last thing I wanted to do was aggravate him any further, so I just shrugged and walked away. During practice I tried again, but Brian wasn't ready to make up then. Or at the next practice. Or the one after that. By the end of the first week of practice, it was clear to me that Brian didn't want to let it go.

By the end of the second week, it was clear to everyone else too. Brian refused to acknowledge me on the ice, which really limited his options. If Ty, our linemate, wasn't in position to receive a pass, Brian would find himself forced to carry the puck across the line; if he ended up behind the net and I happened to be the forward in front, his only option was to try and swing around to a shooting position. At first no one said anything, but when Brian kept turning the puck over, Coach's patience began to fade.

"Brian, pass the puck!" he yelled after a particularly bad turnover. "Wade was wide open on that play." But Brian knew that he was the star and that he could afford to shake everyone else off. Because for all his turnovers, Brian could make up for everything with one fantastic play. Sometimes he would glide between two defencemen at the blue line and create a breakaway. Other times, shooting from an impossible angle, he'd miraculously find a hole in the goalie and bury the puck in the net. Once he even went end-to-end, starting out behind our own net,

blazing past everyone in the neutral zone, and leaning his way to their goal, where he easily tic-tac-toed the puck past the goalie.

Things continued on this way into our first game. While Brian and Ty worked magic with their passing plays, I did my best to keep up, though I usually arrived too late to be of any help. I was virtually invisible out there, and thanks to their speed, the other two had no need of me. We easily won the game 7-3, but I didn't think the victory tasted very good. I knew more than anyone else that I'd been just a body on the ice, and that if Brian didn't change his mind soon, I'd be replaced and dropped off the team.

With this in mind, I went up to Brian in the dressing room.

"Look," I said, "I know you don't like me, and I know why, but I think it's time to move on, okay?"

Brian was too busy toweling off a skate to look up.

"Hey," I said, "I'm talking to you."

This time his eyes flickered up at me. "Piss off," was again his only reply.

"I'm not going away until we work something out."

With a look of perfect patience, he put his skate down and gave me his full attention. "How many goals did I score tonight?"

"Uh, three?"

"And how many assists did you get?"

I said nothing.

"That's what I thought." Brian went back to stuffing gear into his hockey bag, but I wasn't done yet.

"Look, if you keep ignoring me out there, you're gonna regret it."

At this he looked up with a quizzical stare. "I'm sorry, who are you again?"

“See you at practice,” I replied through my teeth, and then walked away.



Coach had us scrimmage for the last half of our next practice. Once again Brian and Ty were off in their own world while I worked on my cardio, following them up and down the ice. But after fifteen minutes of this, I'd had enough. As Brian and Ty skated out of our zone, I skated ahead and waited for Brian to try and cross me. It didn't take long; seeing me in his way, he went to skate in front of me, but instead collided with my shoulder and fell to the ice.

Cursing, he rolled over to get up, but I was already there to push him back down to the ice.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

“Getting in your face.” After a couple more shoves, I let him get to his feet, and we stood facing each other. Throwing aside one of my gloves, I stuck out my hand. “Hi, my name is Wade. What's yours?”

Brian shook both of his gloves off, but instead of shaking my hand, he tried to land a punch. I ducked and socked him in the stomach. Again, he fell to the ground cursing. This time I offered him a hand up. “Want to try that again?”

“You bet,” he said as he grabbed my hand and got to his feet. And then, still hanging onto my hand, he hit me in the jaw.

While all this was going on, the rest of the team had slowly encircled us. Brian looked around, hoping to escape, but there was nowhere to go. I grabbed his shoulder, turned him around, and hit him again in the stomach, this

time harder. He crumpled. I stuck out my hand a third time. "I'll give you one more chance, Brian."

Muttering under his breath, he took my hand and pulled himself up. "Alright, alright, Wade. Can we just get on with the rest of scrimmage?"



After that, our relationship improved, but not much. Brian knew better than to ignore me, but he watched me like a hawk and jumped all over me every time I made a mistake. "You call that a pass?" "C'mon, Wade, that puck should have gone in the net!" "Where the hell were you on that play?" Meanwhile, he and Ty continued to be unstoppable, catching the eye of all the other teams who didn't have anyone good enough or fast enough to stop them.

And then one night, things weren't going so well. We were playing the Giants, and they'd apparently done their homework. Guessing rightly that Ty couldn't do much on his own, they double-teamed Brian, limiting his ability to manoeuvre around the rink. They stripped him of the puck every time it came to him and ran as much interference as they could get away with, setting him on edge and creating scoring chances for themselves which they soon capitalized on. When we left the ice for the second intermission, we knew that we were being badly outplayed and lucky to be down only by two.

On our fourth shift in the third period, Brian finally managed to elude his two shadows, snatching the puck from one of them as he blazed through the neutral zone. Skating towards the play, I watched as their defenceman came out to challenge Brian. Realizing too late that he had overcommitted himself and that Brian was about to prance around him, the defenceman stuck out his leg, aiming for a solid knee-on-knee collision with Brian.

Now, I like hard play, and I like physical play, but I hate it when people play dirty. So, as Brian collapsed to the ice, I charged the unaware defenceman who had stopped to admire his work. The hit delivered, I have to admit, is one of my favorite memories. We were close to the centre of the ice, but I'm pretty sure he ended up lying against the boards, right at the foot of his bench. As the whistle blew, I skated over to the defenceman, but there was no need to say anything: I'd already laid down the law.

As it turned out, the ref gave me a major penalty for charging and a game misconduct, which meant that I finished out the game in the showers. But when the rest of the team came into the dressing room, I was the hero of the hour. And, as Brian passed me, he stopped and said (quite clearly), "Thanks."

"No problem," I replied. "How's the knee?"

And that was the start of our friendship.



I'm proud to say that Brian and I became best friends. I say this because Brian was a temperamental asshole. For every time that he thanked me for watching his back, there were at least three or four other times where he'd get mad at me for messing up a play or something like that and then refuse to talk to me for two or three days. Why did this not take a toll on our relationship? Well, it did, and it would have killed it except that Coach made a point of pulling me aside every other week or so to remind me just how important Brian was to both the team and myself. "You know," he said once, "Brian is gonna give us the championship on a silver platter, so long as he stays healthy." All I could do was nod.

So I continued to support and defend Brian. When he was double-teamed, I found ways to persuade our opponents to keep their distance. If he and Ty were making things happen, I was there behind the play to make sure that nobody got in their way. And whenever Brian managed to tick off the other team after the whistle (which happened all too often), I was there to make them keep their distance.

Although it was clear to everyone else that we were equals, Brian thought of me as his little helper, assuming that I would always be there to back him up. After all, it was my job, and we both knew that my position on the team depended upon my support of Brian. If I ever failed, my hockey career would come to an abrupt end.



Our last game of the season was against the Rockets, this year's bomb squad. We were, of course, at the top of the league and on our way to the playoffs, but this game was their season finale. "Boys," Coach said before the game, "take it easy out there tonight. Save any fire you've got for next week, 'cause you're gonna need it."

But Brian didn't really know how to pare things back. He was as feisty as ever, and the Rockets, in turn, pestered him all night long. After one particularly annoying shift, he turned to me on the bench. "Wade, why won't you send those guys a message?"

"What's the point?" I asked. "They're not going anywhere after tonight, and I'd rather not start anything with a team that's got nothing left to lose."

With a scowl he turned away. He knew that I was right, but I knew that he would never admit it.

The next time he returned to the ice, the Rockets continued to hound him with little pokes and jabs, flustering him even more, until he finally delivered a retaliatory slash to one of their defencemen and received a two-minute penalty in return. Sitting on the bench, I looked into the penalty box across the ice and saw him shaking his head and muttering angrily to himself. I knew that I would have to tell him to simmer down when he returned to the bench.

But Brian chose not to give me that chance.

He left the penalty box as soon as his time was up and joined the play. However, instead of following the puck, he followed one of the Rockets' defencemen and deliberately brought him down with a two-handed slash to the ankle.

I immediately jumped off the bench, not caring about the game misconduct I was sure to receive. Heading straight for Brian, I grabbed him by the arm, hauled him off the ice, and directed him to the dressing room. "Shut up, just shut up," I said as he started to complain. "Go and sit down." He was still mad, but he knew I wasn't kidding around, so he did as I said while I returned to the bench to see what was going on.

The unfortunate defenceman was still lying on the ice, attended by the trainer. I guessed that he probably had a broken ankle. Several yards away the other players were scrumming around—the Rockets were doing their best to punch out their anger while our guys simply tried to contain them with big bear hugs. When all was said and done, Brian and I were both out for the rest of the game, and two other guys from each team were sent to cool off in the penalty box.

Coach came to the dressing room before the game was over. "Brian, what the hell was that?"

Brian said nothing.

“You’re lucky they don’t tape these games,” he continued. “Otherwise you could kiss the playoffs good-bye.”

“But Coach—” Brian started.

“No. Don’t. Don’t even think about testing me right now. Get, get out of here. Now.”

Brian stood up and walked out.



Four days later we had our first playoff game. For whatever reason, the league extended Brian a bizarre mercy and only suspended him for three games. This could have been disastrous (since the first round was a best-out-of-five series), but we managed to win two of the first three games, which meant that Brian had the chance to help us finish things off. Coach still refused to talk to him, but he was glad to have him back; after all, this was supposed to be our championship season.

I, on the other hand, didn’t know what to think.

Everyone in the league knew what had happened, and the universal feeling towards Brian was one of hate. This was reflected in all the papers round the league that ran editorials condemning Brian and whoever stood with him. “Not only is he a disgrace to hockey,” one journalist wrote, “but he is justifying the opinion of all those Americans convinced that Canada’s beloved game is nothing more than a free-for-all ‘Fight Night’ on ice.”

I knew that they were all right, and when Brian walked into the dressing room for his first game back, he only made me more sure. Talking big and flashing a smug smile, he cracked jokes about his suspension. “My only regret is that I didn’t hit him harder,” he said with a laugh.

No one laughed along.

“So, are you saying that you don’t care that you left us in the lurch?” Ty asked. Everyone stopped dressing and focused on Brian.

“Pssh. Whatever, man. I’m here now, aren’t I?”

Nobody said anything else to Brian before the game, and no one smiled either. For my part, I decided that I’d had enough. Not only did Brian not care about what he’d done, but he didn’t give a damn about our team. And so for the first time that season, I chose not to care about Brian.



We all wished Brian hadn’t come back, and it showed. Our normally lively bench was silent. On the ice we quit yelling for the puck and instead played like ten-year-old hotshots, trying to carry the puck end-to-end and failing every time. Although Ty and I were still playing on Brian’s line, and Brian was still a god, we didn’t bother to crash the net or get in the open for a pass. Brian tried to squeeze through cracks in the opposing defence on his own, but he only managed to score once. All night long he got hammered, hooked, and poked while I just watched and refused to lift a finger and help him.

“Come on, Wade,” Brian yelled after being sandwiched by two defencemen. “I’m getting crucified.”

I just ignored him and skated to the bench, but he wasn’t finished.

“What’s gotten into you?” he demanded as we took our seats.

“Oh, I don’t know, what do you think it is?”

He swore. “You’re some friend.”

“You’re something yourself,” I retorted. “Leave me the hell alone.”

Truth was, none of us could put our hearts into the game. We wanted to win, and we wanted to be the champions, but we were convinced that it was already over because God was on the side of our opponents. After all, we were the ones defending an outlaw.



“Guys, listen up,” Coach said as he entered the dressing room after we’d lost the game. “It’s time we came to grips with what we’re up against here.” No one said anything. We all knew what we were up against, and worse, we knew that the problem was, like an inoperable tumor, a part of us. Like him or not, Brian was here to stay.

“I’d be the last one in the world to condone foul play,” Coach continued, “but it’s not your job to punish Brian.” He paused, and I looked over at Brian. I shouldn’t have, because that self-righteous “I’m being persecuted” look on his face made me hate him even more. Coach went on. “The league has already dealt with Brian, so you all as a team need to get over it. Your job is to play hard, to play like you can and win, and to stand up for Brian just because he is your teammate.” This last bit was said directly at me. I looked Coach in the eye and shook my head a little. Clearing his throat, he went on: “You have no choice. This is your team, he is your teammate, and if you refuse to play like you know this, then you are the loser, not Brian.”

The dressing room remained silent. No one knew what to say. I didn’t know what to think. I looked over at Brian, and he looked right back me. The unspoken question was, “What’s it gonna be?” and I hated the right answer.



We had one game left. If we lost, we were done for the year, and I'd be done for the rest of my life. If we won . . . well, who knew.

Nothing had changed in the dressing room by the next game. As we dressed we kept to ourselves, each of us too busy trying to win arguments inside our heads.

The game started out just like the last one. Our team couldn't connect with the puck, and the other team ran all over Brian, snagging, grabbing, and jabbing whenever they got a chance. All while the referees looked the other way and pretended not to see. Every time he had the puck along the boards, Brian would be flattened by bodychecks that were barely legal. And every time he fell, Brian would get back up, shake his head and a few curses in my direction, and then look for where the play had gone.

I knew I was wrong. I knew that I wasn't doing my job. I didn't even care.

Our opponents grew even bolder in the second period. At one point Brian stood by himself along the boards, a good fifteen feet away from the puck, only to be pounded by an enormous defenceman who didn't even try to give him a clean hit. Brian crumpled, and then driven by fury, stood up, chased his attacker, and began pounding him into the ice. The referee blew his whistle and grabbed both of Brian's arms, drawing him back. Though Brian was furious, he managed to keep hold of himself.

And then, unimpeded by the officials, one of our opponents jumped off the bench, skated over to Brian (still restrained by the referee) and dealt a solid punch to Brian's jaw. As Brian dropped to the ice, the other player skated away, still untouched—unlooked at, even—by the referees. I looked around, and I saw that the referees

weren't going to bother calling anything, that they had already given the other team free rein to punish Brian as they saw fit.

"Hey!" I yelled to no one and to everyone. "What the hell was that?" When the referees ignored me, I knew what I had to do.

I left Brian in a heap on the ice, skated over to the other bench, and grabbed Brian's last attacker by the shirt. With a few choice words, I launched into him, only leaving off when his teammates decided to all take me on. Pretty soon the rest of my team had joined me, and we were all landing punches, and what's more, we were winning.

It took fifteen minutes for the commotion to die down. When the two teams were separated, the referees called the two coaches out to the middle of the ice for a conference. Although they'd never admit it, the refs really had no idea what to do. Coach Marc did a lot of finger-pointing, the other coach didn't say much, and the end result was that play resumed without any penalties and a period-and-a-half remaining.

Brian and I both took a seat on the bench and watched the game start up again. As the referee dropped the puck, Brian turned to me and stuck out his hand. "Thanks," he said. "Should we try that again?"

"Alright," I said and grinned.

"About time," he replied, but with a smile. I laughed. We both had jobs to do.