

The Hockey Machine  
By Matt Christopher

“Stu!” Steve yelled as he skated up alongside of him.

Stu passed to him. Steve caught the puck, skated around the back of the net, and quickly passed it back to Stu. In a surprise move Stu stopped it with his stick, then flipped it toward the corner of the net, missing the goalie’s right shoulder by inches.

Another score! This time Stu got the point and Steve the assist.

A call from Coach Larry Hall, standing behind the board, was the signal for Line One to get off the ice and Line Two to replace them.

Four minutes late the game was over, with the Bobtails winning it 9 to 3.

Handshakes and shoulder pats greeted the Bobtails on their way to the locker room. After Steve showered and changed into his regular clothes he left the building, anxious to get home to fill his hunger-gnawing stomach. The late Saturday afternoon sun was slowly disappearing over the western horizon. The shadows were long, the November air crisp. The only signs of last week’s snow were the white spots that clung to some roofs and corners the sun couldn’t reach.

Steve, his blond hair still damp behind his neck, started to climb down the steps of Manley Rink when a boy about his age stepped up beside him. He was tall, well dressed, and wore leather gloves.

“Hi, Steve,” he said, his brown eyes smiling. “I’m Mark Slate. You played a terrific game.”

Steve frowned, bewildered. “Thanks,” he said. Mark Slate? I don’t know of any Mark Slate, he thought.

“I know you don’t know me,” Mark said, reading Steve’s mind, “but I’ve watched you play in several games already, and...well...I feel almost as if I’ve known you for a long time.”

“You’ve been watching *me* play? Why?” Steve looked again at the sharp clothes this Mark Late wore, the expensive leather gloves. Something in the back of his mind began to creep into focus. He remembered now seeing Mark at some of the games, sitting in a seat on the top row, dressed very much as he was dressed now.

Mark's smile broadened. "For a good reason," he said. "And perfectly legitimate, believe me. Come on. I want to introduce you to a friend of mine, Kenneth Agard, Jr. He's over there, sitting in that car."

Steve looked at a shiny, black automobile parked at the curb, at the man sitting behind the wheel wearing a chauffeur's cap.

"You can't see Kenneth from here," said Mark. "He's sitting in the back seat."

He headed down the steps. Steve started to follow him, then paused. "I can't," he said.

Mark looked at him. "Why not? There's nothing to be afraid of. Kenneth is a good kid, and a genius when it comes to hockey. He just wanted to talk—"

"I've got to get home," Steve cut in. "My parents are expecting me." He didn't want to say that they had warned him dozens of times not to trust strangers. Mark must have heard the same warning dozens of times himself.

"Look, I know what you're thinking," Mark said. His voice was calm, friendly. "Don't trust strangers. Well, I don't blame you. But Kenneth Agard, Jr., is no stranger. He knows who you are, even though you don't know who he is. And he's as honest as the day is long. Take my word for it." He took Steve by the arm. "Come on. I guarantee you'll like him and what he has to tell you. I promise."

Steve studied Mark's face, saw the genuine look of friendliness in it, and felt as if he had known Mark a long time, too. Maybe I'm being too cautious, he thought. Mark seems like a real nice trustworthy guy.

"Okay," Steve said. "I'll see your friend. But I can't stay long."

"Good," Mark said. "Come on."