

NISH

North and South

Isabelle Picard

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Acknowledgements

A trip to the northern part of the North in the winter of 2001. Frozen lakes. An icy cold. Animals that blend into the landscape. Silence. Young people full of hope and Elders full of wisdom. A lesson about freedom.

It is impossible not to thank those who inspired this book. Their names have become blurred over the years, but their words and actions remain.

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*To Noah, Adrian and all the
Eloises and Leons of this world.
Anything is possible.*

“It worked, didn’t it? But I was in pain for real. Ouch, the pain! In fact, I still feel a twinge just talking about it. Ouch!” says Joce as he takes another bite from my cake.

“We all know you’d never fake an injury, would you?”

“Never. Come on!” he boasts, giving me a pat on the shoulder with his injured arm. “You can’t say it wasn’t worth it! We’re going to be a killer duo. With your passes and my shots, we’ll crush them!”

“There are still a couple of not-so-bad players on the Kawawa side.” Now it’s my turn to take a bite or I won’t even have a chance to taste the cake.

“Just not bad. Muku mauat miam ninan!”¹

“Not like us, that’s for sure!” I repeat, unable to stop smiling.

There are three things that are important to me: My family, hockey and Joce, my best friend for as long as I can remember. Playing hockey is the activity that allows me to combine all three, especially this year: this is the first time my best friend and I will be on the same team. And that’s all thanks to his plan.

1. But not like us!



Chapter 1
At Home

ELOISE

It's incredibly sunny and warm for a mid-September day, especially in the French classroom, where the many windows that take up the entire wall let the sun in. I can't wait for the bell that marks the beginning of the weekend. Finally it rings and everyone stands up immediately, not giving M. Yves time to finish his sentence. Meli, usually in a hurry to get to the gym, takes her time getting to the door.

"Didn't you have basketball practice, Meli?"

"Yeah, well, it fell through. Everything always falls apart in Schefferville."

"This is not Schefferville. This is Matimekush," I say, winking at her. "And not always. But yeah, in sports . . . only hockey matters. Look at my brother and Joce. You should play hockey with them!"

"With your brother? Never in a million years."

"Right. *He's* the only reason you don't want to play hockey," I tease her, knowing that she doesn't stand up very well on skates.

She bursts out laughing. "You know me too well!"

"Change of subject," I say as I let the Ambroise

cousins pass, chasing each other down the corridor. “What’s wrong with Ati? She hasn’t come to school for two days.”

“It’s her dad again. She has to take care of the little ones.”

“Ah, that’s too bad. What about her mom?”

“Her mom has a lot to deal with when her dad drinks.”

“Yep, I get it. My uncle went to rehab in Quebec City. Maybe it would do Ati’s dad some good.”

We quickly move to our lockers to put away our books and put on our coats.

“My family has already talked to him about it. He agreed, but he hasn’t gone.”

“Poor Ati, seriously . . .”

Melina Gold and Atikush McKenzie are my two best friends. I don’t know what I would do without them. Well, there’s my brother Leon, but that’s not the same. He’s my twin. We’re always together (sometimes too much) — at home, at school, with friends. It’s a good thing he has hockey. It gives me a little breathing space and, more importantly, the bedroom to myself. That is, when I don’t go see him play, which isn’t very often.

“Well, if basketball doesn’t work out and hockey isn’t an option, let’s do volleyball,” suggests Meli, who leads us down the stairs to the exit with a big smile on her lips.

Her unwavering positivity will always fascinate me!

“We can try that. Sure. We have the equipment, anyway! We could ask Mr. Yves to talk to the other classes. There should be at least fifteen of us.”

Meli sighs.

“There will still never be enough players.”

“That’s the problem. There aren’t enough of us. Fifteen is almost half the school. It will never happen.”

“Maybe we could ask the dropouts. Then we’d be more. Could we invite the whole community?” Meli suggests, taking an apple out of her bag.

“In that case, maybe we could make a girls-only team. That would be cool, right?” I say. “The guys would have hockey and we would have volleyball.”

“And if that doesn’t work, we’ll try badminton.”

“Oh, stop with the badminton,” I tell her, miming a limp racquet gesture.

“What?”

“Why not petanque, while we’re at it?”

“Huh?”

As usual, the high school boys are playing hockey in the main hallway of the school, so we have to stick close to the walls to avoid getting hit by balls or sticks.

“Hey! Are we going to watch your brother play tonight?” asks Meli with a little too much enthusiasm.

“Are you interested all of a sudden? You know you won’t be able to improve your skating just by watching them, right? Besides, is it hockey you’re interested in or is it Elliott?”

Melina pretends to throw her apple at me.

“Stop it. You know hockey’s the only thing to do here,” she replies, blushing up to her ears.

“Yeah, yeah, we can go. But it’s only because you insist,” I say, elbowing her in the ribs.

“As if you don’t look at Joce. You think Ati and I don’t see it?”

“Joce? Oh please! He’s injured. And I have no choice but to talk to him. He’s always with my brother.”

“Yeah, right. See you later, *ma puce!*” says Meli.

At Home

She turns to head home, but then she suddenly notices Elliott, who is leaving school at the same time as us. Her eyes follow him while her feet point in the opposite direction, which makes her look ridiculous.

Poor Meli! It's clear as day!

LEON

Tonight is the first practice and that's all I could think about in French class this afternoon. We were supposed to write a 400-word essay about our summer vacation. But to be honest, I would have preferred to write an essay about our upcoming hockey season. I tried to remember my summer — fishing with my father, four-wheeling in the bush, trapping in the woods with Joce, Fortnite in the basement for hours until my mother would tell me to go outside — but my imagination always brought me back to a hockey goal.

I finally managed to write about campfires at dusk by the lake with my sister and our friends. But life here is always the same, as my sister, Eloise, says. She's probably right, but I don't mind that much — most of the time. I must admit that I would have liked to go to Quebec City this summer, to the Valcartier water slides and the iSaute trampoline park. Now that's thrilling!

Fortunately, the bell gets me out of writing this essay. I gather my things quickly and head out. I'm meeting Joce at Blabla, one of the only restaurants

in the area, to fuel up before the practice. My father will bring our equipment to the arena.

The bell on the door jingles. Joce comes in and slumps into the empty wooden chair at my table.

“I can’t believe we’re on the same team. It’s really cool!”

Mrs. Leduc brings two glasses of milk and a piece of carrot cake to the table. I try not to talk too loud. Everyone here knows each other, and I don’t want anyone to know what Joce and I have done to be together this season. That would be the talk of the town. But Joce really didn’t get the hint.

“I told you so, didn’t I?” he says proudly.

“Shhhh!” I whisper to him, moving my lips as little as possible. “Is your wrist better then? You have to give it all the time it needs to heal, you know,” I add a little louder so that no one will suspect anything.

“Yes, all of a sudden it seems better. I’m just going to wait a little while before I remove the brace your mother lent me. You know what I mean?” says Joce, still too loud for my taste.

“You and your plans.”

My friend takes a bite of cake, then smiles at me.

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