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Ben Towne gently rubbed the scar that ran along his jaw. In his six years as Commissioner of the Eastern College Hockey League, there was more turmoil off the ice than on. Last September, the annual preseason retreat was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where the head coaches and athletic directors mixed golf with rules clinics and policy meetings. Some of those sessions popped levels of ego and testosterone high enough to inhibit brain function. On the second day, when he returned to the meeting room after a break, two coaches were wrestling on the floor as the others egged them on. Towne caught a wild, 8-stitch punch when he tried to break them up. It was part of the job.

But today was new territory. He gazed at the bright blue, 48” screen. The name brand—PictureTel.com—and the load of switches and wires suggested no ordinary television.

“Just another minute or two,” the technician said. He adjusted the mini-camera and microphone on top of the monitor. The unit looked like a small alien spaceship, with a long neck jutting out from a black, convex saucer about the size of a dinner plate. He moved to a laptop computer stationed at a side desk and clicked a mouse. A menu popped up on the big screen. The room was quiet, except for the mouse clicks and the whirring fan that pulled heat from the register along the near wall.

Another click and the screen wiped to a different room. The lighting revealed a gaunt, balding, bespectacled, middle-aged man wearing a gray suit that oddly set off his Jiminy Cricket face. He was sitting at a table beside a young black-haired man whose white shirt rippled over powerful shoulders, whose collar was unbuttoned despite the tight grip of his tie. A third man was chewing gum. The crew cut, the bull neck, the dark eyes, and the beefy hands were all framed by a bright red blazer. Ted Farnum. Head Coach. Ryerson Red Raiders. Towne rubbed the scar again as he stared at Farnum, whose voice was not yet audible.

He thought of his own introduction to the sport that shaped his life—and disfigured his jaw. It was a half-mile walk to a small basin called Clark’s Pond, usually with his older brother Seth, sticks on their shoulders like muskets, skates tied together, dangling from the ends of the shafts. Their smiles grew as they jogged down the narrow, paved road to the pond, saw that the ice was clear and smooth, and that the other boys were already playing. They would skate all day, stopping only to open their bags and down an orange or some cocoa, or to shovel the surface of their open-ended rink.

He remembered the arguments that slowed the game:

“That wasn’t a goal.”

“Yes, it was!”

“Cut the shit, no lifting.”

## The Commissioner: A Sports Mystery

But there was no sense arguing. There was no coach or official to settle the dispute. As Seth always said, might as well just keep playing. Although he was the toughest kid in the neighborhood, Seth was always the peacemaker and the compromiser. He was a brother worth looking up to. And now... Now Seth was dead. And Ted Farnum might as well have dumped the pills down his throat.

Towne looked to his left where Bill McGlynn was sitting, tapping his fingers on the edge of the table. McGlynn was the Athletic Director at Springfield University, the President of the Eastern College Hockey League, and the host of the videoconference. Some friends called McGlynn the “silver fox.” But his thick, wavy, white hair was less a hallmark than his tendency to slur words when his Irish temper erupted, which was often. Most people called him “Mumbles” behind his back. When a name like “the NCAA” became “then-say”, it was time to duck for cover.

The technician clicked the mouse, and the screen flashed to the live image of another room, with a smaller table. Two men sat talking, but there was still no sound.

“There’s the rest of the Executive Committee,” Towne said. “Now if we can get audio...”

“I’ll do the talking,” said McGlynn.

“Bill. Thanks for hosting this drill, but I’m not a potted plant.”

“The league bylaws say the President runs the meetings, not the Commissioner. And those two don’t need to talk either,” McGlynn said, pointing to the screen. “All I need is their votes to suspend that little bugger.”

Towne said nothing for a moment, then he turned to the technician. “Are you using this equipment much?”

“A couple of years. It’s good for meetings like this. We’d like to run some courses with it, but faculty are reluctant.”

“Or suspicious,” Towne said.

McGlynn snorted. “Soon they’ll have cameras in every office, spying on us.”

“Computers already know a great deal.” Towne said. “I’ll bet you ten dollars that you have spyware in your computer.

“Th’hell you talking about.”

“The F.B.I. used some sophisticated stuff to nail dirty contractors when I was in the Gulf in ’91. I can’t imagine what the *bad* guys have now.”

“Testing - one, two, three,” the technician spoke toward the microphone. The two men on the screen suddenly looked up and responded, with an audible “hello.”

McGlynn looked at his watch. “Just about four-thirty. Time to start these suspension proceedings.”

“Easy, Bill.” Towne said. “We haven’t suspended a player in the league’s six years. We may be skating on thin legal ice if we do.”

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“What do you mean *if*.” We damn well better suspend him. He assaulted a referee. You’re the Commissioner. You can’t let that happen to an official. Just because he’s a star player.” McGlynn spit dry scorn at the floor. “Just another Ry-son punk.”

Towne said nothing.

The screen wiped again. Towne saw no response from the people at Ryerson. “Lucky the audio’s not there yet,” he said.

“We’re good to go, Mr. McGlynn,” the technician finally said. “Just remember, the videoconference system responds to a voice. If someone in Boston talks at the same time as someone in Ryerson, the screen will start bouncing back and forth.”

“You hear that Towne? Don’t let Farnum interrupt me.” He tapped his long fingers on the table. The creases by his mouth were vertical. Game time.