

Prologue

Number 5 accelerated at the red line, one teammate to his right, one man to beat. The deafening roar of the crowd almost drowned out the words of the excited announcer.

“It’s Quinn with the puck, 2-on-1! The master of the play!”

Quinn, Number 5 for the Black Bears, shoveled a crisp pass to his wing. The wing instantly yanked back his stick and leaned his whole body into the puck, firing a slap shot past the defenseman and at the goal. Fifteen thousand fans screamed.

With lightening-like reflexes, the goalie shot out his right pad and kicked out the puck. “Save!” screamed the announcer.

In a fraction of a second, Number 5 was on the loose puck and without a moment’s hesitation he flicked the puck over the goalie’s leg pad and the red light flashed on.

“Score! Jason Quinn!”

The crowd erupted. The entire Black Bear team spilled out onto the ice and smothered their captain and star. It was minutes before the words of the announcer could be heard.

“Jason Quinn with an upper corner goal on the rebound! What a way for the six foot two senior to end an amazing four year career for the University of Maine! All they have to do now is hold on for the next eighteen seconds and the Black Bears from Maine will be the new national college champions. Ladies and gentleman, this is the most exciting moment in hockey that I’ve ever seen.”

I squirmed as the image on the large screen disappeared and the lights went on in the cavernous auditorium. I always felt a little uncomfortable whenever I looked at a film of myself. On the stage and below the screen, a middle aged man in a deep blue suit spoke into a microphone at the podium. It was a man that I knew quite well.

“I don’t have to tell you what happened next,” the man said to the audience. “Every time I see that tape, I get swept away by the drama. And I’ve seen it many times. Wow! What a moment! And so it gives me great pleasure to present this year’s Distinguished Alumni Athletic Award to Number 5 of that championship squad.”

The speaker paused as the crowd cheered.

“Jason Quinn was captain of that great Black Bear team,” the well groomed man in the blue suit continued. “In his four years at the University of Maine he became the third leading scorer in the University’s history, with 86 goals and a Black Bear record of 139 assists. Impressive statistics. But more than that, Jason Quinn was and is a first class individual. He is a team player all the way. Not only does he have the Black Bear record for assists, but I have never known a player to spend more time helping his teammates with their game. Words of encouragement, friendly, smart advice and even extra sessions with younger players at six o’clock in the morning. I can’t say enough about this man. After fifteen years as Athletic Director and numerous others as a coach and player, I can tell you this: they don’t come any better than Jason Quinn. Students, alumni and friends of the University, this year’s Distinguished Alumni Athletic Award recipient, Jason Anderson Quinn!”

A thousand people rose as one, cheering and whistling and screaming. I was in tears. My legs shook as I walked up to the

podium and grasped Athletic Director Miller's right hand. I was overwhelmed with emotion. I turned and faced the cheering audience. There were so many faces I knew, so many people I loved. But it was the others, all those screaming people I didn't recognize, who took my breath away. I was moved that I had touched their lives so deeply.

I didn't have a prepared speech. I'm not very good at reading speeches. I'd much rather speak directly to the people. And so, when they finally quieted down, I spoke to them. I can't remember much of what I said. My Aunt Susan taped it, but every time she wants to show it, I get too embarrassed and insist she do it another time. I'm sure I talked about the great players on that team, and about my phenomenal coach. I expect that I talked about teamwork and goals and hard work. And I know I talked about the fun of playing the game.

Afterwards there was a question and answer session, and a teenage boy asked me what person or experience was the biggest influence in my life as a hockey player. That was a tough one. I thought for a long time, and everyone was still. I remembered so many moments that had helped to make me the player and person I am today. I saw the faces of countless people in that journey. And as my mind fast-forwarded through these memories, I realized that most of them came from one year of my life, one hockey season, one winter. There was too much for me to share right then, but later in the night and all the next day, I thought about that winter. I relived it.

What did have the biggest impact on my life and my hockey career? All I said in answer to the boy's question was, "It was the winter when I was ten years old. It was my winter on Spy Pond in Glenville, Maine."

Chapter 1

“PASS IT!” DARYL screamed from my right.

I glanced up in front of me and saw just one Ranger defenseman. My blue jerseyed opponent was skating backwards, directly between me and the goal. I can do it, I thought. I can beat him. I pivoted hard off my right skate and crossed it over my left, with the puck still on my stick. I moved my legs as fast as I could. It was an incredible feeling, skating this fast and this smoothly over the ice. It almost felt like I had wings. I rounded my opponent and cut back in toward the goal, keeping my eyes glued to the puck as I stick-handled. A second later, I looked up and there was the goalie right in front of me! Without thinking, I fired the puck and heard the smack as it ricocheted off the goalie’s stick and into the corner. I had been too close to the goalie when I shot it. I had skated with my head down. It was a mistake and I knew it.

Daryl was in the corner digging for the loose puck. I skated in front of the goal and positioned myself to receive a pass. Daryl fought an opponent and skated out with the puck. He saw me wide open and slid the puck in front of their goalie, right toward my stick. The Ranger goalie dove out of the crease and trapped the puck on the ice with his outstretched catching mitt and the referee blew the whistle. I glanced at the bench and saw my coach signaling a line change. I looked up at the clock. 1:48 remaining in the game. Darn! No way would I get back in.

I skated back to the bench with my head hung low. Coach Tower held the door open as my line of five skaters stepped up off the ice. I took my place on the bench and stared down at the strips of hard, black mat pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Two hands clamped down on my shoulders from behind. “How many times have I said ‘pass the puck?’ ”

I said nothing.

“We’re a team, Jason. It doesn’t matter who scores the goal. It’s how we do that matters.”

Sure, I thought. What world is he living in? Most kids care more about goals, assists and ice time. Even the coaches will cut a guy at the end of the season if a better kid comes along.

“Well, Jason?”

“I thought I could beat him, Coach.”

“You did beat him, but by the time you were around him, you had no angle. That’s why you pass in a two-on-one situation like that.”

The coach was probably right, but I knew that I was a better hockey player than Daryl. That’s why I hadn’t passed it. I was replaying the move in my head, not even watching the game, when Andy, our goaltender, came tumbling over the boards, landing on my lap!

“Quinn, move!” one of the coaches hollered.

I was confused, wondering what our goalie was doing off the ice. Suddenly everyone on the Terrier bench was up and screaming. Shawn Keefe had scored the tying goal! The coach must have pulled the goalie and sent an extra skater on the ice. The other five Terrier skaters were piled on top of Shawn while the crowd and my teammates howled and cheered with joy.

That could be me they’re jumping on, I thought angrily. I should be the star of the moment. I should have tried deking the goalie.

Andy shuffled in front of me and stepped out the door, back onto the ice. The score was locked, 3 - 3. I hoped that my coach would put my line back on to try to win it. I still could be the hero. But Shawn’s line stayed on the ice while Coach Tower and Coach Mackey continued clapping.

I just stared at the clock as the seconds ticked away, and then the game was over. Both teams skated onto the ice and lined up for the handshake. I barely held out my glove while the Ranger players each tapped it with one of their own, most mumbling, "Good game."

I skated off the ice right behind Daryl.

"You should have passed to me," Daryl snarled as he tromped in his skates over the wet mat to our team room.

I said nothing. I wanted to tell Daryl that I didn't pass because he had a lousy shot, but I didn't say anything. Daryl wasn't very quick on the ice, but he was bigger than me and pretty tough, too. I was a little afraid of him.

"Great game, you guys. Great comeback! Great *team effort!*" Coach Tower said as we entered the team room.

I didn't even look up at my coaches as I walked to my spot on the bench. While other kids were unsnapping their helmets and starting to untie their skates, I sat motionless.

"Nice game, Jason," a familiar voice said to me.

I finally looked up to the smiling face of my mother.

"I was lousy."

"But you guys tied the game. That was so exciting!"

"Yeah, sure Mom."

"What's wrong with you? You were awesome," she said and paused, "even if you should have passed the puck that last shift," she continued in a hushed tone.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" I snapped loudly. The boys and parents near me stopped talking while they awkwardly looked away.

"Enough!" my mother whispered harshly. "Listen, there's something I need to tell you."

"I don't want to hear anything!" I insisted in a loud whisper.

"Listen, Jason, it's important. I wanted to tell you before the game, but I thought it might ruin it for you, so I waited -"

“Mom, I said that I don’t want to hear it!” I interrupted, my voice rising again.

“But Jason, I have to tell you -”

“Team!” Coach Tower’s voice boomed over the clatter. People quieted down. “I have an important announcement to make. This is Jason’s last game with our team. He and his mother are moving to Maine this week. They just found out, and so this is it. We’ll certainly miss you, Jason, but there’s some lucky team up north who will be getting you, I’m sure.”

I was speechless. I looked at my mother in bewilderment. She forced a smile to her face and shrugged her shoulders.

“Mom?” was all I could say.

“I tried to tell you, Jason,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I just found out yesterday. We have to be out of the house by Saturday. I didn’t want this to happen, but it did.”

No more playing hockey with the Junior Terriers? They were the best select team in the league and one of the best in New England! It was only September, and the season had just begun. It couldn’t be! I had been waiting to make this team for two years. As a ten-year-old, this was my last year in the Squirts, and I had finally been selected for the Terriers. And my other team, my town team, had nine guys returning and was supposed to be one of the best in the Greater Boston League. I was counting on playing for two championship teams! This couldn’t be true!

I found myself standing with my white high-tops on. I hadn’t even noticed that my mother had taken off my skates and put on my sneakers. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore. I barely heard the other guys say good-bye as my mother led me out of the skate room.

Chapter 2

“WHY DO WE HAVE to move?”

“Jason, the traffic’s real bad. Let’s talk about it when we get home.” My mother adjusted the rear view mirror and glanced quickly at it.

“Aren’t you going too fast, Mom?” I said in a critical tone of voice.

My mother stared straight through the windshield and said nothing.

“Mom, I said you’re driving too fast!” I snapped.

My mother continued to ignore me. How could she make me move away? It wasn’t fair. And now she wouldn’t even talk to me! This is what she used to be like with Dad, I thought. They’d fight, he’d yell at her, and she would ignore him. I used to mostly side with my mother in those arguments, but now I was so mad at her, I thought that my father had probably been right.

“Slow down!” I commanded. I remembered how much it used to bother my mother when my father criticized her driving.

She squeezed the steering wheel tighter but didn’t say a word.

“Mom!”

My mother reached down and clicked on the car radio, jerking the volume up high. A surfing song by the Beach Boys blared from our four car speakers. With the push of a button I opened my window, and I stuck my head out and screamed, “My mom’s driving bad and is gonna kill me! Help!”

She jammed on the brakes, causing me to bump my head against the side of the window.

“Jason Anderson Quinn, you shut your mouth this instant or I’ll throw you out of the car!” she screamed while turning down

the radio. Her shrill voice rang in my ears and stunned me. I said nothing but still glared at her defiantly.

She paused, breathed deeply, and continued in a calmer voice. "I can't do this, Jason. Please don't push me. I don't know what I'll do if you don't stop."

"But why do we have to move?"

"It's your father's fault."

"But Dad's dead!"

We were both speechless. I had said it. Dead. I think that it was the first time I actually spoken the word. I had tried to think of him as just not being around. Before he died, he was usually so busy with work that I hardly ever saw him anyway. I had told myself that things weren't much different now, but they were different and I knew it. At that instant, I wasn't angry with him. I just missed him.

"Why is it Dad's fault?" I asked quietly.

"Before he died, he did a lot of things in his business that might not have been right. They're tying up all our assets while it gets resolved."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that we don't have any money, and we can't even keep on paying for our house. We have to leave, and the bank is going to sell it. And we might not even get any of the money because your dad may have owed more money than he was telling us. Jason, I don't want to leave any more than you do, but we don't have any choice."

"What about *your* job?"

"*My* job doesn't pay money. It's a volunteer position at the museum."

"You don't make any money at your work? Then why do you do it?"

"Your father made more than enough money. I used to be a nurse's aid, remember? I've told you that I quit when we got

married. I couldn't stand working weekends and holidays, and the money was terrible. Then, somehow, I got connected at the museum. I loved getting out and meeting the people and just being around the artwork. But it won't pay the bills now."

"Why can't you get a nurse's job again? Then we could still live here!"

"No one can live in these parts on what I'd make as a nurse's aid. Plus, I'm going to be very busy trying to straighten up your father's affairs. I need someone to help look after you."

"Where are we going to live?"

"We're going to move way up to Glenville in with your Aunt Susan and Uncle John for a while."

"But the Reeses have six kids! There won't be room for us!"

"With six kids, what's one or two more?"

"But I don't like those kids, Mom."

"They're your cousins, Jason."

"I still don't like them."

"You hardly know them. They're doing us a big favor. We can't exactly be choosy."

"Can I play on a hockey team up there?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know if there's a rink up there. And I don't know how expensive it is. We have to find out."

There might not be a hockey team? I felt sick at the thought. There had to be one! Hockey was the only thing that I liked to do. School was boring, I didn't have many friends, and TV and videos got monotonous after a while, too. Hockey was the only thing I loved. And this year I was playing on both my town team plus a select team. I had to play on a team!

"What about my Christmas present?"

"Huh?" my mother asked.

"The Canadian Hockey Tour, with the Northeast Eagles, you know, that All-Star team I made. I can still do that, can't I?"

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. It’s a lot of money. I’m sorry.” Mom looked sadly at me.

“Then I’m not going to ask *you*. I’m going to ask Santa Claus for that. So you don’t have to pay for it,” I declared, staring defiantly at my mother.

Mom raised her eyebrows and gave me a ‘come on’ look. She opened her mouth to say something but suddenly looked unsure, and just said, “Uh, Jason, uh, Santa doesn’t always get everything a kid wants.”

“He always has with me. Last year I asked for a week of skiing at Big Mount resort, and I got it. And that was a pretty big thing. And the year before I got a brand new computer. I’ve always gotten the big thing that I asked for.”

“This year might be different.”

“How do you know?”

My mother had never told me whether or not Santa was real. For the past two years, she had acted as if I knew the truth, but nothing was ever said. It now seemed like a good time to talk to my mother as if I did believe in him. This present was one that I wanted more than any other that I had ever asked for. Even though I was ten years old, I thought that playing the Santa Claus card might just work.

My mother seemed to struggle to find the right words. Finally she looked me right in the eye and said quietly, “I just don’t want you to be disappointed, Jason. Can I drive now?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled.