

A DIFFERENT PLACE & TIME

By

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“You can look but you'd better not touch”

Lyrics from, *Poison Ivy*, 1959

The occupant in seat 3A, content after a successful West Coast trip, had his laptop open and was studying statistics and reviewing videos that had been compiled for his review. Over the hum of the jet engines, he barely heard the incoming ping from his Gmail account. The ringing sound, a reminder that he also had a personal life, broke his concentration, and out of curiosity, he shifted gears and programs to check the message. After hitting the keyboard and recognizing the “From,” an old high school buddy and teammate, his face relaxed into a smile, a facial look that his business associates and friends were so accustomed to seeing. At once, fond memories started to pour over him as he instinctively touched his high school graduation ring, and semi-rotated the circular band until he read the message: *Jimmy Holt is dead. Hope things are well. We'll talk soon. Johnny*

Looking up, he called out to a member of the first-class flight crew, “Steward, can I have another?” as he passed his row en route to the cockpit.

Turning around, the ubiquitous inflight ambassador flashed his best headwaiter smile and said, “Finlandia on the rocks. Right?”

Nodding his head, 3A closed his laptop and put it on the empty seat next to him. First class was half full, as was the entire flight. Up till now, his trip had been exactly as planned, productive, but uneventful. He thought again about the message as he sat there slowly drumming his fingers on the armrest, the only sign that a feeling of regret was stirring within him. Patiently, he waited for the steward to return with his drink. Air travel had changed significantly compared to when he first started flying commercially, but good service was always appreciated as the steward promptly delivered his drink request.

With a blank stare, he looked around the cabin, seeing but not seeing. Reaching downward, he wrapped his large hand around the cold glass and raised it to his lips, taking a long, slow sip of vodka on the rocks. He wondered how a single name could reopen such a flood of forgotten memories. Gently shaking his glass, he sat pensively listening to the collision of ice against ice. Then he threw the remainder of his drink back and set it quietly down on the tray. Engulfed in emotions that he hadn't felt since his adolescent years, he let out a long sigh as the plane banked to its left. Leaning against the side of the cabin wall, he looked out the porthole window as light gave way to darkness. When the transformation was complete, he closed his eyes and thought beyond the clouds.

To 1963...He was a junior in high school, firmly rooted in the school's culture, a year away from dreaming about college and his future. To his friends and family, that year, 1963, was a championship year in the truest sense: an undefeated football and basketball team, and a track team in its first year of dominance. It was a special time, where valuable life lessons, taught through the sweat of athletic competition, helped make him the man he was to become. Recalling that school year, he kept his eyes shut, searching for what was not learned through competitive sports; a very personal experience that had just been recalled from a computer ping.

Back then, the passenger in 3A was known as Richie. And Richie knew that 1963 was more than just winning sports teams; 1963 was also about a first love, friendships, and societal pressures. Unfocused at first, gradually he started to form a mental picture of a young woman, in her late teens, smiling at him just before he drifted off to a different place & time.

Chapter One

It started with a light dime sized dusting of snow, followed by snowflakes the size of a quarter that grew in intensity, until they mimicked a Franklin Half Dollar. It was the first major snowstorm of the season, and it looked like a doozy. School or no school, the possibility of a day off made it difficult for Richie to study. Closing 'To Kill a Mockingbird' for the umpteenth time, he looked out his bedroom window at the falling snow while still contemplating Boo Radley's huge impact on the character development of Jem and Scout. As the snowflakes fell, Richie's confidence grew, knowing that he might be granted a respite from tomorrow's English test. Leaving his bedroom for the family room, he found his parents glued to the 11 o'clock nightly news and its prediction of snow accumulations. Satisfied with the weatherman's forecast, Richie headed down the hallway towards his bedroom to crash. Just before he entered his room, he swung a triumphant fist in the air and said to himself, "At last, a snow day." Later on, as his head hit the pillow, a faint smile appeared on his face as he closed his eyes and fell asleep,

certain that school would be closed tomorrow, as well as most of the businesses in the Delaware Valley.

It wasn't till mid-morning that nature's snow gun mercifully turned off the snowfall. Leaning against his shovel, he looked up the driveway back towards his house, admiring his work. Start to finish, shoveling nonstop, he completed his task in less than 55 minutes. He could have done it faster, but the snow was wet and heavy. The only outward concession to the backbreaking labor was the occasional stretching of his back and arms. He was in great shape, and he knew it. He would have preferred to sleep in this snowy morning, but the shoveling had to be done, especially with his Dad's limitations; he wanted to be sure, in case of an emergency, that they could get a car out of the garage and onto the newly plowed streets.

His ranch style house was one of many in the Bosswicks section of Remington township. His family moved there in the mid-fifties as part of the great migration from the city to the suburbs. Like other post World War Two families, they were in search of the American dream: home ownership, a little space to call their own, and a better education for him and his sibling. Bosswicks was a smaller version of Levittown and was not to be confused with the custom homes in the adjacent Danbury community. In "The Wicks," as the kids called it, you either had a ranch or a split-level, two choices, two floor plans, A or B. They had a brown-shingled rancher with a B floor plan.

He left the city in third grade, starting fourth grade in the suburbs. He went from the rigid structure of the Catholic school system to the laissez faire atmosphere of public school--- where he thrived. Like a lot of suburban kids during the great 'Philly Migration,' life was good for he and his sister. He had his own bedroom, a hoop with a net over the garage, and a mini Connie Mack Stadium yard along the side of the house. This allowed him to pursue his athletic endeavors safely, eliminating the dangerous streets and alleys of Northeast Philly. The tradeoff was that he shoveled snow in the winter and cut the lawn in the summer.

"Richie, are you done?" his Mom yelled from the breezeway door, her voice cutting through the see-your-breath air. "I have lunch ready." A nurse at one of the township's hospitals, his mother was the glue that held the family together. At five feet seven inches tall, she was a mixture of Irish and English descent and was the one who gave him his competitive spirit. She tried never to miss any of his games, coordinating her work schedule so it coincided with whatever sport he was playing at the time.

Waving back, he held up five fingers, letting her know that he would be there in five minutes. At six feet two and a hundred and eighty five pounds, he was lean and lanky and a lot stronger than he looked. Still growing, there was a good chance that by the time he was a senior, he would be taller than his Old Man, who was just shy of six feet four inches. Before heading in, he looked up and down the street: it was a buzz of activity. Anyone who wanted to make a buck was roaming the neighborhood shoveling snow, usually in teams of three.

He entered through the enclosed breezeway door, took off his snow gear, and headed towards the kitchen at the back of the house. There he was greeted with a familiar sight, his Dad, off for the day, sitting at the kitchen table reading the morning paper, which Richie had retrieved for him from the snow. Grabbing a seat at the table, he observed his Dad, a decorated combat veteran who served during World War Two and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Before his enlistment, he was a successful amateur boxer who made a point of teaching his only son the formal art of self-defense. Richie's 'Old Man' was an accountant for one of the major accounting firms, taking advantage of the GI Bill after the war to get his degree. A man's man, he was respected by his peers and known as an all-around good guy by both his friends and business associates. A quiet man, his easygoing nature hid a moral fiber that was based on faith and doing the right thing. An avid reader, Richard Sr., Dick to his friends, appeared relaxed, and to an outsider he looked like the perfect picture of health. However, a strong exterior hid a serious heart condition. His Dad's first cardiac arrest happened in '56, a wake-up call for the entire family, especially for Richie, who was midway through fifth grade when death's inevitability suddenly appeared on his doorstep.

"Did you do the sidewalks," asked the 'Inquirer' reader, a smug smile appearing on Dick's rugged face? He knew his son all too well as he fired off his question, simultaneously pulling the paper down, revealing his face. Before shooting back an answer, the "Snow Shoveler" closely examined his Old Man. They both had amazing blue/green eyes, God awful protruding ears that stuck out like flaps, short cropped dirty blond hair, and large hands, which in his son's case were great for palming and dunking a basketball. A link to their German heritage, each had ruddy complexions, and the subtle tendency of cocking their head to the right when they were asked a question or were listening to instructions.

"Yep," he answered, having paid two elementary school kids almost nothing for the privilege of shoveling the walks alongside their local basketball hero.

Closing his paper, his Dad queried, "What are you going to do today...study?"

"Don't you have an English test tomorrow?" his Mom interjected, entering the conversation while putting a ham and cheese sandwich with Charlie's Chips in front of her son?

"It's postponed," he said, a credible evasion of the truth, though the look on both his questioners' faces appeared suspect. Avoiding eye contact, he got up from the table, opened the fridge, and grabbed a Coke, a reward for his shoveling endeavors.

"What are you going to do?" asked the parenting duo almost at the same time.

"Play some B-Ball," first with a mouthful of food, and then again in a clearer voice.

"Isn't practice cancelled?" his father stated, already knowing the answer to the question.

“It is,” but Jimmy has the keys to the junior high gym. You know his Dad works for the township.” Then, before his father could respond, “We’re going to meet there around two.”

No one spoke for several minutes as collectively their focus shifted to their food, his parents eating theirs while Richie inhaled his. It was rare that they shared a daylight meal at the same time, since all three were constantly on the go. The one advantage of the B rancher's floor plan was that the kitchen was designed for family gatherings, allotting proportionally more space to this room than any of the others. The kitchen walls were decorated with a green and white flowered wall pattern, and the trim wood was painted yellow and white, which complemented the flat front maple wood cabinets that hung above and below the black Formica countertop. There was a utility room attached to the kitchen with a door that led to the back yard. All the appliances were brand new; they were his Dad's Christmas gift to his Mom. However, the centerpiece of the kitchen and his Mom's pride and joy was the yellow and green kitchen dinette set. It was the nurse's Christmas gift to the de facto head of their household, and she earned it. The only empty chair of the four was his sister's, who was in her junior year in college. Richie liked the kitchen even before it was renovated and redecorated, but he would never tell that to his Mom. What mattered to him is what the kitchen represented. It was the social hub of the household, a place where they shared their life stories. It was where he could talk to his parents individually or collectively, and where they could talk to him honestly and straightforwardly.

When the last chip was finished and his Coke was empty, he got up from the table and started to put his plate in the sink, only to be asked another anticipated question and statement from his Dad. “How you getting there? You can't drive a car in these conditions.”

He had his driver's license for over a year, but he knew that there was no way that the Old Man was going to trust him with his pride and joy, a 1960, grey, four door Bonneville Pontiac, or his mother's 1962, Ford Galaxie 500 Convertible. Not in this weather.

“Thumb it,” as he turned back from the sink and left the kitchen.

For a guy hitchhiking in the fifties and early sixties, thumbing was a major means of transportation, that is if you didn't have your own wheels, or you couldn't finagle the car keys from your parents.

Like a typical teenager, before he went anywhere, he glanced at the full-length mirror behind his sister's bedroom door. Pleased, he looked like a ball player. He had chiseled features, a strong chin, a nose that was scooped with a turned-up tip, full lips, and a red wine stained birthmark under his right eye, which gave people the impression that he had recently been in a fight.

Minus those protruding ears, his friend's thought that he looked a lot like "The King of Cool," Steve McQueen. Perhaps, he thought, on his best day and the movie stars' worst. His body was well proportioned, though his arms were exceptionally long; a true advantage for a ball handling point guard. Around his neck hung a sterling silver cross crucifix pendant that his grandmother had given to him before she passed away; it was a constant reminder of his faith and his Nana. For practice with Jimmy, he wore a maroon and white T-shirt and grey shorts underneath a maroon sweatshirt with white piping. His outerwear, a Navy pea jacket that he wore almost everywhere, and instead of snow boots, he wore Chuck Taylor low tops. Impractical footwear for this type of weather, nevertheless, he thought they were cool.

Satisfied with "his look," he attempted to make his escape. Like the fleeing convict who goes over the wall only to be caught in the guard tower's spotlight, a female voice from the kitchen froze him in his tracks. "You're not warm enough? "

With a well-worn NBA regulation indoor basketball under his arm, he shouted back, "Mom, I'm fine."

"Change your shoes and wear a hat," came the edict from the world's foremost authority on colds as she spotted the Chuck Taylors through the kitchen door entrance.

Knowing that there was no sense in arguing with the "Home Warden," he yelled back, "Done," as he kicked off his sneakers, tied them together, then threw them around his neck and replaced the Chuck Taylors with his snow boots. His fashion statement lost in the process. He then grabbed an Eagles wool skullcap, his basketball, and bolted from the house before his Dad remembered that he hadn't replaced the fireplace logs from the night before.

STOP

Chapter Two

Once he left the house, he never looked back. His rhythmic stride gliding down the snowplowed streets of "The Wicks" to the syncopated beat of Marvin Gaye's 'Can I Get a Witness,' playing inside his head. It took him less than 15 minutes to get from his house to the main road, where the snow had already turned to slush and the cars and trucks were doing close to the speed limit. Thumbing to Richie was an art form. His friends marveled at the speed at which he could get around the township on his thumb. His secret sauce was that he always had a prop: a football for fall, a glove (not a bat) for spring and

summer, and a basketball for winter. Even if he wasn't going to play a sport that day, he brought the seasonal prop along for effect.

Crossing Wood Road, he positioned himself on the right side of the street, basketball under his left arm, and his right hand pointed in the direction of his thumb trip. Within a minute of staking out his road position, the third car that passed his thumb stopped on the shoulder of the road about a car length in front of him. It was a 1963 Buick Special Station Wagon, with chains on the tires, driven by a middle age woman with two kids, under ten, seated in the backseat. She leaned over and slowly rolled the passenger side front window halfway down while Richie ran up to the vehicle and looked in.

"Where you headed?" She asked?

" Junior High gym, to practice." He held the basketball in plain view to reinforce his intentions.

The young mother looked at the 'Thumb Traveler' closely before saying, "Practicing on a day like this. I'm impressed." Then she turned her head around towards the two young boys in the back seat, and stated, "See what it takes if you want to be good!"

Having made her decision, she asked, 'We're going all the way down Wood Road; I can drop you off at Wood and Highland. That work?"

Flashing an engaging smile, he quickly answered, "Sure does," which was immediately met with a hand motion by the female driver to get into the car. Without hesitating, he opened up the front passenger side door and jumped in. Then, upon entering the Buick, he nonchalantly said, "Think fast," as he flipped a no look basketball pass over the two tone grey and black front seats to the surprise of the young occupants in the back: his thumbing streak still intact.

Richie got out of the Buick, thanked the woman for the ride, and looked towards the junior high. Until 1959, the imposing edifice used to be the high school, whereupon student enrollment demanded a newer school with triple the square footage. The junior and senior high schools were collocated, offering the township's growing adolescent population the opportunity for a quality education within the two structures. Putting the collar up on his pea jacket, Richie shivered as the temperature dropped, acknowledging to himself that it was a ten-minute walk from where he was to the back of the gym. The sidewalks, much to Richie's chagrin, were not plowed; shaking his head, he begrudgingly respected the "Home Warden's" edict to wear snow boots as he navigated his way through the pristine snow.

The destination gymnasium was built in 1937 out of brick and mortar and had served the township and fellow students well over the years. The interior brick walls of the junior high gym were painted maroon and white, the colors of both the high school and the junior high. Though the architecture was uninspired, it's one redeeming structural feature

was its spectacular glass windows, which were situated on the east and west sides of the building between the roof and the brick walls. Perfectly positioned, the windows gave the former high school gym its natural lighting.

Also separating the school's basketball arena from other, more mundane sports venues was the hardwood floor; the stylish geometric flooring was divided into four small basketball courts, and one main court that cut across the smaller courts. The "piece de resistance" was the main basketball floor, which had glass backboards and a parquet floor like the NBA's Boston Garden. This is where the men's and women's junior high varsity, junior varsity, and seventh grade teams now play their conference games. The wooden stands, which were rolled out for assemblies and basketball games, only held 1500 students; Richie's junior class, alone, was now over a thousand students, which is why the new high school and athletic facilities were rushed to be built, and why every school board in the Delaware Valley had to find an answer to the continuous migration of families to the suburbs, and its impact on the suburban public school systems.

Richie headed towards the back of the gym, knowing that the door on the northwest side would be propped open. Before he reached for the handle, he could hear the resonating sound of a spherical leather ball bouncing on the hardwood floor. Upon entering, Jimmy was at the far end of the main court executing a cross dribble against an imaginary defender as he drove towards the glass backboard. At six feet one and 190 pounds, his athletic skill was housed in a well-proportioned body. Playing a combination of shooting guard and small forward, the senior had played with his practice partner since eighth grade. As Richie observed Jimmy's on court presence, he realized that he knew his Negro teammate's features almost as well as his own. The color of his skin, eyes, and hair was a light brown. His ears were close to his head and perfectly shaped, unlike Richie's. Just shy of being handsome with his high cheekbones, Jimmy had a solid chin line, broad nose with nostrils that were neither too large nor too small, and kinky hair that he cropped short. But it was his brown eyes that set him apart. They were alive and inquisitive. Whenever he looked at you, you knew that Jimmy was taking in everything you said and the nearby surroundings in which you said it.

Considered to be the best athlete in his class, he had just accepted a full ride scholarship to play football at the University of Michigan. An honor student and senior class treasurer, Jimmy epitomized the term student athlete. He lived in Montville, a small Negro community that had been part of the township since it was incorporated. Not short on personality, a charismatic though soft spoken leader, Jimmy knew how to navigate the waters in a predominantly white school, where both Caucasians and Negros respected him.

Jimmy retrieved the ball as it dropped through the hoop, then turned and watched Richie walk onto the court, dribbling the ball between his legs in the fluid motion of a confident point guard. Their relationship was built on mutual respect as Richie was considered to be the best athlete in his class.

As soon as Richie crossed the center line, he barked out, "One on one, horse, full court passing drills followed by stop and pop from outside 15 feet."

"Okay, Coach," Jimmy sarcastically yelled back, a smile of earned respect appearing on his sweat-covered face. You sure you don't need to warm up, Richie, I don't want you whining after I kick your ass that you weren't loose." He was spinning the basketball on his right index finger as he said it.

Richie's competitive juices were flowing, "I don't need no warmup, youth's on my side. Let's play 'Winners Out.' We'll shoot free throws to see who gets the ball first.

"Okay," in a high pitch tone, Jimmy responded to the challenge.

For the next two hours, they went at it, neither one giving quarter to the other. Finally, when the second hour passed, Jimmy looked up at the clock on the East wall and said, "I'm done. Old Man is picking me up in 20 minutes, so let's call it a draw." Bent over at the waist, Richie's hands were holding on to the end of his shorts as he reluctantly conceded that he was tired. "Truce" was the only word that came out of his mouth.

They sat in silence side by side on the pulled out bleacher seats, cooling down, then Richie borrowed a towel from Jimmy to wipe the sweat off his body before both changed back into their maroon and white varsity practice sweats. Looking up at the clock instead of at his teammate, Richie asked Jimmy, "You dating anyone?"

With a quizzical look, Jimmy looked back at Richie and at first didn't say a word. Finally, he responded. "How long have we known each other, Richie? Five years? And during all that time playing two sports per school year together, you have never once asked me who I dated. Why now?"

Richie, having opened Pandora's box, opted not to close it. "I was curious with all your popularity, especially with white girls, in an almost all white school, if you only dated girls of your race.

Jimmy stood up and looked down at Richie in a non-threatening manner and carefully chose his words. "What do you think?"

"I don't know, but there have to be some white girls that you would like to date. Right?"

Jimmy glanced at the clock, hoping that time would run out before he had to answer Richie's question. Uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, yet curious as to why Richie was pursuing this line of inquiry, he decided to respond to the first question. "Richie, I date a couple of girls from my neighborhood and another girl from Upper Bethel, a similar neighborhood next to mine. Nothing serious."

Richie didn't say a word and just waited. About 10 seconds passed as an internal debate was taking place within Jimmy as he contemplated telling the truth or just blowing off Richie's second question. Finally, in a barely audible voice, he said, "Sally Dill, Nancy Detwiler, and Bonnie Amburg are the white girls that I would date in a heartbeat, if I had the balls to ask any one of them out." Jimmy waited and watched the reaction from Richie to his deepest secret; However, Richie's poker face revealed nothing. Jimmy's anxiety dissipated, and his relaxed demeanor returned, as he looked Richie straight in the eye and asked, "What's this all about?"

Richie stood up and held Jimmy's gaze, occasionally shifting his weight from one foot to the next, but didn't say anything; instead, he pointed to the clock.

"Shit...I'm late, my Old Man will kill me. Turn off the lights and close the door when you're done." Then Jimmy grabbed his gear and sprinted in the direction of the exit. As he reached the far end of the court and just before he opened the metal door, he looked over his shoulder, back at Richie and shouted back. "Is this about Estelle? Everyone knows you have the hots for her. Be careful, 'Forbidden Fruit'...A white girl dating a Negro guy. Only thing worse is a Negro girl dating a white guy," as the door slammed shut leaving his words hanging in the air.

Chapter Three

Two weeks after his conversation with Jimmy, the team remained undefeated and continued to maintain a share of first place in their conference. High school basketball games were always played on Tuesdays and Fridays, and today's away game would tip off around 6:30 pm with the team bus leaving around 4:45 pm. They would be playing a non-conference team from the Lehigh Valley in a small gym with a hostile crowd. Classes let out around 3:15 pm, and Richie headed over to the school auditorium where the junior class was practicing for a performance of "Our Town." On game days, he pretty much kept to himself, so he quietly slipped into the back row of the theatre and followed the rehearsal. Listening intently as the cast went through their lines, it suddenly dawned on him that play rehearsal was similar to basketball practice. Ball players worked on their individual skills and integrated them into a team concept, while actors worked on their character development within an ensemble cast. One strived for wins and the other for applause, with perfection being the ultimate goal for both. As he slipped out of the theatre and headed for the locker room, Richie had gained a newfound respect for the performing arts and the discipline that was required to be an actor.

After gathering his gear and kibitzing with teammates, Richie was the last to get on the team bus. Being Last on board was a ritual that started with their first road win and continued throughout the season. In the front seats were the head coach, the assistant coach, and the team manager, followed by the varsity players and the all-girl cheerleading team at the back of the bus. Jimmy saved a seat for Richie toward the back, and ironically, sitting right behind the point guard and small forward were cheerleaders Estelle Dinkins and Sally Dill, chatting away. Both Jimmy and Richie rode in relative

silence, their game faces on, running through the game strategy as their pre-game ritual had begun.

The Mayfair bandbox gym, whose bleacher filled rabid fans were almost on top of the basketball court, was rocking as their hometown team held a sizeable lead over the visitors midway through the fourth quarter, Mayfair was a steel town where the majority of male students went right from graduation into the mills or related steel industries. Sports were everything in Mayfair, a point of civic pride in this blue-collar town. They were perennial champions in both football and basketball, where they had a decided home advantage over the competition with their ardent fans, hostile atmosphere, and homer referees.

Nothing seemed to be going right, and with five minutes left in the game, Richie called a timeout. After multiple technical fouls, Richie's head coach and assistant coach had been thrown out of the game in the third quarter and were sitting in the visitors' locker room, stewing, after protesting the hometown referee's bad calls. The student team manager was now the de facto coach of the team, and he, like the players, was waiting for Richie to say something.

As the team silently gathered around him in front of the visitor's bench, the noise from the home crowd was deafening. Richie waited before speaking. Suppressing the pent up anger within him from watching his team's poor play and the lousy refereeing, Richie first looked around the team huddle at the faces of his dejected teammates. Then, looking up, and surveying the stands where the crowd was chanting, "Mayfair, Mayfair he then shook his head and looked back at his teammates, who were still waiting for him to say something. Instead of speaking, an amusing smile slowly appeared on his face as he started to shake his head from side to side before a chuckle turned into uncontrollable laughter, surprising his fellow players and the team manager. When he finally stopped laughing the first thing out of his mouth was, "What a shit hole place to play in." This crowd looks like they got hit with an ugly stick," which immediately elicited wisecrass responses and laughs from his teammates. The tension having been broken, Richie spoke again, this time in a calm voice that cut through the noise of the home crowd. "We're down 20 points to a bunch of Dip Shits that we can beat. So why don't we forget the crowd, the referees, and play our game!" Then changing gears Richie's voice picked up in intensity, "Let's full court press these assholes and trap them all over the court." Taking the measure of his basketball brethren, who were now nodding their heads, Richie's voice hardened as he maintained eye contact with each player, "I don't care how tired you are. Suck it up." The courtside horn blared, signaling the end of the timeout and as the starting five were about to break the huddle, Richie uttered the most famous lines of the season, "When we walk off this court, all I want to hear is silence. Got it? Now let's kick their ass!"

Galvanized into action, for the next five minutes, Richie and his teammates played the best stretch of basketball they would ever play during their high school careers as they whittled the Mayfair lead down to one point with ten seconds left on the clock. With no

time outs, Richie took the inbound pass, avoided two Mayfair defenders and drove the length of the court hitting Jimmy with a left handed behind the back bounce pass on a backdoor cut to the basket, which Jimmy caught with his right hand, swept under the rim and deposited into the hoop with two seconds left on the clock. Time expired as the building fell silent.

As soon as the game was over, the team, coaches, and their cheerleaders made a beeline for the bus. Unlike other away game venues where they would shower and change into street clothes in the visitors' locker room, this time they left the gym with their uniforms on their backs, getting out of Dodge as quickly as they could. Oddly enough, there were no fan incidents as they left the gym en masse to the stunned silence of the remaining Mayfair supporters.

Unlike other away game victories, this time the team bus pulled out of the Mayfair parking lot with no raucous yelling and screaming. Everyone on the bus, including the driver, felt as if they had just returned home from the war, and rather than collectively bragging about their experiences, they internalized them. The cheerleaders were no longer segregated in the back of the bus but seated amongst the players on the ride home. The first song to change the atmosphere was started by the captain of the cheerleaders, a single voice at first, she was slowly joined by one singer after another, until the entire bus including the coaching staff, broke out in song; each contributing to their unique version of the Shirelles hit single, "Dedicated to the One I Love."

Richie, who acknowledged that he couldn't carry a tune, but loved to sing, sat next to Estelle Dinkins, and in the row behind and across from him sat Jimmy Holt and Sally Dill. Songs and lyrics that were easy to remember, from singers like Buddy Holly to Ben E. King, filled the bus with music during the 45-minute ride home. As soon as the team bus turned onto Highland Ave., about three minutes from the high school, a full-throated version of the 1959 hit 'Poison Ivy' broke out amongst the triumphant travelers. When the bus finally came to a stop in front of the high school gym, as tradition would have it, they all departed singing and humming the Coasters' hit single.

After exiting the bus, Richie showered and dressed quickly. Leaving the varsity basketball athletic cage amongst the whooping and hollering of his victorious teammates, he scrambled up the steps, out of the locker room, taking them two at a time, striding across the darkened 'Exit Only' lit home court towards the entrance to the gym. The trophy case anteroom was where parents and students met players and friends after a game. As soon as he entered, Richie spotted Sally Dill wearing her cheerleading outfit: a maroon turtleneck, underneath a white cable knit letter sweater with the school's signature letters emblazoned on her chest, and a short pleated maroon skirt. The senior combined feminism and athleticism in a well-built 5'8" frame. Smart and witty, Sally was extremely popular and had a magnetism about her that drew others towards her. Richie had known her since fifth grade, and though he liked her and they were good friends, he never considered asking her out. She lived in Danbury, which was an affluent community adjacent to "The Wicks." A platonic relationship, Richie shared his school

schedule with Sally and vice versa in case she needed a ride to classes, practice, a game, or home.

Heading towards Sally, he waved to and acknowledged schoolmates and parents waiting in the lobby. Upon reaching her, he asked, "You ready?"

"Yep," Sally replied. "Great game, Richie. In the last five minutes, you guys were unbelievable!" Richie just nodded his head and, with Sally in tow, headed through the doorway across the street towards the school's parking lot.

Ever the gentleman, Richie opened the door on the black, convertible Ford Galaxie for Sally to get in, then hustled around to the other side to get out of the cold night air. Upon entering, the first words out of his mouth were, "You hungry? My treat."

"Sure. It's Friday Night, my parents know I'm with you, and my mom trusts you, plus, I told them we might get a bite to eat after the game." As the Galaxie slowly pulled out of the high school parking lot, Sally asked Richie a question. "I noticed that when we travel to away games, you always sit next to Estelle. What's the story?"

"Is it that obvious?" Richie answered a question with a question.

"It is," then shifting in her seat, "I guess as obvious as Jimmy and me.

Instead of driving to the Hot Shoppes, a chain of drive-in restaurants and the local hangout for the high school, Richie slowed the car down and turned right into the Pinewood section of the township, a stone's throw away from their high school. Neither one said a word as Richie drove to a secluded spot, which had been a lovers lane for couples during his sophomore year before everyone discovered it. It was empty.

Richie pulled into the hidden location, lowered the volume on the radio, and put the car in Park. Sally spoke first, the words tumbling out of her mouth. "My Mom and Dad would kill me if they knew how I felt about Jimmy." She was fighting back tears as she said it. We share four classes, but our only real contact is on the team bus coming back from away games. At first it was the casual brush of our hands, then our legs would touch together, and finally, tonight, on the way back from Mayfair, in the dark, we held hands. My mother would be appalled if she knew."

Hesitant to ask, he asked the question anyway. "Has Jimmy ever told you how he feels?"

Her emotions now getting the best of her, tears again welled up in her eyes, and in an almost inaudible voice, she said, "No." But, I haven't either." Then, looking away from Richie, out the window into the starless night, she confessed. "He's all I think about, day and night. Then turning back towards Richie, shaking her head from side to side, What am I going to do? You know my Dad. He still calls negroes---niggers."

Richie, struggling with his own emotions, didn't say a word, but instead he put his arm around Sally and held her close to him. It was an unusual gesture for him. Fiery and emotional on the basketball court, Richie tended to be more formal when interacting with the opposite sex; he was a John Wayne type of guy.

They were lovers' lane imposters, out of place in their surroundings. Finally, Richie got the nerve to express his feelings, unfiltered. "I feel the same way about Estelle that you feel about Jimmy. I don't know why, but I have a different energy whenever I'm around her. Unlike other girls I've dated, I can talk to Estelle about anything. Pausing for just a second, "And the best part is she seems to know me better than me. I spend as much time as I can with her. We sit next to each other in English and Calc, and are part of a group that has lunch together. We also hang out in study hall, after cheerleading, and basketball practice, but never alone, always with friends."

"But before you ask, no, I've never said a word to her about how I feel, but I'm sure she can tell by the way I look into her eyes and the way she looks into mine. And, yes, now and then, a friend or teammate might kid me about going to the dark side. But one look from me and they shut their yapper, knowing full well that I would never date a negro. If asked, I would deny to anyone that Estelle and I were more than just friends." Disgusted with his behavior, he turned his head away from Sally and stared straight ahead into the night.

When he spoke again, Richie's lips moved, but there was no sound coming out of his mouth. Gradually, the words became audible just above a whisper. "My parents---as close a family as we are--I'm not sure how they would react. My Dad would most likely disapprove, but wouldn't say anything except, 'Don't get her pregnant.' My Mom, she's the wild card. She works with negro nurses and doctors at the hospital, but her baby boy dating a negro girl?" He sat there trying to imagine her response, knowing full well that interracial relationships were never viewed positively in his family. "My guess is her reaction would be like every other white mother's in the township, it's okay to be friends with them, but don't get involved."

They were confidants to the others' deepest secrets, which was why their relationship was so special. Sally and Richie didn't say another word; instead, they just sat there listening to the music on the AM dial, each lost in their thoughts, until Richie shifted gears from Park to Reverse, turned the Galaxie around, put it in Drive, and left the secluded area. No longer hungry, they passed the Hot Shoppes restaurant in silence on their way home. Crowded with Friday date night after the movie twosomes and foursomes, Richie wondered what the odds were that there was one interracial couple among them.

STOP

Chapter Four

Estelle Dinkins, on Monday afternoon, casually waited by Richie's school locker chatting with a female friend from French class. A stylish dresser and a fan of Villager Clothes, she wore a slate blue A-line skirt and a matching cardigan sweater over a Peter Pan blouse. With a devilish grin and in dramatic fashion she said, "In French class, Miss. Stone talks about French architecture, the allure of the French countryside and the beauty of the Gallo-Romance language. Estelle arched her eyebrows and with a graceful movement of her hands and arms that seemed effortless, she perfectly imitated Miss Stone's theatrical flair. Then in a Parisian accent she said, "Our teacher is attractive, twenty-six, years old with a great figure, speaks five languages, a stylish dresser, and has an advanced degree from the Universite de Paris Sorbonne." Then dropping the accent she continued, "That girl has everything going for her. With an inquisitive look on her face she asked, "You know what I would really like to learn about from, "Mademoiselle Stone"---French men. Are they really that sexy? Are they great lovers and are they as romantic as they are portrayed to be....'grands amoureux'?"

While her friend laughed, Estelle's active mind thought about how the French respected the negro, especially those negroes in the arts. France, according to what she had read and had been told by her Uncle, who lived in Paris after the Second World War, was a haven for negroes where you could date whomever you wanted. Now that's a novel idea, she thought, one she would like to experience firsthand.

Both her Mom and Dad were graduates of an all-negro college. Honor students, each rated at the top of their high school class. They were banned from enrollment at an overwhelming majority of predominantly Caucasian colleges and universities due to segregation, especially in the South. Determined to make their way in the world, they both received graduate degrees and became professionals. Her Dad worked for the federal government in Philadelphia in administration, and her mother, who spoke multiple languages, taught French and Spanish at the city college. Estelle inherited her aptitude for languages and inquisitive nature from her mother, and her drive from her father. In order to fit in, she carefully hid her intellect from her friends, choosing humor outside the classroom as a form of socializing.

Like Jimmy Holt, Estelle lived in the Montville section of the township. Her parents emigrated from West Philly during the great white migration. Leaning against Richie's locker, she saw him heading down the hallway, talking with some of his upperclass

football teammates. At 5'9" tall, she was an inch taller than her Mom and three inches shorter than her Dad.

Richie usually dated girls with small, petite features who wore either a bob or a pageboy hairstyle. Estelle was neither; her shoulder-length black hair had a natural wave to it. She had small breasts on a lean, angular body frame, which was complemented by a slender, narrow waist and beautifully shaped, long legs. She had pronounced facial features, which included high cheekbones, a nose that wasn't aquiline, yet was in proportion to her visage, light brown skin, and dark brown eyes that revealed a desire to learn. Richie only saw the complete package as he greeted her and her friend with, "Waiting long?"

As they made their way down the school corridor, Richie and Estelle, feeding off the others' energy, were oblivious to their other classmates as they headed towards study hall. When they reached the auditorium, they found a section in the back, away from their fellow students, where they could talk.

"What did you do over the weekend?" asked Estelle, always anxious to know how Richie lived his other life without her.

"Saturday night, I went into Center City with the guys and caught a Palestra double header, Penn versus Princeton and LaSalle against Temple. You'd love the atmosphere, unbelievable school spirit. It's the best place to watch a basketball game and it's right on Penn's campus. You should go there sometime. Is your Dad into sports?"

"No, cars."

"Oh well, then Sunday, nothing special, church as usual. Then afterwards, one of my cousins had a birthday party, a typical family gathering, boring. And you?"

Estelle lowered her silky smooth voice, and in the process, her bubbly personality became suddenly subdued. "Jimmy drove me home after the Mayfair game, and instead

of going straight to my house, we pulled off to the side of the road, in a secluded area, and for the first time, he told me how he felt about Sally Dill. They were holding hands on the team bus on the ride back from Mayfair. She let her words sink in and continued. “He’s confused and doesn’t know what to do.”

Richie took Estelle’s hand in his for the first time, albeit briefly. “I know, I talked to Sally after the game, and she’s as bewildered as Jimmy. She’s concerned about how her parents will react. And to be honest, so am I.” Neither said a word until Richie spoke. “I’ll try to talk to Jimmy after practice to see where his head is.” And then opening up his English book, he looked away from Estelle under the pretense of studying.

Estelle watched Richie closely, hesitated, then said, “This isn’t just about Jimmy and Sally. Unable to ascertain if Richie, who hadn’t taken his eyes away from his book, was willing to deal with their situation, regained his attention by reciting the following passage from memory from one of his favorite poets, Frost. “Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I---I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” With that, Estelle got up from her study hall seat and left the auditorium.

STOP

Chapter Five

Coach Allen stood alone, watching studiously as his undefeated basketball team ran through their scheduled ball drills. His determined crew had come a long way from final cuts to play what he called TFB (Team First Basketball), a coaching philosophy Allen had instilled in every team and player he mentored during his evolving coaching career. TFB was founded on the principle that you first coach the team on fundamentals, and once learned, you have the foundation to build a winning organization. Pleased with the players' practice energy, he slowly brought the whistle, which hung around his neck, up to his mouth, as he was about to disrupt his rigid practice structure for the first time this season.

Sam Allen was in his mid-forties and had been recruited to turn around an anemic high school basketball program. This was his fifth head coaching job, each assignment taking him to a larger high school. In the three years since he first donned the school’s maroon and white colors, his teams' won/lost records had improved significantly year over year. At six feet three inches tall, he had played his undergraduate ball in Northeastern Pennsylvania at Lafayette College, a small Division 1 liberal arts college. It was very

early on during his playing career that he realized if he wanted to make the game a lifelong pursuit. Recognizing his athletic limitations, he would be a coach and not a player. His physical appearance was the opposite of imposing. He had a mix of thinning brown and blond hair; a long face that housed a nose that hooked down at the end, a weak chin line that led to a chicken-like neck, fair skin with freckles, and hazel eyes that were hidden by sleepy eyelids. Known for his laid-back teaching style, he taught secondary school psychology and speech and was an easy grader. His elective classes were extremely popular with juniors and seniors looking to boost their overall GPA. The contrast between the two Allens was startling. The Classroom Allen was nurturing and easy going in direct contrast to the Coaching Allen, who was a no-nonsense, intense taskmaster.

The shrill sound of the whistle caught every player's attention as Coach Allen shouted out, "Gather around, let's move it," as the 15 varsity players stopped their skill drills and ran towards midcourt, followed by the team's assistant coach, Billy Bower, and the student manager. With a basketball tucked under his arm, the team circled him. Looking at the competitive faces in front of him, Coach Allen finally addressed last Friday's game at Mayfair. "I scheduled Mayfair to toughen you up, knowing it would be the most hostile environment you would ever face this season or any season, including the PIAA State playoffs. What I didn't tell you was that I played and coached against Mayfair in that bandbox gym more times than I care to admit, and each time they kicked our ass. Even though I didn't get to see it, you did collectively what my teams in the past weren't able to do: you kept your composure, shut out the crowd and the refs, and played like the winners you are. I knew you won the game when the building went silent. I'm proud of you. Great Team Win!"

Never one to heap praise on his players during a season, Coach Allen usually waited until after they had graduated. This was a first. Quickly shifting gears, Coach Allen continued, "Friday, we play our archrival, Chelsea. Like us, they're also undefeated, and also like us, they play team ball. However, I have a little trick up my sleeve. Instead of playing man-to-man or zone defense, we are going to play a combination of zone and man. A coaching friend of mine tipped me off about this new Combo D, and we spent the weekend talking about it. Chelsea's never seen this defensive approach, and I believe it will keep their offense off balance and confuse them. Now is the time to spring the trap and use it. There was a trust in Coach Allen's basketball acumen that was built upon success, as the players took in every word he said, confident in the outcome.

The Head Coach grabbed the basketball from under his arm and passed it to Richie, a symbolic gesture to the floor captain and leader of his team. "Since there is no game on Tuesday, we have four days to learn this new D. First team on defense and second team on offense, Coach Bower will show the second team Chelsea's offensive scouting report, so they can work their plays against our starters, while I teach the first team the fundamentals of the new combo team defense." And that's exactly what they did non-stop for the next hour and a half as the entire team learned a new way of defending from a coach who expended his energy on the court instead of in the classroom. It was only a

matter of time before Coach Allen started coaching at the college level, on his way to the pros; this team, the best talent he had coached to date, was his stepping-stone, and he knew it.

When Allen blew the whistle for the final time, Richie was dog tired and ready for practice to end. Under the Head Coach's intense direction, they learned to seamlessly switch from zone to man-to-man and then back again, confusing the second team in the process. Exhausted, yet exhilarated, the players headed towards the locker room. Richie, as he jogged off the court, watched Jimmy grab a basketball and slowly dribble towards one of the glass backboards and position his feet on the foul line. Ready for an invigorating shower, Richie reluctantly retraced his steps and joined Jimmy, catching his shots from under the basket.

After Jimmy's twentieth free throw attempt, Richie spoke, "I talked to Estelle today, she told me about your drive home after last Friday's game. You want to talk?"

Avoiding eye contact with Richie, Jimmy focused on the front rim. Dribbling twice, he hesitated and in one fluid motion released the ball with his right hand. A perfect arc as both players watched the spinning ball swish through the net. Richie caught it before it hit the hardwood. Hesitating, an internal debate taking place inside his head, he held it and then walked towards Jimmy. "Let's talk."

The wrestling team had an away game, which meant that the gym would stay open until they got back, so out of view and earshot from everyone, the backcourt combination climbed up the empty bleachers about halfway up the stands. Jimmy spoke first, moral indignation in his voice, "Richie, do you know who Martin Luther King is? Are you familiar with the Civil Rights movement: Rosa Parks, Little Rock, Arkansas, Greensboro, North Carolina, James Meredith, and the University of Mississippi?"

"Kinda," Richie answered haltingly.

Judging by the expression on Richie's face. Jimmy responded, "Well I am, and it is an important movement that is being discussed everyday within the negro community. I attend a predominantly all white school. I blend in. If Sally and I were to walk down the halls hand in hand, the contrast between black and white would ripple through our idyllic school community like an earthquake. I know what Sally's old man calls me...that ball playin nigger. He stopped for a second to let his words sink in. "Guess what, my old man, who works for the township, and my mother, who teaches elementary school in Upper Bethel, would think?" Well, they would be just as opposed to our dating as Sally's parents. And Harold, my brother, who's on a football scholarship to Delaware State, would be horrified if he knew I was dating a white girl. Harold is part of the civil rights movement. He no longer calls himself a negro. He's black. The situation is fucked, and we both know it. What do I do? You tell me?"

Jimmy's impassioned words struck a nerve as not a word was said between the two athletes. Searching for an answer, Richie looked around the empty arena. It was then that he realized that he had never watched an athletic event in this gym from this vantage point. He had always been a participant, not an observer. Jimmy was a participant in the Civil Rights movement, and he was an observer never even considering what it meant from a negro and fellow teammates perspective. Sure he read the newspapers headlines and occasionally watched the local and national coverage of the growing racial unrest and the negroes protest against discrimination, but not from the viewpoint of Jimmy, Estelle and their families. If it didn't affect him, he tuned it out. Realizing his insensitivity, he decided right then and there to do something about it.

Richie, like Jimmy, had a pretty good idea as to how his parents would react to his dating a negro girl. And because he hadn't the nerve to have a serious discussion with Estelle about their relationship, he had no idea as to how her parents would react if they started dating. Finally, Richie spoke, "I'd say that we have a choice to make. One is which I've been thinking about a lot lately. Our dilemma is that you can't openly date Sally, and I can't openly date Estelle because if we did, all hell would break loose. Can you imagine two ebony and ivory couples walking down our school halls, or worse, going to the movies and eating out? The looks we would receive from our fellow suburbanites. We might as well put ourselves on display at the Philadelphia Zoo. That idea won't work. However, what appears to be is not necessarily what it is. What if you started dating Estelle, and I started dating Sally, and in the process, we pulled off the 'ole switcheroo.' No harm, no foul...Right? First, we would have to escape the prying eyes of our township. Instead, we would double date or meet in the city near Penn or Temple's campus, where interracial dating is at least tolerated. It's not perfect, but...

Still hidden from their fellow teammates, who were now walking across their home court after showering and getting dressed, Jimmy stood up and waited until they exited before he spoke. "Let me think about it ."Then, after another ten seconds passed, a slight mischievous smile started to appear on his face, "Switcheroo ." As Jimmy put his right hand up to his chin, cupped it, and said contemplatively. "Switcheroo, as I recall, is defined as an act of intentionally or unintentionally swapping two objects," pausing again for another ten seconds, he optimistically continued..."It could work. And no one would be the wiser?"

Richie also stood up as his eyes followed Coaches Allen and Bower leaving the gym, "It's a plan, no guarantees, there is always the unexpected, but it could work."

As they scrambled down the bleacher rungs, energized by their forthcoming deception, Jimmy turned to Richie and said, I'm in," just before their feet hit the court.

STOP

Chapter Six

Estelle discreetly avoided Richie since their study hall encounter. In their shared English and Calculus classes, she normally sat next to Richie. Entering both classes late, she seated herself at the back of the class. At lunch, Estelle was noticeably absent. In the afternoon, Richie was called out of one of his core classes by the assistant principal to meet the head basketball coach from a prestigious East Coast college. Richie, by now, was on the college coaches' radar for both football and basketball, and to date, he had received over thirty inquiries. Fueling his recruitment in the two major college sports was his athletic skill set and GPA. As a sophomore, he had first attracted the attention of college football recruiters as a big-armed quarterback with speed who directed one of the few undefeated teams in the football-rich state of Pennsylvania. The consensus of those in the football know was that he would only get bigger and better over time. He was a blue-chip recruit in the making. Then, as fall turned to winter, college basketball recruiters saw the same athlete from a basketball perspective. A smart, unselfish point guard with height, who could shoot, pass, and play defense, subjugating his abilities to the all-important team concept while leading his undefeated basketball team towards the state tourney. Now a Junior, he was recognized as a five-star recruit, who was coachable, and could play both football and basketball in major Division One conferences.

During Richie's sophomore year, he or his parents hadn't set up any formal ground rules for his college athletic recruitment. Evident now since the start of his junior year to Richie, his parents and Coach Allen, who the family trusted, these athletic scholarship offers and requests for meetings would grow in intensity during the remainder of his high school career; Therefore it would be mandatory to establish recruitment rules and procedures to insure the recruitment process didn't overwhelm the dual purpose athlete.

Rapidly walking down the school's hallway to an unscheduled recruitment meeting, Richie reflected on the downside of being recruited by big time sports institutions. He knew he would eventually have to choose between football and basketball, because the coaches who divvied up the full-ride scholarships demanded absolute commitment to their sport. Waiting in one of the school's administrative offices was Dave Hansen, the assistant principle. A former reserve college basketball player under Greg Collins, today's recruiter, Hansen was a gangly six feet five inches tall and had a short torso on top of long legs. He looked a little like a grasshopper, which was why he was called 'Hopper' behind his back. As the assistant principal, he was also the high school disciplinarian. His round head perched on top of a long neck housed a closely cropped crew cut, which looked remarkably similar to the one on the visiting recruiter.

Coach Collins was a respected head coach of a perennial top-ranked college basketball program playing in a major Southeastern Conference. Richie's height, Collins was trim, fit, and powerfully built. Unlike Dave Hansen, who wore a sports coat and tie, he was casually dressed, sporting a red and white basketball warm-up jacket over a white golf

shirt, grey slacks, and black Converse low-top sneakers. But what drew you to the man was his remarkable features, which included a square jaw that jutted out and high cheekbones that seemed to be chiseled into his face, and inquisitive baby blue eyes. He gave the appearance and had the reputation of being a no-nonsense head coach. Richie guessed he was in his late forties, and according to Hansen, he only recruited elite athletes for his basketball program. His presence at the school was confirmation of Richie's basketball talent. A reserve on Coach Collins' national championship teams, he and Hansen had remained friends over the years, and it was Hansen who had touted Richie to Collins as both a basketball player and a true student athlete.

While surreptitiously keeping an eye on the wall clock behind Hansen's desk, Richie sat down politely listening to Coach Collins' recruiting pitch, having previously heard other dual football and basketball college recruitment presentations. When the opportunity finally presented itself, Richie spoke up, "Coach, I have a question?"

Coach Collins, anticipating Richie's query, having heard it from a majority of the recruits he was pursuing, answered exuberantly, "The current gymnasium seats 6,000, but by the time you are a sophomore and are eligible to play, the new field house will have been built. It will seat 14,000 with 7,000 seats designated for students. Collins glanced at Hansen, who was beaming.

"That's great, Coach." Then quite out of character for the old Richie, but not the new one, Richie continued, not mincing words, "How many negroes are on your current team?"

Without hesitating, Coach Collins said, "None."

Richie, unwavering, asked his next question, "How many negroes are there on your freshman team?"

Coach Collins, this time, slowed down his response, realizing he was standing in racial quicksand before answering, "None."

Richie, taking a deep breath, confidently asked the next and most telling question. "I know you're in the midst of recruiting next year's freshmen class?" How many Negroes have committed to play for you?

Coach Collins first looked towards Hansen, whose eyes were downcast, then back at Richie before answering forthrightly, "None."

"I see." Then, looking directly at the big-time college basketball coach, while ignoring the assistant principal whose demeanor had gone from enthusiastic former player to concerned alumni, Richie took in the measure of Collins. Slowly, Richie's facial expression changed from tense to relaxed as he delivered an "I'll never play for you smile before saying," Well, Coach, I want my teammates defined by their contribution to the game and not by the color of their skin."

Expecting a response and realizing none was forthcoming, Richie suddenly stood up and announced, “I just forgot, I’m supposed to meet Coach Allen before my next class. Not sure what it’s about, but I got the message while I was in Spanish.” Looking first at the assistant principal, Mr. Hansen, who was uncharacteristically subdued before turning towards Coach Collins and locking eyes with the legendary coach, “Nice meeting you, Coach, hopefully, I’ll have the opportunity to play against you some day.” And with that, Richie bolted for the door.

Fortunately, the assistant principal’s office was in close proximity to Estelle’s locker. Richie, moving swiftly, arrived just before the bell rang signaling the end of classes and French class for Estelle. She spotted Richie chatting with some classmates as she approached her locker. She was more confused than angry at Richie and had chosen to limit her contact with him until she could sort things out. But seeing him standing there, the first love of her life, with that relaxed smile on his face, made her realize how much she missed him, and she hoped that his physical presence in front of her locker was confirmation of his missing her.

Richie was the first to speak, jokingly asking. ‘You on a hunger strike or have you tired of your lunch mates?’

“Coyly, Estelle responded, not all of them, just one.

“I see. I’m guessing the same one who pretended to be reading his English assignment in study hall the other day while you were trying to engage him in a serious discussion. That one?”

I believe you’re correct, Sherlock. How should I say it in French, oh, Éviter l’évidente, the meaning being, he was *avoiding the obvious*, our relationship.

Richie immediately countered in Spanish, “Mucho miedo lidiar con eso. Then, putting his large hands out to his sides, palms up, he translated, “*Too afraid to deal with it.*”

Opening the combination on her locker, Estelle took her time before responding. “Do you ever think he’ll find the courage?”

Richie closed her locker and came up very close to her, then looked Estelle straight in the eye. “I think he found it.”

Not another word was said as they headed toward the study hall. It was there that Richie told Estelle about the planned ‘switcheroo’ deception.

Chapter Seven

What the pro game lacked in unbridled fan enthusiasm, it made up for in the skill level of the average NBA player, who combined size, speed, and elite athletic ability. What the high school game lacked in pro bound top draw athletes, it more than made up for it with its exuberant fan base. The 3,500 seat high school gym was filled to the rafters with partisan students, parents, and friends of the host team. It had been a while since they had collectively participated in such an important high school hoops athletic event; two undefeated basketball teams each vying for supremacy in a league game, one a perennial winner and the other a perennial loser. A quick look around the tiered planks revealed that each section had its unique personality. Divided by class, they all wore their maroon & white school colors. En masse, their bodies swayed, and their feet stomped as they rocked out to the sounds of the student-run high school pep band. Whenever the undergraduate musicians took a break, the student body continued showing their school spirit through organized cheering and clapping, led by the always animated cheerleading squad, who visited one section after another, whipping up their own brand of fervor for the hometown heroes.

The jubilant pregame arena atmosphere was in stark contrast to the almost monastic cloister of the home team locker room. Richie finished getting dressed, oblivious to the teammates surrounding him, faced his locker, and said a prayer, not that he would be victorious, but that he would play his best. Then, along with his fellow student athletes, he sat in front of his locker with the fingers of his right hand nervously drumming on the wooden bench, awaiting Coach Allen's pregame speech. Unlike Richie's head football coach, Coach Tomasco, who was both a pregame and halftime yeller and screamer, Coach Allen didn't waste any unnecessary words. When he finally appeared in front of the team, they stood up and waited for him to speak. He looked around the confined space, making sure to have eye contact with each of his players, and then in a normal voice, he said two words, "Combo D."

Chelsea's unbeaten, cocky basketball team entered the court for their pregame warm ups and to their surprise, the overly enthusiastic home team crowd went absolutely silent. Eerily quiet, the visitors went through their loosening up drills; the only sounds being the pounding of the various leather basketballs as they hit the hardwood floor and the occasional banter amongst their fellow teammates. For all intents and purposes, Chelsea's Men's Basketball Team might as well have been warming up in an empty arena. Richie gathered his fellow ballers at the top of the steps leading into the gym and waited. Unusual to his and his teammates' ears, there was no cheering emanating from inside the arena. Waiting anxiously for a few seconds until he heard the opening chords of the Rooftop Singers, someone opened the gymnasium door, and Richie and his teammates raced through it just as the "Walk right In, sit right down" refrain played. The crowd anticipating their entrance exploded as one, while the psyched-out Chelsea players stood there and watched. The game was over before it even started. Momentum wore maroon and white that night, and played Combo D!

Richie took his time dressing; they had blown Chelsea out by 20 points in a total team win. The team manager, Terry Terloff, came around with the after game stats, and like he

did after every game, Richie waved him off. In track, where Richie was a sprinter, it was all about the individual times and statistics, but football and basketball were team sports, and so should they remain. He had played a solid game, and that was all that mattered.

Decked out for the evening's activities with black slacks, a white collar shirt, and a black and grey wool sweater, Jimmy shouted to Richie as he passed by his locker, "I'll see you at the dance." Richie nodded his head as he gave Jimmy a conspiratorial smile that suddenly appeared on his face out of nowhere. High School dances, unlike the junior high and YMCA dances, were few and far between. It probably had to do with the driving age in Pennsylvania being sixteen and the freedom it brought to the students whose social schedule was no longer tied to the school's. Richie gave one final look towards the mirror, checked his button-down light blue shirt, repositioned his royal blue sweater, and put his oversized hands in the pockets of his chinos, thumbs out. Not McQueen, he conceded, but perhaps he could pass as his sidekick. *Showtime*, he said to himself and booked it towards the gym.

Big game, big victory, and a big crowd were the setting for the Winter Wonderland dance. Organized by the junior class and hosted by Marvelous Mark, an afternoon DJ from one of the Top 40 AM radio stations in Philly, his presence brought a city feel to suburbia. Each undergraduate class had carved out their dance section in the gym, and to the surprise of his fellow classmates, Richie bypassed the juniors and headed straight for the seniors.

Waiting for him was Sally Dill; this year's homecoming queen had blond hair, which she wore in a modified Bob cut, Pacific blue water eyes, small facial features, and full lips. She was talking to two of his teammates, the Burris brothers, and their dates, the McQuaid sisters. All four were identical twins. Both Burris brothers were starters and played forward, Johnny a shooting forward and Billy a power forward. The McQuaid girls were on the cheerleading squad, athletic and vivacious, and their dry sense of humor was in direct contrast to the slapstick comedic antics of the Burris twins. When all four of the twins were together, it was impossible to tell them apart.

Billy spoke first. "You lost," he said in a kidding fashion. "Juniors are over there. You still have another year to go before you graduate."

Johnny, not to be outdone verbally by his wisecracking brother, jumped in, "Richie, you wouldn't be bird dogging one of our female senior classmates, would you? That just wouldn't be right." as the two male twins spontaneously broke into their version of the Everly Brothers "Bird Dog," to the delight of the McQuaid twins and Sally Dill.

Richie, used to the wisecracking 6' 5 " twin brothers, waited for their off key musical rendition to end before responding. "I like crossing boundaries, especially if two people are destined to be together." Richie then reached for Sally's hand, grabbed it, and headed

for the dance floor, as the Burris and the McQuaid twins, along with other members of the senior class and Sally's female friends, stood by and watched. Of course, the first dance, much to Richie's chagrin, was a slow one as Marvelous Mark announced, "For lovers only, from the King himself, Can't Help Falling in Love."

Richie, awkward at first, took Sally's right hand in his left and put his right arm around her waist with their bodies barely touching. He looked like he was at Miss Jones' mixed couples dance class for elementary school students. Sally responded immediately by pulling their lead hands and arms close to Richie's chest, and their bodies even closer together, the way lovers dance. She then put her face next to Richie's, ensuring that all who had an interest couldn't miss the lovers' charade. Richie could feel Sally's breasts pushing against him, and her heart beating, while her lower body moved rhythmically to Elvis' voice, and even though it was for show, Richie couldn't help but respond. Unexpectedly, Sally whispered in Richie's ear and said, "I find younger men irresistible. Will you marry me?" Richie countered by saying, "Yes, I have the ring in my pocket, and at the end of this song, Marvelous Mark is going to perform a civil ceremony in front of the entire school."

Sally threw back her head, away from Richie's cheek, then looked questioningly at Richie and asked, "How big is the diamond? How many carats?"

Before Richie could answer, the song ended, and both faux lovers laughed as the eyes of their classmates tried to read into their body language and conversation. As they left the floor, Richie noticed Jimmy and Estelle walking off the dance floor hand in hand, delivering their part of the bargain as agreed.

Later, in a secluded section of the gym, the four coconspirators met. "How goes it, Estelle asked as she laughed. Continuing, "I didn't know the two of you were dating? How long has this been going on?"

Sally responded, mimicking her various girlfriends, "You've got to be kidding. I never would have guessed. You never said a word about Richie. Does your Mom know? How long? Is it serious?" Sally just shook her head and smiled as she said, "It suddenly dawned on me that every move in high school dating is choreographed. Before A is asked out, B checks to see if A is willing to go out with B through a network of friends. If so, the dating process proceeds, and if not, then it dies. Not one single dating move is spontaneous. Each move, on the teen romance chessboard, is well thought out ahead of time, with the end game in sight. What we collectively did tonight was break the junior high rules of dating by just showing up with a date, without seeking anyone else's prior approval or advice. We must be the talk of the school.

"Maybe we should keep the arrangement permanent," Jimmy interjected. "Estelle is a hell of a dancer. He said this all the while looking at Sally.

“Perhaps we should,” Sally responded. “Richie seems more adult than most of the guys I know.” All four of them laughed as their bodies started to sway to the rhythm of Dion’s “The Wanderer,” playing in the background.

As the head conspirator, Richie interrupted the music by once again going over the plan. “Next Saturday, the four of us will go into the city for a Palestra doubleheader. Jimmy, you drive Estelle, and I’ll drive Sally. We’ll meet at the Chelsea Mall, by the movie theatre, around 5:30 pm. I’ll take my car to the game so the four of us can drive in together, unencumbered. It’s foolproof. Nothing to worry about.” Silently, they shook their heads in agreement while Sally and Jimmy looked at each other, and Estelle and Richie did likewise.

Just before Marvelous Mark introed the last song, ‘I Can’t Stop Loving You,’ by Ray Charles, Sally and Richie decided to leave the Winter Wonderland Dance. Ignoring the inquisitive looks of their fellow students they said their goodbyes, leaving behind a faux winter scene for a real one.

Sally laughed as they made their way towards the privacy of Richie’s car. “What do you think, did we pull it off?”

“Can’t speak for the female side of things but judging from the looks of approval from my friends and other guys, I’d say we did.”

Sally studied Richie for a few seconds, then said, “We don’t make a bad couple, you and I. Then, looking more closely at Richie, in a way that she had never done before, she inquired, “Did you ever date anyone older than you?”

Richie chuckled out loud, “You mean date an older woman. Yeah, down the Jersey Shore, last summer. She was a lifeguard, two classes ahead of me. She didn’t figure out my age until halfway through the season. By then, it was too late. Broke up with her when I left for football camp in August. Lives in Highland Park, N.J. She’s a freshman at Rutgers.”

“Serious,” Sally asked.

“As serious as it gets for a summer romance.”

“Are you going to see her next summer”?

Richie didn't answer at first. "Hard to tell, she's now a college girl and I'm still in high school. Honestly, that was a magical summer, tough to recapture." Then, looking at Sally, Richie asked, "And you. Date guy's older than you?"

Sally, not wasting a nanosecond, answered. "Of course. Guys date girls in their same class or a class below them. Girls do the reverse; they go out with guys their same age or a class or two above them.

Richie's tone suddenly changed, going from lighthearted to one of regret. "I'm going to miss your class when you graduate." He said it as his Ford Galaxie Convertible turned onto Wanamaker Way, drove another 500 yards, then pulled into the Drive In section of The Hot Shoppes, on his right.

Richie waited until they gave the carhop their order. They were smart to have left the dance early because the drive-in spots were filling up quickly. Reaching over, he turned down the radio and said to Sally, "You know I'm a 'Tweener."

"What's a 'Tweener," Sally asked. "Is it contagious"?

"Nice line," Richie said, laughing. "No, a 'Tweener' is someone older than the classmates in his current class, yet too young for the class ahead of him. In other words, a 'Tweener' missed the cutoff date to start his initial school year and was held back for next year's class. If there hadn't been a cutoff date for school enrollment, I would've been in your class. My guess is that's why I relate so well to the class ahead of me. It's also why I've excelled in sports and have always played with the class above me. Honestly, I relate better to your class than I do my own, and it's why I wish I were graduating with you and the rest of the senior class.

Sally let out a deep sigh, "Well, Mr. Tweener, when it's your turn, you'll find it's going to be difficult to leave behind all your high school friends; classmates that you've known since grammar school. Getting ready for college, you'll ask yourself, Will I fit in? Honestly, it's a little scary, but at the same time exhilarating: a new environment, new challenges, and new friends. I can't tell you how often I wonder about what comes next. Will my high school success, and the respect I've earned from students and faculty, be transferable at the next level"?

Richie didn't say a word; he just listened as the carhop brought their food.

Once they finished eating, Sally continued, "Richie, when you go to college, everyone will know who you are, what do they call you...a blue chip football or basketball recruit? You'll have immediate recognition, and from that, I would guess instant friends, from teammates, faculty, and a student body that will adore you and your athletic skills. In many ways, I envy you.

“Really, funny you should say that, because in many respects, Sally, I envy you. You’ve been admitted to a prestigious women’s college based on your academic achievements, college boards, and your school activities, especially the ones that help others. You’re free to choose your career path, knowing that the only expectations you’ll have are your own. On the other hand, I’ll be a hired gun. A scholarship athlete whose free education is based on my ability to perform. I don’t resent it. In most cases, I welcome it. Whereas your college experience will be defined by what you learned during your four years, mine will be judged by wins and losses, rankings, and championships.

“I never thought of it that way. Then, shifting around in her seat, Sally looked directly at Richie and said, “You know what made this year so special”?

“No”? Richie tilted his head to the right, uncertain as to where the conversation was heading.

“You. Spending time together, driving back and forth from my house to the high school or vice versa, laughing, listening to music, and being honest with one another.” Sally suddenly leaned over and kissed Richie on the cheek. You are the closest thing I have to a boyfriend. Let me rephrase that, a boy who is a friend. I can tell you things that I wouldn’t dare tell anyone else. You listen; give me your honest opinion, always responding in a curious, non-judgmental tone.

Richie didn’t say another word. He just nodded his head, paid the bill, turned up the radio, and slowly pulled out of the Hot Shoppes onto Wanamaker's Way before saying, “Ditto.”

STOP

Chapter Seven

Mrs. White, the Negro librarian, handed Richie a short story that he had put on reserve, “Here you go, J.D. Salinger’s,” “Franny and Zooey.”

Richie had used the book request as a ruse. Taking the book in his hand, he then gave White an appreciative smile as he lowered his voice and asked her if she had an essay by James Baldwin written in November of 62 in the New Yorker.

“In the New Yorker,” she asked?” At 6 feet one inch tall, Mrs. White was an imposing figure. She did not fit the role of the meek librarian portrayed in Hollywood films. Rather, she was assertive, in her early thirties, attractive, but not overly pretty, with an athletic build.

Richie, not completely sure when exploring Baldwin’s work, said, “I think so.”

“He is a provocative author,” Mrs. White stated. She was a recent addition to the school staff, an accomplished scholar who knew exactly who Richie was and his status within the undergraduate school hierarchy. Now in charge of one of the best high school libraries in the state of Pennsylvania, Mrs. White chose her words carefully before responding. “We don’t have it here, but I can get a copy of it.” Hesitating for a second, while taking in the measure of the student athlete who now stood in front of her, one who commanded the respect of both black and white students alike, she asked, “Are you interested in the movement?”

Richie warily responded, “To be honest, I have to learn more about it before I commit to it. All I know is that fair is fair, regardless of the color of your skin or, for that matter, the God that you worship. If that qualifies me for a movement, then yes, I’d choose to be part of it. If you have Baldwin’s essay and want to share it, I’ll pick it up, and if not, then I’m sure that I can find another source.” Richie had gone from an insensitive, casual observer of the negro’s plight in the 60s, to one who was learning about the social injustices that were ingrained in the society he lived in. He thought again about his black teammates and classmates in the context of individual rights and opportunities and felt empathy for their situation. Being in a “relationship” with Estelle and a teammate of Jimmy’s had certainly helped to open his eyes to a cause that was growing, and one that was about to change his country forever.

Softening the tone in her voice, Mrs. White stated, “If you come by tomorrow at the same time, I’ll have the Baldwin article that you are looking for.” A civil rights activist herself and part of the movement since it started in 1955, she observed that Richie was one of the few white students to show any intellectual curiosity about a social issue that would be dominating the news in the coming months.

Richie merely nodded his head and left the library. He knew he was travelling down a path whose outcome was yet to be determined. Walking amongst the student body, his mind drifted towards his favorite poem and the last stanza “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I---I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.’ Richie thought about the two generally accepted interpretations of ‘The Road Not Taken,’ the one readily accepted by readers, who take it that Frost was referring to the importance of not being a crowd follower, or the one that Frost himself said was his own interpretation man’s tendency to regret past decisions, even insignificant ones. Regardless of which interpretation Richie chose as the correct one, he would take the one less travelled by.

Driving home Friday night, Richie reflected on the past school week; it really went fast. He had final exams in all his core studies, participation in the Varsity H Club election, where two senior class officers had resigned their positions under the cloud of academic fraud, two home basketball games against inferior opponents, as well as the opening run of this year's junior class play, "Our Town," whose cast included some of Richie's closest friends from "The Wicks' neighborhood. Richie aced *his* exams and, oblivious to the Varsity Club election process, was nevertheless nominated for one of the two leadership positions. Declining to accept the nomination, he won anyway as a write-in candidate--- the unanimous choice for Varsity H Club Vice President.

On the basketball front, both games that week were blowouts, keeping the hometown team's unbeaten streak alive. Due to the new Combo D and the continued growth and development of the starting five, they were now being touted by the local sports scribes as one of the favorites to win this year's state title. And as far as the student-run production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," Richie reveled in his classmates' performances. The actual play was unlike any other student performance that Richie had seen. With its bare bones stage set, Richie saw Grover's Corner as a symbol for all towns. It left a lasting impression on him of the importance of one's daily activities, and why each day was important, and should be lived to its fullest. '*No regrets*' was his new mantra.

Chapter Eight

On Saturday morning, the date for the covert operation, Richie burst into the kitchen to find that his college-educated sibling was home and that all three of them: father, mother, and sister were seated around the green and yellow dinette set.

Before Richie could ask, Suz (short for Suzy) answered his question, "I drove down this morning, caught a ride with one of my sorority sisters. I needed a break."

His Dad, who was the breakfast short order cook, called out, "What'll it be, a number one, scrambled eggs with bacon, hash browns, and toast, or a number two, hash browns and toast with bacon and scrambled eggs. Make up your mind, the kitchen's about to close."

Richie, rubbing his eyes in an attempt to wake up and catch up with the energy in the room, shouted out, "Can I have both?" Then he slid behind his sister, taking his assigned seat at the table, facing inward to the room, which was directly across from his mother. The Mama Bear was drinking her umpteenth coffee, content that her two cubs were seated with her and that they were all together in her favorite room.

“Well, Richie, who you dating? Anyone special?” Suzy asked that improper question for her own amusement, knowing that it would get under Richie’s skin. She delivered it with a meddling, see if you can dodge this, smile.

With Suzy’s question in the air, both parents focused their attention on Richie’s answer, since he never discussed dating or his social life outside of, “I’m going to meet the guys.” If he needed scratch for a date, he had his own, from his summer job pumping gas at the Jersey Shore or the weekend odd jobs he did with friends for bread.

Richie accepted the breakfast blue plate special from his father and the glass of milk that accompanied it. Then, in a nonchalant response to his sister’s question said, “Estelle Dinkins, the negro cheerleader. She’s a junior, same class as me.” He accompanied the news with a barely noticeable, shit eating grin that was part of the trial balloon that he was floating.

Suz was flabbergasted and slow to react as she just stared with an open mouth at the unexpected rejoinder. His mother tried to hide the fact that she swallowed her coffee down the wrong pipe until she burst into a fit of coughing. Only his Dad took the statement in stride, “Good looking girl...great legs. Don’t knock her up.” At least Richie thought the Old Man was consistent in his advice, black or white.

Richie took a mouthful of eggs, chewed and swallowed before making the next proclamation. “Sally Dill. I’m dating Sally Dill.”

Suz responded first. “The senior? She’s out of your league?”

Richie’s Mom gave Suzy a pained look, one that signaled to her to back off, and then asked, “When did you start dating?”

Richie now was weaving his web of deceit, “About a couple of weeks ago, after the Mayfair game. I’m taking her to a flick tonight.”

The Old Man remained on the sidelines, but he broke up the tension in the room with the following statement, “Sally, good looking girl, well built. Don’t knock her up.” She’s white, right?

“Yeah, Dad, she’s white and you know it.” I drive her home a lot, after practice and away games, and we just decided to start dating. She’s easy to talk to and fun to be around...And that, Ladies and Gentlemen (doing a poor man’s impersonation of Ed Sullivan) is the end of a reaaaaaaally big show. Let’s give that young lad, Richie, a round of applause for being so forthright as to who he’s been dating this morning.”

Richie waited until the clapping in the room subsided, and then, without skipping a beat, he suddenly did a reverse pivot and went on the attack. Looking at his sister and knowing that her semester had just started, asked, “College girl, the prevailing message from Dad,

it's for both of us, don't knock her up or get knocked up." This time, the response from Suzy was silence, which did not go unnoticed by Richie's Mom.

Richie quickly came about and tacked away from Suzy and opened up a new dialogue, "Okay, we pride ourselves on being a tolerant white middle-class family, whose children attend school, and whose parents work with Negroes. We live in an all white neighborhood, and vacation at an all white summer resort. What if instead of Sally, I was dating Estelle? Would it be, okay? How would your friends react?" The gauntlet had been carefully thrown.

The first to pick it up, surprisingly, was the Old Man. "I'll let your sister and mother give their own unique viewpoint on interracial dating. Mine will be from a business or career perspective...Okay." The entire family was focused on the man of few words. "Maybe someday there will be interracial relationships that will be acceptable by the majority of the population, but not now, not at this point in time. I follow the news about the negroes plight in the South and the discrimination that dogs them every step of the way below the Mason-Dixon line, and I don't like it. They're fighting for their rights as human beings, against the unjust laws that have been stacked up against them. However, whites are unaccepting of whites dating negroes, and negroes discourage other negroes from going out with whites. I'm sure you can get away with it somewhere, perhaps on a liberal college campus, but in the workplace, trying to climb the corporate ladder? Hell, it's hard enough to ascend in a corporation if you're black with a black wife or white with a white wife. In case you weren't aware, interracial marriage is a felony in 31 states of these United States of America. So, if you're a white man and you start a career married to a black woman, your job opportunities better be in the other 19 states, and you better hope you don't get transferred to the South or worse turn down a career building promotion because you can't live in a town or city that your company wants to transfer you too. Dick hesitated for a second before saying, "You can do it, but if you think it's easy, you're kidding yourself."

At one time, Suzy was the moral compass of the family. Now finding herself engaged in a topic that was different from the pressing one she had planned to discuss with 'Mama Bear,' she regained her composure and was the next to command the kitchen. "At the University, the blacks hang out with the blacks and the whites hang out with the whites. The exceptions are the arts and athletics. Both disciplines are made up of a disproportionate number of negroes. And unlike other extracurricular activities, the blacks are not restricted by quotas; instead, they are judged simply on their talent." A Fine Arts major, Suzy was both a musical performer and a budding actress, and had a high regard for talent regardless of race. With Suzy, you either had it or you didn't, and the color of your skin should not influence who got the part, regardless of how the book was written. "Are there blacks that date whites and vice versa? Sure. But knowing those individuals as I do, nothing and I mean nothing would get in the way if it came down to their career aspirations.

Finally, Richie's mother weighed in on the topic. Slow and deliberate in her delivery, "You want your children to be happy, whether you are white parents or black parents. A lot of whites in Pennsylvania resent blacks for no other reason than the color of their skin. Conversely, a lot of blacks resent whites because of their impression that whites are trying to hold them back from career and monetary advancements that they are qualified to perform. Through unwritten agreements, god-fearing people, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews have held the negro back using a quota system. Although not all of them, a fair amount of whites find ways to limit the Negroes opportunities, not based on education, but on color. Richie, you dating a negro girl would be difficult for the majority of our friends to accept, just as it would be, I'm sure, for the friends of Estelle's parents. The question is not whether we would survive as a family; we would. But the impact on all our lives would be significant. We live in a state with limited racial tolerance. Like it or not, there is a preconceived notion of who the negro is in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs, and the picture is not flattering. Beyond marriage, there is also the question of children. Assuming you have children, are they white, black, or somewhere in between? The offspring of a mixed marriage will be neither white nor negro and the child will reside in neither camp; an oddity to be singled out."

Richie, having started the dialogue, decided to end it. "Well, it's a good thing that I decided to date Sally instead of Estelle." And with that proclamation, he got up from the table, dropped his plate off in the sink, and left the room, hastily followed by his father. The two women remained in the kitchen, prepared to engage in another discussion about choice, religion, and the sanctity of life.

Chapter Nine

Saturday, mid-morning, Irish Mike, the nickname bestowed on him by friends and foes alike, took a deep breath, thought about the conversation he had with the head of the Devils, then hung up the phone. His associates would not be happy with his decision. However, it would be a necessary sea change, one that was inevitable, if he and those who relied on him for their income were to survive the sixties. As he walked under the elevated train tracks, casually looking at the growing number of empty storefronts on both sides of the street, Mike processed the opportunity that was just presented to him and decided that rather than discuss it among his waiting crew, he would present the Devil's proposal as fait accompli.

Michael Hennessy was the product of two honest, hardworking Irish Catholic contributors to the American dream. At 5'10 inches, the first-born male descendant with bright red hair, fair skin, and choir boy looks, could charm the pants off of everyone he met; one reason why he had risen so quickly through the ranks of his illicit organization. The other being that he was ruthless. Smart with an IQ over 140, he was an enigma. After graduating from one of the nearby Catholic high schools, he was presented with numerous college scholarship offers as well as multiple career choices that were designed to take advantage of his intellect. Instead, the clothes horse spurned them all for the lure of instant financial gratification and the thrill of living on the edge. Rather than take the

path of success through study and hard work, he chose to take a shortcut, one that was rooted in the neighborhood that he grew up in, and its history of crime.

Looking at his Timex high school graduation gift watch, he quickened his pace and headed down the sidewalk directly under the Frankfort-Market Street Subway. It was an elevated line near an El stop and across the street from his destination 'The El Dinner.' Proudly residing in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, which was nestled between North Philadelphia to the south and Lower Northeast Philly to the north, the El Diner's clientele consisted of a large working-class Irish Catholic community. A pillar of local Kensington businesses, The El Dinner, had been in existence since 1934. It was that year, against all odds, that two brothers of Greek descent started the diner during the depression, entrepreneurs who were committed to serving great food at a reasonable price. And that's exactly what The El Diner did, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Walking with the swagger that defined him, Irish Mike, arrived at 'The El' and burst through the revolving doors, knowing exactly where he was headed in the family-oriented restaurant with its vinyl colored red booths and chrome accents. Walking past its traditional long sit-down counter that offered direct service, he headed toward the multiple occupant booths that were always served by an attentive wait staff. Acknowledging in his own way, with a nod of his head and a good to see you smile to those neighborhood diner patrons that he recognized or recognized him, he moved swiftly, not stopping to chat, towards the last booth in the diner, the unofficial headquarters of the B&C Gang.

"Hey," was the greeting he received collectively from his cohorts as he slid into the red imitation leather booth, shoving the menu aside in the process.

Ginny, a fixture at 'The El,' pushed up her beehive hairdo and applied a fresh coat of red lipstick to her thin lips, all the while watching Irish Mike make his "I own this turf" entrance into the diner. Gliding past Ginny, Mike caught her eye and winked. Ginny returned the gesture with a nod of her head and a motion toward the coffee pot she was holding in her hand. The favored waitress of Mike and his associates stood behind the counter until Mike reached the booth and sat down. Once seated, she came over with Irish Mike's favorite brew while intuitively recognizing that this gathering was not a social one and that the booth occupants were most likely up to no good. Waiting till Mike settled in, Ginny approached the now fully occupied booth carrying Mike's preferred drink of choice. "Black," the slightly overweight waitress stated as she placed a cup of the hot liquid in front of him, before carefully retreating out of supposed earshot.

Mike lifted the brew with both hands, blew cold air from his breath across the hot java, waited a few seconds for it to cool off then with great anticipation started sipping his fourth of a five cup a day addiction; purposely ignoring his four associates who were eager to find out why he called this last minute meeting. A quick glance by Mike around the booth reinforced why each participant had a seat at the table. This was the leadership

council of one of the largest gangs in Philly. Starting with Finn, head of security, he was six feet four inches tall and was responsible for recruiting and overseeing the muscle when needed. Liam, Mike's younger brother, could always be counted on to think independently and quickly in case there was a problem. Tim, a cousin of Mike's on his father's side, was the numbers guy and the gang's accountant. He supposedly kept the books in his head. Then there was Tommy, the resident comedian. His quick wit and gallows humor were in direct contrast to his real role within the organization, a cutthroat killer. Tommy, who had no scruples, was the one guy that Mike could count on if things went south, either verbally or physically.

All waited for Mike to speak, knowing that there was no advantage to rushing him. He'd talked when he was ready.

Mike finally put down his cup and began. "Our cousin Joey is a reserve at Marist, and they're playing at the Palestra tonight. I have four tickets for the game..."

Liam was the first to speak, interrupting Mike. "I hate basketball. You know that" his voice trailing off, not wanting to directly confront his older brother for long.

But as soon as Liam finished his thought, Mike put up his right hand, stopping anyone else from talking. "We've come under increased scrutiny by the cops, so we'll take the El at Erie and Torresdale to the game, and get off at 34th street, and then we'll catch the first game of the doubleheader, the game Joey is playing in. After the game, we'll meet the Devils on their home turf and talk some business. They've been selling reefers and some other shit in West Philly, and they've been making a lot of money. They want to expand their territory, but they don't want to compete with us. In a nutshell, they want to supply us, and I agreed to a deal, depending on the quality of the shit they are supplying. Shorty and I agreed that both sides show up for the meet clean."

The most pugnacious of the group, Finn looked at Mike, shook his head, and said through clenched teeth I don't want to work with niggers. Yesterday, I was in Center City at Wanamaker's, and I saw a white guy with a black chick, two college students prancing around the department store. If the place wasn't crowded and I wasn't with my Mom, I would've decked the two of them."

Not hesitating for a second, Tommy replied tongue in cheek, "Really, my guess is, if you could, you would have tried to deck the white candy ass male, and then if successful, and that's a big if then you would have run away with that female jiga boo. Of course, that is if your Mommy wasn't with you."

Finn started to reach across the table for Tommy, amongst the laughter of his fellow running mates. After several attempts to grab the wiry, bobbing, and weaving Tommy, Finn's efforts proved futile, so he sat back in his booth and just glared at him from across the table. Waiting till the laughter subsided, Finn addressed the group while looking

directly at Tommy. “Have your fun, have your fun, but if any of those Devils show up with a white girl, I swear to God, I’ll break some heads.”

Mike held out both hands, palms down, in a gesture to calm things down. “Look, we made a lot of money off of burglaries, but it’s getting harder and harder to pull off, both in the city and the suburbs. It’s also becoming more difficult to fence the stuff at a decent profit. We need to branch out; let’s meet the Devils and check the quality of their stuff.” And with that, Mike threw back the last of his coffee, left a twenty on the table, and got up from the booth. Taking a step in the direction towards the diner’s exit, he looked over his right shoulder, stopped, and turned around to face those still seated, and in a don’t fuck with me voice said, “We meet at six o’clock at the Frankford El stop. Don’t be late.”

Chapter Ten

Richie, having misled his family, looked at the clock in his room and realized that unless he did something, this particular Saturday afternoon would last forever. Grabbing the phone in his sister’s bedroom, he made a series of calls, which resulted in a pickup game at ‘Terloff Gardens,’ the outside basketball court of his close friend and team manager, Terry Terloff. Since both of the family cars were in use, Richie caught a ride from his mother, who was on her way, along with his sister, to shop at Wanamaker’s suburban location.

A classic English Tudor, Terloff’s expansive house was situated on six acres of land in Danbury. Richie marveled at this one-of-a-kind home each time he visited Terry. He was the last to arrive, and once there, he made his way down the hill towards the tennis courts, which is where the half-court basketball court was located. Halfway down the concrete steps, he paused to take in the players that were warming up below him. Juniors and Seniors now, they had all known each other since elementary school and junior high. An unusually tight knit group of friends, they would do anything for anyone in their circle; all you had to do was ask. And yet, Richie had said nary a word to any of them about Estelle. Why, he asked himself? But before he could express a thought or opinion, Terry spotted him on the steps and yelled, “Are you scouting, which players to pick for your team? Made up your mind?”

Richie’s countenance relaxed into a laid-back smile, a facial look that his friends were so accustomed to seeing; waving at Terry, he jogged down the remaining steps and caught a basketball thrown in his direction. “What’s the temperature?” Richie asked as he stepped onto the court and began dribbling the outdoor basketball. Without breaking stride, he shed his jacket with his left hand, flipped it against the fence, and with his right hand banked a shot off the boards into the basket---to no one’s surprise. He was the guy they

grew up playing ball with; he was one of them, and over time, he had become a star in their eyes.

“Fifties,” came the reply from multiple players. Then the varsity starter joined the weakest team and played winners out for the next three hours.

Richie accepted a lift home from Terry, whom Richie had known since fourth grade. Nicknamed the “Professor, Terry, at six feet five inches tall, was a solid pickup basketball player. Unfortunately, his height and competitive spirit couldn’t make up for his lack of athleticism, a requirement to play at the next level of varsity competition. Rather than become bitter at the card the Basketball Gods dealt him, he instead chose to become the team manager and a trusted advisor to both Coaches Allen and Bower. Level-headed and smart, Terry was a year older than Richie and had always treated the starting point guard as if he were the younger brother he never had. But the relationship cut both ways. If there was a problem or situation that Terry was struggling to deal with, Richie was Terry’s go-to guy, to discuss whatever sensitive topic was on his mind. Siblings not traced to a common ancestor, Richie and Terry instinctively knew if something was bothering one of them, it could not be hidden from the other.

Driving in silence, it was unusual for the gregarious team manager to say nary a word as they headed towards “The Wicks.” Richie, attempting to break the awkward silence, asked Terry, “Have you decided on which Ivy League school you’re going to attend?”

Terry, ignoring the question, pulled over to the side of the road and looked Richie straight in the eye and queried, “Are you dating Estelle Dinkins? If you are, it’s a huge mistake.”

Taking in a deep breath, then blowing it out slowly, Richie answered a question with a question: “What makes you think that?”

Terloff responded. “Don’t Bull Shit the Bull Shitter. It’s obvious that she likes you; you’d be a fool not to see it. My question is, do you like her?”

Richie, sitting in the passenger seat, didn’t answer; instead, he stared straight ahead, ignoring the inquiry.

Terloff, glancing over at Richie and realizing he wasn’t going to get a response from him, charged ahead. “You know my parents, they’re liberal and I have a great relationship with them, so I cautiously asked them, on your behalf, about interracial dating and marriage. At first, they thought I was obtaining information for myself. Suddenly realizing it was about a friend, and no, they didn’t guess it was you, they both said that the times were not right for it and that it could screw up both lives, negro and white. They’re conclusion, neither side would accept the other, like a Jew marrying a Christian or a Christian marrying a Jew, tolerated but not accepted, with the child being the ping pong ball.

Furthermore, they emphasized that right now, the negroes are in a historic fight for their civil rights, trying to push a reluctant executive branch and Congress to do the right thing. And if a Civil Rights bill is passed, and it's a big if, the current status quo will change overnight, especially for those whites in the South who oppose it, and they're like speaking brothers in the North. Laws passed for the right reasons don't change prejudiced opinions, especially when it involves race. Besides, interracial dating and marriage are secondary to the main civil rights objective, overall equality for the negro. Should you be able to date or marry whoever you want? Sure, that's the right idea, but that's not the case today, and I'm not sure when it will ever be acceptable. Look you've got a lot of great things going for you, and so does Estelle. Can't say for sure, but my guess is the two of you would isolate yourselves from the rest of your classmates and even be shunned. Is that what you want?" Is that what you wish for, Estelle? It's sure as hell not what I want for you."

Richie sat in the passenger seat with his arms folded across his chest and in a defiant tone responded without ever looking at Terry, "If you're asking, if I've taken Estelle out on a date, yet, the answer is no, but I'm thinking about it?"

"Well, think again," Terry countered in a raised voice, and with that he pulled away from the curb, resumed the drive, and turned up the car radio as 'Go Away Little Girl' by Steve Lawrence played through the vehicle's speakers.

Chapter Eleven

Richie intellectually processed what Terry was saying; however, he emotionally refused to accept it. Having no answer for Terloff's "Words of Wisdom," he waited until the '61 Ford Falcon pulled into his driveway before bolting from the car without saying a word or looking back at the driver.

"Asshole," Terry yelled at Richie in reaction to him slamming shut the passenger side door. The team manager, who rarely lost his cool, knew at one level that he had overplayed his hand. Regaining his composure, he now realized that the anger within him was misdirected. He was pissed, but at himself, for violating one of the most sacred "Junior High Rules," that being to never question who a friend was dating or why he was dating her, regardless of the circumstances. He silently cursed himself, knowing that a stunt like that never ended well. Putting the car in reverse, he slowly backed out of the driveway, then, against his better judgment, peeled out and drove away.

Bursting into the house, Richie violently closed the breezeway door behind him and shouted, "Fuck."

"Whoa, what's that about?" came the maternal voice to his right. After a busy afternoon of shopping with Suzy, she had finally decided to take some "Mom Time," sitting on her

floral couch reading the latest edition of this week's Life Magazine, when the human whirlwind, her son, burst through the door.

"It's nothing," came the brusque reply as he turned the corner and headed down the hallway towards his bedroom.

Unwilling to let it go, the breezeway occupant fired off one more futile volley, "Doesn't sound like nothing, and watch your language, young man. This isn't a locker room. Understood"

"Understood," Richie retorted in the same agitated voice that started the encounter. Hurrying down the hallway, he feinted to his left, then turned right into his bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him. Two steps into his room, he propelled himself upward while at the same time twisting his body around in midair, so that he landed squarely on his back, a perfect landing...dead center...in the middle of his bed.

Not wanting to further incur the wrath of the Home Warden, who might be listening outside his door or wandering down the hall towards his bedroom to seek further clarification of her cursing edict; Richie stared at the ceiling and the Eagles 1960 Championship pennant that was directly overhead, and repeated unceasingly "Fuck, fuck, fuck," in a subdued voice. His version of counting sheep before falling asleep.

Startled by the shaking of his shoulder, Richie found himself awoken by Suzy. "Someone named James or Jim is on my phone. Don't stay on long; I'm expecting a call. I have plans for tonight." She said it in a way as if Richie didn't.

"Jimmy," he asked.

"Could be, Suzy guessed. "He needed to talk with you right away, which is why I woke you up."

Richie rubbed his eyes, jumped out of bed, and grabbed the extension phone in his sister's room that was lying on her nightstand.

"What's up"?

In a higher-pitched voice than usual, Jimmy, frustrated, responded, the words tumbling out of his mouth in rapid fire, "Everything was set. My dad said I could take my Mom's car. No problem. Just as planned, my Old Man would drive to the family gathering. Straightforward. Clean. The cars mine. Then the Old Man gets into his car, and it won't turn over, battery dead. So he comes back into the house with my Mom in tow and says, 'Sorry, Jimmy, I need my car,' and with that he takes the keys and drives off. I've got no wheels and no way to pick up Estelle. "

“Shit. Let me think.” All Richie could envision was a train coming off the tracks and tumbling down a hill. Taking a deep breath and in a low voice, in case Suzy, a notorious eavesdropper, was in earshot, proceeded, “Give me a minute to figure this out. Then, taking his sister’s phone from his ear, he rotated his head on his neck 360 degrees several times, a stress relieving technique that his Old Man taught him that also helped to clear the mind. 30 seconds later, weighing all his options, Richie had a plan.

“You still there?” Jimmy asked?

Richie replied confidently, “Yeah, I’m still here. Don’t sweat it. Time is of the essence. I’ll jump in the shower right away, get dressed, and then I’ll drive over and pick you up. Then the two of us will drive to Estelle’s, where I’ll disappear into the back seat while you pick her up. Once that’s done, the three of us will head over to Wanamaker’s. They’re open till 7 pm on Saturday, where I’ll drop you off at the store. Once that’s done, I’ll drive to Sally’s, pick her up, drive back to Wanamaker’s, and gather up you two shoplifters.” Catching his breath, and in a cheerful tone, he finished his sentence, “Then...we’ll head to the Palestra.”

“That’s a lot of moving parts,” conceded Jimmy.

“It is, but it’ll work,” said Richie. “Let Estelle know that you’re going to pick her up early, and I’ll do likewise with Sally. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Jimmy replied, before giving Richie his address. As he hung up the phone, Jimmy sat there wondering what else could go wrong with such an auspicious start to the evening.

Normally, a dawdler when it came to showering and dressing, Richie claimed dibs on the shared siblings’ bathroom. In record time, he shit, shaved, and showered and rifled through his wardrobe picking out a pair of khakis, a white button down shirt, and his favorite tan and brown sweater to go along with his brown Weejuns penny loafers. This time, he barely glanced at the mirror. Passable, he thought as he executed his beat-the-clock approach to getting dressed.

Passing his Old Man in the hallway, “Life’s Philosopher,” took one look at Richie and said, “It better be worth it. And apologize to your mother, which you’ll need to do if you’re going to take her car.”

Alas, another hurdle. The gods were truly testing him. Avoiding the presumptive close by having his coat on, he approached his mother in the kitchen where she was sipping a cup of tea and listening to a middle-of-the-road radio station playing Doris Day’s ‘Que Sera Sera.’

“Sorry, Mom, for losing my temper and cursing. Can’t say it won’t happen again, but I’ll try my best to avoid using those words around you.”

Scratching her head, she looked directly at Richie and asked him, “Is everything okay. You know you can always talk to me or your father about anything, and I mean anything at any time.”

“I know, I know.” Richie remained standing, not wanting to sit down or engage in a lengthy conversation, which would cause him to miss his window for executing his conspiratorial plan.

“Are you sure?” Her car keys were strategically placed in front of her on the table.

Avoiding looking at them, Richie replied, “I’m sure.” Still standing, and to hasten the conversation, he did a Pinocchio without his nose growing. “All right, you know Terry, Terry Terloff, the team manager and my close friend, well, he’s having girl problems. I told him the girl that the girl he’s dating was playing around and that everyone in the school knew it. He was a ‘Cathy’s Clown’ and he just wouldn’t accept it. He got pissed off at me and, well, we exchanged some heated words. The type you use just before you start throwing punches. When I came through the door, I was more angry with myself than with Terry because I broke a junior high rule. I knew I should have kept my mouth shut, but I didn’t. Sorry, again, for the cursing.”

Holding her chin in her hand, she listened closely to Richie’s explanation without showing any outward sign of believing him. Finally, she let her hand drop from her face. Then, staring at her key chain on the table, she gave a reluctant nod of her head, looked at the symbol of Richie’s freedom, and handed him the keys. “Okay, apology accepted, and as difficult as it is, sometimes, you have to tell the truth, even if you know it will jeopardize your friendship. If Terry’s a good enough friend, he’ll get over it, and if not, then he was never a real friend in the first place. Your Dad and I are going to a neighborhood party tonight, and there’s a full tank of gas in the car. Oh, by the way, tell that cute cheerleader, Sally, I said hello.”

Twenty seconds later, Richie pulled out of the driveway, on his way to executing the first step of the Wanamaker plan.

Chapter Twelve

After leaving “The Wicks’,” Richie turned onto Wood Road and made good time until he reached Warren Road, where traffic on Wood was at a standstill. Apparently, there was an accident up ahead. Undeterred, “The Thumb Traveler,” who knew every major road and side street in the township, turned right at the next light, snaking around the road congestion, until he found an alternative route to his destination, Montville.

Richie made great time, pulling up in front of Jimmy's house, a modest two-bedroom bungalow, five minutes early. Funny, he thought, as he waited for Jimmy, during all their time playing together, today was the first time that he actually knew where Jimmy lived. It wasn't by coincidence. He realized while waiting that he had been to his other teammates' homes and met their families, and vice versa. But he never stepped foot in any of his negro teammates' houses or invited them into his own. They were classmates, teammates, and competitive brothers, yet once they were away from a team environment, it was as if his Negro teammates didn't exist.

Without honking his horn, Jimmy came through the front door of his house and appeared on his concrete porch. Spotting Richie, he waved and headed towards the black Galaxie Convertible. Similar to Richie, he wore a brown leather jacket over a white button-down shirt, a black crew neck sweater, black slacks, and black tassel loafers.

With a how did you pull this off smile on his face, he approached the rolled down driver's side window and admiringly said, "Nice wheels." Though Jimmy had seen Richie's car from a distance, he had never ridden in it.

"Are you ready?" Richie queried as he slid across the seat over to the passenger's side.

"Ready," Jimmy responded as he gracefully slid behind the wheel. "You gotta be kidding me." Putting his hands on the steering wheel, he looked over at Richie and said, "I've always dreamed of a ride like this. It sure beats Pops Oldsmobile." Shifting gears, Jimmy slowly pulled out from the curb.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Don't baby it," instigated Richie.

And with a smile that went from ear to ear, Jimmy hit the accelerator hard and burned some rubber.

Halfway down the block, Richie erupted. "Man who cut the cheese? I didn't say you could fart in my car. I can hardly breathe...How about a warning next time, so I can stick my head out the window before you start defiling my machine."

Jimmy, initially caught off guard, fired back, "So you're one of those silent but deadly types. Yo...man up. You did it, but don't want to admit it. I thought this car needed an air freshener; you've been farting all the way over to my house."

"Not true, I started about halfway here," laughed Richie, who began to roll down his window on the passenger side.

Trying to control his laughter, Jimmy declared, "I'm pulling over and opening up all the windows and the doors. If Estelle gets in the car and sees you and me with a foul stench in the air, she'll think it's me. You know how it goes, blame the Negro. Both of them

were laughing uncontrollably as Jimmy, struggling to keep control of the Ford, maneuvered the vehicle parallel to the curb.

Rubbing the tears of laughter from his eyes, Richie saw Jimmy, for the first time, not just as a teammate, but also as a friend. The same type of cherished friendship that he shared with his ball player buddies at Terloff's Gardens. A boob tuber, Richie, had a twinkle in his eye before he stated the following. "Jimmy, you wanted to date Sally, and I wanted to date Estelle. Together we come up with a secret plan to take our dates to an off-site location where we wouldn't be seen, yet would be in the company of over 8,700 people in an enclosed environment with no chance for escape. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

With Richie supplying the theme music, Jimmy delivered a first-class impression of Rod Sterling, the host of the hit TV show *The Twilight Zone*. Choosing the right intonation, he began, "There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas."

No longer able to hold back during Jimmy's Sterling introductory soliloquy, Richie interjected, "That's the signpost up ahead, your next stop, the Palestra." In unison, both teenagers gleefully delivered the signature line. "You've just crossed over into the *Twilight Zone*."

It was near dusk, as darkness was almost upon them; the car was full of fresh air, and they were now a block away from Estelle's house, driving on a side street. At their last stop, Richie decided to switch seats from the front to the back. Lying sideways, he forced himself into the well, the space between the front and back seats, and chuckled to himself as a blanket from the trunk of the car was thrown over him

"What are you laughing about?" Jimmy asked as he repositioned himself behind the wheel.

"Down the shore, we could get four into the Passion Pit while only paying for two. Since I always drove, I just realized what the accommodations were like in the well and trunk for freeloaders...shitty."

The car stopped in front of Estelle's house, and Jimmy got out. Richie could hear the front door open and a muffled greeting in the distance. While scrunching down to assure that no one could see him, he lay there wondering why he had to do what he was doing, all because he wanted to date a negro? This was an untenable situation and one that had to be rectified. Then he waited and waited and waited. Uncomfortable, he wondered what Jimmy was doing...sitting down for dinner? Finally, he heard voices from Estelle's house. Muffled at first, there were three voices, and they became louder and more distinct as they approached the *Galaxie*.

“Wow, this car is Cherry. You know I always wanted a convertible, never got one, even when I was young and single,” said Mr. Dinkins. “Do you mind if I get behind the wheel, start her up, and pop the hood?”

The driver’s side door opened, and Mr. Dinkins slid behind the wheel with the enthusiasm of a 16-year-old who just got his license. Afraid to move his left leg, which was going numb, Richie didn’t move a muscle. Estelle’s father, apparently a ragman, took a quick glance over his right shoulder towards the rear seats and said, “Looks like plenty of room in the back.”

Estelle, recognizing Richie’s car as soon as she saw it, gave Jimmy a look of bewilderment, which he returned with a conspiratorial smile.

With Mr. Dinkins' head under the hood, it was Estelle who ended the Galaxie tour. “Daddy, we’re going to be late. We have to go.”

Ignoring her plea, Mr. Dinkins continued, “A V8 with 390 CID...Awesome. Jimmy, I recommend that you swap out your hubs for baby moons, a much better look...Badass Son...the next time you pick up Estelle, you have to take me for a ride.”

Finally, Richie could hear the slamming of the Ford hood and the closing of both the front and passenger side doors, moments before the Galaxie went into forward motion.

“What’s going on,’ was Estelle’s initial reaction. Where’s Richie?

Popping up on cue, Richie ignored Estelle’s question and said to Jimmy, “Step on it, we’re running late. I still have to pick Sally up before returning to Wanamaker’s to pick the two of you up.”

“You were in the back the whole time, Estelle exclaimed.

“Yep, he chortled with delight. Then, refocusing on the mission, he instructed Jimmy, “Take Old Harrison Pike, it’s the fastest route.” Then, while Jimmy drove, Richie explained to Estelle how she came to find him hiding in his own car.

”As they pulled into the parking lot at Wanamaker’s, Richie took back his vehicle, and Jimmy and Estelle headed toward the main entrance of the suburban department store, phase two of the plan having been completed.

Using Wood Road to get to Sally’s house, the surface streets were clear, and as Richie pulled into the Dill’s driveway, he could see the silhouettes of two people behind the curtains in the living room. Dam, he thought to himself, he would have to deal with Sally’s father, a successful businessman and braggart, who had an opinion on everything. Pressing the doorbell, “The Blowhard” was the first to greet him.

“So you're Richie,” whom he had met numerous times, “the school's star athlete, a junior, right?”

“I don't know about the star part, but yes, I'm Richie. Is Sally ready?”

“Come in, come in,” Sam Dill extended an arm in the direction of the foyer.” You know, I wasn't much of an athlete myself, but I did a whole lot better than some of the sports nuts that I grew up with.”

“You don't say. I understand from Sally that you are a heck of a golfer.” A stiff arm maneuver by Richie in an attempt to avoid a confrontation.

“Rich man's sport, which I guess is why I excel. Ever played?”

“Only in my mind, I enjoy watching Arnie make his charges, a groundskeeper's son and the hero of the galleries.”

“White boy, give him credit, excelling in a white man's game. The problem with football and baseball, there's too many negroes. Notice I didn't mention basketball, that's already about 50 percent Schwoogs.”

Richie's facial demeanor started to change ever so slightly. Looking Mr. Dill straight in the eye, an incredulous, yet friendly, smile was starting to appear on his face, a ploy to hide his true feelings of anger and revulsion that this pompous, racial, asshole was bringing out in him.

“You know, Mr. Dill, every sport that the negro is allowed to play in, they've excelled. An athlete is an athlete regardless of race or religion. There's a shift in the wind, including sports, as more Negroes gain equal footing. Once that happens, you'll see negroes in all the sports, including tennis and golf. It's just a matter of time before the caddy becomes the golfer.”

“Well, we'll see about that...We'll see about that. He still won't be able to get into my club,” Dill said smugly as he did not attempt to hide his overt racism.

Richie, looking past Sam Dill, was in search of an escape and his date. He knew that he could only parry Mr. Dill's racially biased conversational attacks for so long before he took an offensive posture. Reacting to the perceived threat, Richie's eyes started to change or hardened as he looked back at Dill, taking in the full measure of the man, his verbal sword about to go for the kill.

Sally's Old Man instinctively knew he was jousting with a dangerous adversary, so he suddenly pulled back. “Let me see if Sally's ready?”

But before he could inquire, Sally appeared before the two of them looking stone-cold gorgeous, wearing a brown short-waisted dress and tights, complemented by a wide black belt and black Capezio shoes. 'I'm ready, shall we go,' directing her question at Richie.

Richie, tongue-tied at first, could only nod his head while thinking of his sister's earlier remark that he was 'out of his league.'

The father, soon joined by Sally's mother, exchanged the requisite information between both couples as to their plans for the evening.

Richie helped Sally on with her coat, waited while she kissed her parents, then, carefully avoiding a handshake with the bigot, beat feet as fast as he could.

As soon as they left the Dill's mini Danbury estate, Sally asked, 'What's up? You're quiet, everything okay? There was concern in Sally's voice.

"Richie bit his tongue. The conversation with Sam Dill still rankled him. *What an intolerant, self-important 'dick' he thought to himself.* However, telling Sally about the conversation with her father, he admitted, would accomplish nothing. She already knew her father's position on race and would be utterly appalled if she knew he was now sharing those views with her friends. In the end, Richie decided it would only ruin her evening before it started.

Delaying answering Sally's question, Richie turned on the car radio. Playing through the car speakers was the number one song of the week, Ruby and the Romantics 'Out Day Will Come,' Listening to the lyrics, it was then that he realized the potential consequences of their planned romantic evening, especially for Sally. If caught, her life with Sam Dill and his holier-than-thou views would be unbearable. It took courage to do what she was about to do compared to the other three, whose response from their parents, he guessed, would be at worst disappointment for violating the interracial dating barrier.

Breaking his silence, Richie shook off the negative Sam Dill karma and laughed before saying, "I'm fine. Do you want the long version or the short one?"

Sally, seeing Richie revert to his old self, said, "Short."

"Jimmy and Estelle are at Wanamaker's, shoplifting, only kidding. Jimmy's dad reneged on giving him the car, so I went over to his house, picked him up, and then the two of us picked up Estelle. They're waiting for us, and as soon as we pick them up, we'll head to the Palestra."

Sally, who looked radiant sitting next to him, touched his right arm and said, "Thanks for setting this up and for putting up with my Dad. I heard what he said to you. He wasn't always this bad, but lately his business has been struggling, and it's always the fault of others. I know it's not an excuse, but it's the best I can offer for his behavior."

Richie didn't say a word; instead, he turned up the radio. Ironically, 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow' was playing. Looking over at Sally, he winked, then the two of them joined the Shirelles as they started singing their 61 hit single. Richie, realizing they were running late, stomped on the accelerator in the same way that he and his fellow coconspirators were about to stomp on societal norms. Blending his voice in with the recorded version and the live one sitting next to him in the car, he sang, "Is this a lasting treasure or just a moment's pleasure..."

Chapter Thirteen

Irish Mike, dodging Saturday night traffic, crossed Frankford Avenue and headed to the El Stop. Unlike his associates, Mike was always well-groomed and meticulously dressed. Tonight was no exception, as he wore a three-in-one tan storm coat, over a baby blue mohair sweater, a white turtleneck, and the latest style featuring continental, gabardine, black trousers that were beltless and cuffless. Glancing at his Rolex, it was 5:50 pm. As he approached the landing near the El steps, under the lights were Finn, Liam, Tim, and Tommy. "Everybody clean?" Mike asked. Looking around the group, his gaze stopped at two of the gang members who were standing the farthest away from him. With a slight smirk, he pointed at the twosome and said to Tommy, "Take them into the alley over there and pat them down. No need to violate the terms of the meet... besides, I gave my word we would come clean, and if this deal is to work, then both sides will have to trust the other.

Tommy came back five minutes later with Finn and Liam trailing behind, and nonchalantly stated. "They're clean now."

Nodding his head, Irish Mike, aware of the time, said, "Let's go," as he scrambled up the stairs. Following their leader, the remaining B & C leadership took the El steps two at a time as the six o'clock train could be heard approaching in the distance.

After Jimmy and Estelle were picked up at Wanamaker's, the switch was finally made at the Chelsea Mall. Here, Sally moved from the front seat to the back and into Jimmy's arms. The action was followed by a reaction as Estelle vacated her seat, moved to the front, and slid across the leather upholstery next to Richie. Finally, the four were paired correctly. Richie put his right arm around Estelle, and in doing so, he utilized the suicide knob on his steering wheel, which allowed him to drive one-handed. Pulling out of the mall parking lot onto Western Lane, he headed south towards Lincoln Drive. Utilizing the Schuylkill Expressway, it would take them 50 minutes, in traffic, to get to the Palestra. Knowing the route, he would exit at Chestnut Street, and like everyone else driving to the game, he would scramble to find a parking place. The Palestra on Penn's campus was within walking distance to college basketball's mecca.

During the drive, Richie glanced into his rearview mirror only once. Jimmy had apparently ‘slipped the mac’ as soon as Sally got into the backseat. Envyng Jimmy and Sally for being able to flame their passions, he still felt the electricity of having Estelle next to him, “Forbidden Fruit” as Jimmy had called her that snowy day practice in the junior high gym. Estelle, for her part, was happy to be free of the shackles that had defined her relationship with Richie. For once, she was with the person she loved, free of worry that they would suddenly be exposed. Since Richie was preoccupied with driving, she took control of the AM car radio. Going from A to B to C, she picked out one hit song after another from the two Philly radio stations and the one New York City radio station that you could hear after sunset. Her choices were upbeat top 40 hit songs, and whenever a slow romantic song was ‘introed’ or introduced, Estelle punched the dial, eliciting a swift vocal response from the two lovers in the back of, “Leave it on,” which she ignored to both hers and Richie’s delight.

“Chestnut Street Exit,” Richie announced, which put everyone on alert. “Keep your eyes open for parking.” After turning left on 32nd street, the hunt for parking commenced, commanding everyone’s full attention. Having circled Penn’s campus and the Palestra for about twenty minutes, it was Jimmy who found a spot off of Sansom Street, on Moravian Court. Out of the way, Richie backed into the parking space between two cars. Feeling safe on Penn’s campus, Richie took Estelle’s hand in his and commenced the ten-minute walk to a basketball palace that he was certain he would play in one day.

The B&C gang made the Frankford to Market train with a minute to spare. They got off at the 34th Street exit with a lot of basketball enthusiasts. Liam asked, “Which way, when they departed the El?” Tim responded, “Follow the crowd.” Which is exactly what the five of them did. The sporting throng and the reluctant spectators moved swiftly to the Palestra’s doorstep. Not one of the five B&C Gang members had ever stepped foot inside the massive brick edifice, which now loomed directly in front of them.

“Wait here, I have five tickets at Will Call”, which was located on the other side of the building, Irish Mike announced. There was a buzz in the air, foreign to the five outsiders, as they observed the pregame ritual that was taking place around them.

Richie and Estelle walked hand and hand as Jimmy and Sally did on the sidewalks of the University of Pennsylvania’s campus. In doing so, they passed various Penn students who, judging by their response, couldn't care less as to the pairing of white with black or vice versa. It wasn’t until the Cathedral of College Basketball was directly ahead of them, and they were about to cross 33rd Street, that the four of them reverted into their pre-drive disguise. Richie walked up to the “Will Call” window, leaving Sally with Estelle and Jimmy, and stood behind a man with bright red hair, fair skin, and choirboy looks. He waited patiently while he retrieved five tickets under an Irish name.

Richie’s source for his tickets was his cousin, a senior and an All-Ivy football selection at defensive end. Since Penn was one of the schools that was recruiting Richie, he figured that his cousin went to the head football coach, who, in turn, gladly gave him the four

ducats. The quid pro quo was that during the game, one of Penn's football coaches would make an appearance asking Richie if he enjoyed his seats. When the ticket agent handed him his admission to the games, Richie triumphantly turned around and waved them into the air as his three companions shouted their approval.

Ten minutes later, Irish Mike reappeared with his tickets. Handing them out to his antisocial crew, he declared, "Not bad seats, second level up." Collectively, like sheep, they headed for the gate.

Navigating their way through the growing crush of fans from the West end of the building to the East, Richie's party finally arrived at their entrance gate. Richie looked at the location of their seats and exclaimed, "Wow, these are really great seats, almost courtside." He said it so loud that the five men in front of him heading towards the entrance gate turned around, one of whom Richie recognized as the man with bright red hair, fair skin, and choirboy looks.

Upon finding their seats, Richie felt like he had died and gone to heaven. For Estelle, Jimmy, and Sally, this was the first time that any of them had set foot inside this 8,700-seat arena, with its north-south glass windows, steel arches, and numerous banners that seemed to hang from every nook and cranny in the place. The Palestra was the home court of the University of Pennsylvania basketball team and the site for Big Five basketball. The Big Five basketball concept was the brainchild of one of the city's college athletic directors, who convinced his counterparts of the value of a Big Five tournament for both prestige and recruiting. Working around each team's schedule, a date was chosen where they would play against one another for the ultimate bragging rights as to who was the best basketball team in the City of Philadelphia. Readily embraced by both students and alumni alike, it was a success from the start.

Richie looked at his three companions and then at the overly enthusiastic crowd, who were now settling into their seats. The first game of the basketball doubleheader featured a Big Five rivalry between the host team and their catholic college rival. Richie took in his surroundings and wondered if his friends from Terloff Gardens might be in the rafters, taking in tonight's game. Looking around at the nosebleed sections to see if he saw a friendly face, he saw none. This city rivalry game was an impossible ticket to procure unless you knew somebody.

The B&C gang found their seats five rows back from the last row in the building and, with disdain, took in the Palestra atmosphere. They watched without emotion as the two local teams warmed up. Mike and Liam spotted their cousin on the court during warm-ups, going in for a layup, and relayed the information to their crime brethren. In the end, the five of them might as well have been at a viewing, the kind where no one knows the body in the casket.

Sitting in the Marist section, the four amorous spectators were caught up in the exuberance of the White and Blue, Marist's colors. The overall school spirit at the

Palestra was something that had to be experienced firsthand. Richie sat next to Sally, and she sat next to Jimmy; separated by the two seniors was Estelle. Richie didn't mind being a chauffeur on the way to the game, but on the way home, Jimmy could drive, and he would sit in the back with Estelle. The rivalry game was close from the opening tipoff. Tied at halftime and with no less than twenty lead changes, it was coming down to whomever had the basketball last. With thirty seconds left in the game, Marist had the ball for one final shot. With five seconds left, a shot was taken and missed. Then, from out of nowhere, the dominant player on the court came in from his wing position, unblocked as the ball bounced into the air, catching it with his right hand, he palmed it and then jammed it back into the basket as time expired. The crowd's reaction was mixed as half the crowd screamed with joy while the other half moaned in disappointment. Superman wore blue and white tonight, and his name was Bobbie White. The Palestra was a buzz. It took a full fifteen minutes for the crowd to quiet down and return to normal as the two teams for the second game of the doubleheader took the court to warm up.

Irish Mikes crew sat without any outward signs of emotion throughout the entire game. This was a business trip, and at one level, they resented the environment that surrounded them. Mike kept tabs on his watch and patiently waited. After the two teams came out for the opening tipoff of the second game of the doubleheader, Mike waited another ten minutes before finally giving the signal that it was time to go. Relieved, his recalcitrant crew followed in his footsteps.

Listening to the end of the first game in his car without emotion or interest, Shorty turned off the college radio station after the game and waited. Confounding anyone who met him for the first time, as to the origin of his sobriquet, the head of the Devils was actually three inches over six feet tall. He acquired his shorter-than-average nickname before his growth spurt at the end of his junior year in high school, yet he refused to explain his less-than-descriptive name to anyone who inquired. For those who knew him and did business with him, they would have chosen a more veracious name for the leader of the West Philly Devils: coldblooded, merciless, indurate, case-hardened, or any other adjective that described a soulless person.

"Park it here," Shorty ordered. He was sitting in the passenger seat. Looking at his watch, he estimated that the B&C boys would be arriving at the meet location within the next twenty minutes. In Shorty's entourage were Tallboy, Faye, Will, Tommy, and Harold, his accountant, who carried the stuff. The city and the surrounding suburbs were divided into three turfs. The Devils controlled the West and some parts of North Philly, B&C owned the North and Northeast, and the Italians who had ties to the mob ruled South Philly, Center City, and parts of South Jersey. Shorty figured there was enough opportunity for all of them to make money. However, when push came to shove, he couldn't trust the Italians. They resented the coloreds, which is why he approached Irish Mike and the B&C gang. They were independent, and their leader was smart and ruthless, two traits that Shorty admired.

Chapter Fourteen

A quarter of the way through the second non-conference collegiate game, Lafayette College versus Penn, which was turning out to be a non-competitive affair, Richie leaned across Sally's back and said to Jimmy, "Let's go. By the time we get back and I drop each of you off, it will be when Sally and Estelle's parents are expecting them back."

Through the din of the crowd, Jimmy nodded his head and moved towards Estelle to deliver Richie's message, while Sally, who could hear the conversation behind her, got ready to leave. They waited for a timeout and then walked up the aisle through the tunnel onto the main concourse before Richie got his bearings and pointed to an exit. This time, they departed onto Jones Way, a side street that bordered the Palestra.

"Which way?" Jimmy asked, who was once again holding Sally's hand.

Richie looked to his left and then to his right, having come out of an unfamiliar exit. "To your right." Then, grabbing Estelle's hand, they all proceeded in that direction.

Under the Palestra, the small locker room was a madhouse. Marist, having avoided a trap game on their way to the NCAA's, had defeated one of their strongest non-conference rivals.

Cutting through the noise and chaos, one voice boomed out above the others, "Nice game, Superman." Bobbie White, recognizing the author of those words, turned his head, in just enough time to see the All-American Marist fullback, Billy Jack, barreling towards him. They hugged each other in jubilation. They had entered Marist as freshman, and each athlete during their college career had dominated their individual sport. Both Negroes, had matriculated from the South, rooming together during their freshman year, they had learned the ways of the big city together---becoming close friends in the process.

"Get dressed, Superman, said Billy Jack. I have two ladies waiting for us at their apartment. Come on, Man, stop basking in all this adulation, take your shower, and let's get going."

"Where you parked?" Bobbie asked?

"A side street, about a ten minute walk. Come on, Man, they're not going to wait forever."

Shorty recognized Irish Mike and his crew as soon as they walked up the street and turned into the alley, an out-of-the-way location away from prying eyes. He got out of the '56 black Chevy Impala convertible as did the rest of his crew, and before he took a step

towards the approaching B&C gang, he said to his gang members in a menacing voice, "Everyone clean. Each side is going to pat down the other, so I don't want to be dealing with any bull shit while I'm trying to make you niggers money. Waiting for an answer...the first to break ranks was Tallboy, followed by Faye and Will. Whatever they had, Tallboy took it and deposited it in the trunk of the Chevy.

"Okay, that's better," snarled the leader of the Devils, who looked stylish in his black leather trench coat and Bollman chapeau as he led the West Philly crew towards the first of hopefully many profitable meetings with the B&C Gang.

After walking around for ten minutes trying to find their car, Jimmy said to Richie, "I have no idea where it is."

"Neither do I," was Richie's immediate rejoinder. A slight panic started to enter the minds of all four suburbanites. One thing was sure: they were no longer on Penn's campus. Sally was the first to speak up, "Look, let's go back to the Palestra and retrace our steps. We were in such a hurry to get to the game that we didn't notice any landmarks."

"Sally's right," said Estelle. "Let's just go back and retrace our steps."

Sally held tight to Jimmy's hand as she led the way down a street, then into an alley. Richie and Estelle followed, assuming that Sally knew where she was going.

In a secluded spot in the alley and out of sight from prying eyes, Irish Mike and Shorty were coming to terms on exactly what the B&C gang would pay and what the Devils would supply. Samples had been exchanged and territories tentatively defined. They were just about to conclude the deal when Finn stepped out of the shadows and announced to all, "What do we have here?" With that statement, all ten members of both gangs suddenly emerged from the shadows.

"Looks to me like a negro with a white girl and a white with a negro girl. Then, in Tallboy's best cracker voice, he snarled, "Boy, there are laws against this."

Instinctively, Richie pushed Estelle behind him, and Jimmy did the same with Sally. Richie realized that the odds were against them, especially if they were carrying. It had been a while since he had been in a fight. In a one-on-one confrontation, he knew how to handle himself, but a street fight was different.

Finn, equally outraged, joined Tallboy and stepped towards Jimmy and Richie while the rest of the mixed gangs stood their ground. Finn got to Richie first, and before he could say a word Richie clocked him with a right cross, knocking him out cold. Jimmy, knowing that there was no honor in a street fight, immediately tackled Tallboy and threw him to the ground just as he had been taught as a Big Ten bound defensive back. With those two acts of aggression, all hell broke loose as both girls screamed, and the rest of

the gang moved on Jimmy and Richie. Richie managed to stay on his feet, although barely, as he fended off multiple blows. He had no idea how Jimmy was faring, but his guess was not good. It was only a matter of time before both of them went down and were left to the mercy of their attackers.

He could feel it before he could see it. Two oversized men, one well over six feet, long and rangy, and the other a muscular bull, built like a linebacker, had suddenly come out of nowhere, tossing bodies left and right as the odds suddenly evened out. From the outside looking in, it looked like a professional wrestling match when all the wrestlers entered the ring in a free-for-all. At first, Richie didn't hear the sirens or see the lights, being too busy defending himself. He found out after the fact that eight patrol cars were blocking off both escapes from the alley. Apparently, Shorty and his gang had been under surveillance for quite some time by the vice unit of the Philadelphia Police Department.

"Break it up, Break it up," were the first recognizable words that Richie heard as he finally stepped backwards. Jimmy, who was on the ground, quickly got to his feet and then, standing next to Richie, said under his breath, "At least we're alive." The girls who had stopped screaming stood beside them.

Richie immediately recognized the first of his two rescuers, Bobbie White, the six-foot-eight-inch center for Marist who had made the final game winning shot. The other, Richie, had read about and seen in the sports pages, Billy Jack Jones, Marist's star running back.

The police had separated the combatants into four groups; the B&C Gang were in one, the Devils in another, Richie and his friends in a third, and the two college rescuers made up the fourth. While they were frisking the gang members, the police found something that piqued their interest. Meanwhile, Jimmy and Billy Jack looked like they hadn't been in a fight at all. They were standing off to the side, talking to two Negro policemen who were listening and laughing as they were recounting how it was that they came to be where they were.

Surrounded by three policemen, Richie and his cohorts were wondering what would happen next. The one officer with seniority over the others asked the first question, "Any of you over 18?"

Richie answered for the group, "No."

"Okay then, let's head over to the precinct and sort this out."

Richie and Jimmy rode in the back of one squad car, and Sally and Estelle in the other, all glad to be alive, regardless of the consequences. When they arrived at the police station, one of the cops said to Richie, "I saw you play during the City versus Suburbs Xmas

tourney. My younger brother plays for Central.” Then in a low voice, “ I’ll tell them that your parents are out, and if you have your coach’s phone number, ask if you can call him? Then, stepping away, he said, “They put up a pretty good game for three quarters. Then, pointing first at Richie, then at Jimmy said, “You and that negro are gamers.”

The Captain in charge came up to Richie, who was sitting with Jimmy, and said, “You and the college boys gave more than you were given. Some of those Devils and B&C boys are pretty busted up. Serves them right. I understand that none of your parents are home... well I’ll just have to wait until someone can pick the four of you up.

Richie, right on cue, asked, “Can our Coach get us and take us home. I have his number.”

Looking at the wall clock, he thought for a second, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “Why not. I understand from one of my associates that you two are really good football and basketball players. Baseball was my sport. Pitching. Go make the call before I change my mind.”

The Coach Allen who met them at the police station was not the task master coach from the court. Since neither Richie nor Jimmy had taken his psychology or speech classes, they had never seen this side of the man. After he signed the required papers and the four of them piled into his car, the first words out of his mouth were, “How’d you get here?”

“I drove,” Richie answered.

“You remember where you parked?”

“Not sure, replied Richie.”

“On Penn’s campus,” interjected Jimmy

“It’s near a Laundromat,” Sally called out.

“About a ten-minute walk from the Palestra heading west,” Estelle added

Coach Allen knew the parking options near the Palestra, having spent a fair amount of his time watching the various teams play there. Within five minutes, he pulled up next to Richie’s car and asked, “Who’s going with whom?” Getting no reply, he said, “Look, it’s late, why don’t I drive Jimmy and Estelle home, since they live in a different part of the township than the two of you. Richie, you take Sally home to her house. Okay?” All four responded nonverbally with a nod of the head.

Richie, after he got out of the car, walked around to the driver’s side and waited for Coach Allen to roll down his car window. Before he could say a word, Coach Allen gave Richie a knowing smile, “As far as I’m concerned, this is between the five of us.” Then

he waited until Richie and Sally got in the Galaxie and pulled away from the curb before he shifted his beat-up 58 Buick into drive and headed homeward.

Richie and Sally didn't say a word, driving in silence on Lincoln Drive as they left the city and made their way home. With a tinge of anger in his voice, Richie was the first to speak and chose to avoid the obvious. "Tell your 'Old Man' that the reason you're late was the second game started late, and I wouldn't leave till it was over? Tell him that you tried to get me to leave, but I wouldn't go, and you'll never date me again. He'll believe that."

Sally, in a pensive mood, didn't respond at first, but instead continued to look out the passenger side window as tears started to roll down her face. Then, turning to Richie, she said wistfully, "Negro dating a white girl or a white boy dating a Negro girl. It's just not to be. No matter how any of us emotionally feel about the other, it's just too hard. You can be friends, but you better not get involved. What's that expression, 'tis better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all'. Well, did we tonight and look at what it nearly got us? If those two Marist guys hadn't shown up, I don't want to think about where we would all be right now. Why... because I wanted to be with a negro male and you wanted to be with a Negro female." Crying uncontrollably, she cried tears of both disappointment as well as relief.

Richie took a deep breath, then stated. "It's my fault. I thought I was smarter than the room. I thought I could beat the odds and be with the one person that I loved. Instead, I nearly got Jimmy and me killed, and I put both you and Estelle in harm's way. What for a kiss that I never got, or to gratify my ego. Maybe in the distant future, a white guy can date a Negro girl, but not now, not 1963. You know what really sucks is that I'll have to step away from Estelle, the one person in the world who knows me best. Why, because if I care about her and love her, then I have to do what's best for her. And what's best for Estelle is to end our relationship before it starts."

Sally, regaining her composure, spoke in words that were barely above a whisper, "Life's so unfair... it's so unfair... it's so unfair."

Thirty minutes later, Richie pulled into Sally's driveway and turned off the engine. Sally then quietly leaned over and kissed Richie on his cheek and grabbed his right arm, and squeezed it hard. "Thanks for trying. Had we not taken the chance, we wouldn't have known, and we would have always wondered what if?" Sally, with a sigh, opened the passenger side door and got out of the car while Richie sat there watching her run across the grass towards the front of her house. Just before she put her key in the lock, her mother opened the door and let her inside. Then she was gone.

It certainly had been one hell of a night as Richie looked into his rear view mirror and took an accounting of himself, no cuts or bruises on his face, but the rest of his body was sore from the blows that he absorbed. At this hour, he would have some explaining to do to his parents, but he knew if he told them the truth, it was an explanation that they didn't

want to hear, and quite frankly, one he didn't want to share. Instead, his lateness was going to be due to a flat tire, a slow leak. He would let the air out of the tire tonight in the driveway before going into the house and fixing it in the morning.

Reversing the car back onto the street, he shifted into drive and headed for "The Wicks," knowing that his relationship with Estelle was finished. He had been living in an upside-down world and try as he might, he knew that he would never be able to turn it right side up."

Epilogue

The gentle hand on his shoulder belonged to the Steward who informed him that they were on their final approach and would be landing in 20 minutes. Awakening from his slumber, he reoriented himself to his surroundings and raised his seat to the upright position. Then he grabbed his laptop from the seat next to him, put it in its satchel, and placed it in the space in front of his feet. He had fallen asleep for most of the flight, dreaming about a time when what he aspired to be had not yet been realized.

After deplaning, Rich reflected on his three high school friends as he headed down the walkway on his way to Baggage. His first thought was of Jimmy and their championship celebration at the state basketball tourney; from that moment forward, they seemed to drift apart. Jimmy accepted the college athletic scholarship he deserved, got hurt in his sophomore year playing football against Wisconsin, and never played competitive sports again. He graduated from college with a BA in Economics, received an MBA from a prestigious graduate school, and became quite a successful businessman, owning a string of black radio stations in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. He was married three times, all ending in divorce. After Jimmy graduated from high school, Richie never saw or spoke to him again. He simply disappeared. And though he was invited to all the class and athletic reunions, he always politely declined.

Estelle became a face in the crowd during the remainder of Richie's junior and senior years. She didn't go out for cheerleading her last year in high school, opting instead to take a more active role in other school activities, including various language clubs. She went on to college in New England, attending the same school as Sally Dill, with whom she remains close friends with to this day. Upon university graduation, she moved to France, received an advanced degree in linguistics, and found a position teaching multiple languages at the Sorbonne. No longer forced to live under her previous constraints, she wound up marrying a Caucasian teaching colleague and at last count, they had three daughters. She had found true happiness among the Parisians.

Rich took a circuitous route to where he found himself today. After graduating from high school, he accepted a full-ride college basketball scholarship from Coach Allen, who had left the high school coaching ranks after Richie's junior year. Playing for Coach Allen, the teams won their conference championships and went deep into the NCAA tournament in both his junior and senior years. Upon graduation, Richie was drafted and served as an infantryman in Vietnam. Once he got out, he opted not to turn pro, since he was drafted in the second round by an NBA team in the Midwest. Instead, he worked for a year on the Jersey Shore while he put his life and priorities back together, the war having taken a toll on his psyche. When ready, he then went to law school, and as a lawyer, specialized in civil law for a period of time before he was contacted by Coach Allen to be one of his coaching assistants and an assistant professor in the university's law department. The rest, as they say, is history. Eventually, he was asked to take over the head coaching position when Coach Allen retired, and over time, he surpassed all of his former coach's achievements. His teams were known for the diversity of the players that he recruited---in keeping with the long-standing tradition that Coach Allen had started. In all the time that the two of them spent together, athlete, assistant coach, friend, and mentor...Coach Allen never once brought up that evening at the Palestra when he bailed the four of them out.

As Rich headed down the escalator, the former Sally Dill was waiting for him. He had reunited with her while on a basketball recruiting trip to New York City. He was with a bunch of buddies from his college days, and by chance, they had wandered into an oldies jukebox nightclub in Tribeca that was playing hits from the Fifties and Sixties. She was with a group of coworkers, out on the town, when she spotted him from across the room. They hadn't seen each other since her senior year in high school, although they knew a little something about each other's lives through mutual friends. Ironically, they didn't have to say a word as their eyes locked on each other for the first time in a long time. In the background, Barbara Lewis' 1963 hit single 'Hello Stranger' was playing with its prophetic refrain, 'It seems like a mighty long time'. Both were single, and they dated for over two years before they were married. Sally's stepfather gave away the bride.

Walking up to Richie (she still called him the name that he grew up with), the first words out of her mouth were, "Jimmy's dead."

"I know," he said sadly. "I got an email message during the flight from Johnny Burris."

"I let Estelle know, she was saddened by the news."

Richie looked at Sally and then, moving towards her, he gave her a passionate kiss on the lips, one that celebrated life and their very existence. Then, holding her in both his arms as the baggage carousel started up, he said softly, "What an odyssey of self-discovery we travel, never knowing where the next road will lead. I've been lucky to have someone like you to share in the journey." Sally didn't say a word, choosing instead to give Richie a kiss for the ages!