

Creative
Fiction or Fact
No Shade No Stats

C.T. JUNIOR

Prelude

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Renowned American historian, Dr. Darryl D. Turner, summoned eight historians from top universities across the United States to Vienna. These ten scholars, each a specialist in a different era of American history, typically met once a year to discuss historical events and their documentation for future generations. However, this unscheduled meeting was different. Dr. Turner's message was terse and alarming: "*We cannot afford another historical misstep. Vienna. Urgent.*" The urgency in his tone and the gravity of his words hinted at a dire emergency that needed immediate attention to prevent future generations from being led astray by false historical information.

"Why did he call this meeting at the beginning of summer?" Dr. Henry Fuller raged.

"I thought we covered everything on the docket in February?" Dr. Timothy Lance inquired.

"Evidently not, according to the invite, evidently not." Dr. Clarence Booker stated.

"What could be so important? Dr. Fuller quizzed with tight eyes.

"Nonetheless, the 20th-century capsule will be permanently closed in August, so it's better to be safe than sorry." Dr. Lance reasoned.

"Well, we have worked on the capsule once a year for the last twenty-three years. If it wasn't discussed, maybe it doesn't warrant a discussion," Dr. Fuller stated as his skin began to turn amber.

"The invite stated an important topic was not on the docket and needs to be discussed before the capsule is sealed." Dr. Booker lobbied.

"Gentlemen, one should not let uncertainty diminish the beauty of now. Take a look around, gentlemen. We are standing in the Leopold wing of the Hofburg, the once imperial palace." Dr. Booker said.

"I'm sure we've all been here before, one time or another." Dr. Fuller cynically stated.

"But have you been here for free?" Dr. Booker said with a chuckle.

The eight historians filed into the Circle Room on the far side of the Leopold wing. Near the front of the room, three round tables were adorned with white tablecloths, gleaming glasses, and sparkling silverware. Four chairs were per table, but there was no seating arrangement.

Dr. Turner strolled into the Circle Room as his guest was nibbling on hors d'oeuvres, sipping champagne while engaging in silo conversations. He gave gracious nods to some and shook a few hands on his way to the front of the room to the *matre'd*. After a brief conversation, the *matre'd* exited the Circle Room. Dr. Turner observed his guests. He looked at his watch, then scanned the room to the back entrance door. He strolled over to the end table and picked up a spoon and water glass.

The clicking sound of a spoon against a water glass pierced the hum of silo conversations, signaling the room's attention. The eight men migrated to the tables and took a seat.

Dr. Turner, dressed more like Andy Garcia in *Ocean's Eleven* than the typical historian, stared into the curious eyes of his colleagues. "Gentlemen, welcome to Vienna, and thanks for coming on such short notice."

A few nods of gratitude.

A few irritable nods,

A few sarcastic raising of the glass.

Just as I thought Dr. Turner made a mental note. He stepped on his soap box with immense confidence and showmanship. "We are all aware that we covered every topic on the docket in February. But there was one topic not on the docket." He paused as his eyes scanned the eyes of his colleagues. "I think it is a topic we should and must address. Yes, we can ignore it, or throw it in the unimportant file."

Mumbling and seat repositioning.

Dr. Turner smirked as he glanced at the rear entrance door. "This topic is not normally in our wheelhouse; therefore, it requires an open mind." Dr. Turner pointed to a gentleman in a tuxedo standing off to the side. The gentleman pointed the small device in his hand at the wall, and the theater-style curtains opened. The light dimmed, and the big screen came to life.

Dr. Lawrence Fuller, the assistant chairman, looked at the big screen, eyes wide, "what is the meaning of this? Is this some kind of sick joke? As he craned his thin neck in search of a consigner.

Dr. Turner expected that from Dr. Fuller, but he wasn't sure if it was personal or business.

Dr. Frank Lance from Harvard spoke in his calm even voice, "please don't tell me you drug us halfway around the world to discuss..." as he pointed at the huge screen displaying what appeared to be a throne in a palace. One empty giant king's chair with two regular-sized king's

chairs, one on each side, and a lit torch in the sconce. "We have discussed and settled all the Kings in history, all the great empires, the good, the bad and the otherwise. What is the meaning of this?"

Dr. Turner poured himself a glass of water, "Dr. Lance once upon a time I thought as you, all bases had been covered. But today, I'm not so sure."

"So, who did we slight or who did we leave out?" Dr. Fuller sarcastically interjected, "More than likely, fixing this slight will probably get you another Nobel."

The room chuckled at the jab because Dr. Turner has two Nobels, while the average historian is overly lucky if he or she gets one in their lifetime.

Dr. Turner ignored the jab and nodded to the gentlemen in the white tuxedo with the clicker.

The theater screen flashed to the next scene... appeared a title in bold lettering that read:

ESPN's list of the greatest 15 NBA players of all time

Chatter, chatter, chatter...

Dr. Fuller slid back from the table and stretched his long legs. He looked at everyone except Dr. Turner, "I'm sorry, Dr. Turner, if you haven't figured it out by now, we don't do sports."

Dr. Turner ignored the arrogant sarcasm from Dr. Turner. He cradled his emotions with a smirk and proceeded with his smooth demeanor, "gentlemen, this is not about sports per se." He slowly walked near Dr. Turner's table. "And contrary to what Dr. Fuller thinks or tries to persuade others to think, I'm fully aware we have never dealt with sports." He locked eyes with Dr. Fuller. "Gentlemen, this is much bigger than the game of basketball." He drifted back to the front center. "And honestly, I couldn't tell you anything about the game, as I'm sure it's true for everyone in this room."

Nods around the room in agreement with Dr. Turner.

"Well, if it's not about basketball, what is the topic?" Dr Fuller asked as he looked around the room for support.

Dr. Turner decided not to respond to Dr. Fuller as the room fell silent. "Gentlemen, can we live with history being reported wrong or haphazardly as our predecessor did repeatedly." He paused to gauge the room. "But there is no reason to regurgitate the historical sins of our forefathers. Especially when we are in positions to ensure it doesn't happen again." He rechecked the pulse of the room. "So having said that," he nodded at the man with the clicker, "can we live we this list going into the future as is?"

The theater screen displayed ESPN's NBA top 15 players of all time:

The List

- | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Michael Jordan | 6) Bill Russell | 11) Shaquille O'Neal |
| 2. LeBron James | 7) Larry Bird | 12) Kevin Durant |
| 3. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar | 8) Tim Duncan | 13) Hakeem Olajuwon |
| 4. Magic Johnson | 9) Oscar Robinson | 14) Julius Erving |
| 5. Wilt Chamberlain | 10) Kobe Bryant | 15) Moses Malone |

The room was utterly silent as the historians stared at the theater screen at a list of names that meant nothing to them, nothing whatsoever.

Dr. Turner observed the silence as he shot an eye at the rear entrance door. "Gentlemen, as historian, are we completely satisfied with allowing this list to move into the future as is?"

Dr. Fuller quickly interjected, "Who cares? It's just basketball! We are academics, only concerned with serious matters, subjects, and events!"

"I agree with Dr. Fuller. No one really cares, Dr. Turner. I'm sure that list will change many times in the next hundred years." Dr. Lance calmly stated.

"You're absolutely right. However, everyone in this room knows what it feels like to believe in a serious matter, subject, or event on its merit only to find out that historical information was fabricated, biased, or an all-out lie," Dr. Turner rebutted.

"But this is not a serious matter," Dr. Fuller grunted.

Dr. Clarence Booker from Yale never took his eyes off the theater screen. "So are you saying *The List* is fabricated, biased, or a lie?"

Dr. Fuller growled, "What's the diff..."

Dr. Booker held his hand out, "Hold on, Dr. Fuller. Let Dr. Turner answer my question."

Dr. Turner made eye contact with Dr. Booker, "Truthfully, gentlemen, I don't really know. But I do know this, something happened pertaining to this list. Not necessarily the names on the list, but the essence of what the list represents." He paused and stole a glance at the rear entrance door. "Gentlemen, American history has been written and rewritten with lies, conspiracy, and half-truths since the day of its inception. Our counsel was created solely to prevent such

things from happening again. And to assure future generations can take in American history with pride and not shame, doubt, or unbelief."

The room was eerie silent. Every man checks his conscious and subconscious.

Dr. Fuller broke the ice, without sarcasm, "Dr. Turner, are you asking us to research these individuals to test the validity of the List?"

Dr. Leroy Burns from Princeton spoke for the first time. "It really wouldn't be a difficult task; just go to the stats and compile lists of various categories. Pick out the top players in each category; there you have it. It's simple, really."

Dr. Fuller returned to his sarcasm, but not at Dr. Turner, at Dr. Burns. "As if ESPN doesn't have the best mathematician and stats people on staff."

Dr. Burns gritted his teeth, "I'm just saying, we have to start someplace."

Dr. Turner smiled with his eyes on the rear entrance door. He quickly returned his sight to his colleagues. "Gentlemen, let's try to stay on one accord. Look, let's be honest, if there is something to the *List*, we are not the men to find it."

Slight laughter filled the room.

"This is not our area of expertise. So, a couple of years ago, I found someone to research and fact-check for us. To find something beyond the stats." Dr. Turner's sight moved to the rear of the banquet hall, and his colleagues followed his sightline.

Dr. Fuller's eyes tightened as he leaned into the table and mumbled, "A couple of years ago...what the f...!?"

Dr. Turner ignored Dr. Fuller's comment.

In walked the world-renowned Dr. Felicia Parker, a psychologist who was recently awarded the Nobel Prize for her work in behavioral economics. But this was a different challenge for Dr. Parker, entirely out of her wheelhouse. She turned down Dr. Turner several times before finally accepting the challenge. When asked by her husband, family, and friends, why? Her answer was always consistent, "my grandson."

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Dr. Parker gracefully walked toward the front of the Circle Room with two well-dressed, baby-faced interns in tow. She wore a business blue pantsuit that registered professional but whispered elegance. She was perfectly accessorized with a diamond pendant, matching diamond earrings, and a wedding ring with a diamond that sparkled with every movement of her hand.

Dr. Fuller adjusted his tie as his eyes tightened. He leaned forward on the table, trying to whisper, "She probably knows less than us about basketball, and her team looks like that just got out of diapers for crying out loud."

Dr. Parker heard Dr. Fuller as she passed his table on her way to the front of the banquet hall to greet Dr. Turner. "And good evening to you, Dr. Fuller. And you're right; I know very little about basketball, but this is not just about basketball. But I'm sure you know that." She responded without looking in his direction.

Dr. Fuller glared, slightly embarrassed.

The gentlemen at his table reposition themselves in their seats.

Dr. Fuller's pride wouldn't allow him to restrain himself. "Wait a minute. She is a shrink! A head doctor! What good would she be in this matter?" He raised his voice toward Dr. Turner, who was in a full embrace with Dr. Parker.

Dr. Turner ignored Dr. Fuller's comments.

The Matre'D directed Dr. Parker's interns to the skirted panel table perpendicular to the theater screen.

Dr. Turner stood regal, holding Dr. Parker's hand as he addressed his curious colleagues. "Gentlemen, I'm sure you all are wondering why the lovely Dr. Felicia Parker is here or why I chose her."

Dr. Parker playfully blushed, "You're such a charmer."

Dr. Turner gave her a wink, "gentlemen, here is the story. About two years ago, the validity of *The List* seeped into my consciousness. Quite naturally, I attempted to dismiss it, but as you see, I failed." He gestured to the opulent venue.

Light laughter and chuckles from most, disdain stare from Dr. Fuller.

Dr. Turner continued, "After many sleepless nights, I reached out to Dr. Moore for what, at the time, I did not know." He locked eyes with Dr. Fuller. After all, she is a shrink." He continued over light chuckles. And she is the best Psychologist of our time and, most of all, a lifelong dear friend. He looked into her eyes, "We go way back to our undergrad days at Princeton. "

Dr. Parker returned the gaze through an awkward moment of silence.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I digress. To make a long story short, my efforts to recruit Dr. Parker into my quest for the List's validity or whatever I hoped to find was not well received. She was uninterested and didn't want any part of it. Then, I had to do a gut check and a mind check. Was I losing it? Did I really expect a recent Nobel Prize-winning world-renowned Psychologist to join me on this quest?" He released her hand and threw both hands in the air.

The room erupted in laughter, even Dr. Fuller.

"Okay, okay, I think they got the picture. I'll take it from here, sir, if you don't mind," Dr. Parker playfully suggested.

Dr. Turner maintained his crooked smile, "It's all yours." He strolled to the empty table and examined the three bottles of wine on it. He decided on the red.

Dr. Parker glanced over her shoulder with a nod to her interns, who returned a thumbs up and mimed, "We're ready."

Dr. Parker stood still, surveying the eight historians and waiting for the room to settle down as she thought, *I know I have at least one adversary present, and where there's one... get over it, boys, because there are many more coming behind me...good o'boys, inclusivity is knocking on the clubhouse door...open it, or we are going to kick in. Last warning!* She smirked inside as her eyes continued to scan.

The room settled with friendly nods.

Dr. Parker smiled at Dr. Fuller and continued in a very unusual way...

"Last week, my husband and I celebrated our 30th anniversary," she paused, waiting for the congratulations to stop. "Thank you, I'm sure most of you know my husband, Bane Parker, the high finance guy. If you don't, pick up any finance magazine; you will probably see him on the cover. Anyhow, we have three adult children, one boy and two girls. Our son is a saxophonist and just released his debut CD. Our middle daughter followed in her father's footsteps to Wall

Street. Our oldest daughter is a writer and finally made the New York Times Bestseller list last fall. She is married with two children, a boy, 10, and a daughter, 7. Her husband is a Dentist." She paused, taking in the range of nonverbal responses, from nods of admiration to where is this woman going, and who cares?

Dr. Parker continued, "My point is this...there are no jocks in my family. Well, maybe my grandson, but only time will tell. Nonetheless, when my husband and I were young, just starting out in life, I would overhear him and his brothers and friends occasionally talking about basketball. I heard names that meant nothing to me at the time. Names like Magic, Bird, Jordan, Barkley, Ewing, and Isiah, which, for some reason, was always followed by the Bad Boys. As life became serious and our careers and life started to take form, the sports conversations ceased and were never discussed in our household or among our circle of friends."

She turned to the side and pointed the clicker at the theater screen.

The historians flashed slight smiles and unfocused gazes as if remembering a memorable moment.

Dr. Parker shook her index finger toward the theater screen at the large picture of the hysterical, laughing, and smiling 10-year-old boy opening his Christmas present—a pair of Air Jordans.

Her grandmotherly instinct worked in, "Isn't he adorable?"

Chuckles around the room.

Dr. Parker returned to business, "gentlemen, can someone explain to me how this 10-year-old boy is having the same conversation with his friends about Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Michael Jordan, and Isiah Thomas as his grandfather did, some thirty, forty years ago?

Puzzled looks covered the faces of all eight historians.

Dr. Parker gave them little time to ponder the question. "And if that's not the cat's meow, explain this one... how can a 10-year-old boy crave, desire, beg, and be willing to do anything for his parents to buy him a pair of tennis shoes with Michael Jordan's name on them? How can this be? - Oh, and by the way, that Christmas present was from me."

Laughter filled the room.

She shrugged, "What can I say? I'm a softy for my grandchildren, and they know it."

Laughter and nods of agreement.

Dr. Parker flashed her pearly whites, "Let me give you gentlemen the thousand words behind that picture of my grandson – spoiler alert, it's why I'm here today." She strolled over to the table where Dr. Turner was sitting alone. She gave him a wink and mimed, *I got 'em*, as she filled a water glass.

Dr. Turner noticed all eight pairs of eyes followed Dr. Parker to his table.

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Dr. Parker glided toward the theater screen. She stared up at the happy 10-year-old boy as if seeing him for the first time. With her back to the anticipating historians, she pointed at the screen, "That picture was taken two years ago on Christmas Eve." She turned around slowly, "That particular year, our oldest daughter and her family were the hosts for the Parker family Christmas." She clicked the pointer, and a picture of an elegant neighborhood covered with a new blanket of snow as big snowflakes continued to fall from heaven. "And like always, you can always count on a white Christmas in Edmonton, Canada."

Light chuckles.

"Around noon that day, my husband and son-in-law drove to the airport to pick up our daughter, son, and their significant others. My daughter and my granddaughter were in the kitchen baking. Well, that left my grandson and I chatting in the living room. He decided this was his time to have Grandma all to himself:

"Grandma, I saved up my money to buy my Christmas present this year."

"Really?" I glanced at the presents under the tree. Which one is yours, Andy?"

He dropped his head. "No, it's not under the tree. Dad was supposed to take me to the mall today. But he said the weather was too bad, and he had to go to the airport to pick up Aunt Barbara and Uncle Jason."

"Well, it is rather bad out there, Andy." He had no idea I told his parents I would buy him a pair of Jordans."

And to my surprise, Andy turned lawyer on me.

He said, "I was told if I wanted a pair of Air Jordans, I would have to buy them myself. Grandma, I saved my allowance, I did extra chores, and this past summer, I even caddy once in a while when the bigger boys weren't available." He shrugged his little shoulders, "I don't think they want me to have a pair of Jordans."

"No, Andy, why would you say that?"

Andy sipped his hot chocolate and looked out the window. "Grandma, this is Edmonton. It's always bad weather this time of year. Now, all of a sudden, Dad's using the weather as an excuse

not to take me to the mall. Last weekend, it was the weather, the weekend before that it was the weather, the weekend before that, he mysteriously had to work."

"Andy, the weather is a legitimate reason. What about your mother?"

Andy gave me the strangest look, "Well, mom always has alibi..."

"Alibi?"

"Yes, every weekend she is tied up chauffeuring Ellie around, from ballet, figure skating, cheerleading, or something. Plus, Mom thinks I'm too young to be wearing Jordans. She said she would buy me a pair on my thirteenth birthday." He leaned forward, put both elbows on his knees, and rested his face in his hands.

"Ahh...poor little fella." My heart melted, and I caved. "Excuse me, Andy, Grandma will be right back." I returned several moments later with Andy's present. I sat beside him, "This is for you, Andy, Merry Christmas. Open it."

"Now?... Christmas is tomorrow, Grandma."

"I smiled, "Go ahead. It will be our little secret."

Andy glanced toward the kitchen. "Okay, Grandma, if you say so...but Mom is going to be mad."

I leaned back on the couch, trying to restrain my joy, "Go ahead, Andy, open it."

"Andy opened the present slowly, shifting his eyes toward the kitchen every other second. Well, if he was trying to keep it from his mother, that went out the window when he saw that Nike emblem and that pair of Jordans in the box. "He screamed, "Grandma! Grandma!" so loud that I had to cover my ears with both hands.

His mother ran out of the kitchen, "What is going on in here?"

Little Ellie, with baking powder on her face and hands, "Andy, what is wrong with you running around screaming like a crazy boy?"

"Oh Mom..." My daughter shook her head, laughing, "Andy, get a hold of yourself; it's just a pair of sneakers."

"Andy ran back and forth. I thought he was going to knock over the Christmas tree. Andy jumped up and down. All he managed to say was, "Grandma, Grandma, thank you, Grandma, thank you," over and over. He concluded his meltdown when he ran, fell into my lap, and hugged me tight and long, "Grandma, thank you so much. I love you, Grandma. You're the best Grandma in the world."

"You're welcome, Andy, and thank you." I reached out with one free hand to my daughter for a tissue to wipe the tears from my eyes.

Ellie had seen enough. "It's just a pair of sneakers, my god!" She blurted as she waddled back into the kitchen.

My daughter stood on the threshold, fighting back the tears of joy before she returned to the kitchen.

The Circle room was silent.

Dr. Turner glanced at his normally emotionless colleagues. He smirked at the joy on their faces as they relished Dr. Parker's story.

Dr. Parker continued. "I leaned back on the sofa, crossed my legs at the ankle as I watched my grandson on the floor lacing up his Air Jordans, which seemed like the most important thing to him in the world. I was compelled to ask him, what's so special about those sneakers, Andy? He looked up at me as if I had three heads.

Andy held up one shoe, "Grandma, these are Air Jordans, the best basketball player to ever live!" He returned to the task of lacing up his Jordans.

"You don't say." I decided to pry a little to test his intellect. "Andy, you know basketball has been around for a long time. I'm sure there have been many great players over the years and even today. What makes you think he is the greatest basketball player that ever lived?" I waited patiently for Andy's response. I didn't have to wait long. I was really impressed with his response for a 10-year-old.

Andy stopped lacing his right sneaker. He looked up and gave me his undivided attention. Just me and him. I could tell this was a very serious subject for him.

"Grandma, Michael Jordan is the GOAT!"

"Goat?"

"The greatest of all time, grandma"

"Really?"

"Andy wanted to share some knowledge he knew and assumed I didn't. So I settled in on my grandson's enthusiasm as he uncrossed his legs, stood, and sat on the couch facing me, leaving his half-laced Jordans on the floor. I knew this was big for him, so I played along.

"The Goat – The Greatest of all time," he paused, trying to gather his precious thoughts.

I decided to help him out, "Well, Andy, I don't know much about basketball or any sports for that matter, but I've heard about some other basketball players that were great during their time...like..."

He innocently cut me off, "Please don't say King James, grandma."

"Who?"

"Lebron James. They call him King James." He said with a hint of disappointment.

I smiled, "he must be pretty good if they call him the King."

"He is, but not as good as Jordan."

"Is that so?" I waited because I knew there was more to come when I saw his eyes widen.

"Grandma, all the boys at school who say King James is the GOAT, if you look at their feet, they are wearing Air Jordans!" he enthusiastically stated.

I put my arms around him and pulled him close, "Well Andy I've heard about a guy name Magic Johnson and a guy name Larry Bird. I thought they were the best."

Andy laid his head on my shoulder. "I guess Magic and Bird were the GOATs before Jordan came into the league."

I noticed my grandson had calmed down a bit. It's best to end our GOAT conversation. "Well, Andy, you seem to like basketball. Do you want to play professional basketball one day?"

Andy raised his head off my shoulder, stood in front of me, and looked me in the eyes. "No, Grandma. My goal is to own an NBA team one day." He nonchalantly sat back on the floor and continued lacing his Jordans.

"I sat on the couch in bewilderment, my mind was exploding in two directions. One, I admired my grandson's lofty goal at such a young age. And two, I couldn't get past his statement that *Magic and Bird were the GOATs until Jordan arrived*. How could he be so passionate about a basketball players who played basketball before his parents were born!"

Dr. Parker paused, strolled over to the table, reached for a cup of water, and then took a sip. She placed the glass of water back on the table.

Dr. Turner smirked as he saw the historian staring at Dr. Parker with great anticipation.

Dr. Parker continued. "A few days after Christmas, my husband and I arrived home in Bristol, Connecticut. We settled into our lives, Bane deep into the world of high finance, and I engulfed

in the matters of the mind." She shrugged her shoulders. "But for me, this time was different because I couldn't get the conversation with my grandson out of my mind. So, I spent the next few days googling and researching the NBA from its inception to the present. I didn't know what I was looking for, nor did I have a clear path, objective, goal, or even a reason, for that matter, to be researching the NBA."

Light chuckles.

"But what I did find was enough to make me want to dig deeper. I concluded that this was a noble and time-worthy project. So, on New Year's Eve," she looked over at Dr. Turner, "I reached out to Dr. Turner and informed him I would accept the assignment with no reservations."

Dr. Turner responded with a broad smile and a nod.

She paused a little longer than usual. "Gentlemen, without putting the carriage before the horse - my research led me to the eighties. Something happened that I'm not sure if the human mind has been able to comprehend?"

Ruffles, grunts, and repositioning.

Dr. Parker realized her last statement made the historians uncomfortable.

"I can only imagine what you guys are thinking. But hear me out. I'm inclined to believe that something happened during the eighties that affected mankind in an unexplainable way."

"Are you still talking about basketball, Dr. Parker?" Dr. Fuller sincerely asked.

Dr. Parker responded with caution. "Yes, Dr. Fuller, I'm talking about basketball. Gentlemen, something happened..." she paused, searching for the correct words. "Is it possible that the human mind has not been able to articulate accurately what it witnessed in the eighties? Or did some phenomena take place in the eighties that's unexplainable? Is it possible?...I don't know... maybe."

The historian began to rumble and get uneasy.

Dr. Parker held up her hand, "Gentlemen, please don't jump to conclusion. I promise you I'm not talking about hocus pocus."

Laughter filled the room.

"Seriously, gentlemen." She paused as the room settled down. "I will say, in all my years, I have never experienced anything like this. Get prepared to meet some interesting characters and some of the best storytellers this side of heaven. She nodded at her interns. Then she walked

closer to the historians. She scanned the curious historian until she heard the introduction coming from the theater screen. "Relax gentlemen and enjoy...you be the judge."

ONE

Dr. Felicia Parker decided that internet research, googling, and telephone conversations would only provide her with stats and shadows of what she was looking for - which she really didn't know. However, with the help of Dr. Turner, her first face-to-face interview was set up with Alan Stone, Athletic Director of Springfield College. How ironic, she started her quest where it all began some 130 years ago, thanks to the father of basketball, Dr. James Naismith.

When Dr. Parker arrived at Springfield College the AD was on a conference call but waved her in anyway. He held up one finger signaling one moment. "Yes, that will be fine...I will see you then, goodbye." He placed his cell phone on the desk and extended his hand, "you must be Dr. Felicia Parker, I was expecting you. It's an honor," He said with a welcoming smile.

Dr. Parker smiled, looking up at the well-dressed man, "Thank you for the compliment and your time, Mr. Stone."

He nodded and released the handshake, "Alan will be fine."

"Alan, I promise not to take up much of your time."

"No problem." Alan gestured to the four-chair round table to the right of his desk. "I blocked off an hour when I received the call from my old friend Dr. Darryl Turner. I was ecstatic. Then, I was curious. Why would you be interested in sports?" He held stern but pleasant eye contact. "I mean, you deal with matters of the mind, correct?"

Dr. Parker maintained eye contact, "Yes, I do, and that is why I'm here."

Alan's eyebrow raised, "did I miss something?"

Dr. Parker smiled, "Yes and no." She reached into her briefcase and grabbed a notepad and pen. "Alan, I'm after the psyche behind the heralded *List* and the why?... has the *GOAT* conversation drawn more attention than most presidential races and just about any other major event in American history."

Alan chuckled, "I see. So, you decided to start where it all began. Hmm...interesting."

She nodded with great poise and anticipation.

"Well, you are aware I wasn't there in the beginning?" Alan let out a hearty laugh that broke the ice and presented himself as friendly.

Dr. Parker smiled, "Yes, I'm aware of that fact, Alan."

Alan brought his laugh to a close. "Okay, Dr. Parker," he said, resting his right ankle on his left knee. "I'm all ears."

"Alan, I'm still trying to get my head around this. Dr. Turner told me you could probably shine some light on this subject or point me in the right direction." Dr. Parker scanned her notes quickly, looked up, and locked eyes with Alan. "For starters, what can you tell me about *The List*?" She observed the widening of his eyes.

Alan flashed a slight smile. "Dr. Parker, there are many versions of *The List*. "I think it boils down to perspective and opinion. Because *The List* is subjective." He flashed a broad smile. "Are you after the validity of The List?" He stood and walked over to his fridge and grabbed two bottles of water.

Dr. Parker followed his every move with her eyes. She remained engaged but silent, reasoning that he had much to say if not interrupted.

"Well, one thing we know for sure about *The List* is that I'm not on it. They shared a chuckle as he handed Dr. Parker a bottle of water.

"Thank You. You played professional basketball?"

Alan took a long swig of water. "Yeah, drafted in the second round, played five years for three teams before being released. I was never a starter. I was a role player for my first three years. I was reduced to a bench player my last two years. I loved every minute of it. I just wasn't good enough, I guess." He took another swig of water.

Dr. Parker sunk into his story.

"You know, a lot of guys get bitter and move as far away from the game as possible. But not me; I love the game then, and I love it now." He said with passion. "After my playing days, I automatically fell in line with the family tradition of coaching basketball. My Father coached basketball all his life, and my grandfather coached basketball all his life. I think I was born to play and be around the sport in some capacity. So, I started my coaching career at a junior college in South Dakota. After a few successful years there, I was recruited to coach a university in the Mac conference. After winning back-to-back conference championships, I finally got the tap on the shoulder to join the big boys in the ACC. I never won a national title but made it to the final four a couple of times. My next logical step was to transition to the NBA. I was offered an assistant coach opportunity on a losing NBA franchise. However, at the same time, I was offered the Athletic Director's position here. So, I turned down the NBA and transitioned into the AD

position. Best decision I ever made. I fell in love with Springfield College, the students, my colleagues, and the culture. My wife loves it. Our two kids are grown and gone, but they graduated from Springfield and bleed blue and gold.

Dr. Parker listened intently to his story. *Good start, Felicia, this is the guy.*

Alan exhaled, "Well, Dr. Parker, in my personal opinion, all versions of ***The List*** are valid." He paused, searching for the words to explain such a statement. "Dr. Parker, there have been too many great players over the years, and there are too many great players now to pick a list of the ten or fifteen greatest of all time. Plus, the forever-changing variables of the game - different eras, rules, styles, etc., guarantee ***The List*** will always be subjective. Now, that is my personal opinion."

Dr. Parker wrote on her notepad. She looked up at Alan, who was leaning on the corner of his desk, finishing off his bottle of water. "Alan off the top of your head, how many people you think share your opinion."

"None." He responded without hesitation. "You can listen to a thousand debates about ***The List*** and the ***GOAT*** conversation and never find two individuals that agree. But it will be discussed and debated to the end of time, and that I guarantee."

Dr. Parker's eyes widened. "And that is what I'm looking for; WHY? My psychological instincts tell me there is more to this than just the sport of basketball. I'm not sure what...but I think it's worth exploring."

"Hmm, maybe." Alan walked over to the window with his back to Dr. Parker, looking out over the modest Stagg Field.

Dr. Parker sat in silence. *I wonder what he is thinking.*

Alan turned and walked over to his desk. He picked up his cell and scrolled through his contacts. He scribbled the information on a notepad and handed it to Dr. Parker. She didn't recognize the name, but she recognized the location. Alan cracked a half smile, "Dr. Parker, what you have in your hand is the name of the one person on this planet that can take you back to the beginning."

Her eyebrows came together, "really!" *He must be a hundred years old or better.*

"Well, not quite the beginning, but pretty close. My granddad was his high school basketball coach. As I'm told, my grandfather got his first college coaching job after his gritty point guard, Fred Davidson, led them to a State Championship."

Dr. Parker looked at the name on the paper, *Fred Davidson*. She looked up at the unfocused gaze in Alan's eyes.

Alan exhaled. "Fred Davidson was the first guy my granddad recruited. He went on to play four years of college ball for my granddad. They developed a father-and-son-type bond that would last for generations. In the last days of my grandfather's life, Fred Davidson was at his bedside. Fred Davidson mentored my dad. My dad referred to him as Uncle Fred, and he is Uncle Fred to me and my family. Anyway, he will be expecting you. I will make all the arrangements. I will text or email you the particulars. Dr. Parker, just make your way to Baltimore. In the meantime, I will reach out to some people I think will be more than willing to speak with you and hopefully contribute to your research."

Dr. Parker was more than appreciative as she gathered her things. "Thank you very much, Alan. I really appreciate this."

Alan walked her to the door, "I will be in touch, Dr. Parker. Good luck."

TWO

Day One

The dense canopy of the wooded area enveloped her rented Camry. The rough terrain demanded every ounce of her attention. After a quarter mile of navigating the secluded path, the woods opened to an unexpected sight – a magnificent log cabin mansion. It was both rustic and regal. Dr. Parker's mouth hung open. She put the car in park, climbed out, and did a slow 360-degree turn, "wow, this view is majestic, a hideaway fit for a King." She mumbled to herself. She heard a golf cart screeching to a sudden stop, causing her to press her back against the Camry.

"Good morning, Dr. Parker," the woman said with a hearty smile, "welcome, granddad is expecting you.

Dr. Parker returned a half smile. *Woman, you almost ran me over. What the hell are you smiling about?* She held out her hand, "Thank you. It's nice to meet you."

"Just call me Annie. Everyone calls me Annie. Get in; Granddad is out back pretending to fish." She laughed out loud.

Dr. Parker grabbed her briefcase and climbed onto the golf cart. "So, your Grandad like to fish?" Dr. Parker asked, trying to forget what just happened as she quickly gave Annie a once over – *Timberland boots, jeans, high neck sweater, medium length hair, well groomed, diamond earrings, no makeup, but beautiful features...hmm, cowgirl or glamour girl?*

Once Dr. Parker was secure in the golf cart, Annie whipped the golf cart in a fast U-turn.

Dr. Parker held on with both hands, her briefcase pinched between her knees.

Annie kept her heavy foot on the pedal. "No, he is not a fisherman, but he pretends when he has company he doesn't like." She smacked her leg with her hand and burst out laughing as if she had just heard the funniest thing in the world. Annie made a quick right turn around the back of the log cabin mansion toward the lake.

Dr. Parker didn't see the humor as she held on, "If he didn't want to see me, why did he agree to see me?"

Annie finally eased her heavy foot off the pedal and cruised. "Dr. Parker, I will let you in on a little secret. Granddad pretends to be grumpy and grouchy at times, but in all actuality, he is a softy. That is if he likes you.

Dr. Parker exhaled but still held on with both hands, "What if he doesn't like me?"

Annie steered left, "Yesterday, when Alan called, Granddad sprung to life. I haven't seen him this excited in a long while. Of course, we googled you. Grandad always likes to be prepared. He has lost a lot of things over the years, but not that. He still preaches the importance of being prepared." Annie exhaled with a distant look in her eyes, "You know, Dr. Parker, it was a time when reporters from all the sports magazines were lined up jockeying for an interview with my Grandad. Then, one day, it stopped, and that was many, many years ago."

Dr. Parker eased her grip as the serene, quiet pier and the calm, glassy lake came into view. "Well, I hope I don't disappoint your Grandad." That's all she could think to say, to console or relief the hurt look on Annie's face.

The golf cart came to a sudden stop. Annie turned to face Dr. Parker and whispered, "He likes you, but don't you dare tell him I told you?"

Dr. Parker could only nod and say thank you as she exited the golf cart. *I think I will be better off walking back to my car*, she thought as she watched Annie peel off like Mario Andretti. *Definitely cowgirl.*

"Hi Granddad, Bye Granddad." She didn't bother to greet the man who was walking off the pier to welcome Dr. Parker.

"Hello. I'm Charles Watkins, but you can call me Charlie," he extended his hand with a pleasant smile.

"Hello, I'm Felicia Parker." She gave Charlie a firm handshake and followed him onto the dock.

Dr. Parker took in the serenity as they walked, the subtle chirping of birds, the occasional fish splash. As they got closer to the end of the dock, she felt the gentle lapping of the lake under the dock and a twinge in her stomach as she saw the back of an old man sitting in a wheelchair with a blanket over his lap, a Carhartt coat, hunting cap with flaps pulled down over his ears, a fishing pole in his gloved hands, resting in his lap.

"You met my wife, Annie. This is our grandfather, Fred Davidson. Grandfather, this is Felicia Parker, the lady here to interview you."

Dr. Parker stood to the side of the wheelchair with an extended hand. "Hello, sir, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Uncle Fred nodded with both hands fixed on the fishing pole and eyes locked on the lake.

Dr. Parker pulled her unshaken hand back, "Well, I see you are concentrating on fishing; I will stand over and wait until you are ready to talk. Take your time; I'm in no hurry." She pleasantly said. *Well, he didn't acknowledge his granddaughter, or her husband, and their family, what makes you think he was going to acknowledge you.* She chuckled inside with a warm feeling for the little old man dressed warmly with the bond fire added to his comfort.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders at Dr. Parker. Unfolded one of the lawn chairs leaning against the banister. "Have a seat."

Dr. Parker leaned her briefcase against the banister and stood momentarily, taking in the serenity.

"Grandfather, Felicia Parker came all this way to talk to you. Wasn't you expecting her?"

Uncle Fred never moved his head, "She forgot the Doctor part."

"What?"

"She is a Doctor, moron. The head kind, a shrink, mind-blaster," Uncle Fred chuckled.

Charlie looked at Dr. Parker but no words.

A smile ran across Dr. Parker's face. She was shocked, not by his comment but by his strong voice for such an old man. She expected an oxygen tank, a weak and feeble old man, but not Uncle Fred. She decided to take a different approach. She turned to Charlie, "May I?" pointing toward one of the fishing poles leaning against the banister.

Charlie squinted, taking in her blue business pantsuit, light blue blouse, elegant business hairstyle, and made-up face. "Are you sure?" To him, she looked too prim and prissy to be fishing or know anything about the sport of fishing.

Dr. Parker smirked and pulled off her suit coat. She caught the slight breeze from the lake, "not bad, not bad at all." She unbuttoned the sleeves on her blouse and rolled up her sleeves.

Charlie offered her his jacket, but she refused.

With a wrinkled forehead, Uncle Fred cut his eyes to the right but kept his head straight. *I know she is not doing what I think she is doing.*

Dr. Parker baited her hook. She stood near the edge of the deck so Uncle Fred could get a direct shot of her as she cast her line.

Charlie was amazed, "Wow!" referring to Dr. Parker's long cast.

Uncle Fred chuckled to himself, but still, no acknowledgment as he held a stern eye on the lake.

Dr. Parker eased backward with her reel in hand and took a seat on the right side of the firepit parallel to Uncle Fred. She let the pole rest in her lap. She looked over at Charlie. "You got something good in there to quench a lady's thirst?"

Charlie, unable to remove the cowboy grin from his face, opened the cooler and said, " Sure. Water, juice, or soda."

Dr. Parker gave him a wink, "I was hoping for something with a little more bite."

Uncle Fred could hold his poker face no longer; he let out a belly buster of a laugh. "Alan told me you were something special. The book cover is all wrong on you, young lady."

Dr. Parker said hold that thought, she jumped to her feet, haggled with the heavy bass on the end of line and pulled it in.

Uncle Fred's eyes widened. He laughed, "She got 'em, she got 'em!" He shouted to Charlie, "Call up and tell Annie to bring a bottle of scotch out here ASAP. This calls for a celebration."

Charlie lost the cowboy grin. "Come on, Granddad. You know Annie is not going to..."

Uncle Fred turned his head toward Charlie, "Just because you are afraid of your wife, I'm not. Now tell her or someone to bring me a bottle of my best scotch. We have a guest, and where I'm from, it's customary to have a drink with your guest."

Dr. Parker appeared not to be paying attention as she took the bass off the hook and tossed it back into the lake. She was in awe at Uncle Fred's vitality. *How old was he, 90, 100, 110 or better?*

"But Grandad..."

"Man, will you please grow a pair!" Uncle Fred shook his head. "Since you're afraid to talk to your wife, you go get me a bottle of my best scotch. And hurry back I'm thirsty!"

THREE

Dr. Parker proceeded to bait her hook.

Uncle Fred stopped her. "Doc, let's hold off on the fishing, have a seat, let's talk a bit." He reeled in his line - empty hook and dangling sinker.

I wonder how long he's been pretending to fish. Dr. Parker smirked. "Do you want me to take that?"

Uncle Fred handed his fishing pole to Dr. Parker, "Thank you." He maneuvered his motorized wheelchair facing the firepit.

Dr. Parker leaned both poles against the banister, then turned her chair to face the firepit.

Uncle Fred studied Dr. Parker with a handsome smile. "Alan told me you are doing a study on the NBA. He briefly explained to me what you were after, at least to the best of his knowledge. I told Alan she might as well be searching for universal truth." Uncle Fred chuckled. "So, what exactly do you want from me?"

"Well, Uncle Fred, excuse me, can I call you Uncle Fred?" Dr. Moore inquired.

"Please do, all my friends call me Uncle Fred," he answered warmly.

Dr. Parker explained to him what she was after.

Uncle Fred's face lit up like a Roman candle. "My dear, the answers you seek start with what I call, *Year One*. He held up his index glove-covered finger as he observed the puzzled look on Dr. Parker's face. "Doc, I've seen the ebbs and flow of the NBA, I've seen plenty of the so-called *List* and I've heard many so-called *Goat* conversations over the years. But if you want to get to the nuts and bolts of this thing and put it in the right perspective, start with *Year One*." Uncle Fred looked toward the pathway. "You might want to get your recorder."

Dr. Parker nodded, "good idea." She retrieved her briefcase and suitcoat. She sat back down, rolled down her sleeves, took out her recorder, and threw her suitcoat over her shoulder. "Uncle Fred, my recorder has a video option. I can turn it off if you like.

"I don't mind." he chuckled

Dr. Parker hit the record button, "Okay, Uncle Fred, I'm ready."

Uncle Fred looked toward the pathway again, "what is taking that boy so long? Anyway, where was I?"

Dr. Parker turned the recorder off, "Wait a minute, Uncle Fred." She got up, grabbed a few logs, and dropped them in the firepit. She picked up the poker and stoked the fire a bit. "Okay, that's better," She said as she sat back down, slung her suitcoat back over her shoulders, crossed her ankles, and hit the record button.

Uncle Fred was smitten with Dr. Parker as he watched her every move. "Okay, I think we're ready," he said, closing his eyes for a moment.

Dr. Parker sat silently as the sun moved closer to overhead center and the bright orange songbirds pitched their tunes.

Uncle Fred opened his eyes and adjusted the blanket in his lap. "I really want you to grasp my *Year One* concept. So, I will cover a couple of other sports before we dive into the NBA." He locked eyes with Dr. Parker for confirmation.

Dr. Parker held eye contact, "that's fine with me."

Uncle Fred leaned in, "Baseball. Babe Ruth. One of the greatest athletes of all time. Ruth's *Year One* in the majors went something like this." Uncle Fred glared at the lake with a short smile, "Doc, picture this... It's a hot, sunny day at the ballpark. Ruth is in the dugout with a cold towel over his face. Not to block out the sun but to help nurse the hangover that has him flopped down on the bench like a rag doll. The Skipper shouts, "Ruth, you're up." Ruth mustards the strength to lift one corner of the cold rag off his face, just enough to see the field. He sees the opposing team's outfield moving back to the warning track. The infield players move back off their spots to the edge of the grass. But Ruth was not concerned with that at all. He was looking to see how many of his teammates were on base. Ruth wobbles to his feet. No practice swings are needed. He walks to the plate on the balls of his feet. Little jabbing steps. He gets situated at the plate. The first pitch comes in fast; Ruth swings, misses, and almost falls. He hears the murmurs; 'Ruth is drunk again.' The pitcher laughs. He shouts, 'Skipper your rookie is drunk, I'm going to strike him out and put him out of his misery. The next pitch comes in high and fast; Ruth swings and misses, catching his balance with his bat. The laughter and murmurs get louder, the outfield inches closer, and the pitcher feels good. The next pitch comes in faster than the previous two pitches. And Ruth sends it out of the park. Before the ball leaves the ballpark. Ruth is trotting around the bases on the balls of his feet, almost as if he were tiptoeing. Ruth taps home plate and goes back in the dugout. He grabs a cold towel, flops back on the bench, and continues to nurse his hangover until he hears the Skipper shout, 'Ruth, you're up.' Uncle Fred returned his

eyes to Dr. Parker. "Now, when you look at *Year One*, you are looking for the exceptional *IT* factor, something never seen before. To this day, no one has seen a rookie like Babe Ruth in any sport. It didn't matter that he showed up to the ballpark drunk or hungover; the results were the same, home run after home run."

Dr. Parker sat quietly, more amazed at Uncle Fred's recall memory than the story itself.

Uncle Fred scanned Dr. Parker and said, "Boxing." He balled his fist and returned his gaze to the lake. "*Year One*." He shook his head. The world had never seen a man so fast with his hand and quick with his feet as the young Cassius Clay, later named Muhammad Ali. His *Year One* as a professional boxer was unprecedented. To this day, no boxer has come close. Not only did he win all his fights in *Year One*, but he did it with grace, style, and showmanship. Not to mention his exceptional boxing skills." Uncle Fred paused as nostalgia covered his face. "Cassius Clay would tell his opponent what round he would knock them out and deliver on his promise every time. And to make matters worse, if he decided to, he would dance the first few rounds and never throw a punch and dare his opponent to try to hit him, which they couldn't."

Dr. Parker was aware of Muhammad Ali, but she never heard anyone speak of him with such admiration.

Uncle Fred chuckled, "Never in the history of boxing had there ever been a boxer as rambunctious as the young Cassius Clay, later named Muhammad Ali. And he backed up every word with grace, style, and showmanship. Oh yeah, as a sidebar, Ali was the father of rap. He was rapping and rhyming before rap became rap. Okay, that is another story for another time, back to boxing."

Dr. Parker smirked at the thought of Ali being a rapper.

Uncle Fred locked eyes with Dr. Parker through a moment of silence. "Dr. Parker, remember this is the early 60s; Black men in America were not that braggadocious, loud, and boisterous. It was a different America. And America was not ready for the young Cassius Clay. Even though he rubbed many white people the wrong way, they paid to see every fight he fought! They packed the arenas."

Charlie slumbered on the dock with an unsettling look and a bottle of scotch in his hand.

Dr. Parker clicked her recorder off. "I see you made it back, Charlie," she said with a pleasant smile.

Uncle Fred chimed in before Charlie could respond. "What took you so long? Hell. I could have walked and got it myself faster than that," Uncle Fred joked. He lowered his glasses. Come closer, Charlie."

Charlie sat the bottle on the side table and leaned in with raised eyebrows.

Uncle Fred pretended to examine Charlie's face, "I don't see any bruises, I guess she didn't beat you." He smacked his leg and laughed heartily,

Dr. Parker shook her head, laughing at Uncle Fred's playful nature.

Charlie cracked a smile, "Come on, Uncle Fred." He reached for the bottle of scotch.

Uncle Fred waved him away. "You don't have to do that. I'm sure my new lady friend can pour us a drink," he flirtatiously smiled.

Dr. Parker was flattered at the old man's choice of words; she poured two modest shots of scotch into styrofoam cups. "Well, Uncle Fred, I think I understand your *Year One* concept..."

Uncle Frank raised his glass, "not yet you don't" he took a small sip, "ahhhhhh" just what the doctor ordered.

FOUR

Uncle Fred mauled over his next words. "You see, Dr. Parker, there have always been and will always be many great athletes, most developed over time to end their careers great. But a few are born with something that allowed them to start and end their careers great."

Dr. Parker nodded, "Thus, *Year One*."

"Bingo." Uncle Fred gleamed. "And just like Babe Ruth and Cassius Clay were born with something others didn't have in their perspective sports. Some NBA players were born with gifts that still blow my mind to this day."

Dr. Parker situated herself and checked her recorder.

Uncle Fred took another small sip to finish off his scotch. "In 1956, a young man by the name of Bill Russell out of San Francisco State was drafted 2nd overall by the Boston Celtics. Russell's *Year One* was nothing short of miraculous. He came into the NBA and put the league on notice. '*When you all play the Boston Celtics, you better have a jump shot or develop one because coming in the paint was off-limit.*' Of course, at first, there were nonbelievers, after all, who were going to listen to the young Black rookie, who many thought *at that time* shouldn't be talking but should be more appreciative of being allowed in the league. But those nonbelievers learned quickly not to come in the paint because Russell would block your shot."

Uncle Fred held out his cup for a refill.

Dr. Parker topped off both cups and sat back in awe of Uncle Fred's recall memory.

Uncle Fred chuckled, "Okay, one might say every player in the NBA has the skill and athleticism to block a shot. But not like Russell. He would block the shot and grab possession of the ball. When his coach, Red Auerbach, saw that, he instructed his small guard, Bob Cousy, to run back down the court whenever someone drove to the basket. Never mind what happened; don't wait to see the play develop; just go. Because Red was just that confident, Russell would block it and grab possession. He instructed Russell to launch the ball back downcourt to the streaking Bob Cousy. And that, my lady, was how the fastbreak was born. The fastbreak revolutionized the game. The NBA can thank Bill Russell for that. Revenue and attendance grew exponentially because fans were excited and loved the faster pace of the game caused by the fastbreak."

Uncle Fred leaned in as the ember floated above the flaming pit. "Three years later, another dominant big man came into the NBA. The Philadelphia Warriors drafted a young man named Wilt Chamberlain, 3rd overall pick from the University of Kansas. His *Year One* was phenomenal. Until Wilt, big men were not expected to be athletic and light on their feet. But Wilt was. The world had never seen a man 7'1, 275lbs that could run the length of the basketball court like a deer. And he added to that feat the ability to score at will. The man was unstoppable."

Uncle Fred grinned, "In 1969, the Milwaukee Bucks drafted Lew Alcindor, known today as Kareem Abdul Jabbar. His *Year One* was unforgettable. He showed the world the only unstoppable and unblockable shot, the sky hook. And from his first game until his last game, twenty-something years later, the sky hook was unstoppable and unblockable. A few years later, a young man named Julius Erving, aka Dr. J, wasn't drafted by the NBA. To this day, I'm not sure why. But he was drafted by the NBA's competition, the American Basketball Association, the ABA. Nonetheless, Dr. J's *Year One* in the ABA was no different from his *Year One* in the NBA a few years later. Julius Erving, aka Dr. J, baffled scientists around the world as he illustrated to the basketball world and the world at large that gravity didn't apply to him. Before Dr. J, basketball was basically played below the rim, so to speak. He played above the rim, which is how the game is played today.

Dr. Parker took a sip of scotch as she enjoyed the storytelling ability of the little old man known as Uncle Fred.

Uncle Fred glanced toward the birds playing on the lake. "Me personally, I always look at *Year One*. Of course, they will continue to develop mentally, physically, and skillfully throughout their careers. But that *Year One* tells me what they have in them. In other words, contrary to popular believe, there is a difference between born and made. You can't explain it, but you know there is something there. Don't get me wrong, I just named a few because they were the most memorable. But there were plenty more that had fantastic *Year Ones*. Such as Jerry West, Elgin Baylor, Walt Frazier, Earl the Pearl Monroe, Willis Reed, Oscar Robertson, and George Gervin, just to name a few."

"But!" Uncle Fred placed his empty cup on the table and held up three fingers. "There are three that had the most incredible, most significant, and the greatest *Year One* of them all, and that is in any sport.

Dr. Parker picked up the bottle, Uncle Fred nodded yea. She topped off both cups, sat the bottle down on the table, and focused on Uncle Fred with great intensity and anticipation. She noticed the distant look on his face but remained silent.

Uncle Fred locked his gaze on the lake. "Dr. Parker, I've been a sports fanatic all my life. I played sports from the time I was old enough to walk - football, basketball, baseball, hockey, track and field, you name it. And when I wasn't playing, I listened to sports on the radio." He sighed with a long exhale. "Anyhow, after high school, I played football and basketball at Springfield College. After my sophomore year, I quit the football team and concentrated on basketball. However, my main focus was earning a degree in broadcasting and journalism. Immediately after graduation, I was hired by Springfield College to announce the football and basketball games. And I also was hired by the local newspaper as a sportswriter. After a couple years, I got a tap on the shoulder by a New York radio station that was adding a sport segment to their schedule. That job opened many doors. It wasn't long before I was the play-by-play announcer for the New Giants and the New York Knicks. I still had my radio show, '*The Fred Davidson Sports Show*.' The ratings were the highest in the country for any sports show in America. Everyone tuned in, and every sports personality wanted to be on the show." Uncle Fred returned his gaze to Dr. Parker, "Even though my days were long, it never seemed like work because I was doing what I was born to do."

Dr. Parker noticed the sparkle in his eye and contentment on his face as he regurgitated a time long gone. She knew he was going somewhere with his story, so she waited patiently.

Uncle Fred continued, "Dr. Parker, because of my chosen profession, I wanted to be the best. I studied the games, the players, and the coaches relentlessly. I could tell you the names and stats of the 1st to the 53rd player on any NFL roster. I can tell you the names and stats of the 1st to the 13th man on any NBA roster. I wasn't quite as fluent in baseball and boxing but could hold my own - tennis, hockey, track and field; I was mediocre at best.

Dr. Parker smiled. "Very impressive, Uncle Fred."

Uncle Fred gave an appreciative nod. He locked eye contact through an awkward moment of silence. "So, what I'm getting ready to tell you now is based on the accumulation of all the years I've been immersed in the world of sports. What I'm getting ready to say to you now is the beginning of the answer you seek. What made the NBA fantastic and catapulted it from the least of all sports watched to the number one sport in the 1980s and 1990s. Why is the so-called

GOAT conversation highly debated to this day? Who are the top 10, 20, 30 players of all time. What sent this country into a coma-like frenzy over a sport that formerly very few cared about?" He paused to take in Dr. Parker's dilated pupils and raised eyebrows. He returned to his distant look. "To this day, I have never witnessed anything like it... I'm still in awe at how they," he held up three fingers, "captivated a nation."

FIVE

"The year was 1979, the NCAA men's basketball championship. Indiana State, led by Larry Bird, versus Michigan State, led by Earving "Magic" Johnson. Two young men, one White, and one Black. Great game, I never seen anything like it. Don't get me wrong; I've seen plenty of great games. But nothing like that. For two young men to captivate the consciousness of America the way they did, is mind-boggling. After that one game, no matter if you were White or Black, Brown, Blue, Green or Orange, man or woman - Magic and Bird planted a seed deep into the consciousness of your mind, somehow, some way. Almost to the point that your thought life included them daily.

Dr. Parker wagged her finger at Uncle Fred, "Right there, Uncle Fred! - *captivated the consciousness of America* - can you elaborate on that a little further."

Uncle Fred smirked, took his gloves off, and turned the earflaps up off his ears as the sun postured directly overhead. "Ahh, I see." He chuckled as he took another small sip of scotch. "Dr. Parker, will you look in the cooler and get me a couple slices of bread, please. It should be a half loaf in there."

Dr. Parker eyed Uncle Fred, then the cooler, then back to Uncle Fred. "Sure." She got up thinking, *bread! Please don't lose it now, Uncle Fred.* She opened the cooler and retrieved the loaf of bread. As she worked the twist tie, she thought *he is an old man; you can't be upset; he did good, all things considered.* "Here you go, Uncle Fred," She handed him two slices of white bread with a pleasant smile.

Uncle Fred motored his wheelchair to the edge of the pier and began slowly tossing small pieces of bread into the Lake. "You know, Doc, it's been debated in many circles, both Democrats and Republicans, the validity of the ex-movie star walking into the presidency in 1980. Some argued he won because the American voters were mind-jacked by Magic, Bird, and the NBA's hype machine." He laughed as he watched a couple of ducks waddle over the bread pieces.

Dr. Parker took his statement as a joke, *I guess he is still with me.*

Uncle Fred motored back to the firepit. "Hey, I don't know if there is any truth to that," he shrugged his shoulders, eyes locked on Dr. Parker, "but having lived through that time period, I wouldn't argue against it."

Dr. Parker's mouth hung open, "I thought you were making a joke."

"Far from a joke, Doc." Uncle Fred reached for his cup and took a small sip. He rolled the cup in his hand as his eyes drifted to another place and time. "It was the tale of two cities: the glamour and glitz of Hollywood versus the lunch pail and hard work of Beantown. You couldn't have written a better script if paid to do so. Picture this if you will: Magic Johnson's million-dollar smile matched perfectly with the bright lights of Hollywood. Hell, he brought Showtime to a town built on making shows. And then you had Larry Bird aka Larry Legend. No nonsense, strictly business! Larry was a lace 'em up and let's go to work type of guy and a perfect match for gritty Beantown.

Dr. Parker settled in and took in every word coming out the mouth of the old man before her with a distant look on his face.

"Then it was the Black against White thing." Uncle Fred shook his head, "that thing that always seems to surface one way or another. In this case, it was blatantly obvious; the Black man was drafted by the Lakers to California's rainbow of stars. And the White man was drafted by the Celtics to Boston's emeralds in the rough. There it was, the grey area eliminated. No coincidence, and no reason to debate. It was what it was, for the whole world to see." Uncle Fred sat down his cup, looked toward the Lake, and then focused on Dr. Parker. "What always intrigued me about Magic and Bird was that both young men came from humble beginnings, but both brought more to the world than exceptional basketball skills.

Dr. Parker's eyes expanded, *like what exactly?* She wanted to ask but decided to hold.

Uncle Fred took in the warm breeze coming off the Lake. Magic and Bird had a *Year One* that went like this:

Magic's *Year One* paired him with a team of stars and superstars that couldn't win. As a matter of fact, they were mediocre at best. But Magic came in and changed the culture. His winning attitude was contagious, his unbelievable passing skills were mesmerizing and electrifying. Until Magic, the world had never seen a 6'9" point guard, that was unheard of and unconventional. Point guards were typically the shortest guys on the court." Uncle Fred chuckled, pointing to himself, "That's just how it was."

Dr. Parker shared a light laugh.

Uncle Fred leaned forward with squinted eyes, "See, Magic had the ability to take over a game, control the flow of the game, and win the game without taking a shot. Imagine that, a rookie! And he did it consistently throughout his *Year One*. Unbelievable! But if they needed him to score to win the game, no problem, he could score with the best of them." Uncle Fred exhaled. He smiled, "Magic was about winning and entertaining the fans in the process. Don't mention the fans; because of Magic, you saw more movie stars at a Laker game than at the Oscars." Uncle Fred laughed uncontrollably for several moments.

Dr. Parker wasn't sure what she was laughing about, but the sight of Uncle Fred enjoying himself almost brought her to tears of joy.

Uncle Fred settled his laugh with a hanky to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Magic put the NBA world on notice, '*the basketball court is my sanctuary, and I effectively play all five positions.*' And for those who doubted that a rookie could back up such a claim, Magic proved it on the biggest NBA stage, the NBA Finals, when he walked away with the Larry O'Brien trophy and the Finals MVP trophy after playing guard, forward, and started at center. An unduplicatable *Year One!*"

Dr. Parker opened a bottle of water for Uncle Fred and changed the batteries in her recorder.

Uncle Fred took several small sips, screwed the top back on, and placed the bottle of water on the table next to his cup of scotch. "Now on the other side of the country, Larry Bird's *Year One* was less flamboyant but just as entertaining and effective. The world had never seen anyone like Larry. A White boy with exceptional basketball skills and the heart of a lion. Larry didn't back down from anyone as he made his way to the top of the heap in a predominately black league."

Uncle Fred chuckled, "Larry Bird had to deal with reverse discrimination, if there such a thing. See Bird was viewed as the great White hope, the token White boy, a recipient of White privilege, etc." He chuckled again. "Bird was battle-tested every game his rookie year, and he passed the test every game. First, Bird had to prove himself to his teammates that he wasn't drafted because he was White but because he was just that damn good. Then Bird had to prove himself to the league that he wasn't drafted because he was White, but because he was just that damn good. Bird didn't play with a chip on his shoulder or get involved with the racial narrative; Larry was about winning. He couldn't jump that high, he couldn't run that fast all Bird did was put foot to ass" Uncle Fred laughed heartily. "In my opinion, Bird was the first NBA assassin, a

real killer who knew he couldn't be stopped. Bird gave the league fits along with his coach, Casey Jones. In the fourth quarter, when the game was tight, Casey would call a timeout and draw up a play for his team to execute. He would always make a plea to Bird, 'Larry, do not tell them the play, this time.'

And what would Bird do...

It went something like this....

After the time out, the team would walk back out on the court to run the play. Larry would tell the opposing player who was attempting to guard him the play:

Look, this is what going to happen...D.J is going to inbound the ball to Danny Ainge, Danny is going to swing the ball right to Kevin McHale, who is going to dribble a couple of times then pass it to a cutting D.J. I'm going to pop over to the corner and receive a pass from D. J. I'm going to shoot the three from the corner to win the game. There is not a damn thing yall can do to stop us. The play would run out just as Bird described... swoosh, the Celtics win again.

Uncle Fred slapped his leg, "You want to talk about a *Year One*! He would only get better...At the end of his *Year One* the world knew Larry Bird was the real deal."

"One might argue, well, Magic and Bird were drafted one and six, respectively; they were supposed to play the way they played. Yes, that is true, but Bird and Magic's *Year One* was different from any two overall picks in the history of all sports. To this day, Magic and Bird are forever linked together. If you mention Bird, Magic's name will soon follow. If you mention Magic, Bird's name will soon follow. What those two young men accomplished was much more than basketball."

Dr. Parker repositioned herself.

Magic and Bird came into the league and inherited the weight of a rapidly declining NBA. In addition, the mere mention of Bird and Magic carried a racial undertone. Their skin color, draft positions, and respective teams sent the racial tension indicator off the charts. If we as a nation had made any progress in race relations, and I like to think we did, after the 1979 NBA draft, we were back to square one, Black against White. The bad part about it...the NBA fed off it, the media pushed it to the brink, and society relished in it. What does that say about us as a people."

SIX

Charlie cruised up on the golf cart and lumbered onto the deck to Granddad. "Annie told me to come get you. Lunch is ready, and she said you been out here long enough."

Uncle Fred looked up at Charlie with disdain, "Man, what is wrong with you?"

Dr. Parker fumbled with her notepad and pen, refusing to look up.

Charlie sunk down, his shoulder touching his ears. "Granddad, you know how she gets. I'm not going back to the house without you."

Uncle Fred said, "My lady friend here is a shrink." He gestured toward Dr. Parker. "Charlie now is a good time to speak with a professional. You might want to start with how often your wife beats you." Uncle Fred burst out with a loud belly-buster laugh that scared away the birds frolicking on the water near the deck.

Once again, Dr. Parker laughed at the sight of Uncle Fred in true bliss.

Charlie managed to smirk through the embarrassing look on his face, "It's not like that, Granddad "

Uncle Fred gathered himself, "Okay, okay, have a seat, and I'll go with you, so you don't have to stand up to your wife. I'll save you this time, but damn man, one day, you have to grow a pair."

"It's not like that, Granddad." Charlie lumbered off the deck and took a seat on the golf cart.

Dr. Parker wanted to ask Uncle Fred why he was so hard on Charlie, but she decided to stay out it.

Uncle Charlie clapped his hands, "Where were we? Oh yeah, I'm not sure if the competitive nature of Magic and Bird prevented them from speaking to one another or shaking hands before the start of a game; they just never acknowledge each other. And, of course, the league loved it, the media encouraged it, and the fans demanded it. At first glance, it appeared as if Magic and Bird were playing right into all the hatred and ignorance generated by America, the NBA hype machine, and the media. Nonetheless, Magic and Bird went out and played as hard as they could against one another each and every time, and America loved it. And even though they didn't acknowledge one another verbally. If you looked at Magic's season schedule, the only games circled were the Celtics game. If you looked at Bird's season schedule, the only game circled

were Lakers game. Get this, Larry Bird's first order of business every morning was to pick up and read Magic's stats. Don't laugh because the same ritual was going on in sunny California. But Magic got it twice. Magic read Bird's stats every morning, then when he got to practice, Coach Pat Riley would read Bird's stats out loud in hearing distance of Magic." Uncle Fred chuckled. "As a sidebar, I think that was genius on Coach Riley's part."

Dr. Parker noticed Uncle Fred's countenance began to change. *Whatever it is, it's heavy on his heart.*

Uncle Fred eased his head back up with watery eyes. Trying desperately to prevent any water from falling from his eyes. "The amazing thing about Magic and Bird is that they didn't let the world infect their hearts with hatred and ignorance. It wasn't hatred that governed their actions and behavior toward one another; it was their competitiveness. To Bird and Magic, it was about winning and competing against the best, and they viewed each other as the best. Instead of letting the world infect them with hatred and racism, they infected the world with love and respect. The love and respect they have for one another to this day." Uncle Fred took a napkin and dapped at his eyes. "Because of the integrity of those two young men, the NBA had to come up with a better way to sell their product, the media had to stop pushing Black against White, and America found itself reconciled and cheering for both Magic and Bird over all the rest. Because all America wanted to see was a Boston-Lakers NBA Finals."

Dr. Parker sat quietly, wondering *how much this old man had left in the tank.*

Uncle Fred finished drying his eyes, he bawled the napkin in his hand and tossed it in the firepit. "Now, Dr. Parker, my last *Year One*. Then, I will answer your original two questions about the "*GOAT* and *The List*."

Dr. Parker nodded with a smile; *I think he is getting weary.*

Uncle Fred shook his head, "His Airness" came out of his mouth with reverence, and then he went silent for a few uncomfortable moments. The silence was serene. "This guy," Uncle Fred shook his head with a sparkle in his eyes and a glow on his face that drew Dr. Parker into the story that was about to be told. "No one in the history of sports had a better *Year One* than His Airness. Yes, the NBA had catapulted from the cellar of the sports world to the top of the sports world as the NBA became Fantastic with a marquee featuring Magic and the Lakers and Bird and the Celtics. But in 1984, when the Chicago Bulls selected with the third pick in the first round, a young man by the name of Michael Jeffery Jordan, everything changed. Not just the

landscape and the hierarchy of the NBA, but the world changed. From Wall Street to Hollywood and everything in between. Nothing under the sun was left untouched by the end of this young man's *Year One*. Michael Jordan did things that the human mind couldn't comprehend or articulate."

Dr. Parker held up her hand, "Stop! Stop right there, Uncle Fred." Please tell me what you mean." She pleaded.

"What? What part?"

"What do you mean the mind couldn't comprehend or articulate..."

Uncle Fred chuckled, "Oh, you want the shrink stuff."

Dr. Parker played along, "yeah the shrink stuff."

Uncle Fred held eye contact, "Dr. Parker, I firmly believe everything can be explained, or I did until Jordan came along. And to this day, we, the people, can't explain what we witness because if we did, there would never be a so-called *GOAT* conversation or debate. Michael Jordan was head and shoulder above the rest. Not only on the court, look at his shoe sale some thirty years later. No one comes close." Uncle Fred held up his index finger, "Wait a minute before I go there, let me state a point. All the other individuals I have mentioned thus far who had a great *Year One* also had great teams and winning teams their *Year One*. Apropos that. Jordan didn't join a winning team or a franchise that had ever been associated with winning. He played for the Chicago Bulls. A team that was just a side bar to the Bears, Sox, Cubs, Blackhawks and most high school sports in Chicago. People only went to see the Bulls if they had nothing else to do, or they received free tickets from the radio station or some other outlet, or someone spectacular was coming to town, like Magic or Bird.

Nonetheless, by the end of Jordan's *Year One*, it was undisputable, he was the best to ever lace them up. For crying out loud, the young man played five-on-one his entire *Year One* and never complained. And he played as if he had the advantage and the opposing team was at his mercy, which they were. We seen game after game, that the opposing team had to go eight or nine deep into their bench to beat Jordan. In the process, by midseason Jordan had turned an empty arena into sell out arena every time he stepped on the court, no matter who they were playing. Because of Jordan, Oil Sheiks, English royalty, Russian Czars, and Emperors were flying into Chicago O'Hara to see the man who defied gravity. And he always gave them a night to remember each and every time. Because Jordan didn't have a bad game, never!!! He played

every game as if it was game seven! When asked why, he said, "Parents spend their hard-earned money to bring their kids to the game to see us play. The least we can do is give them our best, entertain them, and give them something they will always remember, and he did just that. I will add that Magic and Bird shared Jordan's sentiments, but they just couldn't do the things that Jordan could do.

The end of the ex-movie star's presidency left America in a rough place in 1984. The country needed something or someone to jumpstart the economy, and it got just that with Jordan. Wall Street came back alive, the ticker tape machines ran full bore, money started flowing, job market became plentiful, Hollywood kicked it up a notch or two. The world watched in awe as the American economy shot through the roof, and everyone around the world was convinced they wanted to be like Mike." Uncle Fred couldn't help himself; he smacked his leg and flashed all thirty-twos. He reached for his cup and took a small sip. "At the end of Jordan's *Year One*, the world was drastically better and the NBA was truly Fantastic!" Uncle Fred paused. Tight eyed, no smile. "Now Dr. Parker, to answer your original question or that in which you seek, Its simple, there is no GOAT conversation, there is nothing to debate. Period. Now *The List* is a different story but simple to answer. Every list you have seen is blasphemy, ridiculous, and invalid."

Dr. Parker's face tightened as she glared at Uncle Frank.

Uncle Fred held up his index finger, "The reason I say that, is because there has been many great players over the years and I mean many. So, there are many options of players you can plug in from 4 to 10 and it would be okay. But one, two and three will and should be Jordan, Magic and Bird. If the list doesn't have them as one, two or three it's not a valid list! Point blank! Two and three are interchangeable - Bird Magic, or Magic Bird, but One is undisputable... Jordan. That's it. Are there any other questions you have, Dr. Parker."

Dr. Parker made some notes on her notepad as she thought, *Uncle Fred you ignored my consciousness of America question twice. But I'm going to leave it alone for now.* "Yes, Uncle Fred, as a matter of fact, I do." she paused, locked eyes, "I'm curious; you didn't mention Lebron James, the King, as he called."

Uncle Fred held a gaze at Dr. Paker with a sinister grin. "Ahh, Lebron James, King James." Uncle Fred took a deep breath and exhaled. "In my opinion, Lebron is an enigma all to himself. The reason I say that, in the world of sports, no one, and I mean no one, has defeated Father-

time. Father-time is undefeated and has never really been challenged. But what I'm about to say is difficult for me because my mind is having a hard time processing the words that are getting ready to come out of my mouth." Uncle Fred raised both hands, "Lebron James has Father-time on the ropes and the knockout punch is coming. And if Lebron decided to stop playing basketball today, he would probably win by decision or, at worst, a draw. In other words, Father-time is poised to take its first loss. Not at the hand of Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali, Bill Russel, Wilt Chamberlain, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, or Michael Jordan but at the hand of Lebron James." Uncle Fred clapped his hands, "I can't explain what the world is witnessing now. In the history of mankind, only one man can stake the claim and boast of defeating Father-time, and that is Lebron James. Lebron is just as dominant on the court as he has always been. Watching him play is mind-blowing." Uncle Fred paused, he looked up at Dr. Parker, "I'm really not sure what category to put Lebron James in...I think he is in a category all to himself."

SEVEN

The Glory years

The 80's

After a long, hot shower, Dr. Parker lounged in her hotel suite. She listened to the recording multiple times, organized her notes, and talked to her husband until the early hours about the incredible old man she had spent the day with. It was well past 2am when she finally drifted off to sleep.

The vibrating cell phone on the nightstand jolted her awake. Unsure if she was dreaming, she laid still, eyes wide, taking in the dark room. Bzzz, bzzz. She reached over and grabbed her cell phone, not recognizing the number. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Dr. Parker. Did I wake you?"

She glanced at the time—6:30am. She cringed, gripping the phone tighter. "Who is this?"

A chuckle came from the other end. "This is Alan."

Dr. Parker snapped out of her morning daze. "Hi Alan. If you're calling about the meeting, it went better than I could have imagined. Thanks."

"You're welcome, but that's not why I called."

She sat up, a deep crease forming on her forehead. "Oh? What's up?"

Alan chuckled again. "Felicia, I made some calls yesterday. I hope you don't mind." He didn't wait for a response. "I think you should talk to an old friend of mine. He was thrilled when I explained your project. Back in the 80s, he was a sports radio personality and the introductory voice of the Detroit Pistons. His name is Anthony Moore. He'll have two self-proclaimed basketball experts with him—Jerry Watkins and David Hobson, both former NBA players and regulars on his radio show during the NBA's glory years."

Dr. Parker got out of bed and started pacing. "Wow, Alan, I didn't expect this. But it's much appreciated. When and where do they want to meet?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, if that works for you. Can you make it to Detroit by then?"

"That's perfect. I'll book a flight as soon as we hang up," Dr. Parker said with a huge smile.

"Great, I'll let Ant know and email you the details."

"Perfect..."

Alan sighed. "Just a heads-up, Felicia—Anthony Moore is quite the character. He can be a bit animated and rough around the edges."

She laughed. "Should I be worried?"

"No, no, nothing like that. You'll be safe, but you might feel a bit uncomfortable. Nonetheless, I think the meeting will be beneficial."

"Alan, are you trying to say something without saying it? Or are you convincing yourself or me?" Dr. Parker laughed again. "In my line of work, we call that projection. Don't worry, Alan. I'll be fine."

At 12:55 pm, Dr. Parker strolled into the lounge on the 35th floor of the Hyatt Regency, a prominent building in Detroit's skyline overlooking the Detroit River. She took in the plush, well-lit dining area, noting the waitstaff preparing for service.

A friendly voice broke her reverie. "Hello. I'm Carlos, the maitre'd. Are you Dr. Parker?" A short man approached with an outstretched hand.

Dr. Parker shook his hand. "Yes, I am. I'm here to meet Anthony Moore."

"Right this way. Mr. Moore and his party are expecting you."

Dr. Parker followed Carlos to a frosted glass partition in the upper left corner. She was briefly distracted by the stunning view out the window.

"Mr. Moore, your guest is here," Carlos announced before swiftly departing.

"Well, well, well, it is a pleasure to meet the woman stirring the pot," Anthony said with a smile as the three men stood to greet Dr. Parker. "I'm Anthony Moore; you can call me Ant." He shook her hand with a firm grip and pleasant eye contact.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ant," Dr. Parker said, quickly sizing him up. He was *well-built for his age, looking no older than forty but likely at least sixty, impeccably groomed and dressed.*

"Fellas, this is Dr. Felicia Parker," Ant said.

Dr. Parker looked up at the two towering men beside him, both with friendly smiles.

"Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Jerry Watkins; you can call me Watts."

She shook his gigantic hand. "Nice to meet you, Watts."

"And I'm David Hobson; you can call me Hops."

"Nice to meet you, Hops," she said, shaking his hand as well.

A waitress appeared, topping off the men's coffee. "Ma'am, can I get you anything?" she asked.

Ant pulled out a chair for Dr. Parker. "Please, have a seat. As you can see, this is the best view in the house," he said with an exaggerated gesture toward the window.

Hops and Watts stood by, waiting for Dr. Parker to sit.

"Thank you, kind sir. Felicia will be fine," she said, setting her briefcase on the floor beside her and taking a seat.

Ant sat closest to her, Hops and Watts sat on the other side of the round table.

"Ma'am, can I get you anything to drink?" the waitress asked again.

"Yes, water with lemon, please," Felicia replied.

"Would you like a menu?" the waitress asked the group.

"I'm good," Hops said.

Watts patted his belly. "I can hold off for a bit."

"And you, Felicia?" Ant asked.

"I'm fine, thank you."

Ant glanced at his watch. "Well, I think it's time for a drink. I'll have a Long Island Iced Tea."

The waitress smiled broadly. "And for you?" she asked Hops.

"A regular iced tea, please," he responded with a chuckle.

Ant leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs as he sized up Felicia. *This chick has savvy. Designer business suit, sheer blouse, and stylish black hair. Hmm interesting.* "So, Felicia, you're interested in the mystique of the NBA?" he asked with a clever grin.

Felicia was impressed by these well-dressed, important-looking men taking time to meet her. "First of all, gentlemen, I like to thank you all for your time."

"You're welcome," they all replied, curiosity in their eyes.

Felicia felt their gazes on her as she took out her recorder, pen, and notepad. Gentlemen, my recorder has video capabilities. I can disable video if anyone is uncomfortable."

Ant overexaggerated, squaring himself for the camera, "I don't mind at all." He joked.

Watts and Hops welcomed the video.

"Well, Felicia, what can we do for you?" Ant asked as the waitress placed his drink on the table.

Felicia sat up straight, making eye contact with each man. "Ant, I'm not entirely sure. Alan assured me you were the man to talk to next. I'm not sure how much he told you about my research, but I'm trying to get answers. I believe there's more to *The List & Goat* conversation than what meets the eye. I'm interested in the psyche behind it... something happened, and I can't quite grasp it yet." She felt herself rambling but saw understanding in their faces.

The men marveled at her enthusiasm and began a lively barbershop conversation as if she weren't there.

Hops, who played eleven years in the NBA, leaned back. "Look, fellas, the lady's looking for the gold nugget. It's simple: there is no GOAT conversation—it's MJ, then the rest. Bill, Wilt, Kareem, and the rest fill out the top ten."

Watts, who played nine years in the NBA, his last three years for the Pistons, interjected. "Here we go again, Hops. The GOAT, yes, but any list without Magic and Bird in the top five is ridiculous."

"Come on, Watts..."

Ant interrupted with a laugh. "Felicia, please excuse my guys. We've had this conversation many times, and they still don't get it."

Felicia smiled. "Why is this conversation still so debatable after all these years, across generations?" she asked, looking from man to man.

Hops jumped in. "Ma'am, because there's no other sport like the NBA."

"Do you say that because you played?" Felicia quizzed.

"No, I say that because it's so damn fantastic!" Hops responded, laughing heartily along with Ant and Watts.

Ant noted Felicia's confused look. "I think you guys missed the question," he said. "Felicia, I have an idea of what you're looking for, but I'm not a hundred percent sure. Nonetheless, I'm going to tell you the story of how the NBA became so damn fantastic!"

EIGHT

Ant stirred his drink and took a sip. He leaned in, placed both elbows on the table, hands folded, "See, the NBA made great strides during the first ten years of its existence when the game was played below the rim. In my opinion, the second ten years bogged down the progress of the NBA because, in the complete 60's decade, fans knew the conclusion before the season started. It was the same every year. The NBA champions were Red Auerbach, Bill Russell, and the Boston Celtics. They were just that good, and no other team came close."

Hops jumped in, "Yeah, they were, but I think Red gets too much credit for that; Russell made them unbeatable."

"Wait a minute, Hops. Red coached up some good players, and Cousy and those boys would die for Red, and they played for keeps." Watts chimed in.

Ant held up his hand, "Hold on, fellas, that's a different argument."

Felicia expected a rebuttal from Hops or Watts but heard none.

Ant took a deep sip, "like I was saying, the Boston Celtics dominated the 60's. When the 70s rolled in, the NBA shifted gears, and the game began to be played above the rim. But the NBA still wasn't a water cooler sport."

Felicia's forehead wrinkled as she stared at Ant with tight eyes.

"What I mean is it didn't carry over to the workplace, the barbershops, or the schoolyards like football and baseball did, or should I say as much. Even with the influx of never-seen-before superstar talent flooding into the league like Oscar Robertson, Earl the Pearl Monroe, Jerry West, Elgin Baylor, the Ice Man George Gervin, Lew Alcindor, Willis Reed, Julius Erving, just to name a few."

Hops and Watts nodded in agreement with reminiscing smiles on their faces.

Felicia listened intently and waited for the meat and potatoes of Ant's story.

"On top of not being the water cooler sport, the NBA lost more ground to baseball and football because of the diminishing of its fan base due to sudden complexion change of the league." Ant checked the eyes of Felicia and continued, "Now on top of the NBA dealing with the challenge of its league getting darker and darker they had a competitor nipping at its heel. A nemesis that wouldn't go away and was getting stronger by the season, the American Basketball

Association (ABA). Now, by the mid-seventies, the ABA's wide-open playground style of play was taking the little shine the NBA so desperately needed. With the talent pool being divided and the ABA stars rising and shining brighter than the NBA stars, particularly Dr. J and the Iceman, George Gervin, it was just a matter of time before the lights went out completely on the NBA.

The NBA owners and executives grabbed the only lifeline available at that time – a merger. With the ABA and NBA merger, the weight of the new NBA was placed on the shoulders of Kareem and Dr. J. And even though they held the torch high and proud, it wasn't enough. From the looks of things, the NBA was moving toward defunct. Near the end of the 70s, owners were trying to sell, and executives were jumping ship. It was a done deal; viewership was down, advertising was dwindling, and the NBA was dead last on the sport, totaling pole. I'm not sure if it was the dark complexion of the NBA or all the in-game fights, but people just were not that interested.

Felicia listened intently.

Ant paused and studied the seriousness on Felicia's face as she appeared to absorb every word he was saying.

Ant finished his Long Island, "I guess the stars and moon lined up just right for the NBA in the eleventh hour. In 1979, the NBA's savior appeared in the form of two young men, Earvin "Magic" Johnson from Michigan State and Larry "Legend" Bird from Indiana State. The world had just watched Magic defeat Bird in the NCAA National Championship. And that game was the catalyst to the NBA becoming Fantastic."

Watts shook his head with a Cheshire grin, "Best college basketball championship game ever played."

Hops squinted an eye, "I'm not sure about that, but it was the most watched."

"Exactly!" Ant shouted, pointing at Hops.

Felicia's eyes jumped from Hops to Watts, Ant to Hops, back to Ant.

A Kool-Aid smile ran across Ant's face as he clapped his hands, "The timing could not have been better. To understand the magnitude of what happened, Felicia, let me give you the back story." He paused and looked Felicia in the eyes. "I'm sure you remember the state of the country during the 70s, but probably not the state for Black America during the 70s." He looked for a flinch, a squirm, or an unsettling look but got none. Felicia remained evenly poised as if she knew or wanted to learn. Ant took that as if he could proceed without caution.

"You see, Black America had survived the 60s and limped through the 70s, and it looked forward to coming into its own in the 80s. After Black America witnessed and enjoyed the victory of Magic over Bird in the national championship game, they were riding high on the hog as if that was confirmation of great things to come, but it would be short-lived. It started with the 1st pick of the 1979 NBA draft; the Lakers selected Magic Johnson. The Boston Celtics picked Larry Bird the previous with 6th pick. Still not that bad because the consensus of Black America at that time was Los Angeles was a better place for a Black man than Boston. But then came the salary; Boston paid Larry twice what Magic received from the Lakers. And oh my god, the racial divide that was present widened tenfold. The old healing wound ripped open, and the outcry from Black America was, "There they go again, elevating that White boy and pushing *US* down again! It automatically became a Black against White thing. The country was more divided than it was during the civil war." Ant let out a hearty laugh, joined by nods of agreement from Hops and Watts.

Felicia kept a straight face. She scribbled on the notepad... *Ant's story is lining up with Uncle Fred's story.*

Ant continued. "Whether you liked sports or not, if you lived in America during this time, you were drawn into the great in-your-face racial divide. There was nowhere to get away from it - the media and the NBA hype machine made sure of that. Because there was money to be made from the young Black man from Lansing, Michigan, and the young White man from French Lick, Indiana. The NBA owners were happy they couldn't find buyers. It was happy days for them again; they lit up the big cigars, settled in their executive offices, and planned to ride these two young men until the wheels fell off." Ant paused when he noticed Felicia had stopped taking notes.

Felicia was drawn into the story.

Ant smirked; he shook his head as the smile went away, "You know, we, the American people, didn't see it at first; we were hoodwinked with hatred fueled by Us against Them. And for the life of me, I don't know why we, the American people, didn't see it; it was blatant, in your face." He shook his head, "The powers that be, Wall Street, the Media, and the NBA wasted no time playing their trump card to maximize their profits and boost ratings. They played the race card to the max. The crazy thing about it, and the reason I really don't understand why we, the American people, didn't see it... the two guys that were used, Magic and Bird, neither one really

cared. The Media built a propaganda campaign centered around the racial divide as if these guys hated each other because of the color of their skin and all the things that come with that type of thinking. And it worked on everyone, except Bird and Magic.

NINE

Felicia pointed her writing pen at Ant, saying, "Excuse me, can I ask you a question before you proceed?"

Ant gestured to the waitress for another round of drinks, "by all means."

"Ant, I hope you don't get offended...."

"No shoot."

"I have never been a big sports fan, but I wasn't living under a rock either. I remember Magic and Bird, but...." she paused, searching for her next words. "Well, your story is fascinating, but it has some holes, or maybe I'm just naïve."

Ant leaned back as the waitress sat down on his long island and removed his empty glass. He stirred his drink, "Do tell..."

"Well, we both know that racial tension has always existed in American sports. If I'm not mistaken, the NFL had the Black quarterback issue during that time. Baseball has always been known as the White man's game. And hockey, well, no explanation is needed. So, correct me if I'm wrong, but by the end of the '70s, the NBA was composed of predominately Black players. I guess I'm questioning the fact that the powers that be had many opportunities to build on a Black against White campaign. So, I don't see how or why...or should I say what was so different or special about Magic and Bird that would trigger such a campaign like you're describing or alluding to?"

Ant took a long sip. "Felicia, I'm impressed. However, the answer to your question can be found in your last statement."

Her stare deepened mildly. *Is he toying with me...* she thought.

"You said, and I quote, 'What was so different or special about Magic and Bird?' Correct?"

She nodded yes.

Ant smiled, "The world had never seen two athletes like Magic and Bird in any sport. There have never been two rookies who catapulted an entire sports league from the bottom to the top. In one year, the NBA went from the least-watched sport to the number one watched sport in the world! Because of two rookies, Magic and Bird!"

Felicia instantly thought about what Uncle Fred had told her about *Year One*.

Ant continued, "Those two guys were so special and different that what started out widened the racial divide in America actually closed it. Magic and Bird did that with their play on the court and the content of their characters. And no one seen that coming."

Hops and Watts nodded in agreement but remained silent.

Ant's face slightly tightened, "You know Felicia, what gets me is this...we, as a people, have forgotten what we witnessed from these two young men. And I say that because there is no way in hell that Magic and Bird shouldn't be number two and three on anyone's top NBA players List. But we have allowed ourselves to be told otherwise because we can't articulate what we really witness from these two young men."

Felicia sat up, gestured to the waitress, and pointed toward Ant's drink. "Give me one of those, please."

Ant shot Felicia an eye with a slanted smile.

Watts said, "Well if that's the case, you might as well set me up with grey goose and cranberry."

Hops chuckled, "I'll have a Long Island, please."

Felicia checked her recorder with a serious demeanor. Ant had given her something in her wheelhouse - the psyche of the unexplainable.

Ant leaned back with his eyes locked on Felicia.

Felicia leaned in, "Ant, can you elaborate on what you meant by *we can't articulate what we saw?*"

Ant smiled, I'm glad you asked. But I must be honest, I don't think I can. Not because of my intellect but because I don't think words were invented that would adequately explain the effect Bird and Magic had on America during the 80s and what actually transpired."

Felicia jotted on her notepad, then nodded at Ant to continue.

Ant glanced at Hops and Watts. "Okay, let me start here. Let the truth be told, both Magic and Bird have been disrespected when it comes to that damn List. What's more disturbing is that we, who witnessed the dominance of Magic Johnson, cosigned a List we know can't be true. And here is why..." Ant leaned back as the waitress set the drinks on the table. "Before Magic, all point guards came into the league relatively short in stature, with two eyes and exceptional ballhandling skills. Magic came into the league, relatively tall for a point guard with exceptional

ball handling skills, and to this day, it's not sure how many eyes he has, but we know he has more than two."

The table erupted with laughter.

Felicia just stared at Ant with a pleasant look.

"I'm serious; the man saw things on the court that two eyes couldn't capture. And he did it game in and game out Year after Year. Plus, Magic had that million-dollar contagious smile that drew you in. Everybody loved Magic, White, Black, Brown, Blue, Green or Orange."

Ant took a deep sip of his Long Island iced tea. "However, when it comes to Larry Legend, it's a shame how we, the American people, have disrespected Larry Bird. It's really a shame."

Ant paused and hung his head for a brief moment of silence.

Felicia curiously waited.

Ant raised his head, "Larry Legend did something no White man has done, and very few Black men were able to do...he changed the narrative of Black America."

Felicia's eyes widened. She took a sip, thinking of a response, but found none.

Ant locked eyes with Felicia, "See, Bird came into the league with double weight on his shoulders. The weight of the NBA he shared with Magic and the weight of being the so-called Great-White-hope." A huge smile ran across Ant's face. "And carry it he did. Whether you were in a barbershop, a bar, a church, a grocery store, or sitting on a porch chopping it up with family and friends. The Black America conversations went like this, "Bird is just another White boy they trying put over us... they just trying to find a great white hope... he is not as good as Magic... he can't run, he can't jump, they just hyping him up...he is just another White boy, etc. In 1979 Black America hated Larry Bird."

Felicia wasn't sure how to process that information. She looked down and scribbled on her notepad.

Ant leaned back, and a Kool-Aid smile ran across his face. "But Black America soon found out he was not just another White boy they were trying to hype up. Larry Bird couldn't jump that high, and he couldn't run that fast; all he did was put foot to ass." Ant reared back with a loud laugh, and he clapped his hands.

Hops chimed in. "And he did it on a consistent basis."

Watts was enthralled in laughter.

Felicia got caught up in Ant's laughter.

Ant wiped the tears from his eyes. "It didn't make any difference to Bird what color you were, who your parents were, where you come from, rich, poor, Black, White, Green, or Orange...Larry Legend put foot to ass game in and game out, Year after Year until he retired. See, Larry didn't smile and joke with his opponents, no, no, no, when you stepped on the court against Larry Legend, expect a foot in your ass because he was going to take it to you and talk trash while he do it." Ant slapped his hands together with loud laughter.

Hops and Watts joined the laughter with agreeing nods.

Felicia couldn't help but laugh more at Ant than the story.

Ant gathered himself. "Now here's the deal, Black America held onto 'he just another White boy thing' as long as they could. But something happened along the way. The narrative shifted. Black America conceded. The Black America narrative changed to Larry Bird was the real deal. Then the word hit the street, I'm not sure, but I think the Round-mound of rebound, Charles Barkley, said that Larry Bird got offended if you put a White player on him...Ant laughed hard. "As the story goes, during a game between the 76ers and Celtics, I'm paraphrasing, Bird asked Sir Charles, why are you guys disrespecting me? Sir Charles replied, what are you talking about, Larry? Why yall put this White boy on me... that's just disrespectful, Charles, and I'm going to make yall pay for that shit. And according to Sir Charles, Bird did just that. When Black America heard that, Black America fell in Love with Larry Bird."

Ant met the eyes of Watts and Hops, nodding their heads in agreement. He locked eyes with Felicia and patted the table five times in unison with his words. "Bird -changed - the - black – American - narrative.) Case in point, to this day, you cannot go into a Black-owned barbershop, Black-owned sports club, or any other Black establishment and say anything bad or negative about Larry Bird. And if you do, you do so at your own peril because there will be consequences to pay, and you will probably get dealt with. Just ask Isiah Thomas." Ant slapped his leg with his hand and laughed for about two minutes.

Watts broke his silence, "Whoa! Wait a minute, Isiah had much to do with the NBA becoming Fantastic!"

Felicia shot an eye at Watts as Ant continued to laugh.

Hops brought his laugh to a close, "That's true, Watts, but Ant is referring to the statement Zeek made when they lost to Boston in the Eastern Conference Finals."

Ant continued to laugh, pointing his index finger at Hops and nodding as he tried to stop laughing but couldn't.

TEN

"Come on, Watts. You know that was messed up," Hops said. Zeek made that statement six years too late."

Ant had to get up from the table because he started coughing and laughing.

"Are you OK?" Felicia asked as she tried to listen to Hops and Watts while pleasantly enjoying Ant having a laughing fit.

Watts didn't see the humor, "Man, that was blown out of proportion, and you know it."

Hops shrugged, "Hey man, all I know is that Zeek made the statement about Larry Bird, then he looked around, and there was no support from Black America."

Ant's laughing escalated again, which made Hops laugh, which infuriated Watts.

"Hell, Zeek was telling the truth." Watts pouted.

Hops abruptly stopped laughing and stared at Watts. "No, he did not! And Black America let Zeek know they didn't support his statement or that mentality anymore when it came to Larry Bird. And that's why your boy Zeek had to retract."

Watts waved his hand, "y'all need to cut it out," he said with a straight face.

Felicia tried to refrain from laughing because she could tell they had hit a soft spot with Watts. She watched Ant and Hops laugh uncontrollably.

Watts raised his voice over the laughter. "Hey, fellas, come on now, Zeek came into the league a couple years after Magic and Bird, and he was instrumental in making the NBA Fantastic, I'm telling you!"

Ant nodded his head in agreement as he brought his laughter to a close. He grabbed his napkins and dapped his eyes, "Excuse me, Felicia, I'm so unprofessional."

"No, you're fine," Felicia said.

"OK, Watts, calm down," Ant said as he returned to his seat. He took a long sip of water. "Watts, I didn't want to get into this just yet. But here is the deal. Yes, Zeek was the real deal. Everyone knew Magic and Bird sat on the throne, side by side. Magic and Bird had a firm grip on the torch, and they had no intention of giving it up. But they allowed Zeek to stand beside them with a couple fingers touching the torch. And any plans to get Zeek a seat on the throne went down the drain when His Airness came into the league."

Watts smacked the table causing his water to spill, "See there you go," he spurted in anger.

Hops eyed Felicia, "here we go."

"I assume you're talking about Michael Jordan, correct?" Felicia asked.

"The one and only..."

"And what year was that," Felicia asked, fanning through her notes.

"The year was 1984!" Ant replied with enthusiasm.

Watts, being an Advent Piston fan, was disappointed, "Ant, I'm surprised at you; you should know better. Zeek beat Jordan three or four times in the playoffs and won two chips before Jordan won one. So y'all got it wrong; that is propaganda, my man!"

Ant looked at Watt and threw his hands in the air. He looked at Felcia and shrugged his shoulders. He looked at Hops and said, "Man, do you want to take this? Explain it to this man, please."

Felicia took a sip and eyed Hops waiting on a response.

Hops locked eye contact with Watts. "Look, that is the argument Zeek has been trying to sell since the Dream Team won gold without him."

Watts interrupted, "there is nothing to sell Hops, those are facts!" his voice louder than usual. "And you know he should have been on the dream team!"

Hops shook his head, "No doubt. But he wasn't, and he has been trying to sell his argument ever since. And he needs to stop taking shots at Jordan... just stop it! It's not a good look for the second-best point guard of all time."

"What do you mean, stop taking shots at Jordan.... hell, Scottie Pippen does it all the time and he played with the man. But nobody says anything about that, but y'all love hating on Zeek."

Ant chimed in, "Scottie, don't count, he is family, big brother little brother shit...no biggie."

Dr. Parker's eyes moved from voice to voice as she sipped her long island, checking her recorder from time to time.

Hops consigned, "That's right Watts, Scottie just got the little brother blues his temper tantrum will pass. But Zeek's come from a bad place, and rightfully so."

Watts shot an eye toward Hops, "what you mean a bad place, Zeek is telling the truth, y'all been hoodwinked."

Hops tried to be sympathetic. "Hey, I said rightfully so. I mean come on Jordan took everything from Zeek, his legacy and his hometown."

Watts pounded the table with his fist. "Man, what the hell they put in your drink? You sound foolish, hell the city of Chicago gave Zeek a hero's welcome when his career was over. What the hell are you talking about, Hops?"

Hops smirked as he gave Watts a deep stare. "Yes, Chicago did that. But didn't you notice they waited until after Jordan left town? If Jordan had returned to Chicago that particular day, Zeek would have been at the park by himself. Because everyone that attended would have left to go where His Airness was."

And the laughter escalated again.

Watts was livid, "bullshit!" he quickly looked over at Felicia, "excuse me, but these guys drank the kool aid and they are talking crazy."

"That's OK; don't mind me," Felicia replied as she desperately tried not to join in the laughter with Ant and Hops.

"OK, Watts, let me back up a bit so you can see the big picture. Hear me out, please." Hops pleaded as he brought his laughter to a close.

Watts waved his hand in frustration. "Go ahead, spit more propaganda."

Hops scooted his chair back from the table enough to cross his long legs. "Look, man, the table was set when Jordan came into the league. Bird and Magic on the throne at one and two. Zeek was Aire apparent at number three. Thus, this sets the stage for Zeek's legacy, or at least his perceived legacy at that time. But when the Chicago Bulls drafted Michael Jeffrey Jordan with 3rd overall pick in the 1984 draft, whatever thoughts Zeek had about his legacy changed, whatever plans the NBA had about building around Zeek changed, whatever Chicago praised Zeek for changed."

Ant folded his arm, nodding in agreement.

Watts tight-eyed Hops nodding in disagreement.

Felicia was deep into the story.

Hops continued, "Think about Watts. The trajectory of Magic's legacy didn't change. The trajectory of Bird's legacy didn't change. However, the trajectory of Zeek's legacy was drastically altered. And to add insult to injury, the NBA became more Fantastic when Jordan arrived."

Watts poised his mouth to interrupt...

"Please let me finish." Hops waited for Watts to fall back in his chair.

"See, Watts, you act like you don't remember the day Jordan was drafted. He put the entire NBA on notice, "OK suckers, I'm going to play y'all one on five, and y'all better have a deep bench, or I'm going to beat you. And he did just that."

Felicia quizzed with squinted eyes, "They actually let him do that?"

Ant chuckled, as did Hops. Even Watts managed to lose his frown.

"Felicia, that is playground talk when you have scrubs on your team. But I beg the differ, Chicago had a few good players on that team, it was the losing culture that made them look bad." Watts explained.

Ant chimed in, "I don't know, I would say 50% culture and 50% percent roster. They were terrible before Jordan arrived."

Hops reeled the conversation in, "be it as it may, my point is this, no Jordan didn't win the championship, nor did he win half of the games his first season, but he beat them all..."

Watts interrupted, "Hops, that don't make any sense. See, that is the shit Zeek is talking about. Jordan won nothing his first few years in the league."

"Watts, Jordan won the throne and the torch. Like I said, he beat them all." Hops explained.

"Bingo!" Ant shouted.

Felicia's eyes moved from man to man.

"The great Magic Johnson said it best, 'Dr. J and Kareem handed the torch to me and Bird, but we never passed the torch to Jordan; he just took it!' Hops said with a chuckle. "In addition to taking the torch, the NBA made a space between Magic's throne chair and Bird's throne chair and placed a King's chair slightly elevated in the middle. At the end of Jordan's rookie season, he took his seat on the throne with Magic on his right, Bird on his left, and the NBA commissioner standing behind him. Jordan kicked over Zeek's little highchair and sent him packing back into population with the other great NBA players."

Hops and Ant shared another laugh as they ordered another round of drinks.

Watts was speechless as he pondered how Hops broke it down.

Hops flashed a humble smile at Watts. "In all fairness, during that time, the NBA had many superstars in population, Sir Charles, Ewing, The Dream, Dominique, Clyde the Glide, Mchale, Parish, Kareem, Big Game James, and Dumars, just to name a few. There were only three players not in population." Only three stood head and shoulders above the rest, and that was Jordan, Magic, and Bird."

Ant flashed three fingers, "Only three Watts, only three."

Watts tight-eyed Ant, "like I said, propaganda."

Hops stared at Watts for a moment. "Watts, as the story goes, Zeek walked toward population, looking back over his left shoulder at the two guys he thought should have had his back, Magic and Bird. They tried to tell Zeek there was nothing they could do, but Zeek wasn't buying it. But what put the icing on the cake for Zeek was the commissioner who once praised Zeek and built some of the NBA campaigns around Zeek and the Detroit Pistons, threw Zeek away like a filthy rag for the rookie Michael Jordan. And the commissioner made it clear, that Jordan was the man, the new face of the NBA, no ifs ands or buts about it. Goodbye, Zeek. So, you see, when Zeek gets on his soapbox and preaches, Jordan never beat him; deep down inside, he knows it is not true. But I understand Zeek's pain; he lost more to Jordan than anyone.

Watts sat quietly, his eyes stoic, as Hops' words danced across his mind, taking him back in time. There was no interruption.

Hops exhaled and ran his hand across his face as he spoke solemnly, "But in Zeek's defense, even though his legacy had to take a detour, Zeek was a winner, and winners find a way to win. Zeek was not done, and he had no intention of going away quietly into the night. The commissioner underestimated Zeek. He took Zeek's boyish looks and his boyish smile for weakness or for granted. He didn't take into account that Zeek grew up in Chicago, not too far from the Cabrene-Green projects, the most notorious projects in America, probably the world. Zeek grew up watching gangs, gangsters, and the like. He knew the ins and outs of what made gangs feared, and how they took territory with violence. Zeek unleashed a reign of violence and terror on the NBA that struck fear in all its opponents, the commissioner, and NBA executives. A level of violence the NBA had never seen and haven't seen since."

ELEVEN

NBA Gangland

Hops eyes shifted from Watts to Felicia. "The one thing about Zeek that couldn't be denied was his leadership skills. He was definitely a leader of men. He knew how to galvanize the troop. And that character attribute was prominent throughout his career. All great leaders have one thing in common: their ability to solve problems. During this time, Zeek had a three-prong problem. He had Bird and his hard hat, lunch box totting boys of Beantown refusing to let him pass. He had Jordan, who had taken flight with his landing gear locked in on Zeek's back. Zeek knew Jordan was coming. Then he had the commissioner trying to eliminate any shine from him and the Pistons. Zeek was running out of time. He had to do something quick, or he would go down in history as just another great player who would soon be forgotten with no jewelry, torch, throne, or Olympic gold. He managed to salvage one out of the four." Hops paused and took a small sip. "With one eye on the commissioner's backstabbing actions and one eye on the impassable roadblock ahead, Zeek put his efforts on fighting off Jordan. But how?... Great leaders have been known to get off to themselves to solve difficult problems. Whether it be a dark room, a mountain top, a cabin in the woods, etc. Zeek chose a bridge overlooking Lake Michigan. As the story goes, after many hours staring out at Lake Michigan, deep in thought, searching for an answer to ground his Airness, Eureka! The Jordan Rule was born. It was the perfect solution. The Jordan Rule kept Jordan from taking flight and withstood the pressure of the stampeding Chicago Bulls long enough for Zeek and the Bad Boys to get their hands on the elusive Larry O'Brien trophy."

Watts threw up the peace sign, "Twice!"

Hops nodded with a pleasant smile, "yes, he did."

Felicia scanned the fellas at the table, settling on Hops, "that wasn't so violent."

Ant smirked, "Just hold on. We are getting ahead of ourselves. The two championships happened in 1989 and 1990. The violence started in 1985 and escalated exponentially for the next five years.

Felicia twirled her pen between her fingers, her eyes narrowed as she felt a twinge run down her spine, "escalated exponentially, reign of violence and terror," she smiled, "Were those storytelling descriptions, or was it really that horrific?"

Hops gave Felicia a direct stare, "more than..."

Ant raised a hand to stop Hops, "Hops, let me field that one."

"Cool, it's all yours, my man," Hops said.

Watts' mind had wandered back to the violence dished out by his beloved Detroit Pistons, now known as Zeek and the Bad Boys.

"The violence, oh my God, the violence," Ant animatedly said with his eyes locked on Felicia. "At the end of the 1985 –1986 season, it was prevalent for the world to see. The shuffling of the deck, the changing of the guards, and the new face of the NBA. And Mr. Isiah "Zeek" Thomas was not included. It's one thing to feel disrespected in private. But it's a different animal to feel disrespected publicly. Whether that was done intentionally, or it was a business decision, it didn't matter because Zeek took it personally."

Hops chimed in, "Ant, give her the skinny."

"Here comes the propaganda," Watts added.

Felicia sat quietly with her eyes locked on Ant.

Ant leaned back with a slight smirk, "It all came to a head for Zeek a couple of weeks after Larry Bird and the Celtics hoisted the 1986 NBA Larry O'Brien trophy. As the story goes, it was a clear summer morning, just before daybreak. Zeek started up his white 500SEL Benz and took a morning ride. A ride away from his plush mansion and the rolling green hills of the immaculate gated suburbs of Detroit. Zeek, by himself, drove down into the inner city of Detroit. He cruised past the abandoned buildings, abandoned burned cars, littered streets, and poverty-stricken neighborhoods with the poorest living conditions imaginable. Zeek cruised past the hookers on the corner, the junkies in the alleyway, the dope house with more traffic than McDonalds. Some say he returned to his roots, a place that reminded him of home and the Cabrene-Green projects in Chicago, Illinois. Yeah, Zeek cruised that morning with Marvin Gaye's Trouble Man playing on the loop."

Felicia was drawn into the story and startled.

Ant started humming the musical arrangement to Trouble Man. Then he put both palms on the table, tapping to the tune and moving his upper body, he closed his eye and to everyone surprise...Ant sung a couple verses....

I Come up hard, baby, I had to fight

Took care my business with all my might

I come up hard, I had to win

Then start all over and win again

I come up hard but that is okay

'Cause I'm Trouble Man don't get in my way...

Ant opened his eyes, still humming, waving his head and moving to tune.

Felicia had a wide smile on her face; her eyes shifted from Watts to Hops to see if they were as amused and entertained as she was.

Watts smiled, "go head, my man, with your bad self."

Hops smiled and hummed the tune as he winked at the waitress, who was just as amused and entertained as Felicia. Hops started moving his upper body in rhythm with Ant.

Felicia and the waitress thought the musical was over. Then, on cue, they heard Hops join Ant in the up-tempo semi-wrap verse of the song.

I know some places and I've seen some faces

I got good connections, they take my directions

What people say, that's okay, they don't bother me, no

I'm ready to make it, don't care what the weather

Don't care 'bout no trouble, got myself together

I feel the kind of protection that's all around me...

Ant and Hops reached across the table and gave each other a high five.

Felicia clapped with amusement; she laughed with the guys. The young waitress was ecstatic, as if what she witnessed had made her day.

Felicia said with a wide grin, "Guys, no matter what comes of my research," she picked up her recorder. I have something on here that is priceless. Now that was Fantastic!"

The table erupted with laughter and high-fives.

Watts said, "Man, that was good, but I know you made that part up."

Ant chuckled, "Hey man, that is the way the story was told to me."

"Yeah, right, propaganda, my man, propaganda." Watts seriously joked.

"Whatever man," Ant joked. "But anyhow." He looked at Felicia, "you asked us to elaborate on the reign of violence, terror, and fear. And this is when, how and where it begin."

The table became silent as everyone could tell Ant was ready to go.

"As the story goes, Zeek returned home that morning with a different perspective, a different attitude – the sinister attitude of a gang leader. He immediately requested or demanded a meeting with the man, the late great Chuck Daly aka Daddy Rich, and the man behind the man, the late great GM, Jack McCloskey. That meeting took place at the Palace in McCloskey's office. And I'm told it went like this:

McCloskey: What a great season, huh?

Isiah: It could have been better.

Daddy Rich: You okay, Captain?

Isiah: I will be.

McCloskey: Isiah, we played in the Eastern Conference Finals; I think we had a damn good year!

Daddy Rich: Yeah, we came a long way in a very short time.

Isiah: Did you guys see what happened to us last season?

McCloskey: No response.

Daddy Rich: No response.

Isiah: The commissioner and the NBA executives served us sideways. Remember, a few years ago the Detroit Piston was a integral part in building the NBA brand. The commissioner and the NBA executive were fixture at the Palace. This past year they were no were to be found. This past year we were demoted to the bottom tier of teams – the teams that were televised the least and with no commercial play.

McCloskey: Isiah, I understand what you are saying...but we are winning. That can't be denied..."

Daddy Rich: Both of you guys are right, but right now, I'm interested in what's on your mind, Captain.

Isiah: I have a plan, but I'm going to need to know you guys have my back.

McCloskey: Of course, whatever you need.

Daddy Rich: You know you have my full support.

Isiah: Good, the disrespect stops now. I want our television time back. I want our name back on the marquee. I don't expect them to give it back, so we are going to take it back. All of it!

Ant rubbed his hands together, "Felicia, that meeting started the transformation of the Detroit Pistons to Zeek and the Bad Boys. It started the transformation of the NBA to the NBA gangland. And it started the must-see TV, as the world at large cringed at the violence but enjoyed the show." Ant paused and scanned his audience. "Zeek went to that meeting in gang leader mode. And he stayed in gang leader mode until he hoisted the Larry O'Brien trophy the second time. So, for six years, Zeek made Seymour Pettigrew look like a girl Scout."

"Who?" Watts and Hops asks simultaneously.'

Ant relished the question. "Little Seymour Pettigrew! If you don't know who Seymour Pettigrew is, ask Bill Cosby."

"Come on, man!"

"Ant, stop it, man!"

"No serious, Bill Cosby told the world in Uptown Saturday Night that Little Seymour Pettigrew was the baddest short man this world had ever seen." Ant clapped his hands and laughed loudly.

Felicia laughed like never before.

"Come on, Ant, stop it!" as they all enjoyed a brief laugh.

Ant settled back into storytelling mode. "No, man, listen up, check this out. You see, in the movie Uptown Saturday Night, Little Seymour Pettigrew had a guy named Big Percy as his enforcer. Zeek had Bill Laimbeer and Rich Mahorn as his enforcers aka the tap-tap twins. Because when heard tap-tap, you or someone on your team was getting their bell rung. In other words, someone was getting hit, maybe two or three hits simultaneously. You didn't know where it was coming from or who was going to hit you, but you know if you heard tap-tap, it's coming, and it's coming hard. Little Zeek was just as proud of the tap-tap twin as little Seymour Pettigrew was about Big Percy. Zeek trusted the tap-tap twins to bring the pain."

Watts said, "The tap-tap twins were doing their jobs. No different than any other big men in the league."

Hops, "Yeah, right, keep telling yourself that."

Ant continued his spill, "Historically speaking, most gang leaders understood their competition, their weaknesses, their strengths, their opportunities, and most of all, what they need to improve and take more territory. You see it was all about territory, at least in Zeek's mind. And for the most part the NBA split the territory down the middle. With the west coast being controlled by the Lakers and their Magician of a leader, who had two dangerous enforcers in Big Game James and Kurt Rambis and a slew of weapons. The syndicate (NBA) convinced the Magician to give some of the other gangs on the West Coast a little territory; it was good for business. The Magician agreed. He gave a small plot of territory to Clyde the Glide and his boys in Portland, and he gave the Twin Tower a small plot down in Houston. A few others in the West got the opportunity to wet their beaks from time to time. But for the most part, the Magician kept all for himself and his boys. For the majority of the 80s, the Magician controlled the East and West simultaneously. To Zeek, the Magician was a smiling backstabber who betrayed him in favor of that flying S.O.B. Zeek kept an eye on the Magician and the Western territory, but he was more concerned about Eastern territory. Which was controlled by Larry Legend, who had three dangerous enforcers in McHale, Parish, and the late Bill Walton. He had a feisty shooting guard in Dennis Johnson, a pesty point guard in Danny Ainge, and a group of misfits that made up his slew of weapons. The syndicate was unable to convince Larry Legend that sharing was good for business. Larry Legend made it clear that the East belonged to him. And he dared anyone to come and take it. On top of that, what every territory you had before Larry Legend came into power he took it. To Zeek, Larry Legend was a hard-nosed backstabber who also betrayed him for that flying SOB. There were times in the 80's when Larry Legend controlled the East and the West simultaneously. But unbeknownst to the Magician, Larry Legend, that flying S.O.B, the commissioner, or the NBA, Little Zeek, had marked his territory on the map in red in his home office. There were no lines neatly drawn on the map, nor were there any circles drawn neatly on the map. There was one huge red circle around the entire map – Little Zeek wanted ALL.

TWELVE

Ant settled in, "Up-and-coming gang leaders always start off slow, sending our fillers, testing the terrain, and pushing their boundaries as they build their reputation. Zeek was no different; he had a one-year test run with the Tap-Tap twins, which worked in his favor. The NBA ignored the warning signs and so did everyone else. Zeek pushed forward. He went on a search for a right-hand man. He wanted what Al Capone had in Frank Nitty - A cold-blooded killer. Someone who would lock you down and gut you. And none was better than the man Zeek hand-picked from McNeese State, Mr. Joe Dumars. Now Zeek understood it was impossible to keep that Flying guy grounded. But Dumars did it better than anyone, and that came from that Flying guy himself. Every gang has a sniper. Zeek was convinced he had the best sniper in the business. They called him the Microwave, Vinny Johnson. The Microwave didn't miss. When his number was called, he entered the game with bad intentions. The Microwave rained, shot after shot and rarely missed. And just like all snipers, the Microwave disappeared after the damage was done until his number was called again."

Hops shook his head, "The Microwave was the real deal."

Watts added, "Yeah, the first few years, Vinny wasn't getting much playing time. But see, it took a leader like Zeek to realize the talent and how to get the best out of his teammates. But see, y'all don't talk about that, only the negative when it comes to Zeek."

Ant signaled the waitress for another round.

"That's not true, Watts," Hops said, "Most people have nothing but love for Zeek, but it is what it is. If Zeek stops trying to rewrite history by mind-screwing everyone to believe some shit that's just not true, the narrative will change in his favor."

Watts fired back. "That's BS, Hops, and for the most part..."

Ant interjected, "Hold on, fellas. Let's not go there just yet, please. I'm sure Felicia has plenty to do, and we have kept her long enough, so let me wrap it up, please."

Felicia smiled, "No way. Take your time. This is better than I could have ever imagined."

Watts and Hops nodded a thank you.

"I'm glad you are getting something out of this, Felicia," Ant said as he leaned back so the waitress could clear the table and set a fresh round of drinks. Felicia, remember, America had a

front-row seat to the stories I'm telling you. If you look it up, I'm sure you will find that daytime soaps and nighttime drama movies lost ratings to the NBA gangland drama."

Hops stirred his drink, "I'll up the ante; I will say all of the eighties."

Felicia said, "That is just mind-boggling. Why?"

Watts narrowed eyed Felicia. He spoke solemnly. "Felicia, everything in the 80s revolved around the NBA. From Wall Street to Hollywood and everything in between. I don't think there is an answer to the 'Why.' Evidently, that is what America needed at that time."

A moment of eerie silence occupied the table.

Felicia decided to shelf her question because she wanted Ant to continue telling his story.

Ant felt Felicia's deep stare. He took a long sip, "Now, where was I?"

Hops said, "You were in the middle of Zeek's recruiting spree."

Ant flashed a smile at Felicia with a wink, "Gang leaders are known to recruit troubled young guys in the neighborhood that had various skill sets, willing to do the dirty work, and had moxie. Zeek was no different in his approach. He wanted two young runners that were willing to do the dirty work. Zeek recruited a young guy who was born to be a Badboy, Dennis Rodman. Zeek became the young guy's big brother, Chuck Daly became the young guy's father figure, and the Detroit Pistons became the family he never had. This young guy had the ability to get into spaces very few could. So they named him the Worm. The Worm ran up and down the court like a wild buck, doing whatever his new family needed him to do to whomever they needed him to do it to. Most of the time, they needed the Worm to rebound the basketball, and the Worm did just that, and none in the league did it better."

"The other young guy was a victim of ghetto demands. He really wasn't the gang type; he didn't belong like the Worm. He was like the kid that went with the flow because he didn't know what else to do. When Zeek recruited him, he wasn't a bad kid, but it didn't take long. See, if this young guy had ended up in LA with the Magician and learned the ropes from Kareem and Big Game James or down in Houston with the Dream, the young guy would be in the Hall. Instead, he became a victim of ghetto demands under the tutelage of the tap-tap twins. Because of his lanky frame and agility, they named him Spider. And Spider, John Salley learned quick how to be the sneaky one. Spider got away with murder, game after game. Because no matter whatever pain he dished out, one of the tap-tap twins was going to be blamed for it - that gut punch, or that sharp elbow to the ribs, or that kidney punch in your back, was courtesy of Spider. I guess it was

okay to blame the tap-tap twins; they taught Spider well. Spider was good at walking away from the scene of the crime as if he had nothing to do with it. And that is how Spider made his bones.

When the 1986-1987 season kicked off, Zeek had his notorious gang ready. He had his runners in Spider and Worm. Zeek had his Frank Nitty in Mr. Dumars. He had his sniper in the Microwave. He had his merciless enforcers, the tap-tap twins. And Zeek had his aces, two OGs in Budu and Dantley. And with his theme song, 'Troubleman,' a permanent fixture in his mind, Little Zeek unleashed a reign of violence the sports world had never seen." Ant paused and locked eyes with Felicia. "Yes, football is a very violent sport, and hockey is a very violent sport. Now, combine the two, and you might come off with half the violence the NBA players and teams suffered at the hand of Little Zeek. Halfway through the season, Zeek's gang was no longer known as the Detroit Piston, it was official; they were known worldwide as The Bad Boys or Little Zeek and the Bad Boys. To make matter worse, they were anointed by a man that owned a football team that was known for being the dirtiest, nastiest and hardest hitting team in football during the 70s. with a roster of players that had a kill first mentality, we'll take the penalty after they cart the body off the field. And they march to the battle cry of their owner, 'Just Win, Baby' the late great Al Davis and his Oakland Raiders. Get this Felicia, Al Davis publicly anointed Zeek and the Bad Boys the Oakland Raiders of basketball.

THIRTEEN

Ant shook his head and exhaled. "Little Zeek and the Bad Boys spread fear across both the Eastern and the Western territories. There was nothing the Magician or Larry Legend could do to stop Little Zeek's reign of violence. The Commissioner trembled as he watched in terror and complained to anyone who listened, "Little Zeek is out of control, and the Bad Boys are ruining the game." The Commissioner dreaded going to the Palace; he avoided the Palace as much as possible. Just a few years prior, the Piston was one of the diamonds in the Commissioner's eyes. Now, he just wanted them to go away.

The fear was prevalent with opposing teams. They hated playing the Bad Boys. When opposing teams played Little Zeek and the Bad Boys, they were forced to double their medical staff. Wherever the Bad Boys played, there were more ambulances than limousines.

Felicia, I'm not condoning violence, but you had to see Little Zeek and the Bad Boys play. As much as people talked about and criticized the Bad Boy's style of play, they had to watch them. They sold out every arena they played. TV ratings skyrocketed when the Bad Boys were televised. Eventually, the networks ***demande***d the Bad Boys be televised whenever they played. The Commissioner had no other choice but to restore the Bad Boys to NBA Elite status. The Bad Boys were poetry in motion, and Little Zeek was the maestro extraordinaire. They knew how to inflict pain and entertain simultaneously."

Watts smiled widely as the story was being told. "Yeah, man, but they gave my Bad Boys a bad rap most of the time..."

Hops voice went up a couple of octaves, "What are you talking about? They tried to decapitate their opponents!"

"Come on man, the damn league was just physical back then. The NBA needed a scapegoat – who better to blame it on than a team with the nickname Bad Boys!" Watts argued.

Hops looked at Watts, "Are you kidding me! How do you think they got the damn name! Look you know I love me some Zeek and the Bad Boys. But let's be real, the Piston turned physical play into violence on another level. They were sinister, nasty, cruel and they had bad intentions before tip-off. They earned the bad pub and all it entailed at that time."

Ant spoke as if he was trying to explain the unexplainable. "You had to see them, Felica, you had to see them. They were good, damn good. Yes, the tap-tap twins played like thugs, but their basketball IQ was second to none. They knew how to play the game and the game within the game. They had them two young guns running up down the court with unlimited energy and cruel and reckless abandonment toward the opposing team. And they had the most dangerous and deadly three-guard rotation the league had ever seen – Little Zeek, the Microwave, and Joe Dumars.

Ant leaned in and squared his shoulders. "This is what everyone missed or never talks about - It took a special type of person to lead that team. Mr. Isiah Thomas, aka Little Zeek, was the ultimate leader. He controlled the tempo of the game despite what the opposing team was trying to do. Zeek knew how to let the tap-tap twins beat you down, let Dumar lock you down and gut the opposing team's best player, let the microwave shoot the lights out, let the two young guns out hustle you and run you out the gym. All that took place in the first three quarters." Ant held up three fingers. "Oh my!" Ant held up four fingers. "The fourth quarter belonged to little Zeek. And whatever little glimmer of hope anyone on the opposing team might was holding onto, Little Zeek was going to take that. Little Zeek was a killer. Period. A stone-cold killer with a basketball in his hand. He embarrassed and demoralized the opposing team with his exceptional ball-handling skills. He frustrated and angered the opposing team with his marksmanship skills. Little Zeek had no mercy. And like most gang leaders that tagged their territory, Zeek was no different. Little Zeek made sure by the end of the game that the opposing team players, coaches, front office, and fans knew that Little Zeek and the Bad Boys had been there and planted their flag."

FOURTEEN

By mid-season of the 1986-1987 season, Little Zeek and the Bad Boys owned almost all the territory in the west. Even though the Magician and his Showtime Lakers were still in power, all the teams in the western territory didn't fear the Magician and his Showtime Lakers; they were terrified of Little Zeek and the Bad Boys. The eastern territory was a different animal; they didn't bow down so easily. Under Larry Legend's rule, all the gangs in the East fought to the death. It was a blood bath. As a matter of fact, there are still missing bodies to this day."

Felicia eyes bucked, "what?!"

Watts jumped in, "don't worry, Ant is always over the top."

"Hey its possible." Hops playfully interjected.

Ant smirked, "Dominique and his boys in Atlanta put up a helluva fight to no avail. Sidney Moncrief and his boys in Milwaukee fought to their last gasp of air. The big young man from Jamaica who took the Big Apple by storm took a slave-like beating as his boys ran for cover. The scrappy Mark Price and his Cavaliers fought fiercely and disappeared quietly. And Philly was a shell of itself by this time. The days of Doctor J, Moses, Chocolate Thunder, Bobby Jones, Andrew Toney and the boys were long gone. However, Sir Charles refused to take a slave-like beating when his boys ran for cover. Sir Charles was just as mean and nasty as the tap-tap twins. Sir Charles fought a losing battle, but the tap-tap twins knew they had been in a dogfight. Nonetheless, the Bad Boys had no mercy on Sir Charles or any of the other teams in the East.

Zeek knew that with all the gangs in the West and the East paying homage to him and his boys, it would mean nothing if he couldn't subdue and conquer Larry Legend and his hard hat-wearing, lunch-box-toting boys in Bean Town who had made Little Zeek and the Bad Boys their stepping stool for many years. And Larry Legend wasn't ready to stop now.

By the end of the regular season, Little Zeek stood with his head held high, shoulder squared, as he sent a message to the Magician, "I'm coming for you. He sent a message to Larry Legend, I'm coming for you. And sent a message to the commissioner, F-you! I took what was rightfully mine!

But despite all his success, Little Zeek was haunted and had many sleepless nights, not because of all the missing bodies or bloodshed. That didn't bother Little Zeek. Little Zeek was haunted day

and night by the guy he called the flying S.O.B. He couldn't get that song out of his head, "Sometimes I dream that he is me, like Mike, I want to be like Mike." Ant rared back with a loud laugh.

Watts didn't want to, but he had to laugh. "Ant, please!"

Hops gave Ant a thumbs up.

Felicia smiled but remained silent.

Ant gathered himself, "Little Zeek couldn't get away from it. Michael Jordan was on every television station. Wall Street's goal was to have Jordan selling some product every minute of the day, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. So, every 60 seconds, Jordan was in your home selling something. It got so bad for Little Zeek. I'm told he destroyed every television set in his home. But it didn't matter because he had the same dream playing on a loop when he closed his eyes at night, Spike Lee asking, "Money, is it the shoes? Jordan replied, "No, Morris"... "Money, it's got to be the shoes!..." "No, Morris."

The room was filled with a burst of laughter from Felicia.

Watts and Hops shook their heads and joined the laugh.

"Hey, you guys are laughing, but it was bad for Little Zeek. And the only person who knew how bad it was for Little Zeek was Coach Daly. He knew what drove Little Zeek, and he knew they both had the same fear. Jordan. There was nothing they could do to stop Jordan. He was coming.

This is how bad it was for Little Zeek. In the final seconds of game seven in the Eastern Conference Finals, the fans in the Palace were rabbit. The noise from the fans almost shook the Palace off its foundation. The sideline announcers couldn't hear themselves. The Bad Boys bench was on their feet celebrating. The city of Detroit was rocking and swaying, producing tidal waves in the Detroit River. All Little Zeek had to do was inbound the ball and walk away victorious. But, unlike everyone else in the Palace and the entire population of Detroit and the surrounding metropolis, Little Zeek didn't hear the celebratory noise; he heard the sound of helicopter propellers getting louder and louder. *Damn! It's that flying S.O.B.* Little Zeek inbounding the ball to Larry Legend instead of Joe Dumars. And the Palace fell graveyard silent. The Detroit River leveled out as the citizens of Detroit and its surrounding metropolis were in a state of shock and disbelief."

The look on Watts' face donned that dreadful day in the Palace as he shook his head in disbelief.

Felicia was in awe, "Ant, you are a great storyteller. You have a way with words."

Hop's face also reflected nostalgia, "that was bad, man." he managed to say, "but you have to give to Little Zeek, he bounced back with blood in his eyes."

FIFTEEN

"Despite all the violence, the gore of bloodshed, and missing bodies at the hands of Little Zeek and the Bad Boys, the NBA Fantastic Beacon was still shining brighter than ever. The water cooler talk was dominated by NBA conversations. The barbershop talk was all NBA. Television commercials continued to entertain most and aggravate Little Zeek. The NBA hype machine was winning with record-breaking ratings. The media was ramping up, plucking up unknown sports journalists from around the globe to help feed America's appetite for NBA information, topics, drama, and storylines. In anticipation of the upcoming 1987 - 1988 season, America was near hysteria."

Felicia's eyebrows raised, "Ant, please tell me you are exaggerated a bit."

Ant raised his hand to stop Watts and Hops from commenting. "Felicia, if I am, it's not by much."

"Really?" Felicia replied with a half-smile of disbelief.

Ant locked a serious eye on Felicia. "The previous year, America had got what they wanted. A Celtic and Lakers NBA finals. That was it! The only ticket that seemed to satisfy America's appetite. And it appeared to America they were back on track to the epic Bird and Magic showdowns. See, the last three out of four NBA finals were Lakers and the Celtics matchups. The one year that Houston interrupted the status quo left the American people with a disappointed attitude. So, America got over it and chalked it up as a fluke. Needing to believe that we were back on track to seeing the Celtics and the Lakers, Magic and Bird, Kareem and Parish, Big Game James and McHale, Cooper and DJ, Scott and Ainge. Those are the names of the players America wanted and expected to see and hear in June. Nothing else would do. Really, one could argue that Magic and Bird spoiled the American people." Ant clapped his hand with a smirk.

Hops glared at Ant, "I never thought about that, but I see your point."

Watts nodded in agreement with overcast eyes.

Felicia locked eyes with Ant, "So are you saying 1987 and 1988 were the apex of this 80s basketball phenomenon?"

Ant maintained eye contact with Felicia. He flashed a crooked smile. "No, I'm saying America wanted what it wanted but got the unexpected changing of the guard."

Felicia held eye contact but remained silent.

"And to add insult to injury, America would never get what it so desperately craved - A Magic and the Lakers versus Bird and the Celtics NBA Finals. Little Zeek made sure of that."

Watts perked up, "say that again," he said with a Chesire grin.

And leaned back and crossed his legs. "Little Zeek and the Bad Boys had all off-season to think about how close they came to finally getting past Bird and his Bean Town boys. So they started the 1987-1988 season with an Eastern Conference rematch in mind. Little Zeek and the Bad Boys beat down opponents with no mercy on their way to the 1988 playoffs on a collision course that met at their impassable nemesis, the Boston Celtics."

Hops chimed in, "But this time, it wouldn't be easy," as he signaled the waitress for another round.

Watts smiled, "That doesn't matter; the only thing that matters is who won."

Felicia cut an eye at Ant.

Ant smiled, "They are referring to the first of the epic battles between Jordan and the Bull and Little Zeek and the Bad boys."

Felicia said, "His Airness, correct."

"The one and only," Ant replied. "This was the first time Jordan made it to the semi-finals; the previous two years, he was eliminated in the first round."

Watts smacked the table, "That's what Isaiah has been trying to tell y'all!"

Hops said, "Damn, man, calm down. Hell, the man made it to the playoff playing one-on-five! Watts, that is not losing."

"Thank Hops," Ant said, shaking his head at Watts.

"Whatever. Facts are facts." Watts rebuttal.

Felicia remained silent. She never took her eyes off Ant.

Ant said, "Moving right along." leaning back as the waitress reset the table with a fresh round. "To this day, I believe Little Zeek and the Bad Boys saved their worse acts of violence for a time such as this. I personally witness assault crimes being committed on the basketball court. I mean prison-time offenses being committed on national television. I mean, Hebrew slaves or runaway slaves didn't get beat like Little Zeek and the Bad Boys beat Jordan and his windy city boys."

Felicia's eyes tighten.

"There you go..." Watts growled.

"It was pretty bad, Watts," Hops interjected.

Felicia finally spoke, "It's hard for me to believe that type of violence was allowed on national TV without repercussion."

"Exactly!" Watts yelled.

"Like I said, Little Zeek and the Bad Boys had the ability and skills to dish out violence and entertain simultaneously," Ant said calmly.

"Violence is violence and inexcusable in any form," Felicia stated.

Ant smirked, "Be it as it may, it happened, and America witnessed it."

Hops eased in with a softer approach. "Felicia, we all agree that there is never an excuse for violence. All I can say is Little Zeek and the Bad Boys got away with it, but they couldn't get away with it today."

Watts remained silent as he observed the strained look on Felicia's face.

Ant settled in, "Well after Jordan and the Bulls limped away with their wounded, Little Zeek and the Bad Boys prepared for their Eastern Conference rematch with Bird and his Bean Town boys. In the first game of the series, it was evident that Zeek and the Bad Boys didn't have to inflict any violence on Bird and his Bean Town boys. Father time had done it for them. In one year, The Boston Celtics were a shell of the team America had grown to love. Bird was forced to relinquish the Eastern territory to Little Zeek, Mr. Isiah Thomas."

"Hey, you have to give it to Little Zeek; against all odds, he did it his way and paid off in big dividends."

Felicia spoke without hesitation, "but at what cost?"

Awkward silence.

"Using violence to achieve an expected end, hmm, I can think of a few individuals that took that route," Felicia said without a smile.

Ant said nothing as he locked eyes with Felicia.

Watts chuckled, "I think that is a little over the top. We are talking about sports. I don't think Little Zeek had plans to take over the world."

Laughter broke the awkward silence.

Felicia brought her laughter to a close, "I sure hope not."

More light laughter.

Ant never took his eyes off Felicia. "I didn't say anything because many people shared your sentiments. For instance, the commissioner, some of his NBA executives, and the majority of America were depending on Magic and the Lakers to put Little Zeek and the Bad Boys in their place."

"So there you go, it's not just me," Felicia stated with a wide grin."

Light chuckles filled the room.

Hops took a long sip, "And Magic and the Laker did not disappoint."

SIXTEEN

"You know Little Zeek didn't take losing to Magic in the Finals too well. Some thought the game was fixed." Watts stated.

Hops gave Watts a sideways glare. "Don't be ridiculous. It was a fair fight, and the better team won."

"Wait a minute," Felicia turned to Hops, "are you saying the violence didn't work?"

"That tried, but it didn't work. Magic had too many weapons at his disposal." Hops joked.

"Yeah, right, his most valuable weapons were the refs." Watts chuckled.

Ant stayed neutral. "I'm not sure, but I will say this, Little Zeek and the Bad Boys returned with a vengeance. Past the halfway mark of the 1988-1989 season, the commissioner and the NBA executives paced the floor, scratched their heads, and drank themselves into a stupor because the violence had increased to epic proportions and the body count was off the chart. Their worst fear was coming to fruition - spending the month of June in Detroit at the Palace because Little Zeek and the Bad Boys seemed unbeatable."

Little Zeek had his mind set on winning it all in 1989. As the story goes, a few weeks before the 1989 playoff started, Little Zeek took another ride down into the heart of the concrete jungle listening to his favorite song, Marvin Gayes' Trouble Man."

A wide smile appeared on Felicia's face, "Do I get another performance."

Ant responded with a wink. "But this particular time, the city was awake, hustling, and bustling under the mid-March overcast. Little Zeek cruised his Benz through the slushy inner-city streets, gliding past stubborn patches of dirty snow. He gave the occasional nod and waved at individuals who normally required a pass from outsiders. Of course, Little Zeek had a ghetto pass because they consider him as one of their own, ruthless, and violent." Ant chuckled as he noticed Felicia hanging on his every word.

"Once again, Little Zeek returned to a familiar environment to solve a problem. Because he didn't want to leave anything to chance. After turning many corners through the concrete jungle, Little Zeek arrived at a solution - A cutter! He turned down his music, put his car phone on speaker, and called his childhood friend, Mark "Ziggy" Acquire. Ziggy and Little Zeek grew up in the same neighborhood. He, too, knew the workings of gangs and how they worked. Like

Little Zeek, Ziggy managed to stay away from gang life. They spent their time together on the basketball court, which paid off big dividends for both. Ziggy was the number one pick in the 1981 draft, and Little Zeek was the number two pick in the same draft. Ziggy was drafted by the Dallas Mavericks. Despite being on a losing team, Ziggy became a prolific scorer in the NBA. Ziggy would stab you a few times, then cut you up and laugh while you are bleeding. I'm told their conversation went something like this:

Zeek: What's up my man

Ziggy: What up with you, Zeek?

Zeek: I'm good, could be better.

Ziggy: I don't see how, y'all doing it, look like y'all headed back to the finals.

Zeek: Getting there is not enough, I got to win it.

Ziggy: I hear you, my man. At least you can get there, hell man, I can't even sniff the playoff!

Zeek: I hear you. But I can't live with the same results. We should have won it last year.

Ziggy: Hey man come on...it was a good series and you're talking about Magic and the Lakers.

Zeek: And that's my point. They are going to get all the calls. The commissioner is going to make sure of that. Man, I'm tired of this shit, fuck that smiling motherfucker, fuck that flying son-of-bitch and fuck that backstabbing commissioner!

Ziggy: Whoa, my man. Silence. Talk to me, Zeek; what's really going on?

Zeek: I'll tell you what's going on... these S.O.Bs are constantly trying to disrespect me. And I can't have that. And I'm not taking no more of their shit. I'm taking it all this year!

Ziggy: Hey man, y'all have a good chance of winning it all.

Zeek: I can't leave it to chance. I have to make sure. That is why I called you. "Pack your bags my man. I need you by my side on this one. Let's show these S.O.Bs where we come from and what we are made of.

Ziggy: Silence. Come on Zeek... that would be nice...but you got Dantely and you know he is not going anywhere. Plus, there is no way these sorry bastards down here is going let me out of my misery.

Zeek: Fuck that! Are you with me or not?

Ziggy: Silence. "You know I'm with Zeek but...".

Zeek: Pack your bags, I'll take care of the rest. I'll see you in a couple of days.

Call ended.

“Zeek called the Palace to confirm that McCloskey and Daly were there and to inform them he was on his way. After pleasantries, Little Zeek wasted no time telling them what he wanted and needed to close the deal on the Larry O'Brien trophy.

Daly rubbed his head, "Zeek, are you sure? Adrian Dantley is one of the best in the post."

McCloskey jumped up from his desk and began to pace. "Zeek, the playoffs start in a few weeks and now you want to dump Adrian? Zeek, I have always given you what you ask for, but this I can't do."

Daly chimed in, "Zeek, you wanted someone to play alongside Laimbeer, and we got you Mahorn. Then you want the unknown guard from Mcneese State, and we got him. Then you wanted us to trade down to get Salley, and we got him. Then we passed up a slew of talent to get the Worm. And they all panned out for us. But this is crazy."

Zeek sat quietly until they were done telling him why they weren't going to do it. Then Zeek took a page from Paul McCarthy and John Lennon, the leaders of the Beatles. Three years after the Beatles invaded America, John Lennon and Paul McCarthy walked into their manager's office and told him Ringo Star was out. Of course, he thought they had lost their minds. He argued that Ringo Star was one of the best drummers in the world. Their manager argued they could not find a comparable drummer if one existed. And without hesitation, Lennon and McCarthy replied in unison, 'Ringo is out. He is not a Beattle.' Evidently, their manager grasped the concept and conceded. Ringo Star was out, and the rest is history.

Zeek politely said, "Adrian Dantley is out; he is not a Bad Boy."

Chuck Daly stared deep into Zeek's eyes. He nodded in agreement as if a light had gone off. He turned to McCloskey who seemed to grasp the same light. Then Little Zeek drove his pitch home. "Dantley is one of the best to ever do it, but to quote Michael Franks, "What good is your music if it's not in my song."

“And just like that, Adrian Dantley was out, and Ziggy was in.”

“With that trade, Zeek and the Bad Boys marched through the playoffs, leaving a trail of destruction on their way to the Eastern Conference Finals against Jordan and the Bulls. With the Jordan Rule in full effect, His Airness and the windy city boys were beaten into shock. Jordan and right-hand man, Pippen, took slave-like beatings again. Jordan's enforcer, Horace Grant, was corralled and beaten into a shell of himself. And the rest of the windy city boys did their best under the circumstances. But once again, America witnessed a massacre at the hands of Little

Zeek and the Bad Boys. And once again, the commissioner was livid, threatening to call the DA's office and press assault charges. And once again, Jordan and his windy city boys had to tend to their wounded and bury their dead." Ant shook his head and laughed.

Felicia tight-eyed Ant, "That was just horrible and inexcusable."

Ant shrugged his shoulders. "Well, once again, America and the commissioner trusted Magic and the Lakers to put Little Zeek and the Bad Boys in their place. But this time Magic and the Lakers couldn't deliver. Little Zeek and the Bad Boys marched through Magic and the showtime Lakers on their way to hoist the Larry O'Brien trophy for the first time."

Watts flashed a wide grin. "It was a long time coming, but we knew a change would come?"

Hops laughed, "Sam Cooke. I see you. But Little Zeek hoisted the Larry O'Brien trophy with fear because he knew His Airness was coming back for revenge."

Watts raised his voice, "You guys kill me trying to throw shade on my man, Little Zeek."

Ant chimed in, "Nobody has to do that. Little Zeek takes care of that himself."

Ant and Hops shared a hearty laugh.

"Now there you go," Watts grunted at Ant.

Ant took a long sip, "let me count the ways my man. See, nobody is trying to discredit Zeek he got that covered. And I'm going to give you a couple solid examples. One, Zeek had too much blood on his hands and too many missing bodies to try to pull the shit he tried to pull after he finally hoisted the Larry O'Brien. History is riddled with gangsters and gang leaders who, at some point, try to go legit. They pretend to clean up their act and pass themselves off as legitimate businessmen. And you can trace that behavior back before the days of Al Capone. And Little Zeek was no different. Immediately after they won their first Chip, He sat on the podium in front of the American people and stated that the Bad Boys were no more. They were returning to the Detroit Pistons and would like to be referred to as the Detroit Pistons moving forward."

Ant and Hops burst out laughing.

Watts smacked the table, "he said that because he lost one of the tap-tap twins, Rich MaHorn to expansion."

"If you believe that, I have a good deal for you, rock bottom price for the Statue of Liberty."

The loud laughter startled Felicia and the staff.

Watts wave off Ant. "whatever man."

Ant brought his laugh to a close, "Look man, it was bad enough he tried to back track and bamboozling the American people by claiming to denounce the Bad Boys moniker. Because Little Zeek didn't mean it. He Had no intention of changing his or his team's behavior. And just like Nobody supported him when he said that shit about Bird, nobody believed him, not even himself. Little Zeek was a clever little guy; he was trying to get the world at large to look one way while he and his boy commit bloody murder on their way to winning back-to-back Larry O'Brien trophies."

SEVENTEEN

“Leading up to the 1990-1991 season, the Zen master, Phil Jackson went to work on Jordan and the Bulls. After they tended to their wounded and buried their dead, they finally got the message. That they were playing a sport, but it wasn't basketball. Some kind of hybrid sport, a mixture of football, rugby, boxing, karate, and hockey. Once they accepted that fact, the tide turned. They went to work. They hit the weights so they would be able to withstand the brutality of this hybrid sport that Little Zeek and the Bad Boys invented.

Every rep Jordan took, he uttered, ‘I will never lose to those thugs again.’ Every rep Scottie took, he uttered, ‘I will never be rendered catatonic again.’ Every rep Horace took, he uttered, ‘never again will they coral me and beat me like a slave.’ The entire team put in the work.

At the beginning of the season, the Zen master made sure Jordan and the Bulls understood that the team they would be facing in the Eastern Conference Final was no ordinary team; the Bad Boys were a different animal. He made it clear, "You don't fight a pig in a pigsty; you will lose every time because the pig loves and flourishes in the slop of the pigsty. So, this time we are not getting in the pigsty; we are going to mind f#\$k them out of the pigsty and stump a mudhole in that ass!" And that they did!"

Hops cosigned, "Yeah, I must say, Jordan and the Bulls got their revenge with class and style."

Watts, "I see you guys decided to exaggerate a bit."

"I'm afraid not," Ant said with a sinister laugh. He clapped his hands, leaned toward Felicia, and continued. "This would be their third consecutive Eastern Conference Final. With the world watching, Jordan demoralized Little Zeek in front of his hometown, Chicago. Jordan and the Bulls handled Little Zeek and the Bad Boys like they were a High School team. The Jordan rule was ineffective because the hits that typically knocked Jordan out of the air couldn't reach him. He was flying at a higher altitude."

"They returned to Detroit, where most of America thought Little Zeek and the Bad Boy would get some type of revenge. The commissioner mandated extra ambulances and medical personnel in Michigan be at the Palace for games three and four. But Jordan was not having it. Jordan and the Bulls skull drug Little Zeek and the Bad Boys up and down the Palace the entire game three. In game four, they ended Little Zeek and the Bad Boys. They hog-tied them and then gutted

them from the tooter to the hooter. Jordan stood on Little Zeek's head and said, "Now! The Bad Boys are no more!"

Hops grinned at Watts, "The word on the street was the commissioner had a party that lasted a week!"

Once again, laughter filled the room; even Watts had to laugh.

"Now, you tell me, did Jordan take everything from that man and change the course of his legacy?" Ant asked through laughter.

"Whatever man, Jordan didn't take the two Larry Os," Watts said as he threw up the pieces sign.

Hops chimed in, "It was the six-word cabosh that sealed the deal on the trajectory of Little Zeek's legacy.

Watts glared at Hops, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Ant jumped up from the table and pointed at Hops, "IF HE PLAYS, I'M NOT PLAYING."

Hops jumped up to give Ant a high five.

Watts' eyes enlarged. " Yeah, that was BS. He should have been on the Dream team."

"You're right, my point exactly...the man took everything from Zeek!"

Felicia was speechless as the guys continued to banter. Then she spoke, "And all this over a game of basketball."

Ant, Hops and Watts responded in unison. "No, 1980s basketball!"

EIGHTEEN

Dr. Parker spent the next couple of days at home, dissecting the recordings, organizing her notes, making phone calls, fact-checking, and cross-referencing. She studied several YouTube videos on players and NBA games of the 1980s. Most importantly, Dr. Parker researched and studied the phenomena of 1980 NBA fans. She was convinced that something happened in the 80s, something that transcended the game of basketball. But what?

She sat quiet and still for several moments. Her eyes shifted from the stack of papers on her desk to ESPN's top 15 players list on her computer screen. She picked up her cell phone and strolled through her contacts to find the number of an old friend, Dr. Walter Blatz, a research scientist heading up the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) investigations for the United States Department of Defense.

Dr. Parker disguised her voice. "Good morning, old friend?"

"Good morning, and who do I have the pleasure of speaking to at this early hour? The pleasant, stoic voice on the phone answered.

"This is a very old friend of yours, and I'm quite disappointed you don't remember me."

The stoic voice grew stern. "I'm sorry, but it's possible you have the wrong number. But I'm sure if you hang up and call the numbers out loud as you dial them, you will get the party you seek."

Dr. Parker broke her disguise with a friendly laugh, "Still just as condescending as you were in college...just stop it, Wally!" she requested with a laugh.

Dr. Blatz's eyebrows came together at the sound of "Wally." Only one person ever called him Wally or was permitted to call him Wally. "No way, Felicia? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me old friend..."

"You don't say. Wow, my horoscope told me to expect a surprise in the near future."

"Come on, Wally, don't tell me you are still into that sort of stuff."

Felicia, listen to the stars; they will tell you everything you need to know. By the way, congratulations on your Nobel Prize.

"Why thank you Wally, and the same to you. I read your book", she paused, searching for the words, "Ahh...it was interesting."

"Just interesting?" Dr. Blatz laughed. If you had any idea of what is happening above us in space, you wouldn't be so coy, Felicia."

Some things never change, she thought, *I better stop him before he goes on a two-hour rant and rave about space, UFOs, and whatever else he thinks is up there.* "Wally that is why I reached out to you."

"What? Why?"

"I wanted to ask you about UFO sightings."

Wally lost his stoic demeanor. "What? Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that the Nobel Prize winner is now a believer in UFOs?"

"Wally, really? She joked. "Actually, I'm more interested in the behaviors and attitudes of the people who claimed they saw a UFO."

Dr. Blatz was silent. "Hmm...Felicia, that is a broad inquiry. You know UFO sightings go back thousands of years."

Dr. Parker rolled her eyes, *damn Wally, do you have to go there.* "Well, can you tell me if there is some kind of common thread?"

Dr. Blatz went silent. "Felicia if you tell me why you need this information maybe I can better assist you."

Dr. Parker closed her eyes as if she knew how he would respond, "Wally, I'm working on a project about the phenomenon of the NBA in the 80s and its effect on society and..."

Before she could finish, Dr. Blatz laughed loudly. "Are you kidding me! The great doctor is interested in UFOs and sports! Excuse me, Felicia, are you having some kind of midlife crisis?" he snorted a laugh.

Dr. Parker pictured him pushing up his wired-framed glasses as he laughed at her. But she knew how to reel him in and move him into action. "Wally, I'm glad you find my research amusing," she said sarcastically with an ulterior motive.

Dr. Blatz rubbed the few strands of hair on his head, "Ok, Felicia, I needed that laugh. But in all seriousness, you are a long way from the matters of the mind, don't you think?"

Perfect, she thought as she smiled. "Maybe so, Wally, but something unexplainable happened. Anyway, maybe you're right. But hey, if you can't help me, can you point me in the right direction? I don't know, maybe someone who has the skills or know-how about UFO sightings as it relates to my research."

Dr. Blatz halted his chuckles but remained silent as he gathered his thoughts.

Dr. Parker put her hand over her mouth to contain her laugh as she pictured him turning red and fidgety. *I got him!*

Dr. Blatz's voice returned deep and serious. "Felicia, no one knows more than me on the subject of UFOs or UFO sightings."

Dr. Parker was unable to respond as she held her mouth tight, with laughing tears trickling down her face.

Dr. Blatz face turned ruby red, "Felicia I will get back with you in a couple of days on this. I have to go now.

Before Dr. Parker could mumble thank you, Dr. Blatz ended the call. Dr. Parker immediately released her laugh. She reached for a tissue to soak up the tears. "Same old Wally, he can't stand the idea that someone just might know more than him about UFOs and that space crap." She said to herself. "But if it's something there, Wally will find it."

Dr. Parker settled down and returned to her research. Google, YouTube, ChatGPT, Copilot, etc. After a few hours of focused research and study, her cell phone vibrated.

She smiled at the caller id, "Hello Allen, how are you?"

"Hello, Dr. Parker. Is this a good time to talk?"

"Yes, what's going on?"

"I want to run something by you, but first, how did it go in Detroit?" Allen asked.

"Detroit was fantastic! Those three gentlemen were amazing, entertaining, and just great company. I didn't want the interview to end. Ant is such a great storyteller and animated." Dr. Parker bragged.

Allen nodded, "Great. So, is your research going as planned, or should I say, is it coming together?"

Dr. Parker considered the question, "Allen, I'm really not sure as of yet. But I will say this: I whole heartily believe there is something there... I just don't know what."

Allen pondered her statement, "Well, that is an excellent segue into the reason for this call. I have another gentleman that wants to talk to you.

Dr. Parker perked up, "Really?"

"Yes. This gentleman will give you a different perspective. He is an ex-NBA owner."

"Really?"

"He sold the franchise a couple years ago. When I told him what you were doing. He immediately responded, 'I want in, set up a meeting, please.'"

Dr. Parker listened intently, "Really?"

"His name is Thurston Brooks. The team had been in their family since the NBA began."

"Really? And he just sold it?" Dr. Parker quizzed.

"Yep, he said enough was enough. He said he was exhausted with the game, whatever that meant."

"Hmm...when and where does he want to meet."

"Thurston would like to meet with you the day after tomorrow. His private jet will be waiting for you at the airport. You will fly into San Diego, and a helicopter will take you out to his Yacht."

"What?" Dr. Parker said with skepticism.

Allen smirked, "Yeah, he is somewhere out in the Pacific, just him, the misses, and their staff of course. You'll be fine. I think Thurston will be very helpful."

"Thanks Allen, you have been so helpful."

"No problem. I will text and email you of the particulars."

NINETEEN

The meeting on the Yacht

As the helicopter descended, the morning sun cast its golden net over the ocean, trapping the mild waves in a shimmering light. Dr. Parker stepped out onto the landing pad of the massive Yacht, as it held steady in the Pacific Ocean's embrace. The vessel, a gleaming white titan against the vast blue, was more akin to a floating palace than a super yacht.

Thurston emerged from the shadow of the upper deck, a figure of undeniable authority, clad in casual nautical attire. "Dr. Parker! Welcome aboard," he announced, with an outstretched hand. His voice smooth and confident.

Dr. Parker returned the greeting as she took in the expansive sea that stretched infinitely.

Thurston escorted Dr. Parker down the winding marble stairs to the second flybridge deck, where an elegant dinette table was set for two. The crisp-dressed waiter and waitress stood off to the side, willingly and waiting for Thurston's command.

"Can I offer you some breakfast or anything?"

"No, thank you. Actually, I had a bite earlier on your Jet this morning." Dr. Parker removed her off-white sweater that she wore just in case it was breezy. But the morning weather was perfect; a slight warm breeze drifted off the Pacific, the glistening sun halfway to top center. Her white pantsuit with a sleeveless sheer blouse was perfect.

"Great. I hope your flight was fine." Thurston said as he waited for Dr. Parker to be seated before he sat down.

Dr. Parker settled in. "The flight was fine," she dipped her head to the side, reaching for her topped-off water glass, "but the helicopter ride was a little unnerving."

Thurston stared in surprise. "Hmm, that is a new chopper. It should have been a smooth flight."

"No, No, it wasn't the flight; it was the water. Shortly after takeoff, I saw no land, just water." Dr. Parker explained.

Thurston's face evened out, "Yeah, I guessed that would take some getting used to."

After the small talk, Thurston wasted no time. "Dr. Parker, may I ask why you decided to take on such a challenge. A challenge, I might add, that probably won't have a solution or favorable outcome or no outcome at all?"

Dr. Parker did a quick self-check because she was uncomfortable with the piercing eyes and stern face locked on her, waiting for an answer. *Okay, get it together, and don't let this guy intimidate you.* She folded her hand on the table and leaned in with direct eye contact. "Well, Sir..."

"Thurston will be fine," he said without any eye movement.

Dr. Parker cataloged his demeanor: "Well, Thurston, I'm sure you know who I am and what I do, or at least the information that Google has provided you about me."

Still no movement from Thurston.

This is going to be a strange interview. "The challenge for me is the connection between the game of basketball and the world at large. The psyche, if you will. I'm convinced that something unexplainable occurred. Or maybe it's just me searching for something that doesn't exist. Either way, I'm down the rabbit hole now, and I must see where it leads me." Dr. Parker said as she leaned back, surprised at what she saw.

Thurston smirked a smile. "Interesting. So let me ask you this, if you could get out of the rabbit hole right now, would you?"

Without hesitation, Dr. Parker answered, "No." She didn't elaborate on her answer. Her psychological mind wanted to get control of the interview. "Now, can I ask you a question?"

Thurston's eyes closed a small centimeter. "Sure, why not?"

"I'm curious, why did you sell your team that has been in your family for so many years?" Dr. Parker took a sip of water. *It's hard to get a read on this guy,*

Thurston reached into his pocket and pulled out a bottle of high-blood-pressure pills and a bottle of Xanax. He placed them on the table, "These are just my portables; at one time, it was possible to mistake my office for a pharmacy."

Dr. Parker's eyes dropped to the bottles on the table, then quickly back to Thurston: "I don't understand. You seemed to be in excellent shape, and you look very healthy." She took in his medium-built frame.

Thurston picked up the two prescription bottles off the table and handed them to Dr. Parker. "Look at the date on those bottles."

"My God, they are two years old!" she said as she pondered his mental state.

Thurston responded to the concerned look on her face, "Don't worry, I don't take them anymore. I carry them with me as a reminder of how the game and the business of the game I

loved so much were killing me. And a reminder that I got a second chance." Thurston lowered his eyes, "Basically, I was a dead man walking, over a damn game of basketball."

Dr. Parker's mind shifted to her profession; she was in psychology mode. She questioned Thurston's mental state. *This man is nothing like the guy I googled. He is on the verge of... I dare not think it.* Well, Thurston, it seems like you have recovered very well."

Thurston raised his eyes and stared at Dr. Parker for a moment of uncomfortable silence. "Dr. Parker, have you ever had an experience that was like nothing you had ever experienced before? And after it was over, you did everything in your power to recapture that experience? Use all your time, resources, and energy to recapture that moment, that experience, but it alludes you at every turn?" He continued to stare deep into Dr. Parker's eyes as he waited for a response.

Dr. Parker didn't blink or look away. She needed to figure out where Thurston was going or what he was up to. She wasn't sure, but she knew she couldn't show weakness, empathy, or sympathy. She folded her hands on the table in a professional manner, her huge diamond wedding ring gleaming like the ocean, casting a beam directly into Thurston's sightline. She leaned in, "Well, Thurston, it seems like you have had quite an ordeal."

"Dr. Parker, at one time, my family owned a baseball team, a hockey team, a football team, and a basketball team. I've been in the sports business all my life. And I loved it. I've experienced the highs and lows of this business. The great and historical moments of this business. Exciting seasons in one sport or another. But I have never experienced anything like the 80s and the 90s in the NBA. Nothing! I mean nothing has come close." Thurston said as his eyes drifted out to sea. "Dr. Parker, I have never been a druggie, maybe an alcoholic at times, but never a druggie. But I've had family members, and I've known many people over the years who were, and some still are, addicted to crack cocaine. And from what they tell me and what I observed, the drug keeps you chasing. Hmm...he shot a quick eye at Dr. Parker, "The NBA of 80s & 90s has had a very similar effect on me, as well as many other NBA owners. I can't tell you how many brainstorming meetings and conferences we assembled with top-notch marketing firms all geared around trying to recapture that magical time in NBA history of the 80s and 90s." His shoulders dropped a bit as his eyes drifted back out to sea. "But nothing worked; we chased it and came up short, very short, time and time again."

Dr. Parker didn't want to interrupt his train of thought. With her eyes locked on Thurston, she leaned to the side and opened her briefcase without making a sudden movement as she observed

him with a distant look on his face. She carefully pulled her notepad and recorder out of her briefcase. She held them in her hand momentarily before placing them on the table. *I don't want to lose this guy. I was right; something unexplainable happened between the world and the '80s NBA.*

TWENTY

The ocean was calm and a sight to behold. A fresh ocean breeze drifted across the deck as the orange sun made its presence known. The waiter punched the remote to slightly advance the shade cover to combat the glistening orange sun as it inched closer to top center.

"Thurston, my recorder has video capability. I can turn off the video if you like."

Thurston nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders. "No need to do that. One more camera won't hurt."

"Pardon." Dr. Parker quizzed with tight eyes.

"Look around, Dr. Parker. There are cameras everywhere. You can't be too cautious when you're at sea."

Dr. Parker smirked and nodded. *Cautious or paranoid. She* decided not to take any notes, she let the recorder do the work. She folded her hands with both elbows on the table as she studied Thurston, her psychological mind reasoning and deducing: *this guy needs and wants my undivided attention, he wants someone to hear his story, he wants to get something off his chest. Thurston, I will be that someone.*

Thurston leaned back and placed his right foot on his left knee. "The thing about chasing something uncatchable is that you don't know it's uncatchable until the chase is over. When you are exhausted and depleted, the agony of defeat consumes you. That is a horrible place to be Dr. Parker." He grimaced with his eyes still locked on the glistening Pacific.

Dr. Parker sat still and remained quiet as she listened intently and observed Thurston, who appeared to have been transported to a far or imaginary world.

"It took me twenty years to realize I would never catch it, and it couldn't be duplicated. Yeah, the post 80s and 90s presented many great players and teams. And by all means, I would never disrespect the post 80s and 90s players and teams. Some of those players and teams were damn good; they even had a couple of dynasty teams. But all they did was give us false hope. No fault of theirs. Something was missing. We spent an insane amount of resources on marketing the NBA only to see the rating drop substantially, never able to come close to the rating of the 80s and 90s. And this, I didn't understand because players were coming into the league with exceptional talent and skills. Exciting players, exciting teams' hell, they were good and fun to

watch. But in that, Dr. Parker lies the paradox. Why didn't the modern game compare? What happened to the magic? The post 80 and 90s players are more athletic, some are exceptional basketball players. What the hell were we missing?"

Dr. Parker had a few questions and a few things she wanted to say, but she opted to remain quiet and engaged as Thurston unburdened himself.

Thurston uncrossed his legs and turned to face Dr. Parker. "After years of chasing, implementing one business strategy after another, one marketing campaign after another, draft pick after draft pick, superstar after superstar, anointing the next savior, assembling super teams, and countless sleepless nights, I finally got the answer. And at that moment, I knew we would never catch it or experience it again. And at that moment, I decided I was out. I put the team up for sale the very next day!"

Dr. Parker dropped her hands flat on the table, "just like that? *I understand the importance of being decisive, but that seemed a little extreme and irrational*, she thought as she witnessed Thurston flash a smile that resembled the man she had googled.

Thurston signaled to the waiter for a fresh pitcher of water for the table. "You may think my decision was irrational, but when you know you know. And I knew." He waited for the waiter to place the fresh water glasses and pitcher on the table and remove the old ones. "How about a mimosa, Dr. Parker?"

"I don't mind if I do, thanks Thurston." Dr. Parker said with a pleasant smile. *His entire demeanor has changed. Now I see the power and confidence. Hmm...is he a scitso?...or does the unexplainable just have that effect...interesting*, she thought.

Thurston told the waiter to bring a couple large mimosas. He looked at Dr. Parker, "See, it happened to me like this. We were at our owners' meeting a few months before the highly anticipated and televised all-star game featuring a half-time event introducing the top 75 players of all time. It was to be a big event. We, the owners didn't pick the players, but we had the list. And we didn't meet to discuss the list. The list was really an afterthought, placed at the bottom of our agenda. Anyway, before the conclusion of our meeting, the list was put on the big screen. The conversations started, the drinks flowed, and memory lane was unavoidable." A pleasant look covered Thurston's face as the waiter sat two large mimosas on the table. "Dr. Parker, you are going to love this." He took a deep sip, "Ahh."

"It's delicious, Thurston. Fruitier than I expected." Dr. Parker confirmed.

"My special recipe," he jokingly boasted. "I have a lunch recipe for salmon that you will beg me for." He joked as he signaled to the waiter to advance the shade covering.

Wow, what a turnaround! I guess this is the gentlemen's side of this complex, man.

Thurston rubbed his hands together, "Okay, where was I? Oh yeah. As I studied the list of the 75 greatest players of all time, the conversations in the room faded from my consciousness. It was almost like I was having an out-of-body experience. And for a moment in time, it was just me and the list. The list began to transpose, sorting into three columns. One column formed the list of players who had played pre-80s & 90s. The second column listed the players who played in the 80s and 90s. The third column listed the players who played post-80s & 90s. Not ranked, just separated.

I observed the players on the list pre-80s & 90s. A list of players I admired as a kid. There was Russell, Chamberlain, Havilchek, West, Frazier, Reed, Gervin, Robertson, Baylor, just to name a few. They were outstanding athletes and superstars, exciting and fun to watch. Then I looked at the post-80s & 90s list of Lebron, Durant, Curry, Paul, Wade, Westbrook, Hardin, just to name a few. They are superb athletes and superstars, exciting and fun to watch. Then I examined the list of the players that played in the 80s & 90s - Jordan, Magic, Bird, Thomas, Barkley, Wilkins, Montcrief, Shaq, Weber, Kobe, Iverson, Pippen, Duncan, Ewing, Olajuwon, Miller, and the list goes on." He took a deep sip. He scanned Dr. Parker's facial features; he took in her hair resting just above her shoulders and admired her professionalism. He pointed to his temple with a smile. "Then a question popped into my head - what was the difference? And just like that Dr. Parker, it hit me like a ton of Bricks!"

Dr. Parker stopped as she was about to take another sip; her eyes widened...

"The pre and post 80s & 90s had players with talent, they had superstars, that had players with exceptional skills, but what they didn't have was the storylines, the back stories, and the drama!

The outburst of laughter surprised Dr. Parker. *Guards are down, he is out now.* She thought.

"See, we were looking in all the wrong places, and the answer was staring at us in the face all the time." He took another deep sip, "Because it couldn't be quantified or number crunched, we ignored the value of storylines, back stories, and the on-the-court drama." He laughed heartily. "But I got it! Oh boy, did I get it? I remember looking around at the other owners, wondering if they got it? Did they see what I saw? But I quickly realized they did not." He exhaled. "You will

probably think I'm cruel, but to this day, I haven't told the other owners that my epiphany that day was the reason I sold my team. They will probably hate me when your report comes out." He laughed out loud again.

TWENTY-ONE

Dr. Parker asked her first question, "Are storylines, backstories, and drama essential for a sport to be successful? And if so, why?"

Thurston briefly pondered the question, "Well, first, you must define success. For instance, were we barely successful monetarily, pre-80s & 90s, post-80s & 90s most definitely. Were we successful with market share? Pre-80s and 90s? definitely not; post-80 and 90s, we are dangling between second and third in market share but losing ground quickly. Were we more successful in the eyes of the American public, pre-80s and 90s no way, post-80s & 90, I would say somewhat. Now the 80s and 90s dominate every category but one. And that is monetarily. But then again I even question that, if you compare the dollar against it time."

Dr. Parker waited patiently through Thurston's moments of gazing out at the ocean.

"You see, Dr. Parker, sports is a different animal; it goes as the public goes; after all, they are the ones that pack the arena. And as you know, the American public is fickle. They lift you up to break you down. For instance, a phenomenal player comes into the league, and they love him for a few seasons, then with no warning, they start looking for dirt to bring him or her down. They root for a winning or star-studded team for a season or two, then turn on them and start rooting against them to lose. That is just the way it is in the world of sports. So, to answer your question, I really don't know. But for two decades, the 80s and 90s, the stories, the backstories and the drama in the NBA controlled the minds and thoughts of the American sports fan and non-sports fan. Those were definitely our most successful years."

Dr. Parker's antennas went up. "Excuse me, I need to jot down a few notes." She opened her notepad and jotted *the first mention of the unexplainable*. She looked at the time on her recorder and jotted down 10:48am. She decided to pry, "Thurston, we both know the American people are complex. Do you really think a sport can control their mind and thoughts?"

Thurston scanned Dr. Parker's face. *She is definitely a shrink*. He smirked, "If I looked at the history of mankind in its totality, I would say no way. But!" he gestured with an open palm, "I would have to make that claim with an asterisk. Because for twenty years, which is just a speck

on the timeline of mankind, America was mesmerized, captivated, consumed, and, yes, controlled by the NBA world and all it entailed at that time - and justifiable so. See, the NBA was given a unique blessing, a gift, to not only be shared with the world but to change the world as mankind knew it to be at that time. And like most blessings, it came in an unrecognizable form."

"As you know, mankind is aware and comfortable with its indifferences. Whether it be religion, race, politics, wealth, have and have-nots, intellectual, ignorance, appearance or what have you, it is what it is. So, when the blessing came in the form that it did. The NBA world and the world at large categorized the blessing as just another indifference in the form of an old fight between the races.

Yes, the blessing started like the story of old, Black against White, but morphed into something that can't be explained to this day. And that blessing and gift was Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. They came into the league with storylines and built-in backstories that fueled the drama and consumed the American people and, eventually, the world at large. The blessing unfolded into unity, love, respect and entertainment that hasn't been matched to this day. No, we can't explain it, but we will all admit we missed it when it was over, and we have been chasing it ever since. And to this day, none of us can really articulate what happened or how it happened." Thurston exhaled, returning his gaze from the crystal blue ocean.

Dr. Parker put her pen down, folded her hands on the table, and locked eyes with Thurston. "So, it was Bird and Magic that's responsible for the hoopla of the 80s & 90s?"

Thurston finished his mimosa. He fiddled with the fruit at the bottom of his glass with his straw. "Yes, they kicked it off, but there were many stars and co-stars along the way who contributed to the drama and came in with their own stories, backstories, and drama that somehow fit perfectly into the world the Bird and Magic had created, like Michael Jordan, Isiah Thomas..."

Dr. Parker unintentionally interrupted, "Yeah, I heard about the violent Isiah Thomas..."

Thurston released his straw, "Whoa, hold on now...."

"I'm not judging Isiah, but from what I've heard, he was a violent man, a dirty player..."

Thurston held up his right hand with a sly smirk. "Let me stop you right there."

Dr. Parker sipped her mimosa.

"Isiah got a bad rap. Yes, he was the leader of the Bad Boys, were they violent, without a doubt. But it was necessary..."

"When is violence ever necessary, Thurston?" Dr. Parker asked with tight eyebrows."

Thurston leaned in with both forearms on the table, palms opened as he spoke in a calm, smooth tone. "See, every story needs an antagonist. And let me tell you there was none better than Isiah Thomas. As you know, it's the Antagonist that moves the story forward. And little did we know at the time the NBA needed an antagonist. Without Isiah, the NBA story would've still been *Fantastic* with Magic, Bird, Jordan, and a host of other stars in the 80s, but it would not have been *unexplainable Fantastic!*" He paused to gather his thoughts as he gauged Dr. Parker's interest in the story.

"The drama and the backstories generated by Isiah and the Bad Boys were priceless to this day. And what made it so intriguing is the fact that Isiah started his career off as a protagonist, a voice and one of the faces of the league." Thurston laughed at what he was about to say. "Bam! And just like Two-face in the Batman movie, circumstances turned Isiah into an antagonist."

Dr. Parker didn't see the humor but enjoyed the story.

"I have to admit, at the time, I opposed Isiah and the Bad Boys, as did the majority of the owners. But looking back, it was a necessary evil.

Dr. Parker's eyes tightened, but she held her tongue.

Thurston responded to her demeanor with, "Dr. Parker, you had to see it, read about it, hear it, or live it. It was something to behold. The best Hollywood writers could have not scripted it better. Isiah and Bad Boys against Bird and the Boston Celtics, Isiah and the Bad Boys against Magic and the Lakers, Isiah and the Bad Boys trying to hold off Jordan and the Bulls, Isiah and Bad Boys terrorizing the league, and finally, Isiah and the Bad Boys win back-to-back championships." He shook his head. "It was something to see."

Dr. Parker didn't hesitate, "It sounds entertaining, but I don't condone violence..."

"And neither do I, Dr. Parker. But because of the circumstances, Isiah had no other choice."

Dr. Parker interjected, "Thurston, you are aware the individuals that are abusive to their kids or spouse normally blame others for their violent behavior."

Thurston playfully wagged his finger, "No, Dr. Parker, not like that. See, Isiah was kicked out, or should I say we kicked him out and replaced him with Micheal Jordan. Instead of Magic, Bird, and Isiah being the face of the league, it was Jordan, Magic, and Bird. And I must say, if

Isiah didn't do what he did, he would've been an afterthought, just another talented small point guard. But I have to give it to Isiah; he believed he was more than that and proved it. Think about it; Isiah made a way out of no way. There was nowhere for him to go. He was out. The NBA decided to go in another direction." He shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the waiter for another mimosa.

Dr. Parker waited to hear the next excuse for violence."

Thurston ignored the disdainful look on Dr. Parker's face. "But kudos to Isiah, he decided to create his own direction. The little man had moxie. I've seen a lot of players over the years who just accepted the status quo or the plans of others and played out their careers to the beat of someone else's drum. But not Isiah; he bet on himself, and he won. We all had to bow down, even the commissioner." He laughed and smacked the table, "I admire Isiah to this day. He will always be the ultimate antagonist in my book. Because, unlike most antagonists, Isiah tasted victory! Even though many has tried to serve him the agony of defeat."

TWENTY-TWO

Dr. Parker twirled her pen between her fingers as she took in the blue sea, the soft breeze, and the warm sun rays on her skin. "Okay, Thurston, even if the violence was justifiable," she made tight eye contact with Thurston, "and that is a big if. I don't think that is enough to capture the minds of the American people."

Thurston returned the stiff eye contact, "No, it's not. But see, that is the beauty, uniqueness, and mystique of the 80s and 90s NBA. It was riddled with stars who came with or created their own backstories, storylines, and drama." He pointed to the waiter for another mimosa.

Dr. Parker declined.

Thurston jumped right into it, "For instance, down in Atlanta, there was Dominique Wilkins known as the human highlight reel and his in-your-face point guard Doc Rivers pushing their opponents to the brink, only to come up short again in again. But everyone had to tune in to see the epic battles between the human highlight reel and whoever his opponent happened to be. Then there was the big fella, Pat Ewing, the toast of New York. He came into the league with high expectations and a chip on his shoulder. A chip that was still on his shoulder when he retired - mainly because of Jordan."

"Then there was the round mound of rebound, Sir Charles, Charles Barkley." He scanned Dr. Parker, "Barkley wasn't violent or a dirty player; he was just the meanest, nastiest player in the league." He paused, expecting Dr. Parker to comment, but she didn't. "Well, put it this way, just like nobody wanted to play Isiah and the Bad Boys, well, Isiah and the Bad Boys didn't want to play Sir Charles and the 76ers. Because Sir Charles gave them the business, all four quarters. And even though the outcome was a foregone conclusion, Isiah and Bad Boys had to persevere through a dogfight to get that win. And the American people loved it, so did the networks."

The waiter removed the empty glass and sat the fresh mimosa in front of Thurston.

Dr. Parker jotted on her notepad. *It's just a game of basketball. Why? How?*

Thurston took a long sip, "Dr. Parker, this next storyline will shine a bright light on the American people and NBA."

Dr. Parker leaned in, trying to discern the gap between Thurston's slight smile and the sad look in his eyes.

"In all my days, I have never seen a love relationship go to hate in .2 seconds." He shook his head.

Dr. Parker glanced at his mimosa. ".2 seconds? Thurston, that's impossible. Relationships typically decline for one reason or another before reaching the hate stage. And there are always signs. Most of the time, the signs are ignored."

Thurston leaned back with a smile plastered on his face without sad eyes. "Dr. Parker, your statement is true 99.98% of the time." He chuckled. "Listen to this. Two young big men came into the NBA with great fanfare. Ralph Sampson in 1983 and Olajuwon in 1984, both drafted by the Houston Rockets. Ralph Sampson was a clean-cut gentleman. He was loved because of his character and the fact that he stayed in college for four years and earned his degree. Well, you know most guys left college for the pros as soon as they could, a college degree was an afterthought. So, Ralph had the heart of America before he stepped foot on an NBA court. Now, Olajuwon, known as the Dream, was a Nigerian native. Developed his basketball skills to a level that earned him a scholarship at the University of Houston. As you know, the American people love rags-to-riches stories and the Dream foot the Bill.

So, these two young men came to be known as the Twin Towers. America loved them, rooted for them, and supported them through their turbulent years." He stopped and locked eyes with Dr. Parker. "Please make sure you are getting this because what happened to these guys and the Houston Rockets is unexplainable - or maybe you can explain it."

Dr. Parker checked her recorder with a tight face, her shrink mind turning, "okay I'm ready."

Thurston continued, "The American people were so tuned into the NBA during this time it was nothing short of bizarre." He paused and looked out to sea, searching for the right words, "It was as if the American people were in a 365-day pressure cooker, and pressure built every day for 365 days. On the 365th day, the pressure cooker was open, and out came the release of the Mardi Gras like celebration, tears of joy, bragging rights, and even the celebration in defeat. After the festivities were over, the American people would put themselves back into the pressure cooker to repeat the process. The American people did this every year from 1980 to 1988. Now here is the kicker, the pressure cooker could only be open under one circumstance because the American people wouldn't settle for anything else, they wanted what they wanted. The fiscal year ran from June to June. And when June came around, the American people expected and demanded the summer be kicked off with Magic and the Lakers versus Bird and Celtics in the NBA Finals.

Nothing else would do. As a matter of fact, anything else was unacceptable. The bottom line, Dr. Parker, nothing under the sun would satisfy the American people but Magic and the Lakers versus Bird and the Celtics in the NBA finals.

Dr. Parker looked at Thurston as he removed his straw and guzzled from his glass. With the same question running through her head, *How? And Why?*

Thurston held up his finger, "Hold on...remember .2 seconds. It's June 1986, and the American people were ready, boiling with anticipation, steaming with expectation. Bird and Boston Celtics were in position, Bird had his hand on the handle. Two hands had to be on the handle to open the pressure cooker, the same two hands, Magic and Bird. So, the American people were seething, the pot was shaking, and the top had to be open soon, the 365th day was approaching. Now, the American people had sentimentally rooted for the Twin Towers. But now it was time for them to get out of the way and return the way they came as far as the American people were concerned. *Okay, Twin Towers, we rooted for you, and you made it to the Western Conference Final. Yeah, hoorah, now it's over. We will see you next year.* But the Twin Towers had other plans. And it showed when they had Magic and the Lakers on the ropes. *Okay, Twin Towers, y'all showed y'all have grit, but there is no way y'all will beat Magic and the Lakers in a seven-game series.* Here is the conundrum. The score was tied with .2 seconds left in the game. Until then, the American people loved the Twin Towers and the Houston Rockets. And it goes without saying they loved Magic and the Lakers. But above all, they loved the matchup between Bird and the Celtics and Magic and the Lakers. The entire nation thought the game was going to overtime. *The Lakers will close the door on the Twin Towers and we can get out of the pressure cooker and start the festivities.* Now you know .2 seconds is not enough time to do anything."

Many people believe time stood still twice in the history of mankind. Once, when the news came over the wire that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. Two, when Ralph Sampson threw the ball toward the rim, it hit the bottom of the net. The clock read 00:00:00; time stood still as the million-dollar smile that seemed to be a permanent fixture on Magic Johnson's face was not present. And Michael Cooper's, bone seemed to have liquefied as he slurped to the floor. And at that moment, the American people were furious, and they hated the Twin Towers with a passion. Then Twin Towers didn't have a fan in the world; they were hated more than Bin Laden." He stared at Dr. Parker, ".2 seconds!"

Dr. Parker was in awe as she slowly closed her mouth.

Thurston rested his right elbow on the table, hand under chin as the breeze drifted through his silver full head of hair. “So, you see Dr. Parker, it’s possible to go from love to hate in .2 seconds.”

“Thurston, I stand corrected.” She said before finishing off her mimosa. “I’ll have another now.”

TWENTY-THREE

Thurston circled the rim of his drink with a distant look. "Dr. Parker, as great as the storylines, backstories, and drama of the 80s and 90s were, we, the American people, just can't articulate the essence of what we experienced. So, we are at the mercy of this generation that believes the last twenty-plus years have been the best and most exciting years in NBA history. And for the most part, we have conceded."

The waiter replaced the empties with fresh mimosa.

Dr. Parker noted Thurston's exuberant attitude as he began telling her the story and his melancholy attitude once he finished. "Thurston, my research tells me NBA merchandise and viewership are at an all-time high. So, I guess I don't understand, or I'm missing something..."

Thurston interrupted, "It's the latter; you are missing it. Yes, the last twenty-plus years have produced some great, exceptional, outstanding, and exciting players, along with a couple of dynasty teams. And with social media, the NBA is in good hands. But!" he folded his hands, leaned in with a serious look, "Without the storylines, the backstories, and the drama, the NBA won't be a 12-month sport." He paused, waiting to see if Dr. Parker comprehended his last statement.

She held eye contact, rapidly searching her internal database, "12 months; how can that be?"

Thurston smirked, "NBA basketball seasons during the 80s and 90s didn't end in June. In the summer, during baseball season, NBA basketball dominated the barbershops, sports bars, and workplace water-cooler conversations. In the fall, during football season, NBA basketball dominated the barbershops, sports bars, and workplace water-cooler conversations. It was nonstop and in the minds of the American people. Now, the NBA season is six to seven months at best. Like clockwork, it eases into the consciousness of America after the All-Star game and rides the traditional wave to June. It's pretty much over after the best team hoists the championship trophy. The American people gravitate toward the sport of the season."

"Now that is interesting, Thurston, it really is." Dr. Parker said with a Eureka look on her face. "I strongly believe there was some unexplainable phenomenon between the NBA and the American people."

"Bingo! And that unexplainable phenomenon is what we were chasing, and that unexplainable phenomenon is why I sold my team." Thurston said as eyes shifted back out to sea."

Dr. Parker jotted on her notepad - *some phenomena are beyond the scope of our vocabulary – Ludwig Wittgenstein (research)*. After a few minutes of silence, she wasn't sure if he was waiting for her to catch up with her notes or if he was thinking about what to add next. She set her pen down just in case.

Thurston remained eerily silent with his eyes locked on the calm blue Pacific.

Dr. Parker sensed the end of the interview was near. She decided to break into his thoughts: "Thurston, it has been a pleasure speaking with you. This view is breathtaking, and your yacht is beautiful."

Thurston returned from whence he was, "Thank you, I will give you a tour before you leave, but first you must have lunch, my chef is preparing the best salmon this side of heaven." Thurston boasted.

"Oh really, that would be nice."

Then it happened...

She asked the billion-dollar question...

Dr. Parker took a sip, relaxed, comfortable, and pleased with the interview thus far. "Thurston, can I ask you two more questions before we settle in for the best salmon this side of heaven?" She smiled.

Thurston returned a pleasant smile, "Sure."

Dr. Parker checked her recorder, then shifted her inquisitive eyes to Thurston. "My first question is two-fold, what do you think about the so-called *GOAT* conversation...and in your opinion, who is the GOAT?" She wasn't sure if the heat was coming from the sun or Thurston's piercing eyes.

A shadow of tinted red rested on Thurston's face; his blue eyes narrowed to fire blue. He stared at Dr. Parker as if she had three heads and spoke a language that was not English.

Dr. Parker was uncomfortable for the first time since her arrival. She desperately tried to keep her calm and composure as she thought, *what did I say so terribly offensive to this man. He looks like he is going to have me thrown overboard*. She looked down at her notes with one eye and the other eye on Thurston as if searching for the next interview question when she saw

Thurston abruptly jump to his feet and walk over to the rail, staring out at the calm ocean.

"Thurston, is everything okay?"

No Reply.

Dr. Parker's eyes widened. She looked over at the waiter and waitress busing themselves. Her head swung back toward the rail at Thurston. *What is going on?* She studied Thurston. *I wonder what he is thinking.* She saw him lean over the rail as if looking for something. *Oh my God, is he going to jump! Or is he thinking about throwing me overboard? Oh well, maybe I should text my husband and let him know not to look for me because I was eaten by the sharks somewhere out in the Pacific Ocean for asking the infamous so-called GOAT question...Sweetie, tell my story.* She smirked at the internal amusement but maintained her professional exterior.

Thurston walked stoically back to the table and leaned in with both hands on it, looking down at Dr. Parker. "There is no GOAT conversation."

Dr. Parker wasn't sure how to respond. She exhaled, "but..."

Thurston quickly raised his hand and shook his head, "There is no GOAT conversation."

She picked up her notepad, "but I have..."

"No, you don't! There is no GOAT conversation! Thurston said sternly as he took his seat and stared at Dr. Parker through awkward silence.

Dr. Parker dropped her notepad on the table, leaned back, and raised her hands but remained silent. *Alright, here we go, we seemed to have struck a nerve,* she thought.

Thurston broke the silence, "Dr. Parker, contrary to what you heard or read, there is no GOAT conversation when it comes to the NBA, and how can there be? There is no comparison, not even close."

She wanted to interject but decided it would be in her best interest to hear him out.

He sighed, his facial features relaxed, both elbows on the table, chin resting on interlocked hands. "The American people and fans worldwide have been prodded, persuaded, manipulated, and punk'd into believing that such a conversation exists when it doesn't. We have accepted the *so-GOAT* conversation because we can't defend, argue, or debate the obvious effectively. The so-called *GOAT* conversation began shortly after LeBron James joined the league. This kid and he was a kid when he joined the league straight out of high school, was assigned this generation's savior, so to speak. Even worse, he was sort of a savior for many people trying to understand or

was unable to understand and articulate what they saw and experienced from the one and only GOAT, Michael Jefferey Jordan, His Airness."

Dr. Parker took a sip of water, *this is going to be priceless*, as she thought about Ludwig Wittgenstein - *If an event doesn't fit within their preconceived notions of reality, they may struggle to find appropriate words*. She checked her recorder, leaned back confidently, and prepared for Thurston to grind his ax.

Thurston continued, "Now let the truth be told, the late great Kobe Bryant was the closest to Jordan, and he was miles behind. The American people always griped that Kobe played just like Jordan, and he want to be like Jordan...well hell, so did everyone else! Nonetheless, that line of thinking puts us in a conundrum because if Kobe is like Jordan and we can explain Kobe but can't explain Jordan, then where does that leave us? Right back where we started with unexplainable experiences. Even Jordan said when he spoke at the late great Kobe Bryant's funeral, *'now I won't be able to watch myself play anymore.'* He was referring to the only man on the planet that reminded him of himself. But somehow, Jordan's acknowledgment of Kobe has been overlooked, never spoken of, and never debated when it comes to the so-called *GOAT* conversation. And I think I know why."

Dr. Parker repositioned herself in her chair while maintaining eye contact. "Okay, Mr. Thruston, give it to me, "why?"

TWENTY-FOUR

Thurston exhaled with a serious stare into the curious eyes of Dr. Parker. "We the owners, get together before the draft to discuss draft picks one through ten. Not that we don't care about the other players, but from a business standpoint, the first ten picks are the bread-and-butter, so to speak. Most of the time, one or maybe two players in the draft have the potential to carry the future burden of the league. Very few fit the bill. However, in this case, LeBron James fit the bill and more." He paused for a long sip of his mimosa.

Dr. Parker waited silently with her eyes locked on Thurston. *He is struggling; why?*

Thurston closed his eyes briefly, then continued, "Dr. Parker, LeBron James came into the league with size, speed, agility, skills, hops, you name it, LeBron had it. We, the owners, the commissioner, the NBA executives, were committed to putting everything into this kid. He was it, the new face of the NBA." Thurston paused.

Dr. Parker followed Thurston's sightline to the gleaming and sparkling Pacific.

Thurston squinted as he began to speak, "We knew everybody wanted a piece of this kid, so we devised a plan to protect him and his assets." Thurston shook his head and returned his sight to Dr. Parker. "Do you know this eighteen-year-old kid turned us down. A kid from very humble beginnings. I will be the first to admit that we all predicted a negative financial outcome for this kid. Another inner-city statistic – *a local kid made it big, now living in squalor.*" He took a sip of his mimosa. "When LeBron turned us down, our phones rang nonstop as the man-eating sharks circled the waters."

Dr. Parker's eyes drew tight as she jotted in her notepad a research reminder.

Thurston smiled, "Not only did LeBron prove us wrong, but he did also it his way. He knew something we didn't know; he had to... because he assembled a team of individuals with inner-city backgrounds and nothing else but loyalty and respect. LeBron and his team went from zero dollars to handling millions of dollars. By the way, if you didn't know, they grew into billions of dollars. What LeBron James has done defies all odds, stats, history, and the status quo. It blows my mind to this day. I don't think he gets enough credit for his impeccable character and business savvy. The world has watched this kid grow into a man with a wife and kids. I say impeccable character because, throughout his career, he has zero, I mean zero, off-the-court

incidents that would jeopardize the integrity of his character. Not one! Come on! Even the three that sit on the NBA throne, Jordan, Magic, and Bird, had their share of issues off the court. Not Lebron, his character is impeccable. And his game, well, I'll just say, it's not how you start, it's how you finish."

Dr. Parker reveled silently at Thurston's reverence of Lebron James.

Thurston rubbed his hands together as his eyes danced from right to left. "Lebron is absolutely a phenomenal basketball player, one-of-a-kind, but, and I say this with all due respect, and by no means do I intend to diminish or belittle Lebron James in any way. But Lebron James is nowhere, and I mean nowhere near Michael Jeffrey Jordan, His Airness."

Dr. Parker raised an eyebrow looking for a joking smile or gesture, but got none.

"It's difficult for a human being to have a thought or experience and can't explain it. The psyche wards across the country are full of people with that problem. Individuals go to school for twelve years to learn how to help people with that problem. He gave a small squint of the eye toward Dr. Parker. No disrespect."

"None taken."

"And we as human beings, fans of the game, educated and uneducated, are unable to explain what we saw from 1985 to 1997 from Jordan. It's not that Lebron is being disrespected or put down. On the contrary, we are actually respecting Lebron and elevating him. See, I believe we had to make the comparison; in all actuality, we had to bring Jordan down to a level we could comprehend, understand, and articulate. If for nothing else, our sanity. That's just how great Jordan was. He gave us something we had never seen till this day. Unfortunately for Lebron, he was the one we anointed to keep our sanity."

Dr. Parker remained quiet as she wrote. Wittgenstein *emphasized the context-dependent nature of language and the idea that some aspects of human experience defy straightforward description – research deeper.*

This generation has forced us to believe we didn't see what we thought we saw. We can't argue or debate it successfully because we can't articulate it. One of the best sports debaters of our time, Stephen A. Smith, has been debated into submission. No, I won't sugarcoat it; Stephen A. Smith has been beaten down like the rest of us. The social media generation gave him the business about the so-called GOAT conversation."

Dr. Parker interrupted, "Who?"

Without hesitation, Thurston answered, "Stephen A. Smith, the best sports debater of our time."

Dr. Parker wrote another research reminder, *Stephen A. Smith*.

Thurston scanned Dr. Parker. "He is definitely someone you want to interview for this subject matter. I can give him a call if you like."

"Thank you. I will let you know once I do some research."

Thurston nodded, "Dr. Parker, Stephen A Smith has one of the most complete intensive vocabularies of anyone in the world. He dials it back for his show and his audience, but I would put money on him against any academic in the world. Stephen A's communication skills are impeccable, and his vocabulary is one to envy. And yet," Thurston smiled for the first time in a while, "Stephen A's inability to articulate what he saw, what he experienced, what he knows to be true about Jordan, make him like the rest of us. Stomped! But I will give Stephen A. Smith credit for the *"Eye Test"* suggestion he used to survive the beatdown he was taking during one of his *'Who's the GOAT'* debates. And to Stephen A's credit, the *"Eye Test"* is the best we as a people can come up with when trying or attempting to explain His Airness."

TWENTY-FIVE

Dr. Parker shook her head with a motherly smile. "This thing is so fascinating on so many levels. For the life of me, I can't figure out how or why my 10-year-old grandson is just as adamant as you are about Michael Jordan being the greatest player ever. How can that be?" she stated rhetorically.

Thurston grinned, slightly raising his voice. " See, see, that is what I'm talking about...it can't be explained. It's like trying to explain a UFO sighting; no one can."

Dr. Parker's antenna went up, and she thought about her conversation with Wally. Hmm..."

Thurston lost his regal demeanor and became overexcited. He wagged his finger at Dr. Parker, "Now, see if you can wrap your head around this. Jordan retired on October 6, 1993. And on that day, every media outlet in the country broke into the middle of their story to report Jordan's retirement announcement. Major networks like CNN broke into the White House events to announce Jordan's retirement." He laughed, thinking about it.

Dr. Parker's eyes widened as she searched her mind for any recollection of that day. Nothing.

"Get this Dr. Parker, The President of the United States was giving a press conference at the Whitehouse! And one of President Clinton's advisors eased up beside him at the podium and whispered the news of Jordan's retirement in his ear. Uncertainty covered the President's face. The fidgeting and scurrying of his staff and security immediately started rumbling in the press room. The reporters were trying to figure out why all the commotion? *Did we get bombed? Did the stock market crash? A natural catastrophe? Are we bringing our troops home from Kuwait?* No, no, and no! In the middle of the press conference, the President of the United States said, "I was just informed that Michael Jordan has retired from basketball. The room was deflated. The press conference ended. The reporters where no longer interested in what the President had to say, or what else was happening in the world. The most important event of the day was the announcement of Michael Jordan's retirement." Thurston laughed and shook his head, "unbelievable!"

Dr. Parker was unable to join in the laughter but maintained a joyful smile. *Is the man amusing himself with an exaggerated fib, or can there be any truth to such a story?* She thought as she jotted on her notepad—research *Jordan's retirement*.

Thurston took a deep sip of his mimosa as he wide-eyed Dr. Parker, "Oh, it gets more profound than that. The story leaked that the President immediately left the press room and made a beeline to the Oval Office with his staff in tow. He held an emergency meeting to discuss the effect that Michael Jordan's retirement would have on the economy. They concluded the impact would be devastating! It was rumored that the President put a committee together to try and persuade Michael Jordan not to retire. I didn't work."

Dr. Parker couldn't reframe, "Thurston, is what you are say true or part of the Jordan Lore?"

Thurston took in the serious look on her face, "I understand your skepticism, Dr. Parker; sometimes it's even hard for me to believe, and I was front and center in the thick of it." He paused and gazed at the Pacific, "Dr. Parker, I'm sure you are going to research Jordan's retirement, but in doing so, it would be in your best interest to research his return; it was just as eventful." He returned his gaze to Dr. Parker, "When Michael Jordan returned some eighteen months later, President Clinton interrupted his press conference, once again, to announce that Michael Jordan was returning to basketball. And he went on to say that now the economy would boom again! Think about that for a minute. The economy of the most powerful country on the planet will not boom again because Alan Greenspan and his brilliant team of economists had put together an economic strategy. No! The economy was going to boom because Michael Jordan returned to basketball. And that's a fact, Dr. Parker. Wall Street reported record numbers immediately after Michael Jordan's announcement to return. And that trend was reported in all markets around the world." He leaned in with a stern stare, "Dr. Parker, is there any logical explanation or psychological theory to explain such a thing? Or better yet, is there any man in the history of mankind, other than Jesus Christ himself, that had such a profound effect on the world."

Dr. Parker rested her head between her hands as she gently massaged her temples. "Thurston, I'm at a loss for words. I do have a lot of research to do. What you just told me is inconceivable."

"Yes, it is." Thurston leaned back as his voice escalated. "Now you see why I get so upset at that so-called *GOAT* conversation! There is no dame *GOAT* conversation!"

"Now, now dear, you have been doing good with your blood pressure..."

Dr. Parker turned around to see where the motherly voice was coming from.

With her hand extended, "Hello, Dr. Parker, I'm Mrs. Barbara Brooks."

Dr. Parker stood, reaching for the extended hand. "Well, hello, Mrs. Brooks. It's a pleasure to meet you," she said with a pleasant smile.

"Barabara will be fine," she replied with a welcoming smile as she continued toward her husband. She gave him a peek on the cheek. I think that's enough for one day, dear. Let's have lunch. It's all prepared and ready."

Dr. Parker began gathering her things.

Thurston smirked with his wife's hand in his, "Dr. Parker, one last thing. Just because we can't come up with the words, or the words haven't been invented yet, or we are just not intelligent enough to articulate them, or maybe we are all insane. Be it as it may, we know what we experienced, and we saw what we saw, and that alone expels any validity of a GOAT conversation."

TWENTY-SIX

The Glory Years Continues... The 90s

Dr. Parker woke up before daybreak. Research, research, research were her first thoughts when her feet hit the floor. She prepared for an early morning run to clear her head from the array of thoughts that kept her tossing and turning through the night. After her brief five-mile run, she sat on her patio deck, checking her pulse during her cool down. She entered the patio door quietly, trying not to wake her husband, who usually slept in on Sunday mornings. She grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and headed to her office.

She fired up her computer and googled Stephen A. Smith. She started with his Bio. *Very impressive*, she thought. Then, she watched and listened closely to several of his debates and interviews on YouTube. But there was one of Stephen A's interviews she watched over and over. And that was the interview with Isiah Thomas. She watched closely at their body language, which spoke volumes to her. She listened intently to the content of their conversation, which she deduced was friendly and difficult at times.

Two things stuck out in that YouTube interview that prompted Dr. Parker's next move. One, she heard the originality in Stephen A's voice when he used the term Thurston accredited him for '*The Eye Test*' as it pertained to the game of basketball. Two, she examined the look in Isiah's eyes when he heard the words '*The Eye Test*' from Stephen A. Dr. Parker - Fast forward, rewind, fast forward, rewind - several times trying to analyze that brief second, maybe a nanosecond when a glaze flashed over Isiah's eyes as if at that moment he saw or heard something his mind could not compute. Maybe in that nanosecond, he saw Jordan defying gravity.

Dr. Parker paused the video as Isiah began to refute. With her eyes locked on the man on her laptop, she leaned in, "So we finally meet Mr. Isiah Thomas, the man behind the violence or the necessary violence, according to Thurston Brooks."

After several moments, she reached for her cell.

Ring, Ring, Ring, Ring

She looked at her watch, "Hmm...it is a little early. I'll call back later."

"Hello and good morning." The chipper voice answered.

Dr. Parker smiled at the sound of his voice. "Good morning, Mr. Moore, this is Felicia Parker; from the sound of your voice, I didn't wake, but is this a good time to talk?"

"Well, well, well, if it ain't my favorite shrink. I didn't recognize the number and almost didn't answer, but I'm glad I did. How are you doing, Felicia? And how is your project coming along?"

Dr. Parker was still laughing at the favorite shrink comment. "Mr. Moore, you are a character. The project is progressing fine, and my research has led me back to you."

"First of all, Felicia, what's up with this Mr. Moore stuff? We are friends, remember? My friends call me Ant," he chuckled.

Felicia blushed. "You are absolutely right, Ant. My sincere apology." She said as she quickly dismissed the unprofessional thought in her mind.

Ant clapped his hands, "Now that we got that out of the way. How can I be of service...shoot."

Felicia smiled, thinking about his animated character and exceptional storytelling skills. "Ant, I just watched a YouTube video of Stephen A. Smith and Isaiah Thomas..."

She was interrupted when a burst of laughter echoed through her phone.

"My man, Stephen A!...yeah, I remember that. If you ask me, Stephen A. went light on Zeek. But then again, they are boys. Nonetheless, that interview, to me, was a bad look for Zeek."

"Really, how so?"

Without hesitation, Ant responded, "Any NBA fan could tell Zeek was trying to grind his ax. Not good, Zeek. Let it go, my man! Everyone knew Zeek should have been on the Dream Team and why he wasn't. But come on, Zeek, how can you expect the guys on the Dream Team to break bread with you after all the violence and bloodshed you and the Bad Boys inflicted on them and their teammates...come on, man!"

Dr. Parker leaned back in her chair with a big smile thinking *this man was so damn entertaining*. "Ant, I guess that is the perfect segway to the question I called to ask you.

"You don't say, okay, give it to me..."

"Ant, you told me about the 80s, but what happened in the 90s?"

"Damn, you're right! Even though that interview with Stephen A. and Zeek happened many years after Zeek's playing days, it symbolically communicated the death of the 80s and the birth of the 90s. Hmm... okay, I'm going to give it to you, how the 90s went down!"

Felicia struggled with maintaining her professional demeanor; her unexplainable giddiness wouldn't go away. She smiled and decided to switch to speaker, turn on the recorder, kick back, listen, and be entertained.

"Okay, when the 90s rolled in, the NBA was pregnant with the next generation that was fathered by players of the 80s, so to speak. Before the next generation arrived, the NBA wanted to rid the league of any residue of the violent style of play that the Bad Boys had instilled into the league. But like any other bad behavior or habit, it takes courage, perseverance, and sometimes deliverance to eliminate. Hmm... maybe that's why some called him Black Jesus." Loud laughter flowed out of her speakers.

Felicia jumped to her feet, "What! Who?"

"Jordan, some called him Black Jesus."

Felicia leaned on her desk, her face looking down at her cell. "Now that is going too far, don't you think?"

"Maybe, nonetheless, that was one of his monikers," Ant observed her concern and moved on. "Anyway, Felicia, now that Jordan was the official undisputed triple crown winner. He had two of the three crowns since his rookie year. The seat on the *Throne* that the commission placed between Magic and Bird, elevated, I might add. And he had the *Torch* he snatched from Magic and Bird. Now Jordan had the *Mantle* he ripped from Zeek and the Bad Boys. From there, Jordan instituted his commandments to rid the NBA of its bad habits and set precedence before the next generation of players arrived. In other words, His Airness restored order and established his kingdom as he saw fit.

Felicia settled back in her chair, trying to digest the Black Jesus commit.

"Okay, Felicia, I hope you are ready..."

His Airness Commandments:

ONE: No *co-torch* holding like his predecessors did Bird and Magic, Kareem and Dr. J, or Russell and Wilt.

Two: No switching of the *Mantle* back and forth like his predecessors, Magic and Bird.

Three: No one was allowed access to the *Mantle* but Jordan like the days of Russell.

Four: If anyone wanted a seat on the Throne, or possession of the Torch, or possession of the Mantle, they would be granted six games to try to take it. Ant smirked, "I guess instead of playing a seventh game, His Airness rested." Ant laughed loudly and uncontrollably.

Felicia didn't see the humor, but she had to laugh at the storyteller. "Ant, that is a bit much. You probably shouldn't tell that story in that manner," she suggested.

Ant struggled to bring his laugh to a close. "Okay, okay, but did you get my point?"

"I guess." She replied with a smile she couldn't suppress.

"Now, Jordan's second order of business, he had a sit-down with the former controller of the East, Larry Bird, and the former controller of the West, Magic Johnson. As the story goes, Jordan lit a Cuban and started his spill. Look, guys, y'all have served our league well, and it's time for you guys to rest on your laurels. I'm going to put some things in place to ensure nothing like the Bad Boys will ever happen again. Our league will not be terrorized again. To achieve that, I will install three controllers to govern the West and three controllers to govern the East. Relax, I'm not kicking you guys out. You guys will always be sitting on the Throne with me, on my right and left, as my ambassadors, if you will."

Felicia interjected, "And Magic and Bird were okay with that?"

"Ant smirked, "I don't know, but what choice did they have. Plus, no matter how much they loved the game, they were getting old and needed help to rule, reign, and govern their respective domains or conferences. And they knew it was best for the league. Plus, Jordan sold it with a couple of cherries on top – Magic, despite your health problems, and Bird, despite your chronic back problems, I'm taking you guys with me to Barcelona."

Now, neither Bird nor Magic thought they would be selected to represent the USA at the Olympics in Barcelona. That was music to Magic's ear because he loved the game so damn much, and he knew it would be his last shot at winning a gold medal. But Bird needed persuasion, not that he didn't love the game as much as Magic, his back wouldn't allow him to play at the level he was accustomed to playing. He was basically ready to hang up his sneakers. But Magic basically threaten Bird, 'man you are going with us to Barcelona, if I have to hog-tie you and put you on the plane myself.' And with that threat, the Dream Team was born. As the story goes, the Dream Team roster was picked that day at that sit-down! A few months before the selection committee was ever assembled."

Felicia shook her head as she waited for the laughter to stop. "Is that ethical?"

"Probably not. But if you think that was unethical, listen to the other cherry Jordan, put on top for his new ambassadors, as he called them. "Look guys not only will the three of us sit on the throne, we will also be forever encased on the Mt. Rushmore of basketball, I will make sure of that."

Dr. Parker couldn't hold it, "Ant, stop right there! How can he make such a guarantee?"

Ant rubbed his forehead and exhaled, "I don't know, Felicia. Maybe there is a reason they call him Black Jesus."

"Stop it!"

TWENTY-SEVEN

Felicia paced her office with cell phone in hand, "Ant, so what was this elaborate plan Jordan told Magic and Bird he had for the NBA moving forward?"

Ant wasted no time getting into his spill, "Felicia, let me start by saying that the 90s was an extension of the 80s on steroids. In other words, the 80s gave birth to a generation of NBA players who were athletic freaks of nature. I mean, the world hadn't seen anything like it. For instance, a mammoth young man named Shaquille O'Neal, who came into the league at 7'1, weighing 300 hundred plus pounds, ran the court like a deer with the ability to take the ball coast to coast like a guard. He was nasty, shattering backboards at will and totally dominating the paint. He was something to behold.

On the other end of the spectrum, there was a little guy named Allen Iverson, AI, who came into the league with the Heart of a Lion. He was 6'0" and only weighed 165 lbs, soaking weight on a good day. Opponents who took his size for granted came up short when they played against AI because his heart's barometer was off the charts and unexplainable to this day. Pound for pound, he was the greatest player who ever lived."

"Whoa...are you putting another player above His Airness?" Felicia jokingly interrupted.

Ant quickly clarified his statement: "No, I'm not Felicia. I said pound for pound. The NBA is the land of giants. And even though there have been other small guys in the league, none, absolutely none, could come close to AI. Put it this way: If Jordan and AI were the same size in weight and height, it would be no contest. I would put my money on AI."

"Unbelievable! Did I hear you correctly, Mr. Anthony Moore, AI was better than His Airness!" She joked with an outburst of laughter to mimic him.

A Kool-aid smile ran across Ant face, "Oh so you got jokes this morning, Dr. Felicia Parker."

Felicia blushed at the way he said her full name. "I'm just asking..." she joked as she found it harder and harder to dismiss the unexplainable thoughts, that were dancing to the forefront of her mind as she conversed with Ant.

Ant picked up on something in her voice, but he wasn't sure. "Look, I'm not saying AI was better than Jordan in no stretch of the imagination. But I will say this, to bring my point home, Dr. Felicia Parker. Jordan played one-on-five and never made it past the first round of the playoffs. AI played one-on-five and made it to the NBA finals. Now, I'm going to leave you to your vices to digest that unprecedented phenomenon." A schoolboy grin ran across his face as he waited for a reply.

Felicia searched for her professionalism as she thought, *I need to end this call*. But she couldn't, "okay, Ant, I get the point."

Ant clapped his hands, "Moving right along, there were many other freaks of nature with exceptional basketball skills that impacted the 90s. Just to name a few, Alonzo Mourning, the shot blocker phenom. Chris Weber, the versatile power forward with crazy passing and scoring abilities. Penny Hardaway, who was Magic Johnson 2.0. Grant Hill with unbelievable multi-talent basketball skills before injuries. Ray Allen, who was Reggie Miller 2.0. Tim Duncan, a big power forward with superior fundamentals and foot work like a ballerina. Vincent Carter, with the ability to jump out of the gym and come down with a monster dunk. Dirk Nowitzki, the 7' German, shooting the lights out from the parking lot. There was a guy named Kevin Garnett who came into the league with the intensity of a Saltwater Crocodile and the versatility of an octopus. The most deadly of them all was the late great Kobe Bryant, a kid out of high school who became Jordan 2.0. And the list goes on... like I said, the 80s birth freaks of nature basketball players."

Felicia thought it best to remain silent or add minimal dialogue as possible. "Interesting."

Ant smirked and continued, "Now, Jordan's plan. As the story goes, after Jordan, Magic, and Bird picked the roster for the Dream Team, Jordan lit another Cuban and gave them his plan for his kingdom's new world order." Ant chuckled. "Bird, since the East needs more policing, I will start with you. You are going to get Ewing and his Apple dumpling gang, that young gunslinger Reggie Miller and his group of no-names, the Diesel with Penny and their Mickey Mouse crew. They will police the East together, as you see fit. Bird nodded in approval.

Jordan turned to Magic, "Magic you will be getting, the Dream and his scrappy point guard Kenny the Jet Smith. I'm going to move Sir Charles from basketball purgatory to the Phoenix Suns, and at least he will have some guys who will get in the trenches with him. I figure Sir Charles and Kevin Johnson will be strong enough to help police the West. And also, the Glove

and Shawn Kemp. And even though the West is laid back, you will also have the Mailman and Stockton. Magic smiled like always, 'But what about my boys? Big games James can handle it.' Jordan responded, you know, Big game James is my dude, but without Magic, the Lakers will soon be an afterthought. Magic smiled, trying to think of a rebuttal, but was unable to find one. Jordan concluded with, anybody causing trouble, or any situation you see getting out of hand, if you can't handle it, let me know; Scottie, and I will take care of it before things get out of control." Ant heard a smirk.

Felicia chastised herself and felt she could return to the conversation. "So, His Airness Kingdom toed the line of communism—a police state."

"Be it as it may, but a few years later, the Bad Boys 2.0 emerged in a big way."

"Really? You mean to tell me somebody went against the plans of His Airness." She laughed out loud.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Ant thought to himself, *welcome back, Felicia*. "Well, you know the *saying, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely...* Ewing and the Apple Dumping gang decided they didn't want to share the power, and they had no intentions of obeying Ambassador Bird or any of Jordan's commandments."

Felicia shook her head, thinking, *unbelievable! Jordan's commandments*. "Ant, before you go on, I have a question."

"Shoot."

"In your opinion, was there a change in the engagement level of the American people with the NBA from the 80s to the 90s?"

Ant clapped his hands, "The American people cooled off a little, but not much because the 90s had its share of backstories, storylines, and drama." He chuckled, "For instance, America loved Ewing and the Apple dumpling gang because of the way they came to be. Get this, their charismatic coach, Pat Riley, defected to New York from Hollywood when Magic retired. Now Pat Riley only knew winning, but he didn't have a Magic, a Kareem, or a Big game James. So, the American people were on the edge of their seats, watching with great anticipation, and Riley didn't disappoint.

When Pat Riley arrived in New York, he only had one person on the roster he wanted to keep and that was the leader, Patrick Ewing. With one piece in place, he built the Bad Boys 2.0. As the story goes, Pat Riley took a trip to sing-sing prison and handpicked the toughest guy in the yard, Anthony Mason, and made him one of his enforcers. Pat Riley got another enforcer from Cook County jail in Chicago, a thick bruiser named Charles Oakley. From there, Pat Riley took a trip to Folsom prison and handpicked enforcer number three, a man named Xavier McDaniels. Then, as the story goes, Pat Riley walked into a grocery with a New Knicks uniform and a basketball. He handed the uniform and basketball to a young man bagging groceries by the name of John Starks. Pat Riley said put those bags down and punch out; you are now the starting guard on my team, the New York Knicks." Ant laughed uncontrollably for several moments.

Dr. Parker's mouth hung open, "No way! Please tell me you are embellishing the story."

Mason couldn't respond because he couldn't bring his laughing to a close.

"Ant, are you okay," she asked with a wrinkled forehead.

Mason finally brought his laughter to an end and composed himself the best he could to continue. "Hey, that was the word on the street at that time. But in all seriousness, you can believe the John Stark's story. He was a guy that fell through the cracks and ended up bagging groceries. Pat Riley reached down in the ignored cracks of the NBA and found a diamond in John Starks, and the rest is history. Pat Riley had successfully assembled the Bad Boy 2.0."

Felicia made a mental note to research the Bad Boys 2.0. "Wait a minute, I thought you said Jordan put things in place so that wouldn't happen again."

"Yes, he did. But Pat Riley was smart. He groomed the Bad Boys 2.0 for two years as if he knew something no one else did. You see, MJ went on holiday, sort of speak, for 18 months. And that is when Pat Riley unleashed the beast."

"What? Are you kidding? His Airness left his kingdom for 18 months? She stated sarcastically.

"Yes, he did. He thought everything was in place, so he decided to go play baseball for a while with the intention of eventually one day dominating baseball like he did basketball. Some said he was on his way. At least until he could no longer ignore the chatter that Ewing and the Apple dumpling gang had broken his commandments and were terrorizing the league."

"Ant, don't say that, please. He is just man." Felicia pleaded.

Ant ignored her plea, "The tap-tap triplets, Mason, Oakley, and McDaniels, with their tenacious in-your-face shooting guard John Starks and the big Jamaican, Patrick Ewing leading the way, some say they were more vicious and violent than the original Bad Boys. But they didn't have the flare or smoothness of the original Bad Boys because they didn't have a little Zeek. The Bad Boys 2.0 were wild, untamed, and prison-yard tough. The opposing team was destined for a merciless beat down."

"So we're right back where we started, which proves my point, His Airness was just a man." Felicia gloated.

"Not so fast. See, Jordan had confidence in the young Gunslinger Reggie Miller. Reggie gave the Bad Boys 2.0 the business, and America ate it up; they loved it! See, Reggie didn't just give it to the Bad Boys 2.0; he also gave it to their fans, especially their number one fan, Spike Lee."

"The writer, movie guy, Spike Lee?" Felicia quizzed.

"The one and only. But, what happened at Madison Square Garden between Reggie and the Bad Boys 2.0, was better than any script Spike ever wrote." Ant laughed.

Felicia smiled. *I wonder if he knows how good a storyteller he is. Hmm. I can listen to him talk all day.* She closed her eyes. *What is wrong with you? Get a grip,* she reprimanded herself.

"Picture this Felicia, It's a Sunday afternoon, playoffs, everybody in America watching. Of course, the number one fan, Spike Lee, was in his designated seat in the first row, center court. Nine seconds left in the game, and barring a miracle, the Bad Boys 2.0 will win. Spike Lee is giving Reggie the business something fierce. Spike wouldn't let up; he couldn't leave well enough alone. Reggie got pissed and rained a barrage of three points shots in the final seconds of the game to beat the Bad Boys 2.0. Then what Reggie did on national television!...today!, would probably get him thrown in jail for some kind of assault.

Felicia's eyes widened as she gasped a deep breath.

"The Gunslinger, Reggie Miller, ran up and down the court with both hands around his throat, taunting the Bad Boys 2.0 and their fans, especially Spike Lee. One would think that Bad Boys 2.0 nation would be mad at Reggie. No...No! They crucified Spike Lee. The front page of the New York Times read, *Spike, you cost us the game!* One paper read, *Spike, quite aggravating the Gunslinger!* Another paper pleaded with the owner, *Spike Lee should not be allowed to attend any more games!*

"Really? Ant, please tell me you are exaggerating." Felicia pleaded.

"Nope. It got even worse. The sentiment around America was - Reggie had exposed the Bad Boy 2.0 for what they were - choke artists. Well, that rubbed Pat Riley the wrong way, and he turned up the heat. He instructed the tap-tap triplets to take the gun out of the Gunslinger's hand. And with over-the-top violence, they did just that, and down went the Gunslinger. The Bad Boys 2.0 prevailed, and in the process, they saved Spike Lee from the hangman's noose."

TWENTY-NINE

"Ant, are you saying the New York Knicks brought Jordan out of retirement?" Felicia asked.

"Because if you are, that means His Airness commandments were ignored, or his plan was not as solid as he thought they were, which means he is flawed like the rest of us."

Mason laughed at her line of thinking. "Felicia, I understand your reasoning. As a shrink, it's important, that you can argue the case or surmise that Jordan is normal like the rest of us living on this rock rotating around the sun, but he is not."

Felicia blushed at his choice of words, "Ant, you missed your calling."

"Oh, that's nothing, Felicia. if you're ever in Detroit again, look me up. I have a million and one entertaining story you just might like."

Silence.

Felicia stared out her office window for a moment. "Ant, I just might take you up on that offer." She paused, "I mean if I'm ever in Detroit."

"Any time." Ant grinned, "Now, after Jordan gave the young gunslinger, Reggie Miller, words of encouragement, *'Hold your head up Reggie, you did your best, you held your own.'* Then he called his number one, Scottie Pippen. "Handle this shit, Scottie!" he forcefully demanded.

Scottie confidently replied, "Don't worry, I got it, Mike. Enjoy the diamond."

"But, once again, Pat Riley turned the heat up even higher. In the end, Scottie didn't have it. Scottie kicked, screamed, and threw chairs. I'm not sure, but maybe the cause of Scottie's meltdown was DeJa'Vu. We will never know, but we do know Scottie had some bad experiences with the original Bad Boys."

Felicia shook her head as she admired Ant's storytelling skills.

Ant smirked, "Now, everything that had happened thus far in the 90s led to the infamous conference call. The conference call that changed the trajectory of the 90s. As the story goes, the Skipper at Regions Field, down in Birmingham, Alabama, summons Jordan out of left field. Not because Jordan had dropped several routine fly balls, no, because Jordan had a phone call to take in the clubhouse. Jordan hustled to the clubhouse, angry, frustrated, and disappointed with himself, "Hello!" he barked. To his surprise, it was his ambassadors.

No small talk; Bird jumped right into it. "Michael, you got to do something. Your boy, Scottie, can't handle it, and we are seeing the rebirth of the Bad Boys, and that's not good. In the meantime, I'm going to Indiana to coach and mentor the young gunslinger."

"Not a bad idea, Larry; he will benefit from your tutelage."

Despite the seriousness, Magic gloated through his million-dollar smile, "Larry, I think you are overreacting. Didn't y'all see what my guys, the Dream and the Jet, did to Ewing and the Apple dumpling gang?"

"Just barely!" Bird and Jordan blurted simultaneously.

"Magic, we can't leave this to chance." Bird stoically said.

"I agree with Bird," Jordan stated.

"And with that, Jordan hung up his glove and cleats and laced up a pair of sneakers bearing his likeness. And all the newspaper headlines worldwide printed the same thing on the day of His Airness return, "He's Baaaaack!" Ant laughed again with his signature clap.

"Just like that?" Felicia asked.

"Just like that." Ant replied. "Yeah, it was something to behold as we approached the middle of the 90s. Jordan returned to restore peace and civility to his kingdom. Jordan returned and made a strong statement by dropping a double nickel on the Bad Boys 2.0 in the Garden. But he overlooked the young boys in Disney land, as did everyone else. The Diesel, Penney, and their two snipers, Dennis Scott and Nick Anderson, along with Jordan's ex-enforcer Horace Grant, prove to be a formidable force to be reckoned with. As they eliminated Jordan and the Bulls on their way to the NBA finals."

"Wait a minute, His Airness tasted defeat!" She joked.

"Yeah, but His Airness would never again taste defeat while wearing a Bulls uniform. He returned the following year with his number one, Scottie, his secret weapon, Toni Kukoc, his no-quit little point guard BJ Armstrong, and he added the Worm. Yeah, that's right, the Worm from the original Bad Boys. His Airness had a well-disciplined supporting cast that included the likes of Harper, Lonely, Kerr, and Wennington. His Airness and the Bulls created a frenzy that surpassed that of the Beatles."

"Ant, please!"

"Crazy but true." Light laughter, "look it up."

"And what followed had America on its feet and consumed with backstories, storylines, and drama. And there were plenty of each. Starting with the young boys down in Mickey Mouse Land. America prepared to see another dynasty in the making with Diesel and Penny, but America was deprived because they were too young to control their egos. They crumbled from within.

During this time, the unthinkable happened. Some say Pat Riley knew Jordan was coming back with a vengeance, so he jumped ship, leaving Ewing and the Apple Dumpling gang to fend for themselves. But, even without Pat Riley, Jordan knew the Knicks had bad intentions. So what Jordan did to the Bad Boys 2.0 was twice as worse as what he did to the original Bad Boys. But as you know, New Yorkers are tough, aggressive people. So, after fighting relentlessly and taking beating after beating, they went in search of someone to help ease the pain from the wrath of Jordan. But that led the Knicks to a fatal mistake. The one mistake that sent them into basketball purgatory." Ant laughed loudly. His voice trailed off to a slow cadence, "They went and picked up Dominique Wilkins's little brother Gerald Wilkins." Ant paused for effect. "And this man went on national television and crowned himself the Jordan stopper! Felicia, the man told the world the Knicks brought him to New York for one reason, and one reason only... to stop Michael Jeffery Jordan!"

Felicia laughed at the dramatics, "Ant, what was wrong with that? It seems like that man had confidence in himself and his skills."

"Felicia, what Gerald Wilkins said was blasphemy!" Ant laughed.

"Don't you dare start that again! He is only a man!" Felicia pleaded.

"So you think. Anyway, America had to wait and see if there was any validity to Gerald's claim or if he was the antichrist."

"Stop Ant! I'm serious."

Ant laughed and continued, "But his brother Dominique didn't have to wait. Dominique had played against Jordan for many years before he retired. He knew his little brother had put his foot in his mouth. As the story goes Dominique supposedly called his little brother and gave him the business. Cussed him out like a Russian sailor, then told him to just play the damn game and keep your mouth shut! Call ended." Ant exhaled, "but Dominique wasn't the only one in the Wilkins family to give Gerald the business. I didn't see the article, but I was told by several people who had read the article in the USA today. Someone leaked the story that leaders of the

Wilkins family said because Gerald had embarrassed the Wilkins family, he was no longer allowed to attend family functions." It took Ant several minutes to stop laughing.

"He was ostracized by his own family?"

"Apparently so." Ant exhaled. "I don't have to tell you how Jordan responded to Gerald's Jordan-stopper comment. But I will say, after that year, the Bad Boys 2.0 were no more, and Gerald Wilkins was never seen on a basketball court again. His whereabouts are unknown." Ant clapped his hands with a hearty laugh.

Felicia smiled but remained silent.

Ant continued, "Once again, His Airness had restored his kingdom on his way to hoisting three more Larry O'Brien trophies. And the 90s went out peacefully and in order. New laws and high standards were in place so that the next generation could just play basketball without the threat of anything resembling the Bad Boys or the Bad Boys 2.0. And there you have it, Felicia, the 90s, the end of a two-decade era where America and the NBA were unexplainably inseparable.

THIRTY

Dr. Parker had spent the last few days wrapping up her research, editing, and organizing notes. She had worked well into the night with two broadcasting interns she enlisted from the university to help put together her video/audio presentation. She was so impressed with the two interns that she invited them to accompany her to Vienna.

Dr. Parker rolled over and strained through sleepy eyes at the clock as the joyful ringtone on her cell demanded attention. She grumbled, *first order of business, change that annoying ringtone*. "Hello."

"Good morning, Dr. Parker, guess who?"

"Wally?"

"The one and only! Are you awake, sleepy head?"

"Wally, I'm talking to you; what does that tell you." *Just as annoying as he was in college.*

"My, are we grumpy this morning...hmm."

"Don't even go there, Wally."

"I'm just saying you are friends with the greatest scientist in the world. There is no reason for you to be grumpy." Wally jokingly boasted with laughter.

"Oh my God! Really, Wally!"

"Okay, okay. Let's get down to business. Can we do a Skype or something? I want to see you when I give you this information.

"No, we can't. I'm not decent."

"Hmm...really."

"Wally, stop it!... it's 5:00 o'clock in the morning!"

"The world of science never sleeps...24/7, Dr. Felicia Parker."

"Wally, damn! Give me a minute to freshen up, get a cup of coffee and I will call you from my office. But this better be good."

"I thought you knew, Science is always good dear."

"Bye, Wally."

Dr. Parker got out of bed, slumbered to the bathroom, then went downstairs to the kitchen talking to herself. *I hope he didn't wake me up for some space mumble-jumble. Felicia, you know Wally*

is out there, way out there with that space stuff. And he has gotten worse over the years. She sat at her computer and stared at the screen, *Felicia, why are you doing this. Yesterday, you had a pleasant, entertaining conversation with Ant, and now you are going to have a conversation with this quack.* Well, *Felicia, you did reach out to him.* She took a sip of coffee and turned on her computer.

Type, type, type, enter. "Wally, are you there?" She rolled her eyes as she put the coffee mug to her lips.

"You are aware I can see you," Wally laughed. Wow, all these years, and you haven't changed a bit."

"Whatever, Wally, what you got?"

"Okay Felicia, I have given much thought on our last conversation which basically revolved around the phenomenon of unexplainable events, would you agree?"

"Ahh, pretty much. That is close enough." She answered with tight eyes and a creased forehead as she studied the man on her computer screen, wearing a white lab coat, a full pocket protector, wire-rim glasses, and a thinning comb-over in a lab with a space theme and an overabundance of space artifacts and models.

Wally leaned forward with his serious science demeanor. "Dr. Parker, when things like this arise, it's up to science to shine a light on the matter. Such matters can't be left up to business people, political people, or people who play with other people's minds to find a solutions." He rocked back as he laughed out loud.

"Wally, that is not nice...our work is also considered science?"

"Whatever, dear, if it helps you people sleep at night to think so, so be it..."

"Wally, what do you have, please!" *You arrogant quack.*

"Okay, serious. I took a look at the UFO sighting trend over the last one hundred years. From 1920 to 1955, over fifty UFO sightings were reported. What I found interesting was that UFO sightings dropped off substantially after the 40s. There were only three reported UFO sightings from 1955 to 1963.

"Where is this man going? *Please get to the point, Wally.*"

"So I decided to dive into those three outlier UFO sightings, and here is where it gets interesting. Get this, Felicia. The first of the three UFO sightings occurred on an extremely cold morning, December 7, 1956, by a midwife on her way to deliver a baby in West Baden Spring,

Indiana, a small town outside French Lick, Indiana. The population at the time was unknown, but today, the population is 595.

"What? Wally, did you wake me up for..."

"Hold on, Felicia. Hear me out." The next sighting occurred a few years later. It was a bright, sunny afternoon on August 14, 1959. Several people near Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, Michigan, reported the sighting.

Wally, what are you trying to say?"

Wally shrugged, "Wait a minute, let me finish."

"There's more?"

"Yes. Now mind you, both reports were identical. They reported, A strange piercing beam of light released from an unidentified flying object for a split second, then the light disappeared and so did the unidentified flying object."

This man has missed my point altogether. He has gone down the UFO rabbit hole again! Let me get off this call with this quack. "Wally, please send me your information, and I will take a closer look. And thank you, sir."

Wally ignored Dr. Parker, fidgeting, "I don't have a problem with that. But for now, make sure you are anchored to your seat because the third sighting still has my head spinning. "On a bone-chilling cold night, February 17, 1963, two police officers sat in their patrol car sipping coffee and eating donuts when they saw a strange forceful beam of light land on top of Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. They looked up to see where it came from but saw nothing.

After the police officers searched the perimeter, they went inside Cumberland Hospital to investigate. They spoke with several doctors and nurses, and all confirmed that nothing unusual had occurred. Shortly after the police officer's departure, a heavy-set nurse from the maternity ward stepped off the elevator with her hat, coat, and scarf in hand. She walked to the nurse's station and placed her purse and coat on the counter. She wrapped her scarf around her neck and told the head nurse, 'The strangest thing just happened in the maternity ward.' The head nurse's eyebrows came together as she thought about the two police officers. 'Really like what?' she anxiously asked. The heavy-set nurse put on her coat and bundled up for the brisk cold that awaited her. "Well, we were at the desk like normal; all the babies and mothers were sleeping. It was quiet as a church mouse. Then, all of a sudden, the lights in the baby's room came on. It

startled everyone because the entire floor was under the night light. We ran to the babies' room, where we had at least thirty babies tonight. They were all crying up something fierce.' The head nurse listened intently, "Oh my God, that bright light probably frightens those precious babies.'

The heavy-set nurse put her purse on her shoulder. She looked at the head nurse. 'Yeah, they were frightened. The strangest thing, they were all crying except one baby. Beth noticed he wasn't crying. She whispered, 'Come here and look at this.' I hurried over, thinking something was wrong. The darndest thing, one little fellow was not rattled at all. His eyes were wide open, and his little tongue was hanging out of his mouth. He was just lying there looking at us as if he was saying can y'all shut them up so I can get some rest? I have big things to do."

Silence.

Silence.

Wally smirked with a boastful grin at the woman on his computer screen, frantically flipping through her notes for the bios of Michael 'Air' Jordan, Earvin' Magic Johnson, and Larry 'Legend' Bird. Particularly their birth dates and places of birth.

THIRTY-ONE

The Conclusion

The charismatic Dr. Turner raised the light slowly for effect. Dr. Parker stood silently scanning the faces of the most prominent historian in America as they had their eyes fixed on the three pictures on the big screen. On the left was a picture of Larry 'Legend' Bird and 1956 west Baden Springs Indiana. On the right was a picture of Ervin 'Magic' Johnson and Sparrow hospital in Lansing Michigan. In the middle was a picture of Michael 'Air' Jordan and 1963 Cumberland hospital in Brooklyn New York.

Eerie Silence.

The silence was broken by none other than Dr. Fuller. He cleared his throat, "Dr. Parker, world-renowned, I might add," he said sarcastically. Are you trying to tell us that Larry Bird, Michael Jordan, and Magic Johnson are aliens?"

And the room came to life.

Dr. Lance chuckled and pointed at the big screen. "Or maybe a UFO was just happening to be probing Earth on the day they were born, and wa-la!"

"I only have two things to say about all this," The stoic Dr. Brooks said with a rare, pleasant look. "First of all, great presentation, Dr. Parker. Second, I hate that I missed out on being an NBA fan in the 80s and 90s. Oh well, I think I'm going to start watching the sport. Dr. Fuller, you might want to join me."

Dr. Fuller picked up the carafe of wine off the table and held it up, "I just might do that, Dr. Brooks." Then he did the unthinkable. He laughed and complimented Dr. Parker. "Thanks for your research and presentation of a world I knew nothing about."

Dr. Parker nodded, "Thank you, Dr. Fuller." She looked wide-eyed at Dr. Turner, who smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

Dr. Franklin nodded in agreement with Dr. Fuller, "Dr. Parker, do you think I can get a copy of your presentation. I think it's fascinating on so many levels. I think it would be a great learning tool for the young minds at Harvard."

"Yes, I would also like a copy."

"Yeah, me to Dr. Parker."

"You can add me to the list."

Dr. Turner strolled to the front of the room to bring order. "Gentlemen, let's not forget why we are here..."

Dr. Parker interrupted. That's okay, Dr. Turner. Gentlemen, I will send everyone the address to the link once it's published and posted."

Dr. Turner smiled, "There you have it, gentlemen. And on that note, let's give Dr. Parker a hand. She exceeded expectations."

Claps, "job well done," claps, "excellent" Claps

"Thank you."

"Now, down to business!" Dr. Turner hit the clicker, and ESPN's list of the top fifteen NBA players appeared on the big screen. "Remember, we are historians; we write history for generations to come. We want to make sure it's the truth or as close to the truth as we can get. And in this case, we want the truth as it pertains to the NBA's *"List"* and the *"GOAT"* conversation for generations to come."

Dr. Fuller stood, "Dr. Turner, may I have a minute, please?"

Oh, shit, here we go; I knew it was too good to last; here comes the cynical Dr. Fuller, "Yes, by all means." Dr. Turner looked at Dr. Moore, who thought the same thing.

Dr. Fuller smirked as if he could read everyone's mind, "Look, good people, I just want to go on record as saying, "I agree with Uncle Fred, I think that is his name." He looked at Dr. Parker for confirmation, which she confirmed. "We do not need to waste precious time discussing the GOAT conversation. I agree there is no GOAT conversation. It's hands down, Michael Jordan. The man jumpstarted the United States economy for crying out loud!"

Laughter filled the room.

"You're wrong, Dr. Fuller; Thurston Brooks said that." Dr. Lance boasted.

"They both said it, I think." Dr. Franklin blurted.

Dr. Turner cut an eye at the carafes on the tables.

Dr. Fuller smiled uncontrollably, "Whether Uncle Fred or Thurston Brooks, I vote for Michael Jordan."

"I agree"

"I agree."

Dr. Turner's eyes moved slowly from table to table as his mouth slanted to the right with no teeth exposed. "So, I take it that we are all in agreement." He paused. "History will be recorded that no one opposed." He paused, eyes shifting from table to table. "Okay, let it be written for all eternity that Michael Jeffrey Jordan is the undisputed GOAT!"

No claps, no toast, no second-guessing, as if it was a no-brainer, thought Dr. Parker as she observed the historians; they were all focused on the theater screen.

Dr. Turner shrugged his shoulders at Dr. Parker as he thought, "I better speed this up," as he saw the waiters substitute the empty carafes with full carafes of assorted wines.

Dr. Lance stood with his waist parallel to the table. "The way I see it," he started without asking Dr. Turner for the floor. "*The List* presents a simple twofold solution. One constant and the other subjective. The latter presents a fluid subjective conundrum because there are so many great players to choose from, past and present. So, I suggest we leave the subjective challenge or problem to future generations to decide. Because four through fifteen will change with time. But one, two, and three will never change, so I vote that we record for history, the constant, Michael Jordan, Earvin Johnson, and Larry Bird, Bird and Johnson at two and three are interchangeable, Bird and Johnson or Johnson and Bird." He uncharacteristically took a bow before taking a seat with a Cheshire grin.

Dr. Turner's eyes widened at all the nods and chatter of agreement, *no debate whatsoever; hmm, is it the wine or their intellect.* Then he glanced over at Dr. Parker. *No, it's her research, damn good job!*

Dr. Fuller slurred out, "I'm curious, Dr. Parker, what is your take on all this.

Dr. Parker walked closer to the tables. She smiled, "First of all, gentlemen. I don't have a horse in this race. She blinked her eyes a couple of times. *That is something Ant would say.* She quickly regrouped, "I presented you guys with my finding that will hopefully assist you guys in making the decision you deem necessary." She poured herself a small sample sip of wine. "Not bad. But I will say this, maybe Dr. Wittgensten was correct when he said, '*Not all experiences can be neatly packaged into words. Some phenomena are beyond the scope of our vocabulary.*' In other words," She poured herself a full glass of red, with all eyes fixed on her, she made eye contact with a slow scan. "There is such a thing as the "Eye Test," and apparently, you all saw what they saw, the unexplainable."