

THE SEVENTH GAME

by

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PROLOGUE

Jerusalem, 34 AD

He'd never actually seen a crucifixion before. Obviously, he'd heard about them and was revolted by the absolute barbarism. But punishment wasn't supposed to be fun. It was meant to teach a lesson. In the case of crucifixion, to both the unfortunate bastard up on the cross, as well as anyone in the crowd contemplating acts similar to those that got said poor bastard up there in the first place. In his own teachings, he promoted forgiveness over punishment. But the dusty streets leading to Golgotha were not his classroom and the jeering crowds throwing rocks and insults in equal measure were not his receptive students.

"Look at him," a Roman soldier spat. "King of the Jews!"

"How's that working out, your majesty?" another laughed as he pretended to bow.

The view from atop Calvary was spectacular, the sprawl of Jerusalem stretched out as far as his eyes could see, protected from harm by its earthen wall. In the multitude of colors and textures, he recognized his Father's handiwork. So too in the nails driven through his palms and feet, the mixture of blood, sweat, and vinegar stinging his parched throat, and the raw hatred spewing forth from the assembled mob. His Father could be vengeful. And it seems it was his turn to feel the full fury.

"I get his robe!" an old legionnaire shouted, picking the seamless garment from the pile of discarded belongings at the foot of the cross.

"Forget it," another protested. "I saw it first."

"Take these," the legionnaire replied, holding out some tattered leather sandals. "Not like he's gonna be needing 'em."

He'd tried to live his life in an exemplary way, to embody the lessons he sought to teach. And if the ultimate lesson required him to lose his life so that others may receive everlasting

peace, it was a small price to pay. His only regret was being unable to ease the suffering of those he'd be leaving behind. But if they truly believed in him and his message, then they would be reunited soon enough. And for all eternity.

CHAPTER ONE

Old Towne Arena, Northwest Diocese, Present day

Billy Grail wanted to die. Check that. The greatest player in the history of the Sacred Basketball Association would have gladly given his life to win a championship. For twenty years, he'd given his heart, soul, and body to a game he loved more than anything in the world. But as he made his way back to the visitor's bench, serenaded by the hostile Old Towne crowd, it dawned on Billy that the feeling might not be mutual.

Grabbing a seat, sweat pouring off his battle-hardened body, Billy was overcome by a sickening sense of déjà vu. On three previous occasions, he and his Crystal City Cavaliers had reached the SBA championship round. And three times had come up short. A bounce here, a whistle there, and Billy knew his story would have already had a much more satisfying ending.

Surrounded by his teammates, like him clad in china white uniforms trimmed in cavalier blue, Billy fought hard to block out the distractions and keep history from repeating.

"Yo, Cap!" Coach Monroe Henry called out, snapping Billy's attention back to the Cavalier bench. "Still with us?"

"You know it, Skipper," Billy replied.

He loved Monroe Henry, a total unmade bed whose eyes bugged out of his bald round head when he got fired up. And at that moment, with the Cavs facing elimination, Coach Henry was really fired up.

"All right, gentlemen, we got a whole lotta work and not much time."

Grabbing his video tablet, Henry knelt down and got busy diagraming a miracle. "Listen up, nothing fancy. I'm talking to *you*, Orlando," Henry warned, staring directly at Bo Orlando, his handsome, gap-toothed rookie point guard.

"I can't help it," Orlando cracked. "God made me fancy."

Next, Henry pointed to Mike Drinkwater, his gangly center, "Drink, you inbound to Orlando at half-court," and then he began furiously drawing X's and O's. "I want back screens here and

here.” Henry motioned to Alonzo Oden, power forward and team enforcer, “Zo, you’ve got to get a chip on Mason.”

“No problem,” Oden replied, taking a squirt of energy drink.

“He’s been a problem all night!” Henry snapped, casting an eye toward the Old Towne bench where Grant “The Beast” Mason, the Crusaders’ mercurial point guard, was joyously mocking them.

“Y’all are chumps,” Mason laughed, his black and red satin Crusader uniform shimmering under the lights. “We still the champs!”

Then, as he had for the past twenty years, Coach Henry looked to the end of the bench for salvation, “Billy, anything left in the tank?”

Checking the prehistoric mechanical scoreboard— Crusaders 100, Cavaliers 98, :06 left to play— Billy knew it was doable. In basketball, six seconds was an eternity. He just needed to banish the ghosts of history. Fixing his golden-brown eyes on his fellow warriors, Billy flashed them his best magazine cover grin.

“Just get me a look, fellas.”

“You heard the man,” Henry joyously replied. “Remember, win tonight and we stay alive. Lose....”

“Not gonna happen!” Orlando jumped in.

“Take us out, Cap,” Henry said, locking eyes with Billy. They’d fought too many battles to go out on the losing end of the stick. “Let’s make some history.”

“This is what it’s all about, guys,” Billy smiled and called the boys together. “Here we go. Cavs on me. Cavs on three. One-Two-Three....”

“Cavs!”

Just inside the half court line, Drinkwater waited to inbound, with Orlando steps away in the frontcourt. Grail trotted over to the far-left corner and was immediately picked up by Grant Mason.

“Ain’t you learned nothing by now, Choir Boy,” Mason snarled. “You ain’t never gonna win. Never!”

Ignoring the taunts, Billy slowed his heartbeat and focused on his breathing.

“Watch the back screen, Grant!”

Old Towne’s coach Cardinal Julius King barked instructions from the bench, the scar along his jaw rippling with every command. “Don’t let Grail take the shot!”

A barrel-chested referee handed Drinkwater the ball and blew his silver whistle.

With a quick head-fake, Grail broke along the baseline, Mason right on his hip. Drinkwater inbounded to Orlando, who snuck a peek at the clock—:04 left.

As Billy came across the key, Oden stepped down low, his shoulder catching Mason squarely in the chest. The Beast stumbled, giving Billy precious inches of separation. Orlando spotted him open in the corner, just beyond the three-point line, and fired the ball. In one fluid motion Billy caught the pass, elevated, and spun to face the basket.

Having regained his balance, Mason hurled himself at Billy. But he was too late. With a flick of the wrist, Grail let fly nanoseconds before Mason plowed into him, sending them both crashing to the court.

As the ball arced toward the hoop, everyone inside Old Towne Arena tracked its flight. Around the world, hundreds of millions more held their breath and offered prayers. After all, nothing less than the fate of the world depended on whether the shot found its mark.

The game clock hit :00.

EHHHHHHH! The buzzer sounded and then—

Swish. The ball slipped gently through the twine. Billy Grail had done it.

Final score: Crystal City Cavaliers 101, Old Towne Crusaders 100.

Old Towne Arena went silent. Victory had just left the building, shoved out the door by Billy’s God-given talent. Disappointment soon turned to rage and the Old Towne fans began showering the court with beer cups, programs, and whatever else they could find.

Gaining his feet, Mason stared at the basket in disbelief.

“Good game, man,” Billy said, still flat on his back. “Get a hand here?”

“Of course,” Mason replied, holding out a hand, only to pull it away the moment Billy tried to take it. “We ain’t friends, Choir Boy. You ain’t nothing but in my way.”

Old Towne guards dressed in black riot gear adorned with the red Crusaders logo, stormed the court to separate the fans and the players. Through the chaos, Grail spied Cardinal King staring back at him, a faint smile creasing the distinguished man’s lips.

“You okay, Cap?” Orlando asked, offering Billy an actual hand up.

Getting back on his feet, Grail took a step and winced. His left knee was on fire.

“Never better.”

CHAPTER TWO

The dingy basement-level pressroom was slam packed with journalists still abuzz from the evening's excitement. Grail's heroics meant a deciding seventh game back in Crystal City, an appropriately thrilling end to what had become an epic series. Though the world would have to wait three more days to crown its champion – and fulfill their divine obligation – the chance to see Billy Grail finally achieve what he richly deserved would make it worth the wait.

Freshly scrubbed and wearing a sharp cavalier blue suit and crisp white oxford, Billy gingerly slid behind the bouquet of microphones, doing his best to conceal the shrieks coming from his injured knee. Meeting the press was his least favorite part of the job, but it was his duty. So when a sea of hands shot in the air, Billy knocked them down one by one.

"Billy, take us through that last shot," came the first question.

"I had a good look, I just wanted to make sure I got it over Mason. Hats off to him and all of the Crusaders."

"Looked like you and The Beast got tangled up on the way down," another inquired. "How's the leg?"

"This time of year, everybody's a little dinged up," Billy replied, willing his knee to quit complaining. "I'll be fine on Sunday."

Finally, it appeared, the elephant in the room. "Will Sunday be your last game?"

"That's the plan. Or at least my wife's plan," Billy replied, adjusting his collar, as chuckles rippled through the room. "In all seriousness, God has granted me a wonderful career and a beautiful family. But time comes for every athlete. And this Sunday it's coming for me. Thank you very much."

As Billy stood to leave, one last question rose from the pack.

"Ever wonder why you've been so unlucky?" a female reporter shouted.

"What's that?" Grail hesitated, the question catching him off-guard.

Pushing her way to the front came Molly Crookshank, an ex-athlete turned sports reporter, wielding a mini-recorder and a no BS attitude. "You've had a glorious twenty-year career in a sport where most players are lucky to play two. Yet you're still in search of your first championship."

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” Billy deadpanned, prompting chuckles from the press corps.

“Thanks for reminding me, Miss Crookshank.”

“You’re welcome,” Molly laughed, reflexively tucking her long brown hair behind her ears.

“Still, my question is, do you ever wonder why you’ve never won?”

Chuckles turned to murmurs as Billy considered both Molly and her question very carefully.

“Timing, perhaps. Bad luck, maybe.” He then looked toward Heaven. “You’ll have to ask Him.”

“Did you ever consider the possibility that you’re too valuable?”

“What do you mean?” Grail wasn’t sure he heard her correctly. “Too valuable?”

“Too valuable to die.”

That got everyone’s attention, especially the Old Towne guards. In a flash, three giants dressed in black and red blazers flew in and surrounded Molly.

“Easy, fellas. I’m just doing my job.”

Before he could respond, Billy felt a hand on his shoulder – it was Monroe Henry. “Big crowd outside Billy,” he whispered. “Best get going.”

When Grail looked back for the reporter, she was gone.

