

Chapter Fifty-Three

Friday Night

Marriot Hotel, St. Louis

Barbara Walters took one last look at herself as she left her dressing room surrounded by technical make-up people and last minute information. She was set to interview Coach Graham and looked forward to it as much as any interview she had been granted, but felt unprepared about her subject. She knew nothing about basketball and knew even less about Gus Graham, but was told to relax since the rest of the world just wanted to find out more about the man behind the team that had sparked the world's imagination.

Barbara saw the man she'd be interviewing from afar. He was seated in a chair surrounded by people fussing over his hair and skin tone. His dog, Sam, sat close to him. Patient, protective, loving. She moved closer and listened.

"Please young lady, my eyebrows are just fine, and anyone who doesn't like them can go to blazes. Now watch that hair, I don't have much of it left up there. Sir, just what do you plan to do with that thing? No thanks. I'm black; my skin color is just fine with me. You want me to read this. Okay. Hmmm. Sir, what am I reading? No, I'm not signing anything at all that doesn't make common sense to me. Young lady, I am now getting up since you have violated my eyebrow law. Thanks everyone, now, where's this interview being held?"

Just then, a large, rather rotund man, came into view. Barbara surmised him to be Jackson Cool. She chuckled as she found herself eavesdropping on their conversation quite

unintentionally. “Coach, settle down will you? There’s nothing to get nervous about. These people are just doing their jobs and yes, even black folks need makeup for television!”

“Jackson, I never should have agreed to this interview. It’s the boys who should be on this interview, not me. Okay, how are they doing? Are they getting some rest before tomorrow Jackson?”

“Yep. Except tonight they’re taping some 20/20 interview I think. They’re having the time of their lives Coach. You have to be pretty proud of them.”

That seemed to settle him down. He sighed and said, “Yes, I guess you’re right. So what kind of woman is this Walters lady? Is she going to accuse me of overthrowing the government or anything like that? I think I’ll tell her I’m JFK’s illegitimate child. What do you think? Would she like that?”

Just then, Barbara Walters turned the corner pretending to catch them by surprise. “Oh, I’m sorry, you must be Coach Graham. I’m Barbara Walters.”

They shook hands and the coach introduced Cool. “Ms. Walters, this is my associate Jackson Cool, who has been instrumental in setting this up.” The coach gave Cool the evil eye.

“Yes, Mr. Cool; thanks for getting us this interview. The twenty thousand dollars in unmarked hundred dollar bills is under that chair as you requested. Thanks for doing this.”

Jackson, taking the joke in stride, added, “Thanks Ms. Walters. Always a pleasure. I assume the other half of the payment will be delivered if the coach behaves during the interview?”

They laughed and enjoyed the breaking of the ice but Gus was a bit left in the dust. He pretended not to care.

“Coach Graham, how do you want to be addressed during the interview? Is Coach okay or do you prefer Gus?”

“Anything Barbara. Whatever you are comfortable with. Is that where we’re sitting for the interview?”

“Yes, in fact if you’d like to be seated they’ll do some last minute lighting checks and we’ll be set to go.”

Gus rolled his eyes. “Thank you.” Gus sat in a very comfortable green, deep sofa, facing one exactly like the one he sat in. An army of men and women came over again without paying much attention to him. He felt like a painting or something inanimate. Walters took her seat as well and the same group swarmed over her. She ignored them as they adjusted everything from her hair to hiding a bra strap. They had microphones placed in their lapels and Barbara leaned forward as if to whisper a secret and said, “By the way, when I was doing some background on you I found some very interesting information but wanted to check with you before I said anything on the air. Is it true you are the illegitimate love child of President Kennedy?”

Coach Gus stared at her for a long three seconds and said, “Yes.” They both laughed out loud causing everyone to look over to them as they were practically rolling on the floor. Barbara and Gus suddenly enjoyed a chemistry that rarely came this quickly.

The producer approached them as they spoke, “Hi Barbara. Hi Coach, I’m Tim Gunther, the show’s producer, but then again Barbara, you already know that. Is everything good for you Coach? Can I get you anything before the interview?” He shook his head in the negative. “Great, Barbara, do your thing and Coach, just relax and try to be yourself, which is who everyone wants to get to know tonight. Okay? Great.”

“He’s done this a few times I take it?” Asked Gus.

“Oh yeah. Ready? This should be fun. Here we go.”

In the distance someone said, “Three, two, one, green!”

“Hello, this is Barbara Walters with a very special interview this evening. I’m sitting with Gus Graham, the coach of the... some would say... mighty CMC men’s basketball team. As many of you know, the CMC Tigercats have made a shambles of the NCAA tournament thus far by beating teams considered unbeatable and by doing so in convincing fashion. But the real story is that they are doing this on the legs of men who are approaching forty years of age, men who should not be competing with NBA-bound college aged athletes. We’re here to speak with the architect of this team and also to talk a bit about why the public around the world is so taken by this team and what they’ve accomplished. Coach Gus Graham, maybe we should tackle this first. What do you think is going on out there?”

Gus straightened his tie. His gray pin-striped suit fit him perfectly. Lucille would have been proud. He answered clearly. “It’s about hope Barbara. We live in a throw-away and youth oriented society;” he paused. “And anyone who thinks their life has passed them by is looking for examples of hope. Certainly the boys on this basketball team didn’t set out to do this. Quite frankly, they did this to save an old coach’s job. But in the process they have shown the world that with hard work and belief, anything, literally anything, is possible.”

Walters hung on every word. She leaned forward and asked, “Gus, where did you come from? I’ve heard reports that you’re the next Knute Rockne or Vince Lombardi. I realize it’s probably an unfair question but can you explain that?”

The coach was visibly uncomfortable with any praise, but he answered knowing that Barbara wasn’t sure what to ask. He chuckled. “You know Barbara, you must have your facts wrong, because most people know me as just an old coach from the Bronx.”

“A modest man.” She was gushing. Even her producers noticed. “Gus, last night, on Bob Costas’ special interview with the team, your boys, as you call them, displayed incredible insight for anyone listening. When you coached this team twenty years ago, with all the problems surrounding them, how do you think you handled it and what would you change if you could?”

“Phew. Well, first, those were some of the best years of my life. Actually, I started coaching these young fellas eight or nine years earlier when they were just little boys. Even way back then you knew they’d be special. But it was a tough time to raise kids. I don’t know, maybe it’s always a tough time, Lucille and I never had kids ourselves, but it seemed our house was always filled with them. But with these boys, there was a twinkle in their eye and trouble just about from the outset. They made me run. Back then I had to be on my toes because these guys had me literally guessing as to what would happen next. Aside from the pain they caused... youth is so dumb isn’t it?... they were the blood that pumped in my veins.” He paused for a second. “I’ll tell you, I realized that I had done the boys a disservice way too late in the game. And I think, to answer your question, that’s what I’d change. It was during their senior year in high school when I was working so hard to keep them on track for college scholarships that I realized I was too late. I had always saved them from trouble with the law or wherever it was coming from at the time, and never really got to the root of their problems. Today, there’s more help available to help young people in trouble... and much earlier in the process, but back then, I really didn’t know who to turn to. So, in that sense, I failed them. I should have worked harder to find help for them instead of protecting them so much. Who knows, maybe it’s not Thomas White’s fault as much as it’s mine. If I was smarter, or had taken more time to help Thomas, maybe we wouldn’t be sitting here tonight. I think there’s plenty of blame to go around, but

ultimately I failed them as a coach back then.” Anyone watching saw the pain in his eyes as he said the words.

Barbara was taken back by his honesty. “Gus, I read somewhere that even after the loss in the New York City championships that you stayed close to these guys. Why?”

“Because they were part of my family. Any boy I coached became part of my family if they so desired. And over the fifty years that I’ve coached; I’m a pretty old man Barbara...”

“Well I’m no spring chicken either Gus.” They both smiled.

“...but these boys were very special. We stayed close after that game, throughout their trials with the law, during the time some went to prison and then as their lives smoothed out and they became good, honest working people. Oh, don’t get me wrong, they were always good people, they were just young. If you ever had the chance to know any one of these guys you’d never let go. They are truly the salt of the earth and the best friends a person could ever ask for.”

Barbara looked at him and adjusted her skirt. “Which brings me to my next question. Why did they come to your rescue, so to speak? What was in it for them?”

Gus placed his hands together forming a temple with his fingers, thinking about his answer. “I told them, after they had informed me of their decision to apply to CMC, that they had to do this for one main reason and that was an education. Now I’m no fool. I know they did this to help me get through a rather difficult period, but they really didn’t do this for any personal gain. Quite the contrary. They sacrificed time with their families, possible humiliation and ridicule, and there was plenty of that in the beginning, and probable failure in their quest to help me keep my job. Not to mention job challenges of going to college full-time and playing basketball. So if you’re looking for some ulterior motive you won’t find it in this bunch. And in case anyone is wondering, they had to maintain a 2.5 GPA, which is a higher standard than the

NCAA sets at 2.0, to stay on the team. I'm proud to say they've done that so far, although with how their lives have changed over the last couple of months I'm not sure what their plans are for the next year. So the short answer is that they were trying to help out an old friend. If they hadn't applied, I can assure you I certainly would have lost my job. So you see the real stars here are all those boys, and not just the older guys. Brad Montgomery, Justin Smith, John Simonson they've been incredible. And Rick Tierney, a guy who's never really had any impact the first three years on the team could play on any team right now. How these guys have melded is incredible. It's funny how things work out."

"Do you think you'll be back next year?"

"Won't start thinking about that until Tuesday."

"A most proper answer Coach Saxon Gerald Gus Graham. Would you ever consider coaching at another university?"

"Whoa. You've done your homework. It's been a while since I heard my real name. Hmmm. Again Barbara, right now my thoughts and energies are with my team and our next game, which I hope you can attend by the way?"

"Are you asking me out Gus Graham?"

The coach laughed and said, "Sure, why not?"

Walters laughed as well, especially since she was being serious. "Coach Graham, did you ever think six months ago that you'd be in the championship game? Or for that matter the toast of the town?"

"Barbara, if someone told me that we would have had any of these experiences I'd say it was a fairytale. No, I certainly never thought I'd be in this situation, certainly not sitting here speaking to you either.

“I remember my dad use to tell me that if I worked hard I could do anything I wanted. He’d tell me that I’d be in the midst of championships and great success if I worked hard enough, but I thought those were just dreams passed by after a while, but now, I believe anything is possible Barbara. I believe anything is possible if you set your mind to it. I really do. I had a conversation with a man in his fifties who ran an asphalt company. You know those companies that do your driveway every year?”

Barbara Walters nodded and pretended to know what he was talking about. Everyone in her neighborhood used concrete.

“Well, this gentlemen said that he’s always wanted to go to art school, so I told him to go for it, but he’d need to change his thinking first. His eyes lit up and he understood. He finally understood. He knew that what he wanted was just beyond freedom.”

Barbara listened but found herself in that typical interviewer’s mind; something she had not fallen prey to in years. “Gus, in the last few moments we have, can you talk a bit about what the rest of the world should be doing in light of what they’ve been watching over the last few months. I mean, it’s uncanny how so many people who are not even sports fans have tuned into what you’ve accomplished. Win or lose Monday night, what do you tell these folks Gus, who have been most influenced about this?”

Gus thought at that moment that Barbara had hit the nub of the issue. “Barbara, you hit the nail on the head. Here are hundreds of millions of people rooting for these guys who go to work with typical everyday challenges and average lunch pails, what should they do differently if anything?” Coach Gus thought hard about this. The camera took its time navigating Gus’ lines around his eyes, his frown about the forehead, the tightness of his lips. The lens missed nothing. The audience, millions of them, watched as Gus thought about his answer. One could almost

hear the clock tick as he thought. Here was a man they all admired; a man that could be their grandfather, their dad, their friend. Gus' hands met his temple as he thought some more.

Barbara Walters looked at her producer. He gave the cut sign and asked what was going on in the sign language of the business. Barbara answered give him time. He reluctantly did so.

Gus thought about his father and what advice he'd give at that point. Gus didn't give a hoot about ratings or being politically correct. He knew that for those who listened, for those who cared, he'd give the best answer he could.

“Barbara, there are a few things I'd say to those who are hanging on the edge, hoping for the best for these guys. I'd say: let go. Forget CMC and focus on yourself. Focus on you. Use guys like Lucas Johnson, Thomas White, and JJ Harper as guides to your journey. Don't worry about what they've done so much; just know with all your heart that all is possible in your world. My mom used to say, 'Needle and thread when the sun's down low, and work a bit harder cause you just don't know' which basically meant work your ass off, but believe, believe. As sure as the sun will come up the next day you'll have new challenges and opportunities as well, but you have to be on your game. You can't let up Barbara. Without belief and finding the right team as Thomas said the other night, you have nothing. So for all those who are looking for the magic, take it from me, you're halfway there if you already recognize what you want to change. After that, it's finding the team you want to play with and believe. Believe in what you and the team want to do and I guarantee folks, anything is possible. Anything is possible.”

Nothing was said for a moment. It was as if little oxygen remained in the room. Network executives didn't care about the advertisements they decided not to run. The money they'd make from rerunning this interview would pay for things very nicely.

Barbara nodded her head and unwrapped her hands from her knees. She reached out and held Gus Graham's hands. "Gus, we are out of time but I thank you so much for spending it with us. I know now why they call you the next great thing after Rockne and Lombardi. You are nothing short of amazing Gus Graham and I hope you and your team continue to do well. Is that invitation still open for the game?"

Gus Graham blushed and let his eyes meet hers. "Yes, Ms. Walters. You are certainly invited to attend our game, but to be honest with you, I am tending to my boys, so I really won't have any time to spend with you. Please take that in the most positive spirit it is intended."

Barbara Walters leaned over and kissed him on the cheek." Okay, so you witnessed a first. This is Barbara Walters with the coach of the CMC Tigercats wishing you the best and good night."

The camera went out and Coach and Walters were finally off the air.

"You know Gus; we're going to be an item because of this."

Gus Graham got up and looked Walters in the eye. "You know Barbara, if that happened, I'd have to live with it." He smirked and left the room. Jackson handed him Sam's leash and they were off. Barbara Walters just watched and wished she had met him under different circumstances in a different time. She shook her head and sighed.