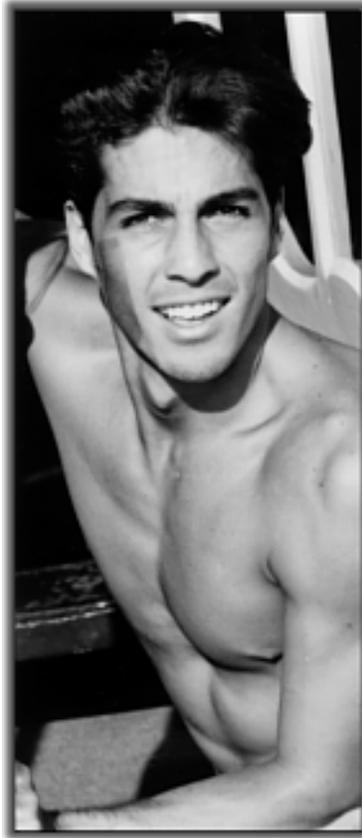


C H A D



B e y o n d

A

M o t h e r ' s M e m o r i e s

This book is dedicated

To my Son, Chad

and

All the Children

He now holds hands with...

and

All the Children

Who will have Lives and Dreams

Because of Them

Preface

I met Arista through the publisher of Reggie's book, "Quiet Grace." From the moment we spoke, I knew we would be friends for Life...Mothers losing a Child- what greater bond could we have together. But when she told me about "The Chad Foundation for Athletes and Artists," I was thrilled. Finally, we had somebody doing something to help save young lives from Sudden Cardiac Death by screening them with echocardiograms before they play sports. And she wanted to provide a screening for the youth at Reggie's former high school, Dunbar High, here in Baltimore and she did: the doctors and technicians from Johns Hopkins Hospital would conduct these tests. Arista spoke, I spoke, the Doctors spoke to the Student Body about the importance of prescreening athletes to identify risk factors, like HCM, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy- which took Reggie and which we now know is genetic. One in five hundred births can have this abnormal gene. I cannot tell you how important it is that we screen athletes and youth before the start of their sports seasons and also to have the portable AED's (Automatic External Defibrillators) available at every sporting event. Chad, through the generosity of Agilent Technologies, donated an AED in Reggie's honor to Dunbar High School. I, myself, played basketball on those gym boards and my talented son, Reggie, followed. I wish you all could have known Reggie. He loved children and when he became a Boston Celtic he gave back to the children of his community through basketball clinics and he had a Turkey Giveaway every Thanksgiving which continues to this day. On behalf of Reggie and Chad and all those young people who did not have the benefit of early screenings or an AED, please support The Chad Foundation to help save young hearts and lives.

*"IF TEARS COULD BUILD A STAIRWAY, AND MEMORIES BUILD A LANE,
I WOULD WALK RIGHT TO HEAVEN, AND BRING YOU HOME AGAIN."*

Friend till the End,
Peggy Ritch

Proud Mother of Reggie Lewis, All Star-Boston Celtic, 21 November 1967 to July 1993

Chapter One – “The Phone Call”

I remember the credit card, held tightly between my thumb and index finger. It was near closing time at Bloomingdales NYC on a Saturday in April. I was finishing up with the last customer and then I could go home and work on my screenplay. Yea! Life was good. I had worked hard to establish myself as a makeup artist in the cosmetic industry and could work as a resident artist 3 or 4 days a week in a permanent position which allowed me the vehicle to sustain my art as an actor/writer. My Sons were doing well on the west coast, living on their own in the City of Angels, pursuing careers in the film industry. And *finally* after many years of raising my three sons, I was living in NYC pursuing my own career as an artist. In the past few years I had written, produced and performed my 1st off off Broadway stageplay, “All About Sneakers” - audiences really loved this little play and now the screenplay version looked like a promising indie film. But in about 1 minute my life was about to change forever... the phone was about to ring delivering the call every parents dreads, is in denial of ever receiving- and can't imagine how those parents who do receive it can survive. Me? Well, I didn't really worry about it too much because, in my mind, I had made a pact with God... anybody but my 3 Sons... “I” had made the pact, and as I hadn't heard anything to the contrary, I assumed it was consensual...

But today, the proverbial tower was about to fall- all those false notions we tell ourselves were about to be swept away. Funny, what you remember- on this earth-shattering, life-changing moment... the little cubby hole where the cash register was located, the customer's credit card, stuck between two fingers, like a car that becomes frozen in its tracks, unable to move as it sees that roaring train heading straight for it. A

conductor once told me that after such a train accident, the person's hand might have to be pried from the steering wheel- with the help of a tool; it was stuck that tight. This day, as I heard that speeding locomotive coming straight for me, I dropped the phone but held on to the customer's card. My legs buckled leaving me near the floor, but that card was still glued to my thumb and forefinger as I heard the calm voice on the other end of the phone...speaking words I could not comprehend. You are enduring the greatest shock of your life but by all means don't lose the customer's card. The voice was that of my former husband and the father of my children, Carl. He had never called me at work before, but today he was telling me Chad, our eldest son, was playing football and there was an accident and after somewhat of a pause, he said... "He didn't make it..." He didn't make what? I thought and said, "What are you talking about...he didn't make it—a touchdown?" In the same calm voice, he repeated it in more detail... Collin and Curt, our other sons, went to the hospital... to identify.... "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT??" My voice roared in volume... The owner of that card was watching the scenario and it didn't look good...and her card was still stuck to my fingers and all she wanted was her merchandise and to go home. But I was trying to decipher some altered state of conversation and it took complete precedence.

He told me in different words. This time it hit home and my emotions surfaced, like a tsunami, engulfing everything. There was no warning and editing was not an option. The president of the United States could have been standing next to me; there would have been the same reaction. "HOW CAN YOU TELL ME THIS? WHAT ARE YOU SAYING??" I still am unable to process what I am hearing. I cried, I bent over, I don't know where the phone had gone... was it still in my hand, just no longer on my ear?

And the woman standing on the other side of the counter is no longer there and then suddenly a colleague from the neighboring counter appears. Frank is a nice man, I always liked him. I handed him the phone. His face was turned away from me but I could tell by his shoulders and the way his hand covered his mouth, it was true. When he turned back, the first thing he did was embrace me... proud mama, always talking about her sons, showing pictures. Why Chad had even stopped by the counter at Christmas on what would be his last trip to New York and our last family trip together but they remembered the handsome young men that were my Sons. The cosmetic associates all knew how close we were. How could she possibly handle this news was on his mind as he tried to be the buffer of these sad tidings. This day, this phone call would remain with him a long while. When he turned back, he spoke to me firmly and gently, I had to get home as quickly as possible as plane reservations were made and then he put the phone in my hand again because I needed to listen to the details. Of course, Carl would have taken care of all the details even in this- his most tragic moment. When he was 18, he was going on 40. Dependability was his second nature. But it was Frank's manner, both compassionate and firm, and the inkling of the thought that I had to get to my other sons that caused me to take the phone from him again. What my sons were going through was inconceivable, I must get to them.

Suddenly one of the flagship retail behemoths of the world turned its business face aside and became very human. The floor manager came to handle the counter immediately. My manager, returning from her break, accompanied me home at once to help me pack. She lived on Long Island, it didn't matter to her. When my neighbor, Frank, returned to his own counter, as in La Prairie, he took the card from my fingers

though the fingers remained in the same position for several seconds. Here was a person in myself who was not used to being led but this day I was so grateful for those people who led me through the next few hours. The tower had fallen and the lightning and thunder, though invisible in their magnitude, were felt by all and they were the brave souls leading me through the maelstrom. I vaguely remember being led out of the store arms around me, someone else calling a cab for us.

When we reached my apartment, Carin, my manager packed my suitcase. How does one do that? Go into a strange closet and start choosing clothing but she did a very excellent job for when I arrived in LA, it seemed I had all the right clothes to wear. It's true, we New Yorkers wear a lot of black, but Carin had also packed other colours. Chad would have been happy. He would have not wanted me completely in black. He was the most positive person I ever knew.

I remember a moment on the plane. I wore my sunglasses continuously, even though it was night, for my eyes were swollen from crying. I remember asking the flight attendant for ice. She brought it quietly and disappeared. People know something is wrong and give you your space and respect. It is so appreciated for I found in this circumstance one becomes oblivious to all, even one who is usually conscious of social demeanor in public. I was glad it was a night flight and that the plane didn't seem completely filled. Then, one, like an animal that had been recently attacked, could retire to a place of solitude and lick its wounds in private.

As the plane took off- I cannot remember what airport, the ride there, or who was sheltering my suitcase. Carl had made all the arrangements and I was just on

some conveyor belt being led through this murky, surreal state. As the plane started to rise, I felt this terrible pain suffuse my entire being- no more delaying, no more turning back, this plane with every motion was taking me to meet, face to face this horrific loss. Sharen, Carl's wife, must have sensed my anguish at this moment, for she, reached across for my hand and we held hands across the aisle as the plane took off... to face the most difficult moment of our Lives.