

Catch You Later, Traitor

{ Avi }

Chapter One

The way I see it, I stopped being a kid on April 12, 1951.

We were playing our regular afternoon recess punchball game out in the schoolyard. I was about to smack the ball when Big Toby, who always played catcher, muttered, "Hey, Pete, that true about your parents?"

I looked over my shoulder. "What?"

"Is what Donovan said about your parents true?"

I stared at him as if he had walked off a flying saucer. Why would Mr. Donovan, our seventh-grade teacher, say anything about my parents? And how come I hadn't heard?

"Come on, Collison," Hank Sibley yelled at me. He was near second base, which was someone's sweater. "Stop gabbing. Recess almost up." He blew a huge bubble with his gum, which popped as I punched a shot inside third.

Kat, the only girl playing, raced home.

Our schoolyard was cement, which meant if you slid home, you'd peel off your skin. So no sliding allowed. Anyway, Kat stomped on her geography text, our home plate, and yelled "Dodgers win!" well before the ball was thrown home.

Grinning, I stood on first base, my English reader. Next moment the school bell clanged, so we grabbed our stuff and headed back to class.

"Kicky hit," Kat said to me.

Kat's real name was Katherine Boyer. Some people considered her a tomboy. I couldn't have cared less. She and I had been sitting next to each other ever since fourth grade. In fact, we did most things together: school, homework, movies, radio, and TV. Her mother once said we were back and forth between apartments so much, it was hard to know who lived where. Kat was pretty much the other half of my brain.

"Thanks," I said, but Big Toby's question— "*That true about your parents?*" —kept bouncing round my head like a steel marble in a lit-up pinball machine.

We poured into Brooklyn's Public School Number 10. The old brick building had no music room, no art room, no library, and no gym. All the same, it had a locker room stink.

Back at our wooden desks, all of them bolted to the floor, we did what we were supposed to do: sit with faces front, hands clasped, feet together, like rows of plaster ducks in a Coney Island shooting gallery. Since Donovan wasn't there, I wadded up a piece of paper and flicked it at Big Toby, hitting his fat neck.

He hooked a frown over his shoulder.

"Psst! What did Donovan say?"

The second I spoke, Donovan walked in. "No talking in class, Pete," he barked.

I ducked my head, looked toward Kat, and whispered: "Did Donovan say something about my parents yesterday?" It must have been when I'd left school early for a dentist drill.

She nicked a nervous nod.

That helped. "What'd he say?"

"Collison," said Donovan, "do I need to send you to the principal's office?"

Kat sneaked a small smile in my direction. It wasn't her usual smile. More like the smile on a store window mannequin: all show, no tell.

"Collison!" Donovan barked. "Eyes front."

With his potbelly, slack cheeks, large ears, and baggy eyes, Donovan reminded me of a beagle. He was strict, insisting we call him "Sir." His smiles were as rare as finding two bits on the sidewalk.

The way he told it, he was a World War Two vet with Technicolor tales about what happened to him and his buddies in the Pacific. In the mornings, when we stood by our desks, hands over hearts, pledging allegiance to the flag up front, he snapped a military salute sharp enough to chop cheap paper.

So when Donovan called you by your last name, it was like hearing a cop-car siren. You might not know what you were doing wrong but you stopped doing it. In other words, there was a smell in the air and it wasn't just the school.

School dragged on for another hour and a half, geography and then grammar. I was so rattled, my notion of a dangling participle was that long, skinny country of Chile.

When the class clock finally hit three and the bell rang, we poured out of school like beans from a split beanbag. It being Thursday afternoon, I should have gone to my once-a-week job, reading newspapers to a blind guy named Mr. Ordson, except he had called and canceled. Fine with me. I needed to talk to Kat about what Donovan said. But she raced ahead, and her mother was waiting for her outside.

Most times when Kat's mom saw me, she flashed a friendly "hello." That day when she saw me walking toward them, she hauled Kat away as if I had the chicken pox.

"Call me tonight!" I shouted to Kat.

With Kat gone, I searched for Big Toby, but he, too, had bolted. So there I was, alone, though what Toby said hung round like an annoying young cousin.

To calm myself down, I went over to Montvale Street to my favorite store, Ritman's Books.

When I walked in, Mr. Ritman, a little man with big Albert Einstein hair, was sitting behind the counter reading *Tales from the Crypt*.

Ritman always wore a green plastic visor that protected his eyes from the glare of the naked light bulb that dangled over his head like a cartoon idea. From his thin blue lips a lit cigarette hung, the burning end pointing down, the smoke drifting up, the ashtray in front of him a bird's nest built of butts. "'Lo, Pete," he mumbled, his eyes fixed on the gore in his comic book.

The front room of Ritman's store was filled with rotating wire racks stuffed with paperback books, comics, and magazines. I headed for the back room, which had the old detective magazines. I loved those mystery monthlies, ones like *Black Mask*, *True Detective*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Their covers always had some radioactive babe falling out of her dress next to a square-jawed guy about to either save her or kill her; it wasn't clear which. The stories were full of hard guys in hard situations with hard bad guys and dames, talking in such hard ways it would take a chisel to break their sentences apart.

My all-time favorite detective book was *The Maltese Falcon*, written by Dashiell Hammett. It was about Sam Spade, a hard-boiled private eye, a gumshoe, who was tough, honest, and stuffed with feelings, which he kept stuffed inside.

The Maltese Falcon starts something like this:

"There's a girl wants to see you, Sam. Her name's Wonderly."

"A customer?"

"I guess so. You'll want to see her anyway: she's a knockout."

"Shoo her in, sweetheart," said Spade. "Shoo her in."

Sam Spade, talking as if he were spitting firecrackers, was my Shakespeare. If I were a writer, that's the way I'd write. I was always trying to talk like him.

After reading *The Maltese Falcon* tons of times, listening to hours of mystery radio shows, and losing myself in detective stories, I knew what I wanted to be: a hard-boiled detective.

Trouble was, I had nothing to detect. And a detective with nothing to detect is like a fish living in a tree.

Anyway, I found an old *Black Mask* magazine, full of detective stories, the kind I loved. I flipped a dime to Ritman for the magazine and went to buy Ma her afternoon *Post* at the corner newsstand.

For a nickel, I got the newspaper and read the screaming headline:

PRESIDENT TRUMAN FIRES GENERAL MACARTHUR!

I went to the back page.

BASEBALL SEASON ABOUT TO BEGIN Yanks, Giants, Dodgers Hopes High

Thinking baseball until I turned onto my street, I tried to imagine the scene as if it were in a detective story I had written:

Hicks Street was lined with large apartment buildings with walls of blank-eyed windows, facing narrow streets with parked cars lined up like rows of dead sharks. Among the apartment buildings stood old brownstone houses, which seemed to have been assembled from slabs of brown bread. Here and there, skimpy pin oaks managed to grow in squares of unbreakable dirt. A tin sign that read "Curb Your Dog" was nailed to each oak. The cocker spaniel using the square closest to Pete Collison's building for a public squat must not have been able to read.

Pete shot through his building's lobby, grabbed two letters from the mail table – one for his parents, one for his brother Bobby – and took the elevator up to the third floor. Unlocking the door, he stepped into apartment 3B. As always, the place smelled like an unwashed ashtray and was as quiet as a sleeping brick.

I usually got home before my folks. Ma, a guidance counselor at Brooklyn Trinity School, often had to stay after school guiding kids. Dad was at New City College, where he taught American history. He got home around five. As for my brother Bobby – two years older than me – he usually stayed late at his high school working with his Rocket Club.

I headed down the dark, narrow hall, toward the bedroom I shared with Bobby. The hall was lined with so many books it might as well have been a bargain basement bookstore. Small, framed family photographs of cousins,

aunts, uncles, and grandparents were stuck between the books, creating the impression of a ship's passengers peeking at me through portholes.

I was halfway down the hall when our phone rang in the kitchen. Hoping it was Kat—we talked every day after school if we weren't together—I ran and picked up. "Hello?"

"Is this Pete?"

"Yeah."

"You need to help us, Pete."

"What? Who is this?"

The next sound was a dial tone that sang like a bee that hadn't bothered learning more than one note. I stood there, phone in hand, not sure if it had been a prank call or if someone had just threatened me.

Except ... why would anyone threaten me?