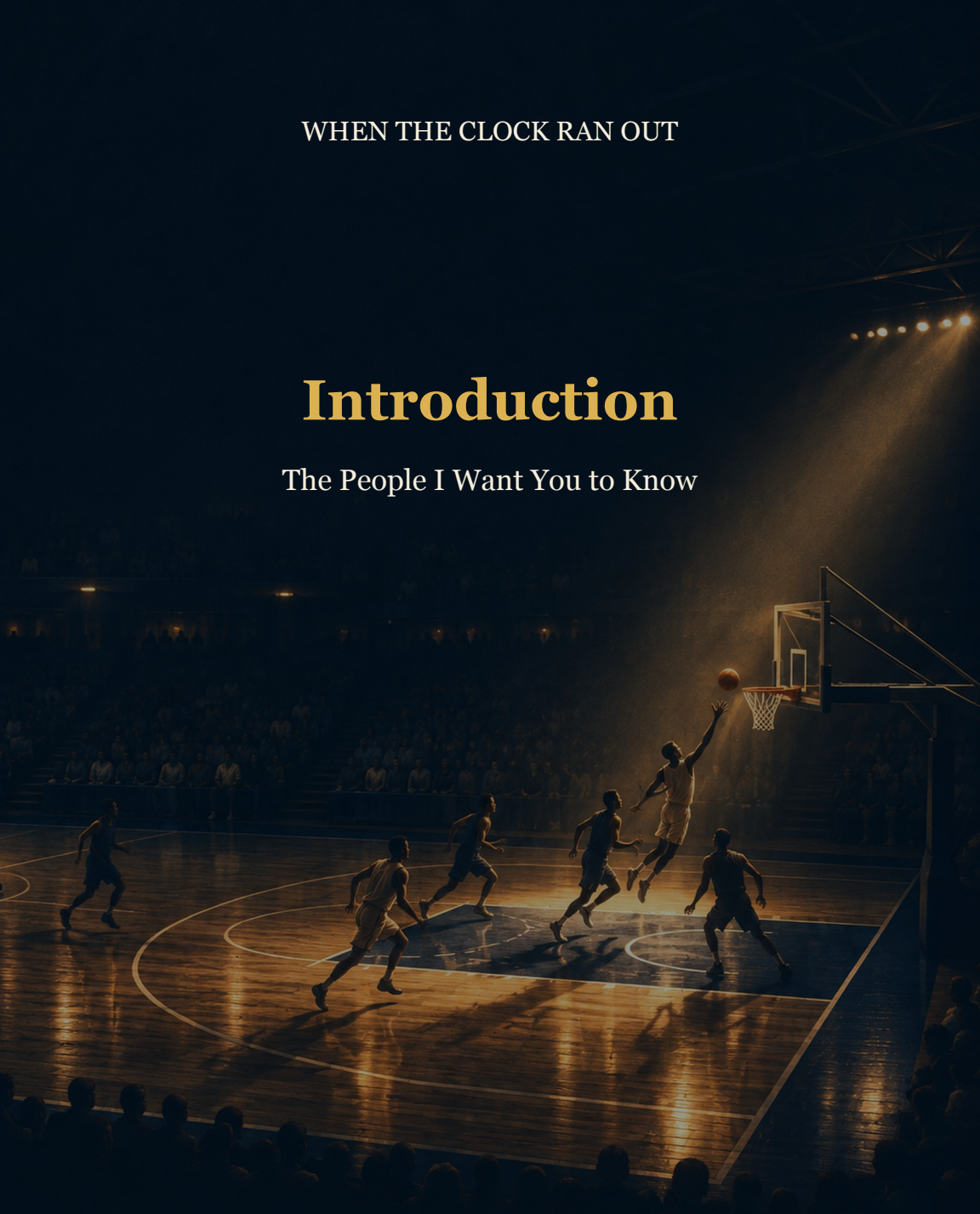
Introduction

The People I Want You to Know



MIKE EATMON

In my real estate office in Wilson, I keep a basketball signed by the team and a framed photograph of the 2007 champions. They belong to a season I still love to talk about. They also belong to people whose lives had been crossing mine for years before the country learned their names.

A visitor can see a trophy season in those signatures. I see evenings in Wilson Gym, a friend on the bench, and young men I had come to care about. I remember what it was like to worry for them before anyone could tell us how the story would end.

That is the place I am telling it from.

I wasn't the coach. I wasn't the point guard. Nobody was putting me in with the game on the line.

I was a friend and a fan. Sometimes my contribution was buying a bag of mints and trying to persuade strangers to pull for Barton. Sometimes it was asking Ron what the team needed. A good deal of it involved making more noise than the people near me had expected when they bought their tickets.

I enjoyed myself. I also cared about those boys.

When Darla Lievense introduced herself at church in 1996, I couldn't have imagined where the friendship would take us. Ron was the new basketball coach at Barton College. His gym was about five minutes away. I started going to games, and before long the team had become part of my life.

That is the Barton I want you to know: a college in Wilson, North Carolina, where you could see the coach at church on Sunday and watch him work during the week. You got to know his wife and daughters. You learned the players' names. If something went wrong, the people you worried about were people you knew.

Plenty went wrong in the championship season. Alejo Barovero broke his shooting hand. A thirty-four-point loss left the team with questions it couldn't avoid. Close games kept asking for more time, until overtime seemed to be a place our boys had taken up residence.

Ron saw those things from inside the team. I saw them from the stands. Later, when we talked through the years together, his account filled in much that a fan couldn't have known. You will hear both perspectives, with Ron's memories kept in his care and mine in mine.

My Christian faith is part of this story. So is Ron's understanding of coaching as a calling. I believe God worked through the people who gathered around that program, and I am grateful for what we were allowed to share. You are welcome here whether you understand the season that way or simply love a good basketball story.

The players wearing Winona State uniforms deserve a place in it, too. Their excellence gave the championship its weight. Our joy came at the end of an afternoon that hurt them. Remembering that keeps my gratitude honest.

What happened in Springfield made Barton famous for a little while. What brought us there had been happening for years.

I worry that much of that longer story could go untold. Ron is not going to organize his life around telling people how much he has done. I love that about him. It also leaves something for a friend to do. I have watched him give years to young men whose names may never appear in a championship account. I want those years remembered, too.

But even a book that makes Ron more fully known can miss what matters most to me. I believe this is God's story. Ron is a man God has used, and the championship is one part of a much longer work. I saw God's involvement in the years of service, the friendships, and the help people gave one another, not only in the seconds when the whole country could see the score change.

That conviction is why I cannot leave the story alone. I want you to know my friend, and I want you to see why I give God the credit. Ron would do the same. The privilege, for me, is getting to tell it.

THE COMPLETE STORY

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