

Chapter One

Owen

The Woodlawn Wildcats were going down!

But not without a fight, it turned out.

It was late in the fourth quarter, and my socks were so soaked with sweat I felt like I was standing in the shallow end of a swimming pool instead of Woodlawn's gym.

My best friend, Chris, dribbled down the court and passed to Nate, the fastest guy on our team.

Nate took off, chased by a bunch of green and yellow uniforms, and dodged one of their guards with a couple of awesome moves that could have been ESPN highlights (if ESPN covered middle-school basketball).

The crowd was on their feet.

But then Nate was stuck dealing with Woodlawn's other guard, who wouldn't budge.

I watched my teammate try to work some magic, but he kept getting blocked by the guard's long, skinny arms.

"That guy's an octopus," I said to Chris.

He nodded. "We've gotta help Nate out."

I tried to get open by ditching the big Wildcat who'd been stuck to me like a brand new Band-Aid for the whole game. The kid seemed to know every move I was going to make before *I* did. When I broke left, he was already there. If I went right, his freckled face and hot ketchup breath were waiting for me. I seriously couldn't get away from him, no matter what I did.

But luckily, I wasn't the only Lewis and Clark Pioneer out there.

"I'm open!" Paul shouted, and I watched Nate throw the ball right to him.

A perfect pass.

Perfect teamwork.

I rested my hands on my knees, catching my breath while Paul dribbled a couple of times and checked out his options.

He didn't have too many.

"Shoot!" The crowd yelled so loud I thought the backboard would shatter.

The Woodlawn cheerleaders started jumping up and down screaming about "spirit" to distract him.

But Paul had two little sisters who were even more annoying than they were, so he just smiled and got into position. In about two seconds, the ball was in the air again.

I willed it to go straight into the basket.

And it *did*, dropping through the net with a big, fat swish.

"Sweet!" I cried, over the cheers of our fans. I high-fived Paul and Nicky Chu, who were as amped as I was.

We only had two minutes left and we were still down by three points, but there was hope. Lots of it.

Coach pulled Paul out and it was Russ's turn to hit the hardwood. My twin yanked up his blue and white shorts, making the tucked-in jersey I kept telling him wasn't cool even more obvious.

Some things never change.

I nodded at Russ and he smiled back with a flash of his braces, and then he bent to retie the laces of the most awesome Nikes on the planet.

The next thing I knew, he was doing some stretch I'd never seen before, his elbows sticking out all over the place. It wasn't anything we'd been taught, which meant Russ probably read about it in a yoga book or something.

As I watched him, I was still kind of weirded out by how comfortable my brainiac brother looked on the court. After years of science fairs and nerd herds, he'd taken a chance on basketball and it had totally paid off.

Sure, his dribbling still needed work and he wasn't exactly the fastest guy on the team, but he had the third-best shooting percentage and his fan base was out of control.

"Let's see some hustle, Russell!" some eighth-grade girls shrieked from the stands, proving the point.

My brother's face turned bright pink.

The ref blew his whistle and Chris passed the ball to me.

I could hear the Wildcat breathing hard behind me and I'm pretty sure he sprayed the back of my neck with ketchup spit.

I pivoted right and by some kind of fluke, he didn't see that move coming.

With nothing but open court in front of me, I could finally *do* something!

"Shoot!" the crowd yelled.

But I wasn't going to rush anything. We had time on the clock, so there was no reason to waste the shot. With all of the eyes in the gym on me, I took a couple of deep breaths.

When I was ready, I dribbled a little closer to the net. I stopped to bounce the ball one more time, then let it fly.

And man, did it soar!

I couldn't hear a sound as I watched the ball shoot through the air. When it found its target, it wobbled around the rim in slow motion for a second or two before finally falling through the net.

Yes!

Two points for Owen Evans, thank you very much!
I jogged back toward centre court.

Being so close to a win we could taste it was nothing new. After all, the Pioneers had been rocking a winning streak lately.

Okay, we'd only won two games in a row, but streaks had to start somewhere, right?

We'd smoked Roseglen by eighteen points, which was our biggest lead ever. But the Lincoln game had been more of a nail-biter and we'd only won by six.

Now we had less than a minute left before the final buzzer and we were down a single point.

I could tell the whole team was feeling the pressure.

Nicky was biting his lip so hard, I was pretty sure I saw blood on his chin.

Paul was cracking his knuckles fast enough that it sounded like he'd just added milk to a bowl of Rice Krispies.

Russ was mumbling something about the periodic table, which he only did when he was wiggling out.

And me? I was watching the seconds on the clock tick by at double their usual speed.

Lucky for us, Russ got fouled about half a second later by a kid who'd been on the ref's radar since the tip-off.

I watched my brother walk up to the line, his blue and silver Nikes squeaking against the hardwood. He adjusted his glasses, which was another sign he was stressed, and licked his lips.

I watched him roll his shoulders like he'd seen Carl Walters do during Blazer games. Then he dropped the ball for the first of his usual three bounces.

It hit the toe of his shoe and shot out of bounds.

"Calm down, Russ," I whispered as the skin on the back of his neck turned bright red.

The ref tossed the ball back to him and he bounced it three times with no problems.

The whole gym was dead quiet as he bent his bony knees, then straightened up to take the shot.

The ball seemed to hang in the air for about a year, but in reality it was barely long enough for me to blink.

I held my breath and then let it out in a big, "Yes!" when the ball hit the backboard and dropped through the net.