

## Chapter Nine

### Owen

My alarm clock went off on Wednesday morning and I could only think of one thing.

Tryout day!

I stared at the ceiling, imagining running drills and seeing my name on the team list. I was sure I'd make the roster, but my stomach felt weird, like there were jumping beans in there.

I had a shower and grabbed the Adidas box from my closet. I'd been planning to save the shoes for the Pioneers' first game, but having an edge at tryouts wouldn't hurt.

I took off the lid, pulled the tissue paper out of the way and smiled.

Mint condition!

They were dark blue with white stripes and light blue stitches. It had been hard to choose between them and a red pair, but I'd decided I wanted my shoes to match my Pioneers uniform.

Just like Russ.

I lifted one shoe out of the box for a closer look. When I first saw them, I'd thought they were the coolest shoes on the planet. But that was before I saw my brother's. I stared at the Adidas, and realized they weren't half as cool as his Nikes.

I closed the box and shoved it into my backpack, trying not to think about it. I was supposed to be supporting Russ, just like he supported me. It wasn't about shoes. Or T-shirts. Or those awesome shorts with the stripes down the side that he got two pairs of. Or the sweet hoodie I wished was hanging in *my* closet.

It was about making sure Russ didn't embarrass me (or himself, of course) at tryouts. Period.

And besides, I could forget about the gear because Russell's basketball career was going to be over in, like, seconds. All he'd have left after tryouts were the shoes.

The Nikes would be souvenirs, like the parting gifts they gave to people who lost on game shows.

"Big day," Mom said, as I walked into the kitchen. "I made waffles."

"Awesome," I told her, even though they were *Russ's* favourite, not mine.

"Any sign of your brother?" she asked.

"I think he's in the shower," I told her, through a mouthful.

"I hope he does well today," Mom said, quietly. "I know your dad gave him a pep talk last night, but—"

"He'll be fine." All he had to do was stand there. He could do that. Even the maple tree in our front yard could do that. In fact, it *did*. Like, twenty-four seven.

When I left the house, Chris was waiting for me on the corner with a ball under his arm.

“Finally,” he said, when I caught up with him. “Are you ready?”

“Yup. I’ve even got brand new shoes.” I pointed toward my pack.

“Cool. I’m wearing my lucky underwear.”

If it was the same pair of underwear he’d worn all the way through last year’s semi-finals, it was not lucky.

In fact, I felt sorry for it.

“I’ve been working on my jump shot,” he said, when we were about halfway to school.

*What?*

“You have a jump shot?” The jumping beans in my stomach started moving.

I didn’t have a jump shot!

“I haven’t mastered it yet,” Chris said. “But my brother said seventh grade is when coaches want to see what you can do from the field.” He shrugged. “You know, three-pointers.”

What? No one told me that!

“But last year was free throws and layups,” I reminded him. “And staying close to the hoop.”

“That was last year,” Chris shrugged again. “My brother said the school record is thirteen three-pointers in seventh grade.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I’d never scored a three-pointer in my whole life! Sure, I’d been close, but like my grandpa always said, close only counted in horseshoes and hand grenades, whatever that meant.

Would Coach Baxter really be expecting us to make jump shots?

Would I be able to do one under pressure?

Could I do one *at all*?

I doubted it.

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I made it through my morning classes, and during lunch Chris, Nate, Paul, Nicky and I sat together to trade snacks and talk about what was going to happen that afternoon.

“Did you say jump shot?” Nicky asked Chris.

“Uh-huh,” Chris grunted, biting into Paul’s apple.

“No one said anything to me about jump shots,” Nicky muttered.

“Tell me about it,” I groaned, glad I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t do them.

“I can only make maybe two out of five,” Nicky sighed.

“What?” I practically choked. Maybe I *was* the only one, after all.

“I can only hit a three-pointer in about one out of *ten* shots,” Paul said.

That made me feel a little better.

But only until Nate said, “Dude, this is tryout day! You’ve gotta do better than that.”

I tried to drown my jumping beans with a juice box, but they seemed to know how to swim.

After lunch, I was on my way to social studies and trying not to freak out when I overheard Russ and some other kids in the hallway.

“Man, those shoes are awesome,” Ryan McNichol told him.

What?

I forgot all about jump shots and three-pointers. Russ was wearing his brand new shoes? To school? Sure, he'd worn them to practice at Sunset Park, but to *school*?

He wasn't saving them for the gym floor?

I shook my head. Of course he wasn't.

I mean, saving them for what? He wasn't going to make the team, so why not wear them every day? Why not mess up the most awesome shoes on the planet without even thinking about it? What difference did it make?

"Thanks," Russ said. "My dad got them for me."

"I heard you're trying out for basketball," Jeff Billings said.

I peeked around the corner. Russ looked way more comfortable than I would have expected, considering it was a conversation about sports, not space stations.

"Yeah. I know I won't make it, but Coach Baxter wants me to try."

"You never know," Jeff said. "You're pretty tall, and they could probably use a tall guy."

*With skills*, I wanted to shout. Tall or not, a guy still had to be able to dribble! They made it sound like anyone could do it!

"You're really trying out?" Maria asked. "That's so cool. Good luck, Russell."

"Thanks, I'll need it," he said, laughing.

I walked over to his locker when the other kids left. "Want to take some practice shots at afternoon break?" I asked.

"Thanks, Owen, but I'm too busy," he said.

“Tryouts are *today*,” I reminded him. “Like, in a couple of hours.”

He pushed up his glasses and squinted at me. “I think we’ve gone over this. I’m not going to make the team, Owen.”

“I know,” I said, nodding. “But we want to make sure you do okay.”

“We practised on the weekend,” he said. “You told me to just stand there.”

“I know, but—”

“You said that would be enough.” He was starting to look worried.

“Sure, but—”

“You think I’m doomed?” he asked, sounding just like that Jason kid on his brainiac team.

“Okay, never mind the practice,” I told him. “Do you think you’ll be able to block the shots the way you did at Sunset Park?”

He held his books tight against his bony chest. “I think so.”

“Then you’re cool. All you have to do is show up, stand there, and when it’s over, you’ll never have to worry about basketball again.”

At least that’s what I thought.