

F R E D B O W E N

OFF THE  
**BENCH**



# *CHAPTER* **ONE**

**K**ris Hall felt the game before he saw the game.

He walked up the stairs to the Oak View High School gymnasium with his mother, father, and younger sister, Joni. The stairs almost trembled from the pounding feet on the floor above. The noise of the crowd swirled down the stairway.

Kris could sense his heart beating faster.

His father handed four tickets to a man sitting on a high stool near the double door at the entrance of the gym.

“First game of the season!” Mr. Hall shouted to the man over the sound of the crowd. “Good to be back.”

The man nodded as he tore the tickets

in half and handed the stubs to Mr. Hall. “They’ve got a chance to be pretty good this year. Especially with your son on the team.”

“I just hope they all have a fun season,” Kris’s mother chimed in.

The family squeezed by several people standing around the entrance and stepped inside. The gym was almost full. The two teams—Oak View and Wilson High School—were warming up. Players and basketballs flashed around the polished floor.

“There’s Dylan!” Joni shouted, pointing to the floor.

Kris spied his older brother moving, passing, hustling. He looked every inch a real ballplayer. Six feet even and in great shape for his senior year. Dylan was all business before the game, eyes focused on the ball and the action on the floor, looking sharp in his white uniform with the black and orange trim. Number 14—his favorite number.

Kris looked around at the people in the stands. Groups of parents, students, teachers, and people from the town huddled

together along the rows of wooden bleachers. Their voices blended with the pounding basketballs and the squeaks of basketball shoes against the floor. A warm gym was a good place to be on a cold December Friday night in a small town.

“There are the Russos,” Kris’s mother said, pointing to a woman standing and waving in the crowd. “They’re saving seats for us.”

The family threaded their way through the crowd and sat next to the Russos. On the floor, Dylan stood at the foul line practicing his free throws as he’d done thousands of times in the Halls’ driveway. He bounced the ball three times, took a deep breath, dipped his knees, and spun the ball toward the front of the rim. His shot slipped through the net, barely moving the strings.

Kris looked past the players to the crowd on the other side of the gym. “There are Mason and Kordell,” Kris said to his parents. “Can I go sit with them?”

“Sure.”

“We’ll meet you at the bottom of those stairs after the game,” his mother said, pointing to the door the family had used to enter the gym.

“I want to hear you cheering for Dylan all the way across the floor,” his father said with a smile as Kris moved away.

Kris crossed the gym, staying close to the wall at one end of the court. As he passed the floor, he noticed the Oak View players. *They’re a lot bigger and faster than us eighth graders*, he thought.

He climbed to the last row of the bleachers and traded fist bumps with Mason James and Kordell Lewis, fellow Oak View Junior High basketball players.

“Hey, your brother looks good warming up,” Mason said. “All his shots are dropping.”

“I’ll bet he gets twenty tonight,” Kordell said.

“Maybe,” Kris said, studying the players. “How does the Wilson team look?”

“Not bad, they’ve got a couple of big guys.”

Mason pointed to a corner of the gym. “Hey, look, there’s Coach Davis.”

Kris saw their junior high school coach standing near a door with his hands in his pockets. “He doesn’t look much older than the guys on the floor,” Kris said.

“I heard he just got out of college a year or two ago,” Kordell said.

“Did he play hoops?”

“I don’t know. But I think this is his first year coaching.”

The teams gathered around their benches as the public address announcer began speaking to the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, here are the starting lineups for tonight’s game between the Wilson Presidents and the Oak View Tigers. At center for the Presidents, a six-foot-five senior, Rodney Taylor.”

“I told you,” Mason said. “That’s one of their big guys.”

Kordell nodded. “That dude might be tough to handle under the basket.”

“And the boards,” Kris added.

Polite applause greeted the Presidents starting lineup as they ran out onto the floor. The announcer raised his voice to a shout.

“Now, here is the starting lineup for your Oak View Tigers. At center, a six-foot-four junior, Eric Reed.”

The Oak View starters ran between two lines of pom-pom-waving cheerleaders and hand-clapping bench players to the middle of the floor and traded high fives. The crowd’s cheers grew louder and louder with each player until the announcer finally shouted the last starter’s name. “...At guard, a six-foot senior, Dylan Hall!”

Dylan ran out and joined hands with the other starters as a circle of players and cheers surrounded him.

Kris sat with his back against the gym wall and took in the scene. The crowd. The cheerleaders. The referees. The players moving out to the floor for the opening tip. His father and mother standing across the way clapping. Joni bouncing with excitement in the stands beside them.

*This is what I want to be*, Kris thought with his brother’s introduction still ringing in his ears.

*One of the chosen five.*

*A player whose name is called out at the beginning of each game.*

*A starter.*