

THE
WALK-ON

A NOVEL ABOUT LIFE AND BASKETBALL

ROSS CAVINS

Excerpt

Chapter 1

Tommy Chandler drifted through the back door and tossed his book bag onto the kitchen counter. Helen Chandler picked it up and handed it back to him. "In your room."

Tommy took the bag and stalked off. She yelled after him, "How'd you do?"

He didn't answer.

In his room, Tommy plopped onto his bed. Today had been the last day of high school basketball tryouts. Tomorrow the list would be up outside the coach's office. But tonight, Tommy could only worry.

For some guys, there was no question. Patrick Hart, for instance, always got everything he wanted. He drove a new car, dated Laura Novak, and he would surely start for the basketball team. His parents were boosters. They'd donated the money for the uniforms, and rumor had it they'd chipped in for half of the new computer lab.

Patrick was set for life.

Then there was Nick, Tommy's best friend. He'd make the team, maybe even start beside Patrick at the other guard position. Nick was the best shooter Tommy had ever seen. He could make a hundred free throws in a row, and then switch to his left hand.

Tommy's little brother, Brant, appeared in his doorway.

"How'd you do?"

"Leave me alone."

"Think you got cut?"

"Go away."

Brant stood there until Tommy raised his head, saying, "What do you want?"

"Mom said for me to tell you to wash up good. She doesn't want supper to smell like a locker room."

"Bite me."

Brant didn't move.

Tommy sat up and threw a fuzzy basketball at Brant. It hit the door jamb.

"What do you want, dorkhead?" Tommy asked.

"Mom told me to make sure you washed up."

Brant was twelve, four years younger than Tommy, and took a lot of things literally. Tommy shook his head, then got up and lumbered past Brant and into the bathroom. He took a quick shower and threw on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt before sitting down to dinner. The aroma of fried pork chops had assaulted him as soon as he came through the back door but it hadn't truly registered until now. His stomach grumbled.

"You going to answer me now?" his mom asked.

Tommy shrugged and dragged a pork chop to his plate. "I did okay."

"Just okay?"

"I don't know." Tommy loaded his plate with mashed potatoes and gravy.

His dad cleared his throat and spoke to the food in his plate, "I could have used some help at the store today."

"Gene." Helen Chandler said only one word, but it was the clipped way she said it that added meaning.

"All I'm saying is the delivery truck came in."

"You could have had it delivered tomorrow when you knew Tommy would be free." Helen was now glaring at Tommy's dad.

"We were out of whole wheat bread."

"People eat regular bread too."

Gene Chandler turned his attention back to his food as Helen looked at Brant.

"How'd your day go, honey?"

"I got an A on my math test."

"Very good, Brant." She smiled.

Brant said, "I could help out at the store."

"You're too young, honey," Helen said before Gene could answer. "We've agreed you won't help at the store until you're fifteen."

"But I want to help."

Helen smiled at her youngest son and passed him a bowl of green beans. Brant took them with a frown and spooned some onto his plate.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Gene Chandler said, "So you don't even know if you made the team?"

"Gene."

Gene glanced at Helen, eyebrows raised in surprise. "It's a valid question."

"It's the way you asked it."

"How did I ask it?"

Helen stared at him as she took a bite.

Gene paused a second before turning to Tommy. "Well?"

"I'll find out tomorrow."

"You don't have any clue how you played compared to the other boys?"

Tommy shrugged.

Gene's voice raised a notch. "You've had tryouts for a week and a half, and you don't know how you did?"

Tommy pushed his green beans around his plate and took a bite of his biscuit.

Helen said, "Okay, Gene. Let's just have a nice dinner."

"What?" Gene snapped his head toward his wife. "I told him he was too undersized to make the team. And even if he did, he'd never start and probably wouldn't get any playing time. What good is being on the team if you never get in the game?"

"Do you always have to be like this?"

"Like what? There's no point in playing if you know you're going to lose before you suit up."

Helen put her fork down. "Sometimes you have to finish second before you can finish first."

Gene humphed and shook his head. "If you don't finish first, you might as well come in last. Second place gets the same damn thing last place gets. Nothing." His fork had halted inches from his face, a huge sliver of pork chop stuck to it, dripping gravy onto the edge of his plate.

"Language." Helen sat up in her chair, skin taut against her chin as she thrust it toward her husband.

Gene held her gaze for a moment before returning to his food.

"Maybe if I had new shoes," Tommy offered.

"New shoes!" Gene exploded. "You think those grow on trees?"

"But my shoes aren't real basketball shoes."

"Boy, shoes are shoes. In my day, we wore Chucks. They didn't have no special arches or zippers or whatever. They worked just fine."

But to Tommy, Sears shoes were not real shoes. They weren't made for basketball like Patrick Hart's Air Jordans. Tommy slipped his hands beneath the table and brought up one of his shoes.

He waved it over his plate. "These aren't made for basketball. They give my feet blisters if I try to do too many moves."

"Get that off the table," his mom said.

"They're not even real leather," Tommy added. "They're *pleather*." He held the shoe away from the table. "And they creak when I walk."

"You're not getting new shoes just for basketball unless you buy them yourself," Gene Chandler said.

"With what?" Tommy replied. "You barely pay me anything for all the hours I put in at the store."

Gene held his eyes steady. "You can't put a price on experience."

"Experience won't buy me new shoes."

Gene stared at his son, impassive. "Keep it up, boy."

"Gene," Helen scolded.

Gene kept his gaze on Tommy, eyes firm, unforgiving. The look conveyed the speech Tommy had heard a million times.

Grandpa Chandler started the store and handed it down to his oldest son, Tommy's dad. It went without saying that the same was expected of Tommy, Gene's oldest son, to learn the business and take it over when the time came. Gene made it no secret that the store was the family's only source of income. And it was more than just a business, it was a family heirloom, like the big Bible that sat on Maw Maw Chandler's coffee table; it was a keepsake to be passed down from generation to generation, with reverence and thanks. The store was not an optional way of life, it was *the* way of life.

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Helen stared at her husband, wishing he was easier on the boys sometimes. He didn't have to be perfect, just a little more understanding

and lenient.

"Can I be excused?" Brant said, breaking the moment. He'd cleaned his plate and finished his tea.

A second passed and Helen turned to him, smiling. "Yes, honey."

As he slid his chair back, she asked if he'd finished his homework. He said he just had some reading in his history book.

"Go do it now."

"But, mom, I can do it right before I go to bed."

"You can do it now before you watch TV."

"Mom," Brant whined, elongating the word into more syllables than needed.

"No arguments."

Brant dropped his dishes into the sink and slunk from the kitchen.

Helen nodded toward Tommy, "Don't play with your food."

Tommy had formed a word with the green beans. When his dad raised up to see what it read, Tommy messed it up with his fork.

"May I be excused, too?" he asked.

"Who's Laura?" his dad said.

Tommy jerked his head up. "No one."

"Who's Laura?" Gene looked at Helen now.

"The Novak's daughter," she said. "Bill and Janie?"

"Janie Matthews?"

Helen licked her lips and squinted her eyes. "Yes, that one."

Gene held a hand up, a grin forming over his thin mouth. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

Tommy's dad tilted his head. "What? You gonna hold a memory against me now?"

Helen's eyes narrowed.

Gene tapped the table to get Tommy's attention. "She good-looking, this Laura?"

Tommy's mouth opened, but he said nothing.

"Gene."

"What?" He turned back to his wife. "I'm just trying to see how far the apple fell from the tree." He grinned and looked back at Tommy. "You going steady?"

"Gene," Helen said, shaking her head. "They don't go steady now."

Gene frowned. "What do they do?"

"They *go together*. Isn't that right?" She turned to Tommy.

"Mom."

Brant stuck his head into the kitchen. "Tommy's got a girlfriend. Tommy's got a girlfriend."

"No I don't!" Tommy slid his chair out. "We're not going together!"

"Tommy's got a girlfriend." Brant launched into a sing-song version of the chant. "*Tommy's got a girlfriend, Tommy's got a girlfriend.*"

"Boys." Their mother's voice was drowned out by Brant's singing. "Brant, go to your room."

"But—"

"Go." She pointed. "Homework, now."

Brant smirked as he twisted on a heel and strolled down the hall humming. Helen turned to her older son, eyes relaxing. His seventeenth birthday was approaching soon. He was growing fast now. She had noticed it this past summer when she had to buy school clothes. None of his jeans had fit. Tommy called them high-waters. Some terms never went out of style.

Tommy's boyish features had begun sharpening in this last year, his body developing. His voice changed octaves, it seemed, almost overnight. And she'd noticed the fur forming on his upper lip.

She knew this would happen one day, but it had arrived too soon. Wasn't Tommy just in diapers? He'd just cut his first tooth. Taken his first step. Had his first haircut.

And all of a sudden, he had his first girlfriend. It was too soon.

"Stop it, Mom," Tommy said.

Helen blinked. "Stop what?"

"Stop looking at me like that. I know what you're doing."

He really was growing up, she thought. Able to read her like a drive-thru menu.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"I'm not going with anyone." Tommy leaned forward and made impressions in his mashed potatoes with his fork, little railroad tracks from one side to the other.

Helen studied her son with a gaze only a mother could offer. She set her silverware down. "We can talk about anything."

Gene Chandler continued to shovel food into his mouth.

"Mom," Tommy said. "There's nothing to talk about, really."

She sighed. "And I suppose nothing happened at school today, either?"

"Only basketball tryouts." Tommy fidgeted in his seat. "Can I go now?"

Helen picked up her fork. "Go ahead. Do your homework before you get near the TV. I mean it."

Tommy cleared his plate and left the room.

Helen watched him leave and turned to her husband. He paused mid-bite, saying, "Don't look at me like that."

Her eyes moistened. "He's growing up so fast."

"I'm just glad he's into girls."

"Gene."

"What? I am. There are worse things, you know. He could be one of those kids who don't know what he likes. I heard the Granger's son is a fairy."

"Stop it."

He shrugged and filled his mouth with buttered biscuit.

Helen sighed again. "Once it starts, you know, there's no going back. Girls will preoccupy him from now on." She paused, the sides of her mouth turning down. "And he'll get his sweet, little heart broken."

"Jesus, Helen. He's sixteen." Biscuit crumbs shot from his mouth. "He's not a kid anymore. It'll be good to get his heart broken. Make him a man."

"That's an awful thing to say."

"And if you're gonna have a girl break your heart, it might as well be Janie Matthews' daughter."

"What's that mean?" Helen jerked around in her seat so she was facing him.

More biscuit crumbs tumbled from Gene's mouth. "All I'm saying is that if you're going to get your heart broken, shoot for the stars. You know? What's the point in—where are you going?"

Helen had pushed away from the table and stood with her plate. "I'm suddenly not very hungry." She dropped her plate in the sink as Gene watched. She passed by him, saying, "And I think I feel a week-long headache coming on."

She narrowed her eyes at him and disappeared down the hallway toward their room.