

A graphic of a basketball hoop and backboard, rendered in a grayscale, textured style. The number '1' is integrated into the design, appearing as a large, stylized digit that overlaps the hoop's structure.

Chapter 1

Layup drill!” Coach Giminski shouted above the sounds of pounding basketballs and squeaking sneakers on the shiny wood floor. The Wildcats, a team of seventh graders in the Rising Stars League, snapped into action, moving swiftly to fill the shooting, rebounding and passing lines. “Count ’em off,” the coach ordered.

Brett Carter, the Wildcats star forward, caught a bounce pass from Will Giminski, his teammate and best friend. Brett took a quick, confident dribble to the basket. He pushed off with his left foot and laid the ball against the top right corner of the square outlined on the glass backboard. The ball dropped through the net. *Swish.*

“One,” Brett called. He circled under the basket to the back of the rebounding line. Each player shouted out a number as the ball went into the basket. “Two ... three ... four...”

“Make ’em all,” Coach Giminski instructed. “Remember, you guys can’t scrimmage until you make twenty in a row.”

“Five ... six ... seven ...”

On the eighth attempt, Antwon Davis, a reserve guard, put the ball up too hard against the backboard. It bounced off the front of the rim and fell away. The Wildcats groaned.

“Come on, Antwon,” Brett said. “Concentrate. We gotta make twenty.”

“Start it over,” Coach Giminski called.

The count began again as the coach watched from the sidelines, a silver whistle dangling from his neck. “Come on, the layup is the easiest shot in basketball,” he said. “Use the backboard. Take it strong to the hoop.”

The count was at sixteen when Brett bounced a perfect waist-high pass to Will.

But his friend fumbled the ball and it slipped out of bounds.

“Start it again!” his father demanded.

Brett and Will stood in the rebounding line together. Brett put his hands to his throat. “Choker,” he teased.

“Give me a break,” Will muttered. “It slipped.”

“You choked,” Brett insisted.

“Just make *your* shots, okay?” Will snapped.

The count got closer and closer to the magic number: 17 ... 18 ... 19

Antwon tossed a pass to Brett. Without hesitation, Brett dribbled hard to the basket, laid the ball against the backboard and through the net.

“That’s twenty!” he shouted . He turned toward his cheering teammates and pumped his fist into the air.

The coach blew his whistle. “All right, scrimmage time,” he said.

The Wildcats cheered even louder as Coach Giminski began to divide the squad. “Okay, let’s have Brett be captain of one

team and Will captain of the other.”

Brett and Will stood across from each other at midcourt. As the Wildcats starting forwards and best players, Brett and Will were always the captains in scrimmages. They were both tall and athletic. With their dark hair, they could even have been mistaken for brothers. But though they were close in ability, Brett was always a bit quicker and better than Will.

“Jeremy Sims, Robert Maldonado, Christian Reyes and Antwon Davis, you’re on Will’s team,” Coach Giminski said. “Ellis Lee, Gabriel Matos, Troy Jensen and Garrett Fox, you’re with Brett.”

“Hey, Dad, what defense do you want us to play?” Will asked.

“Man-to-man,” Coach Giminski said. He bounced the ball to Garrett to start the game. “First team to ten baskets wins. I want to see lots of passes and picks out there.”

Brett and Will ran down court, side by side. “Ready to lose again?” Brett said.

“What are you talking about?” Will said

as he began to play defense against Brett. “We’ve got Jeremy. He can score.”

Brett’s team jumped off to a quick lead as Brett canned two jump shots. “So when are you guys going to start playing?” Brett needled Will as he backpedalled down court after the second basket.

Will charged by Brett for a quick layup. Then Jeremy, the Wildcats’ starting center, tapped an offensive rebound back to the basket. *Swish!* A minute later he tapped back another rebound. *Swish* again!

Now it was Will’s turn for a little trash talk. “You guys taking a rest on defense, or what?”

Brett answered by hitting a jump shot from the corner to tie the score, 3 – 3. “What did you say, Will?” he teased.

“Don’t let him have that shot,” Coach Giminski warned his son. “Go out and cover him.”

Will got the ball on the right wing, but Brett kept up his chatter even while playing defense. “Listen to your old man, Will,” he said. “Better not let me have *that* shot.”

The game went back and forth. Neither team was able to get more than a basket ahead. All the Wildcats were playing hard. Everyone wanted the bragging rights of a win against their teammates. Finally Will hit a turnaround jump shot, even with Brett draped all over him. The game was tied at 9–9.

“You better not let me have that shot,” Will told Brett as they ran down court.

“Next basket wins,” Coach Giminski called.

Brett ran down the right side of the court with Will trailing close beside him. Het leaned to the left and started heading to the other side of the court. Then he suddenly stopped and pivoted to the right.

Dribbling up court, Garrett saw the move and hit Brett with a pass about twenty feet from the basket. Brett caught it and pumped the ball high as if he were going to shoot. Will leaped to block the shot. As Will flew through the air, Brett pulled the ball down and dribbled past him, threading his way to the basket. With one final step, Brett

angled by Jeremy and laid the ball against the backboard. The ball splashed through the net.

Brett's team had won, 10–9!

Tweeet! Coach Giminski's whistle shrieked. "Okay, that's it. Practice is over," he called. "Clear out, guys."

The Wildcats gathered their gym bags and water bottles scattered along the gymnasium walls.

"Nice layup," Brett's twin sister Brooke said. She was standing on the sideline with a basketball under her arm, waiting to practice with her own team.

"Yeah." Brett grinned. "I faked Will out of his shoes."

"He'll be steamed about that," Brooke said.

"I know." Brett took a long gulp of water. "When's Dad coming?"

"In about an hour. Right after my practice."

"That's okay, I've got a book," Brett said. "Hey, how's your team looking so far?"

"Real good," Brooke said. "We've got the

Carlson sisters, Sonja and Renee. They can score.”

“And they’ve got you,” Brett reminded his sister. “You’re good.”

Brooke shrugged. “We’ll be okay.”

Coach Giminski and Will walked by them on their way out of the gym. “Nice fake,” Coach Giminski said to Brett. “Always be thinking about getting to the basket. Like I said, layups are the easiest shots in basketball.”

Brett nodded and eyed Will. His friend was staring at the floor.

“And you ...,” Coach Giminski said, playfully nudging his son in the ribs. “I’ve told you a million times, stay on your feet on defense. You can’t cover anybody flying through the air.”

“I know, I know.” Will rolled his eyes.

After the Giminskis had left, Brett sat down in the corner of the gym. The smooth, hard wall felt cool on the back of his sweaty T-shirt. He pulled his book out of his backpack. Then he looked out on the court. Brooke, the Carlsons, and the rest of the

team were warming up by shooting layups. Brett rested his head against the wall, thought of his own game-winning layup, and smiled.

Chapter

We're home!" Mr. Carter called as he entered the house with Brett and Brooke. In the corner of the living room, Jumper, the family's West Highland terrier, stirred on his pillow and fell back to sleep.

"I'll be down in a second," a voice said from upstairs. "I'm on the phone with Grandma."

Brett grabbed a glass from the cupboard. He walked over to the refrigerator, pushed a button, and filled the glass with cold, filtered water. He gulped greedily as he stared at the two report cards posted side by side on the refrigerator.

“Looking at that B in Social Studies isn’t going to change it to an A,” Brooke teased as she filled her glass with water.

“If I get an A this quarter, I’ll get an A for the semester,” Brett said. “Then we’ll be tied.”

“Maybe you’ll win the Social Studies Bee next week,” Brooke said. “It counts toward our Early American History unit.”

“Want to help me study?” Brett asked.

“What about me?” Brooke asked. “I want to win, too, you know.”

“I need more help than you,” Brett said. “I’m the guy who got the B, remember?”

Brooke smiled but didn’t say anything.

“Come on,” Brett pleaded. “I’ll ask you some questions, too.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Do you two have much homework?” Mr. Carter asked from the dining room as he looked through the day’s mail.

“Not much,” Brett answered. “Just studying for the history bee next week.”

Mrs. Carter came downstairs and gave her husband a kiss on the cheek.

“How’s your mom?” he asked.

“Fine,” she answered and then turned to Brooke. “She may come to your game on Sunday.”

“Hey, what about my game?” Brett asked, pretending to be insulted.

“Grandma will get to one of yours, don’t worry,” Mrs. Carter said. “How was practice?”

“Great,” Brett and Brooke both answered. “I scored the winning basket in our scrimmage,” Brett boasted. “I faked Will out big-time. He was pretty annoyed.”

“I hope you didn’t give him a hard time about it,” Brett’s mother said, frowning.

“Huh? Well, maybe a little,” Brett admitted. “But I was just joking. We’re still best buds.”

“You two better get started on your homework,” Mrs. Carter said.

Brett and Brooke scrambled up the stairs to their rooms. Brett tossed his backpack on his unmade bed. As he changed his clothes, he looked around the crowded bedroom. The walls were covered with sports

posters, as well as tickets and programs from games he had attended. In the corner of the room, the top of Brett's dresser was filled with trophies from his soccer, basketball and baseball teams. Beside the dresser, next to a heap of dirty clothes, was a stack of old sports magazines. Brett walked over to his cluttered desk to study the Wildcats schedule.

We better beat the Panthers on Sunday because the Huskies are going to be really tough, he thought. Then he grabbed a notebook and headed to his sister's room across the hall.

"Come in," Brooke said after Brett knocked on the door. She was at her computer, typing out a message. Her room was a lot neater than Brett's. The light green walls were covered with posters of her favorite actors, actresses, and rock bands. Her clothes were put neatly away in her dresser. But the top, just like Brett's, was covered with trophies.

"Want to quiz me on the history stuff now?" Brett asked.

“Okay.”

Brett handed his sister the notebook. He flopped on her bed and grabbed a pillow for his head. “Start with the last section,” he instructed. “You know, the one on the Civil War. I know the stuff before that pretty well.”

Brooke studied the paper. “Okay,” she began. “Who was the President of the Confederacy?”

“That’s easy.” Brett smiled. “Jefferson Davis.”

The questions and answers went back and forth like passes in a layup drill.

“What did President Lincoln issue on January 1, 1863?”

“The Emancipation Proclamation.”

“What did the Emancipation Proclamation do?”

“It freed the slaves.”

“Who was the general for the Confederates at the Battle of Gettysburg?”

“Robert E. Lee.”

“Who was the Union general?”

“Meade.”

Brooke raised her eyebrows.

“Okay, okay. George Gordon Meade,” Brett said.

“These are too easy. I’m going to find a really tough one.” Brooke glanced down the page. “Okay, here’s one you’ll never get.”

“On the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg, one of the Confederate generals led a famous charge. Who was it?”

“I know this. I know this....” Brett pounded his forehead, trying to knock the answer loose.

“That won’t help,” his sister told him.

“Give me a hint,” Brett pleaded.

“No way,” Brooke said. “Mr. McCracken and Ms. Fromm won’t give you any hints.”

“Come on, just one.”

“Okay.” Brooke thought for a moment. “What do you do with your nose all the time?”

“What?” Brett said. Then he had the answer. “Pick it!” he blurted out. “General George E. Pickett.”

“Right.” Brooke laughed. “Gotcha!”

“Funny,” Brett said. “Very funny.”