

**ERIC WALTERS**

**BLACK**

**AND**

**WHITE**



## CHAPTER ONE

“SO, ARE YOU GOING to stay or what?” Steve asked.

“I really don’t want to,” I answered.

“Come on, Tom, school’s over and you’ve got nowhere you have to be. So you can stick around and watch a little basketball, right?”

“I don’t want to watch basketball.”

“That makes no sense. You *always* want to watch basketball,” he said.

Steve and I were best friends, and teammates—not just on the school team, but on the rep team as well—and we did spend a lot of time together around basketball.

“But the *girls’* team?” I questioned. “Do I really want to watch our girls’ basketball team play?”

“Hey, basketball is basketball, and I never thought you’d get tired of it. Are you feeling all right? Should we take your temperature?”

Steve made a big show of reaching up to check my forehead, but I blocked his arm.

“Besides, they’re pretty good,” he argued.

“The Homelands Middle School girls’ basketball team?” I asked. “You really think they’re good?”

“Well ... maybe not. But what I *do* know is that some of those girls stayed after school last week to watch us play against Hillside.”

“That’s different. Our team really *is* pretty good. Besides, if you’re talking about Kim, she didn’t stay to watch our *team* play, she stayed to watch *you* play.”

“Well ... if you think about it, I practically *am* the team,” Steve replied.

“Yeah, *right*,” I said, sarcastically.

“Okay ... but you have to admit that, except for you, I am definitely the best player on the team.”

“Not to mention the most modest, the most humble ...”

“Fine. So why don’t you stay anyway? Watch the girls play and keep me company.”

“And then what?” I asked. “Is your mom coming to drive us home?”

“Well ... I was hoping that maybe your mother could drive us.”

Suddenly a light went on in my head. “So *that’s* why you’ve been bugging me all day to stay and watch. You don’t want my company, you just want a ride home.”

“I’m insulted!” Steve said. “You’re my best friend. Of *course* I want your company.” He paused, and a big smile crossed his face. “And if I get a ride home as well, that’s just a bonus!”

“Aha! And what if my mother can’t give us a drive home ... would you still want me to hang around?”

“Of course. It’s a long walk home and I’d enjoy your company. Come on, Tommy, stay ... be a pal, and I’ll owe you big time.”

I didn’t answer right away. I wanted him to squirm a little bit more.

“Well ...?”

“I’ll call my mother. If she can come pick us up, then I’ll stay and watch the girls play.”

Steve slapped me on the back. “Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

“But if she can’t, then I’m going right home. Right? No way I’m walking all that way.”

Steve looked at his watch. “You’d better hurry then, ’cause the bus leaves in less than five minutes.”

When I got to the office I walked in and stood in front of the big counter, trying to catch the secretary’s eye. She was sitting at her desk, talking on the phone, like I wasn’t there. I always got the impression that she didn’t really like kids, as though we were some sort of inconvenience that got in the way of her real job—running the school. I was pretty sure that was her job, because it didn’t seem like either the

principal or the vice-principal was in charge. However, it was obvious from her end of the conversation that this wasn't any sort of official school business she was discussing. She was talking about a movie she'd seen.

I looked at the clock over her head. The bus was going to leave any minute. I didn't have time for this conversation.

"Excuse me," I said.

She turned so her back was to me.

"Excuse me!" I said even louder.

She turned back around and scowled at me.

"I need to use the phone," I explained. "I have to call home."

Her scowl grew even darker, but then she nodded her head and turned back around. I pushed open the little swinging gate and circled around behind the counter. I picked up the phone, pushed the button on the only open line, and quickly dialed out. The phone started to ring. It rang again ... and again. *Come on, Mom, be home ...*

My mother picked up the phone at last. "Hello?"

"Hi, do you think you could come and pick me up from school in about an hour?" I blurted out.

"Why are you staying?"

"There's a basketball game that—"

"You forgot you had a basketball game?" she asked, sounding shocked.

"I don't have a basketball game. I'm watching a game ... the girls' team is playing."

"I didn't know you had an interest in girls' basketball," she said. She sounded amused.

"I'm interested in *all* basketball," I protested. "So, can you come and get me or what?"

"I guess so. You'd better get going now or you might miss the faceoff."

"Faceoff? Mom it's a—" I stopped myself mid-sentence as she started to laugh.

"I know, I know, it's a tipoff. I'll see you in an hour or so."

"Thanks, Mom ... see you then."

I replaced the phone in the cradle and looked up at the secretary. I was going to thank her, but she had her back to me, the phone still glued to her ear.

I circled back around the counter, left the office, rushed down the hall and into the gym. I got there just as the clock was ticking down the last two minutes before the start of the game.

Our girls were at one end of the gym, in two rows. One row was taking layups while the second row was grabbing the rebounds. It was a pretty standard drill. Of course, it would have looked a bit more familiar if they'd made more than an occasional basket. They really weren't doing very well. Some of them were downright brutal. They were going to get killed today.

Steve stood up in the bleachers and waved for me to come over. It wasn't like I was going to have any trouble finding him because the stands were practically empty. There were maybe fifteen students, a couple of teachers, and a handful of parents there to watch.

As I walked across the gym floor I saw the other team warming up. They were doing a shooting drill. They put up a few shots—wide, short, long, but nothing that dropped. They didn't appear to be any better than our girls. Maybe this wasn't going to be such a blowout after all.

I settled in beside Steve as the buzzer sounded. Most of the players hurried to their respective benches while a girl from each team, the captains, huddled with the ref at centre court.

“Your mother okay to drive us home?” Steve asked, a bit anxiously.

“Would I be here if she wasn't?”

“I guess you're right. So, what do you think about the team?”

“From the little I've seen there really isn't much to say.”

“Go easy on them, Tom. It's school basketball. Think about the guys on the boys' team. There really aren't more than five or six guys who can really play ball.”

“Maybe not, but at least there are five or six,” I said. “That's not happening here.”

“Some of these girls can play,” Steve replied.

“Like who?”

“Just watch and you’ll see for yourself.”

The ref blew his whistle and the starting five from both teams came out. They lined up and decided who was covering each man—or player, I guess—and then got ready for the tip. One of the girls from our team went into the circle. She wasn’t even close to being the tallest on the team, so why was she taking the tip? The other team’s centre had to be half a head taller. The ref tossed the ball up and our centre leaped up into the air, sailing well above the outstretched hand of the other player. She tapped the ball forward to one of her teammates, who tried to grab the ball, but it slipped through her fingers and then bounced off the legs of another player and right back into the hands of our centre! She put the ball on the ground, dribbled upcourt, and laid it in for a basket! The bench and the few spectators in the stands cheered.

“So,” Steve said, “do you see anybody who can play some ball?”

“Who is she?” I asked.

“Her name is Denyse.”

“How come I don’t know her?”

“She’s in grade seven.”

That explained it. I knew everybody in grade eight in the whole school, but only some of the sevens. Steve, however, knew everybody. His mother always

said she wished he'd spend half as much time on his homework as he did on the phone and on Facebook.

"I didn't think they let grade sevens on the senior team," I said. "They wouldn't let *us* try out for the grade eight team last year."

"They don't usually, but she's so good they had to."

The play went back up the court to our end and the Hillside guard put up a hurried shot. It bounced off the side of the rim, through a couple of hands, and then right into Denyse's grasp. She grabbed the ball with both hands, stuck out her elbows, and swung her arms around to protect the ball. As everybody cleared away and started back up to the other end she put the ball down and began dribbling.

"Is she the centre or the point guard?" I asked.

"She's whatever she wants to be," Steve said. "She can play every position."

Denyse brought the ball upcourt, and three members of the other team came toward her. She feathered a pass through them to an open teammate right under the basket, who fumbled it, regained it, and then wildly tossed up a shot that clanked off the backboard and into the hands of the other team.

I watched in fascination as the play went back and forth up and down the court. It was obvious that there was nobody out there who was even in the same league as Denyse. She could stop anybody one on one, while there weren't even two members of the

other team who could work together to contain her. The only reason the score stayed close was that she spread the ball around, setting up teammates, even though they failed to convert her set-ups and sometimes couldn't even catch the ball. Just as impressive as her play was the fact that when somebody did blow a play she didn't yell or make a face or give them a dirty look. That was something I'd been working on with our team. So far, I'd had only mixed results. I hated when people did stupid things on the court and sometimes I had trouble not letting them know, right there, right then.

"You know who she reminds me of out there?" Steve asked.

"Who?"

"You."

I smiled. "She does play pretty well," I said, trying to not sound too smug.

"I don't mean the way she plays—although I suppose there is a resemblance there. I mean the way she looks."

"You think she looks like me?" I asked, a bit shocked.

Steve nodded his head.

"Well, Steve, if you haven't noticed, I'm white and she's black. I'm male and she's female. I'm about five ten and she's about five inches shorter. Just how do you think we look alike?"

“The face.”

“I don’t look *anything* like her.”

“Yes you do,” Steve argued. “You both have that same expression on your face when you play.”

I looked at Denyse as she came back down the floor. I didn’t see any particular expression ... she just looked ... looked ... determined ... no, more than that, she looked angry.

“That’s how you look,” Steve said.

“I do not,” I protested.

“Yes you do, and believe me, I know that a lot better than you do. You’re on the inside of that expression, but I’m the guy who spends most of the game staring at it from the outside. That’s *exactly* what you look like.”

I wasn’t really sure I agreed with what he was saying, but there wasn’t much point in arguing. So what if I looked angry, or determined? That wasn’t bad, was it?

“So, do you think you could take her, one on one?” Steve asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” I snapped. “Of course I could take her.”

“How about her brother?” he asked.

“Of course I could take her ... who’s her brother?”

Steve laughed. “You don’t know anything, do you?”

“I know that you’re starting to sound a lot like a gossipy girl.”

“So, I guess you don’t want to know ... ?”

I didn’t answer.

“It might help if you knew her last name. It’s Smith.”

“That really helps. There must be more people called Smith than any other name in the whole world, and ... wait, you don’t mean Jamar Smith, do you?”

Jamar was two years older than us. He’d been in grade eight when we’d come to the school in grade six. He was on the basketball team back then. Heck, he *was* the basketball team.

Steve laughed again. “Can’t you see a little bit of his game in her?”

“Not really. They don’t play the same. Heck, they don’t even *look* the same.”

“What did you expect?” Steve asked. “A grade seven girl who’s six foot five?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t know he had any sisters.”

“One sister, two older brothers.”

“And how do you know all that?” I asked.

“Me?” Steve said, pointing a finger at himself. “I’m just a gossipy girl, remember? Besides, who doesn’t know about the Smith brothers?”

I guess in some ways he was right. Practically everybody in our part of town who knew anything about basketball knew about the Smiths. The two older brothers were at university on basketball scholarships,

and Jamar was supposed to be better than either of them were at his age. He was already on the senior team at Erindale High School, even though he was only in grade ten. Not that he *looked* like he was in grade ten. He was already one of the tallest guys, and he had to weigh at least two hundred pounds.

The Smiths lived a few blocks over from me. Sometimes I'd walk by their house, and there was always a basketball game going on in their driveway. I really would have liked to join in, but I didn't know those guys, and they were all at least a couple of years older than me. And way bigger. And a lot better, too.

The buzzer sounded to start the fourth quarter. Our team was now up by twelve points—or, to be more accurate, Denyse was up by twelve points. She was the entire team. I'd watched her the whole game, and not just because the ball was always either in her hands or about to come back to her. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was so skilled ... so fluid ... so cat-like ... so ... *pretty*. Despite the scowl on her face—apparently the scowl I shared with her—she was really, really good-looking. And a couple of times when the play stopped, when she smiled, her whole face lit up. One of those times she'd looked up at the stands, like she was looking right at me while I was looking at her. We'd both quickly looked away.

“Kim looks pretty good out there, don't you think?” Steve asked.

I looked over at him. “Steve, she’s on the bench.”

“I know that.”

“She’s been on the bench almost the whole game.”

“I know that, too.”

“And when she was on the court I don’t think she touched the ball even once,” I added.

“Not once,” Steve agreed.

“She actually kind of looked afraid of it, and ...” I paused. “You weren’t thinking about her basketball skills, were you.”

There wasn’t much doubt what Steve was thinking about.

“She looks so *fine* in that Homelands uniform. It just makes me proud to be a student here.”

I couldn’t argue with that—Kim really was good-looking—but the last thing Steve needed was any encouragement to talk about girls. We’d been friends since grade four, and he’d always been a little bit girl-crazy, but over the past year he’d stopped thinking with his head completely and let his hormones take over.

“Hey, there’s your mom.”

She’d come in through the double doors at the far side of the court. She smiled and gave me a big wave. I slumped down in my seat.

“At least she didn’t blow you a kiss,” Steve said.

That was only a little bit funny. I could see her actually doing something like that.

The year before, my mother had stopped working. She'd said she wanted to get off "the treadmill" and spend more "quality time" with us ... which was kind of a scary idea. There were benefits, for sure, though. I liked her being more relaxed. I also liked her being able to pick me up from school or drive us places. And my lunches were certainly a lot better. What I didn't like about her being around more, though, was that she was around a *lot* more. She did volunteer work at the school, and she was one of the handful of parents who sat in the stands every time our team played. I guess I should have been happy—and I'd never let my mom know I wasn't—but what thirteen-year-old guy wants his mother hanging around all the time?

"Hello, boys," my mother said as she settled into the spot right beside me. She leaned over and gave my arm a little squeeze. "I didn't know you two were so interested in girls' basketball ... or is the interest more in the *girls* than the basketball?"

Steve chuckled, my mother smiled, and I did neither. I just stared at the game in progress in front of us.

"So, Steven, is there one particular young lady on this team you're most impressed with?" my mother asked.

"Well ..."

"Wait, let me guess," she said. My mother looked very intently at the players, first those on the floor and then those sitting on the bench.

“I can’t make out her number, but I think it might be the one sitting on the bench, third from the left.”

“That’s amazing!” Steve said, nodding his head. “You’re wasting your time stuck at home—you should be working for the psychic hotline!”

“She’s not psychic,” I said. “She’s just using her head.”

“What does that mean?”

“Try using *your* head for a second.”

“No way,” Steve said. “It’s painful enough having to think all day at school.”

“Do you want to explain it to him, or should I?” I asked my mother.

“Be my guest.”

“Fine. Kim has long blond hair, blue eyes, and she’s tall and thin.”

“Believe me, I’ve noticed,” Steve said.

“That’s what you always notice,” I said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means she looks like the last girl you liked, and the one before that, and the one before that, all the way back to the first girl you kissed in grade five.”

Steve shrugged. “I guess I am sort of predictable.”

“And which girl do you like, Thomas?” my mother asked.

I shot her a dirty look.

“He’s had his eye on Denyse,” Steve said.

“Shut up, Steve.”

“Which one is she?” my mother questioned gleefully.

“Number four, on the floor,” he said. “She has the ball.”

“Oh! I can see why you’d like her, she’s very pretty and—”

“I *don’t* like her!” I snapped, cutting her off. “I don’t even know her! The only reason I’ve been watching her is because she’s the only person on the whole court who knows anything about—”

The buzzer sounded, cutting me off and ending the game.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Do you have all your homework?” my mother asked.

“Of course I do,” I said, holding up my backpack.

“How about your gym clothes?”

“They’re in my locker, where they always are.”

“Where they’ve been for weeks. It’s time to wash them,” she said.

“More like time to *burn* them,” Steve said.

“They’re gym clothes. This isn’t a fashion show,” I protested. “Some of us should be a little less concerned about how we look.”

“And some of us should be a little *more* concerned about how we *smell*,” Steve replied.

“And all of us should be concerned about heading home and having supper. Let’s get going,” my mother said.