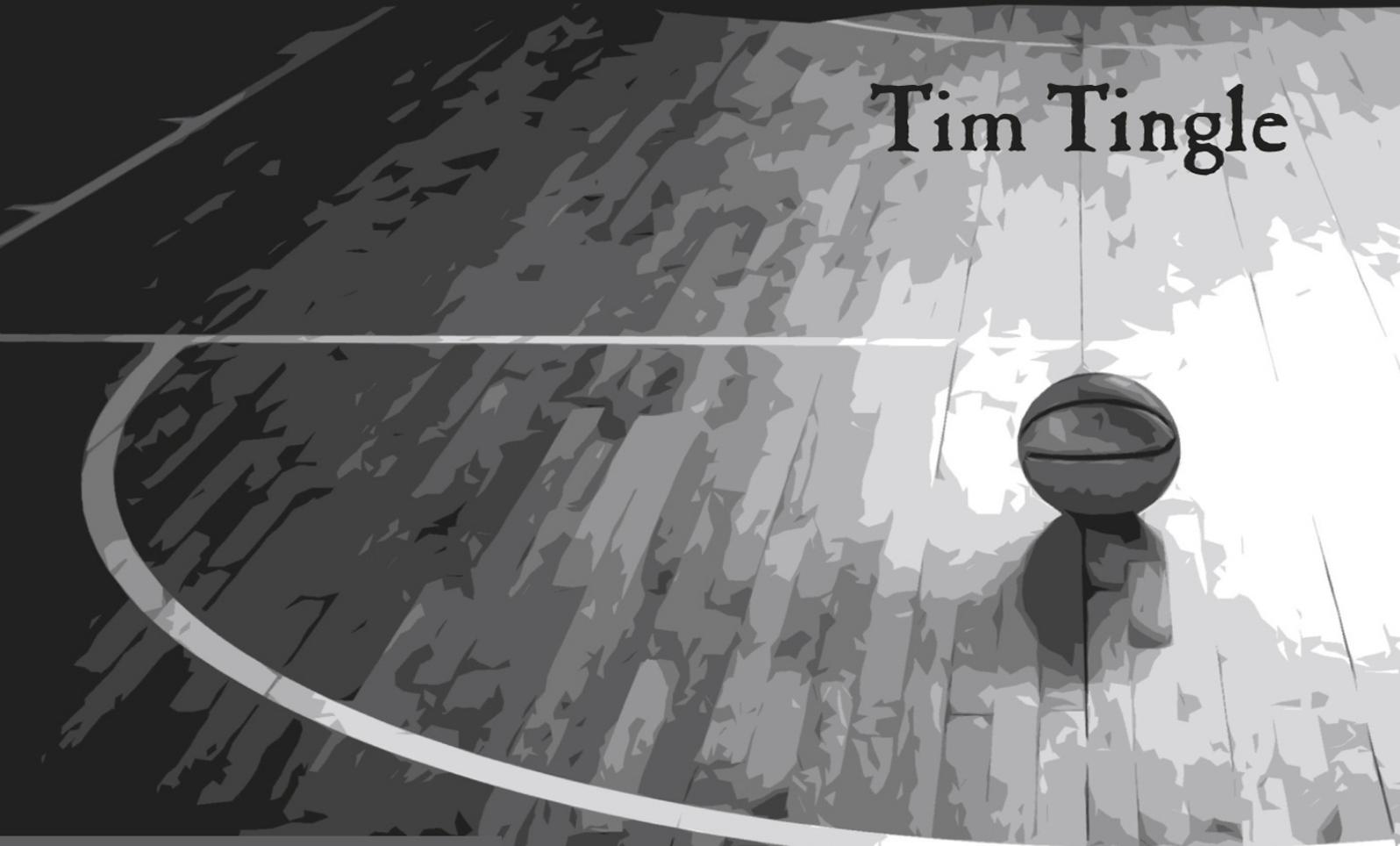




# Trust Your Name

Tim Tingle



**PathFinders**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Stepping Down the Mountain

*There's nothing better than playing for the district high school basketball championship.*

Of that I was convinced. But I was wrong. Winning your district championship basketball game, that would be better. And we Panthers came so close, but close is never good enough.

I still believe we could have won if Lloyd Blanton hadn't been hurt. Lloyd's ankle was badly sprained and he could barely walk. He sat with his dad in the stands and watched our chances float away, with one bad pass after another.

With only a few minutes to go, I glanced at Lloyd in the stands. He had his head buried in his hands, and what I saw next was worth the evening. Yes, basketball is important—it saved my life. But if you have to choose between your favorite sport and family, the choice is easy.

Lloyd's dad looked to his son and saw his sadness. He grabbed him around the shoulders and pulled him close. I can't read lips, but whatever he said showed a strong father-son bonding. Something like, "They're missing you, son."

Lloyd gave his dad a smile and nodded, "Thank you."

After the game, we rushed through the handshakes and hurried to our dressing room. Soon Coach Robison entered and we grew quiet.

"Men," he said, "this is not the time for a grand speech about the season we have had, the battles we've won and lost. I want to ask one thing of you as you remember tonight's game, over and over, as I will. Hear me out.

"Blame no one. Every one of you fought and hustled and did everything I asked of you, everything your teammates needed. Blame no one, and when you think basketball, think of the games we won. And when you think of the loss, work to improve so next year our friends and family are celebrating. You are all, my young Panther men, champions in my heart.

“Thank you for allowing me to be your coach.”

As he turned to go, he had one more thought, one he had to share. “Panthers,” he said, and we all grew quiet and turned our attention to him. “No one will ever truly know why certain things happen, but I would like to share something my Choctaw mother used to say.

*The Lord works in mysterious ways, his miracles to perform.”*

What a miracle worker is our coach, Coach Robison. On a night when we lost our only district title in two decades, he left us smiling.

We dressed quietly and quickly and soon stood on the sidewalk, avoiding fans and friends from school as best we could. Nobody wanted to talk. We weren’t very good at handling defeat.

Mom and Dad met me in the parking lot, and Dad asked, “You’ll probably want to ride home with Johnny?”

“If that’s hoke, Dad,” I said.

“Sure, Bobby,” Dad said. “Stay strong and we’ll see you in a few hours.”

My best friend, Cherokee Johnny, had his own car and usually gave me a ride everywhere. As we walked to his car, Lloyd and his dad were waiting for us.

“Mind if I tag along?” Lloyd asked.

“You know you’re always welcome,” said Johnny.

“I won’t be long,” Lloyd said to his dad.

“No worries,” Mr. Blanton said. He stepped toward his car, then stopped and slowly turned to face us.

“You gotta admit, Lloyd, we’re better now with these two Indians on the team,” Mr. Blanton said.

Lloyd looked at Johnny, looked at me, and gave us a quiet smile. “Bet that’s something you never thought you’d hear from my dad,” he said quietly.

“See you in an hour, son,” Mr. Blanton said. “Gives you a little play time.”

He knew we weren’t going anywhere to “play,” but he was giving us time to talk through the game. We hopped in Johnny’s car and turned in the direction of Lake Thunderbird.

“Any reason you’re driving this way?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “I thought you’d want to see if they ever repaired the fence you broke. Wouldn’t want you feeling guilty about that little escapade.”

“Whoa,” Lloyd said. “Get our minds off the game in a hurry, huh, Johnny.”

My thoughts took another step to the past, to the night following my first-ever high school game. I played well, we won, and Dad was thrown out of the gym for showing up stumbling drunk.

He waited for me in the parking lot, and as Johnny and I neared his car, he honked his horn loudly and flew past us, shaking his fist at me.

I grabbed Johnny’s car keys and took off after Dad, speeding to Lake Thunderbird, his favorite drinking spot. Dad made it fine, but when I saw him standing by the roadside and tapping his hand to his heart, I lost it.

He was letting me know he loved me!

I let go of the steering wheel and crashed Johnny’s car through the fence and into the lake. I came so close to dying, but the real miracle was not my survival. My near-death experience brought our family together, really together for the first time—that was the real miracle.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, his miracles to perform,” that’s what Coach said.

Johnny parked his car at the roadside park overlooking the lake. The wire fence was now a stone wall. We drank Cokes and DPs, ate chips, and talked about the game. And the past year. Lloyd had an even tougher time than I did.

His dad had survived a heart attack that almost killed him, and why? Because Lloyd refused to give up, caused a ruckus in the hospital, and the doctors gave it one more try.

There followed a beautiful quiet moment, with the moon shining on the lake and waves washing gently against the cliffs. Our minds were a single cloud, floating from one brush with death to the other.

“You Indians sure know how to attack,” Lloyd said, “especially when a man is flat on his back.”

“I give up,” said Johnny. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about when you two attacked my dad’s heart.”

*What?*

“Yeah,” said Lloyd. “He did everything he could to hate you Indians, to

hate your families, to hate Coach Robison because he was Choctaw. So you went on the warpath.”

We waited in silence. We knew this was not a joke—his voice was too serious and he was almost crying.

“Dad broke Coach’s window and Coach invited him to speak to the team. Dad cussed about you two even playing on the team, to anybody who would listen.

“And what did you do? You attacked my old man with goodness. You forgave him and worked hard to make me part of the new Panthers, the winning Panthers. Thank you, guys.”

I can never think of this night as the night we lost the district basketball title. No, I will forever remember this as the night Johnny and Lloyd and I became brothers.



## CHAPTER 2

# Best Summer Job Ever

The Monday following the game, Coach Robison called us all together after school. We gathered at the gym and sat on the bleachers, having no idea what was about to happen.

“We’ve had a good year, men,” said Coach Robison. “And I am calling you men rather than boys for a reason.” He smiled, glancing at the floor, and when he raised his head to look at us, his basketball team, his eyes beamed with respect. He lifted his palms to the ceiling and continued.

“We did not win the district championship, so I won’t call it a great season. But what you men have achieved is so far beyond what anyone expected.

“I know the troubles many of you have overcome just to stay in school and keep your grades up so you can play sports. I have seen you come together as a team, on and off the court. Yes, I am proud to be your coach.

“And here’s the good news, men,” he said. “The Choctaw Nation has asked me to coach a summer basketball team. The Five Tribes will sponsor the team in a summer league, which leads to a national tournament. Games will be played in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Little Rock, Arkansas. The regional tournament will be in Tulsa.”

Everyone held their breath and no one said a word. I looked at Johnny—he lowered his head and returned my look. We knew where this was going and hoped no one would be upset about being left out.

“As many of you have already guessed, the team I will be coaching is an all-Indian team, with players from high schools mostly in Eastern Oklahoma.”

A loud *whoosh* circled the dressing room, and the feeling of disappointment was like a heavy fog. Johnny and I had the same thought—how can we leave these guys home, our Panther teammates?

Coach Robison was ready. “Men,” he said, “if it were up to me, you would all be on my team till your grandkids had to help you off the court!”

Hoke, we had to laugh at that!

“Coach, we’re never gonna get that old,” Johnny said. Cherokee Johnny was the only other Indian on our team.

“No, not the way you drive,” said Coach.

When the backslapping and laughter drifted away, he continued. “I accepted this job on one condition,” he said. “As players show up to try out for the team, you Panthers will scrimmage with us. You’ll play as hard and as clean as you have all season, and help me decide who’s on the team.”

“How they play against you Panthers will go a long way in determining Bobby and Johnny’s teammates. We all want this team, the first Indian team ever in the tournament, to win.

“Any questions?” Coach Robison asked.

“When do we start?” Jimmy asked. He was our senior post player and was already wondering where he might play college basketball.

“In two weeks we’ll have our first scrimmage, on a Saturday. Can I see a show of hands? Who wants to play?”

Without hesitation, everyone raised their hands.

“That’s what I was hoping for,” Coach said.

“Thank you, Coach,” we all said, shaking his hand as we hurried to the parking lot full of cars and buses.

“Wow,” said Johnny as we stepped into his car. “Did you have any idea we’d be playing ball in the summer?”

“Nope,” I said. “I knew we’d hit the court at the park every day, to get out of mowing the lawn and repainting the house, or whatever else our dads have planned.”

“Wonder if our folks know anything about this,” Johnny said.

“Coach is still on the sidewalk,” I said. “Maybe if you swing around and drive real slow, we can ask him.”

Johnny circled the street and returned to the parking lot, stopping just behind Coach’s car as he was opening the door.

I rolled my window down. “Say, Coach,” I said, and before I could even get the question from brain to lips, he had his reply.

“I was wondering what took you two so long. Yes, I called both of your

parents at noon today. They are as excited as you are. And you'll both be interested in knowing that your dads had summer jobs lined up for you."

"I don't think 'Thank you, Coach' comes anywhere near close enough," Johnny said.

"You are right there, son. Now, drive careful and I'll see you tomorrow for our first informal after-school workout."

"Still the mind-reader," I added as we pulled away. "You know that is a Choctaw power, don't you, Cherokee Johnny?"

"Yeah, and blocking your jumper when you try driving to the basket, that's a Cherokee power. And don't you forget it."

Our minds were ablaze as we left the school, with questions pouring out as fast as we could form the words.

"Where do you think we'll play?"

"Will there be any players from Indian boarding schools?"

"Where do we stay when we travel? Man, I want to get to the national tournament!"

"Did you watch the Oklahoma state finals last year?" Johnny asked. "Man, that Lakota post man was strong! He muscled his way to the basket and nobody could stop him."

"Oh yeah," I said. "They call him *Mato*, a Lakota word meaning *bear*. His name was Mick Harris, but everybody calls him Mato."

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