

NO SUCH THING AS FRIENDLY

There was no such thing as a friendly basketball game in my world. You played hard, and you played to win. Even if that meant stealing the basketball from your best friend.

In my case, that would be Melina. We'd been best friends for years. She was a good basketball player, but she telegraphed all her moves. It was her biggest weakness. If you paid attention, which I always did, you could tell exactly what she was going to do next.

Sure enough, Melina shifted her weight to the right. Her plan was to throw the ball between my legs, catch it on the other side, and make a run for the basket. Or at least try.

Unfortunately, there was a huge problem with her plan. Me.

It was my signature move, and it definitely wasn't going to work against me. Not now. Not ever. I was taller and faster than Melina and my arms were longer. And I was patient.

Her eyes glanced left and then down at my feet. I waited until the last possible second to move, but as soon as she thrust the ball, I dropped low and blocked it with my arm.

Grabbing the ball, I dashed toward the hoop. One, two, three strides, and I went up for the easy layup.

At least, I thought it was going to be easy.

As I flew through the air, a chill ran down my spine and the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stood up.

The strange sensation threw me completely off my game. I lost control of the ball, and it spun awkwardly out my hand and clanged hard against the rim of the basket.

I landed ready for the rebound, but the ball took a bad bounce off a rough patch of pavement.

As I watched it roll away, I couldn't shake the odd feeling. Basketball was usually the one thing in my life I had control over. Sure, I'd missed plenty of shots before, but this was different. Something felt off.

I shook my head and walked over to the stray ball.

“Taylor!” Melina called. “How do you always know what I’m going to do?”

“You’ve got a tell.”

“What’s a tell?”

I tossed her the ball and she ran up for a layup, but she misjudged the distance and the ball bounced off the rim.

I caught the rebound and lined up my jump shot. “It’s something you always do that lets me know what you’re planning.” I released the ball, and it arched through the air and into the basket. “Swish!” I bragged. “That’s more like it. Nothing but net.”

“Well, what is it?”

“You always look where you’re going to go.”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Melina said, looking confused. “How else am I supposed to see where I’m going?”

We both laughed, and I ran over to get the ball. “I can show you a few tricks to make it harder for people to see it.”

“That’d be great. I *really* want to make starting lineup this year.”

“Stick with me and you’ll make it for sure,” I said, tossing the ball back and forth between my hands. “I’ll even help you fix that layup.”

Melina bent down and retied her laces. “We can’t all

be superstars, Taylor. Are you ready for tryouts Monday?"

"I've never been more ready. We're definitely going to beat the Ravens in the playoffs this year."

"You think so?" she said, sounding surprised.

"I know so. And I'm going to win the tournament MVP."

The Most Valuable Player award went to the playoff tournament's best basketball player. My older brother, Jason, won it two years in a row when he went to Central.

"I don't know," she said, clearly unimpressed with my swagger.

"MVP goes to the person who scores the most points. And I'm definitely going to score the most points." I took another shot. It wasn't pretty, but it went in.

Melina caught the ball as it fell. "It's a team sport, you know. It's not all about you."

But I snatched it out of her hands. "When I see the shot"—I lifted the ball above my head—"I take it." I threw the ball, but missed.

"That's for sure." She rolled her eyes.

"To win MVP, I've got to be the best!" I said, dribbling the ball back and forth between my legs.

Melina sighed. "It's getting dark. I'm going to head home."

"I want to keep playing," I said. "Just for a little bit longer."

"All right."

Her voice sounded different, almost sad, and I felt bad for showing off so much. "See you tomorrow morning?"

"Maybe," she said, and turned and walked away.

Maybe? What'd she mean by that? But I shrugged it off and continued playing.

I misjudged my next shot and had to chase the ball down the court. But when I picked it up, the strange sensation hit me again. It felt like I was being watched.

I scanned the area and noticed the silhouette of a person behind the big cypress tree. It was a girl. As I moved toward her, she turned and ran off, so I wasn't able to get a good look at her. But she was about my height, with big, bushy hair.

Who was she? And why was she watching me from the shadows? Did I know her?

Then it hit me. The Ravens! There was a girl with big, bushy hair on their basketball team.

She was probably a spy, sent to check out the competition.

The Western Ravens were the defending division

champions. They were also the Central Tigers' greatest rivals. Both schools took basketball very seriously, and both teams played to win. But that was where the similarities ended.

The Ravens played dirty. And everybody knew it.

I wouldn't go so far as to say they cheated, but they definitely bent the rules. If the refs weren't looking, you could count on a Ravens player to pinch, trip, or even hip-check their opponents.

If Coach Carter ever caught a player on our team trying something like that, he'd have them warming the bench for the rest of the game. But the Ravens' coach encouraged the bad behavior.

Unfairly or not, the Tigers had lost every game to the Ravens for as long as I could remember. But all that was going to change this year. This year was going to be different.

"Hey, Raven! You spying on us now?" I called after her.

No answer. She was long gone.

It didn't matter. I figured the next time we saw each other would be on the court—and I'd let my skills do the talking.