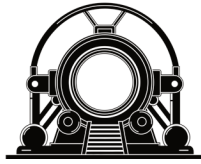


1



Mike Henderson had his man covered but watched his best friend, Shawn, stumble while a boy on the opposing team faked right, darted left, and hit a short jump shot.

“Tie game,” the boy said. “Nine up. Next point is game.”

Grabbing the ball, Mike sent it back to the other team. *Make it, take it* was the rule for the three-on-three pickup game after school.

The other team had already been playing on the paved court in the August Boston heat, and they’d challenged Mike on his walk home from school. He’d put together the team available to him—his twin sister, Grace, and his best friend, Shawn.

Shawn cringed while they prepared for the defense again. “Sorry. He got by me.”

Grace patted Shawn on the shoulder. “It’s okay. We got this.”

Mike hesitated but nodded. Shawn was tall and gangly, and no one would accuse him of being an athlete.

Unlike Shawn, Grace possessed the ability to hit an open shot and stay in front of her opponent. She could have made the eighth-grade team, but she preferred excelling at genius math and science classes. For Mike, school was like a dungeon, and he did his time during the day so he could play sports afterward.

Here at the playground, the other three boys were all ninth graders—a year older, taller, and stronger. Mike could handle it, and Grace could hold her own. But Shawn? Well, they needed a warm body to fill out the team.

The opposition passed a couple times and took a long shot that clanked off the rim, careened high into the air, and dropped right into Shawn's hands like a gift on Christmas morning. After Shawn caught the ball—a miracle in itself—he stood there, his eyes big and a goofy smile blooming on his face. He gazed up.

He had a clear line to the basket.

Shawn stuck out his tongue, furrowed his brow, and started dribbling forward. When one of the opposing players finally reacted and stood in his way, Shawn panicked. He grabbed the basketball with two hands, took a few too many steps, and launched the ball at the rim.

The leather orb sailed up and up while everyone craned their necks to watch it continue to soar over the rim, the backboard, and the fence to land in the grass outside the court.

The boys on the other team laughed. Mike groaned.

“Ah!” Shawn put his hands on his hips. “Almost.”

Grace giggled, moving back into a defensive position while one of the boys went through the gate to gather the ball.

Mike frowned. All wasn't lost. It was a tie game. They could still win.

The other team ran a pick and roll against Shawn and Grace, keeping Mike away from the action. Grace guessed

right, shuffled her feet, and stuck a hand out to knock the ball free. A great play, and even better, she caught the ball. She spun and tossed it over to Mike, who leapt out to grab the ball in one hand.

Shawn piped up. “You guys want our autographs now, or after we win? We try to be nice to the ordinary people.” He smirked.

Mike held the ball just beyond the foul line. Shawn on the right. Grace on the left.

“Yo, Mike-Drop!” Shawn waved his arms like he was flagging down a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier. “Fruity Pebbles is open!”

Kids at school had given Grace the name “Fruity Pebbles” after the cereal, since her clothes always included a mix of bright colors. Today, she wore a red, white, and blue tie-dyed T-shirt, hot pink shorts, and camouflage shoes.

She slid to the side, and the other team adjusted, all looking at Grace and expecting the pass, especially with Shawn as the other option. Not a very good option.

Shawn did a little hop, and when his opponent’s head turned to Grace, he charged to the basket with long strides.

He was wide open. Right under the basket.

At the same time, Shawn’s kid left him and came to double-team Mike.

Mike could flip an easy pass to his best friend, and Shawn would only have to hit a layup.

But Mike’s hand froze on the ball. He had known Shawn since third grade, the two of them friends through some hard times a few years ago, which kept them close even though Mike opted for sports while Shawn remained a nerd. The only thing bigger than Shawn’s sense of humor was his heart. The guy was like family.

Mike couldn’t trust him with this, though. With two boys

leaping to block, Mike dribbled right, then crossed over, creating distance, and found a line of sight between the two defenders. He planted his feet and jumped straight up. He took the shot.

The arc was good. Mike kept his hand up in an exaggerated follow-through. The ball descended toward the basket, looking perfect.

When the ball arrived, it circled the rim, rolling around once, twice, then three times, teasing with a slight drop in the net and then popping out like it had a mind of its own.

Mike dropped his arms, his mouth agape. *What?*

A boy from the other team grabbed the rebound and passed it. It all happened so fast that by the time Mike turned around and Grace skipped back to guard one player, a third became open, received the ball, and swished a short jumper.

Ten. The other team won.

Shawn still stood under the basket.

“Game!” the three freshmen boys shouted, giving each other high fives. “Maybe next time, losers!”

Shawn ambled over to Mike. “Hey, you were robbed. I thought that shot was in.”

Grace gave Mike an accusing look. As twins, they’d always shared a type of weird mental communication. She didn’t have to say a word. *You should have passed it to Shawn.*

Instead, she nudged Shawn and grinned at Mike. “Just a game, though, right?”

The other team continued to celebrate behind them.

“Right,” Shawn said. “I’m getting better, you know. That one time, I was more open than my fly in the lunchroom yesterday, and when I took the shot, ball didn’t land as far outside the fence as last time. I’m no Larry Bird, mind you, but I’m half Irish, which means it’s only a matter of time before I’m a legendary Celtic.”

Grace chuckled. "I hope that works out for you, 'cause you're too tall to be a leprechaun."

"I'm pretty magical, though." Shawn grinned.

Her chuckle escalated to a laugh. "Definitely magical. Right, Mike?"

Mike took a breath and forced a smile. "Yeah, sure. Right."

"Hey, let's go back to the house." Grace cocked her head at Shawn. "You thirsty?"

"Well, now that you mention it," Shawn said, "I might have squeezed out a couple drops of sweat and need to replenish my fluids."

"Um, I'll take that as a yes. You ready, Mike?" She lifted a brow. "Mom and Dad should be done with work."

Mike sniffed and dismissed his daze of disappointment. By *work*, she meant Dad's scheduled reentry from elsewhere had been an hour earlier. "Yeah, they should be."

Elsewhen was a term the Hendersons and other Paladins used when they talked about the work protecting the Sacred Line, like being elsewhere but in a different time.

Thirty seconds later, the three of them headed down the sidewalk under the blazing sun to the Henderson townhome in downtown Boston, an ancient structure in the oldest part of the historic city.

When they walked inside, Grace typed her security code into the keypad to keep it from beeping. They traipsed through the entryway and the hall into the kitchen. Grace flung open the fridge and grabbed a few sodas.

"Get me the diet." Shawn stretched and patted his stomach. "I put on some summer weight. Need to watch the calories."

Mike didn't have to force a smile this time. "Oh, yeah. We can tell." Mike did a double take at Shawn's lean frame while Grace handed out the drinks.

Sipping from their soda cans, all three hovered around the island between the kitchen and living room. Since Shawn's mom was a single parent and worked late most nights, he often spent time at the Henderson house. He was only allowed to be there when Mr. and Mrs. Henderson weren't *working*, however.

Mike's mood always improved with his sister and best friend around. He opened his mouth to tell a story about how Zach, a football player, had admitted he liked musicals from the 1950s and how they'd laughed at him over lunch ... but he never got the chance.

Clanking noises came from the basement, muffled through the thick closed door.

Shawn raised his brow. "Is that the basement? I didn't think you guys ever went down there."

Grace stood straight, her shoulders squared and her eyes blazing at Mike. *Mom and Dad are still down in the basement. They're not done yet, and Shawn is here!*

Mike scrambled to come up with a way to kick Shawn out of the house without being obvious or rude. He stammered, the solution eluding him.

Grace began, "Hey, Shawn. I think that ..."

Footsteps pounded up the basement stairs. *Boom, boom, boom*. The sounds grew louder, then stopped, but other noises followed—a whirring and beeping of the security system being deactivated. The basement door burst open, and Mom leapt into the kitchen.

Delores Henderson, Navigator Paladin of the Sacred Line, eyed Mike and Grace, then pounced on them, clasping an arm each.

"Kids! Your dad is gone! He missed reentry!"