



THIRD PLACE RECIPIENT

Choosing What's Right Over Who's Close

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The bench is silent, no one could think of any words to make the loss feel better. We unlace our cleats in silence, getting ready to make the long, embarrassing drive home. That's when I heard someone quietly crying. It was Hayley, a teammate I didn't know very well, more of an acquaintance than a friend.

At first, I looked away. I am not in the mood to comfort anyone. But then I remember that I was the tea, captain. Maybe I should check in, mainly to show the coach that I could be a good leader. So I walked over and asked if she was okay.

Her eyes were red and watery. She wiped her nose and glanced toward Emily. Then she told me something I wasn't expecting: Emily had been bullying her. Not just in that game but all season.

Emily. My closest friend since fourth grade. The best player on the team. I couldn't believe it. I wanted to think Hayley was just being sensitive, or maybe she had misunderstood Emily. Still, I told Hayley that as a captain, I'd look into it and see what could be done. It seemed like the right thing to do, even though I didn't think there was a problem.

At our next practice, I hugged Emily like usual. We started talking about our week, and then I brought

up what Hayley said. Emily laughed. "Well, maybe if she didn't suck, I wouldn't have to say anything," she said, still smiling. My jaw dropped. She could tell I was shocked, but she just laughed it off. After all, it was just a joke, right?

But it didn't sit right with me. The rest of the practice, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I had two choices: protect my friend and ignore what I'd heard, or stand up for what was right and risk losing Emily.

That night, I realized something important: if I stayed silent I'd be no different from the bully. Doing nothing would make me part of the problem. No one deserves to be treated that way, and no friendship is worth compromising your values.

So I texted the coach. Together, we came up with a plan to talk to Emily and remind the whole team that bullying has no place in our program. Things were awkward between me and Emily afterward, but I could live with that.

Because doing what's right isn't always comfortable. Sometimes, it means standing up to the people closest to you. And that's a lesson I'll carry far beyond the soccer field.