

# Worth It

“Ha!” I shouted as the ball flew through the hoop with a satisfying *swish!* Three pointer, easy. “Beat that.” I was playing horse with my friend Elizabeth at a park near my house. Quite frankly, I was smoking her. Liz had “h-o-r-s,” and I had “h-o.” She took the shot. She almost made it, too. Almost.

“Aw, crud, Mel,” She said, wiping her forehead with her shirt. “It’s too hot outside. Let’s get out of here,” said Liz. I smiled.

“You’re just mad `cuz you lost,” I said, smirking. Liz frowned.

“It’s like two billion degrees out here,” she argued. I pulled my unruly black hair into a ponytail. It really was hot.

“Are you okay?” I questioned. Liz shrugged.

“Dunno,” she muttered, avoiding my gaze. Instead, she looked down at her legs, which were covered in dark bruises I hadn’t noticed until now.

Now, I’d known Elizabeth since before we could talk, and I knew it wasn’t normal for her to not want to play basketball, even if it *was* hotter than the Sahara Desert. Liz sat down on a bench by the court. “Elizabeth?” I said, sitting down next to her. She looked away from me, trying to hide her own fear and sadness.

“Melanie…” She said.

“Y-yes?” I replied, holding back tears. I knew what was coming, and she didn’t have to say a thing. I’d learned about cancer in my health class at school, but I never would have thought that something like this could happen. Twelve-year-old girls weren’t supposed to have their

friends and family die. Up until then, I thought stuff like that only happened in movies and books. That's when she said it, and I thought my life would end.

“Mel...I've been diagnosed with bone cancer.”

I burst into tears, even though I'd known it was coming. This was all too much! I could tell that Liz was holding back tears, too. She forced a smile and put her arm around me, “Hey,” she said, “It'll be okay.” I just started bawling harder, so she tried again, “Now that technology's so advanced, a bunch of people survive cancer...” she said, her voice shaking. My tears were slowing down; just a little. “Look,” she sighed “Let's just sleep on it. I'll call you tomorrow.” She got up and started to walk away. I could tell that she was crying. Man! She was trying to be strong--for me! I couldn't believe I'd been such an idiot! It should have been the other way around! I should have held back my tears for her!

“Arghhh!” I slammed the ball against the brick wall, then stormed away.

“Hi...” I muttered, not looking at Elizabeth. I couldn't. Not without bursting into tears like I did when I'd first heard about her cancer, exactly a month ago.

“Hi,” she whispered. I finally gathered up the courage to look at her. My grip on the flowers I was holding tightened. Liz had already lost most of her hair, and she was attached to all sorts of wires and IVs. I couldn't believe that this was the same Liz that I always played with and talked to. Her long blond hair was history; her previously tanned skin was now ghostly white. I handed her the bouquet, and she winced as she took it.

“So...” I said awkwardly, trying to start a conversation. It had been a month since I'd heard about Liz's cancer, and she'd been talking to me every day. I looked around the room. “Nice place you got here,” I said. She laughed and tried to sit up. She groaned and lay back down. She gazed blankly up at the ceiling.

“Chemotherapy.” She said. “That's why...” she trailed off and looked towards me.

“Yeah,” I said softly, “I know.” Now it was *her* turn to cry. Not bawling, like I had. Just soft sobbing,

“I’m scared,” she whispered, her voice shaking. I would be, too, if I was in a hospital where you know that every day could be your last. She looked up at the ceiling again and seemed to forget that I was there. Or not. “Sometimes at night, I get scared to go to sleep. I’m scared that I might not wake up.” I blinked back tears. “I really don’t want to scare you, Mel... I just... feel like you’re the only one I can talk to.” I nodded and looked up at the ceiling with her. I didn’t tell her about how scared it *was* making me. I just listened. “And every time I have to go into chemo, I feel like I’ll never get better. Like I’ll just stay here, in this hospital, with all the doctors trying to make me better, and having to start all over again each time.” I nodded again. “I owe those doctors everything,” she said. I put my hand on hers.

“You’re gonna be okay. I know it. Those doctors won’t let you die.” She was drifting off to sleep, “I love you.” I whispered. Just then, a plump, friendly-looking nurse bounced into the room.

“Hon,” she said, “It’s time for you to go now.” I got up from my chair and followed her out the door. I hoped Liz couldn’t see the relief in my step.

The phone rang. “I’LL GET IT!” I shouted, jumping up from the couch and running into the kitchen. Elizabeth’s mom had been kind enough to give me frequent reports on how Liz was doing. I picked up the phone, “Hello?” I gasped, out of breath.

“Melanie?” came the voice of Mrs. Connell. I sighed with relief.

“Speaking. How’s Elizabeth?” I blurted.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about! Good news!” My heart skipped a beat.

“Really?!” I could almost hear her heart beating.

“Maybe I should talk to your mom first.” What?! I thought fast.

“She’s in the shower” I lied. I didn’t usually do that, but this was urgent. There was a short pause, and I thought she’d bought it. Then she laughed.

“I can tell when you’re lying, Melanie. Let me talk to your mom, please,” Darn.

“Here she is,” I pouted. I ran into my mom’s study and handed her the phone, “It’s Mrs. Connell, she wants to talk to you.” I stood there and watched for a while, until Mom mouthed “Out!” and shooed me away with her hand. The second I closed the door I heard a scream. I burst back into the room, to find my mom crying. And grinning. “Is she...?” Mom nodded. I screamed and started to cry. I collapsed on an armchair. Liz was cured!!

“Mrs. Connell said that Liz had said that she ‘couldn’t have done it without Melanie.’ Do you know what she’s talking about?” Then I jumped up and hugged my mom, not believing this. All those nightmares, all those tears shed—if I had really helped Liz get better—all of those were worth it. Completely.