

PLAY FOR KEEPS

REBOUND



Fowler DeWitt

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A Play for Keeps Book

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Ryan tries out for the basketball team. He hasn't played much, but he's very tall. When he makes the team, Nick and Will welcome him—but Efren doesn't. Efren says Ryan only made the team because of his height. Is Efren jealous?

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Chapter 1

Books or Friends?

Ryan Taylor was reading a book about a kid who fought dragons. It was dark outside, and the house was empty except for him. Ryan heard people yelling and dogs barking. With his heart pounding, Ryan looked out his window.

It was only his neighbor calling to her dogs.



The glass in the window was cold. As Ryan watched, a few snowflakes stuck to the window. *I guess winter is here*, he thought. By morning, there would be a few inches of snow on the ground. Then, just like every year, there would be snow and ice for months.

Ryan's neighbor saw him looking out the window and waved. Ryan waved back but closed his blinds. He liked being by himself.

Then his phone rang. He wasn't going to answer, but he saw the call was from his mom.

"Hi, honey!" said his mom. "How did the basketball tryouts go today?"

"I don't think I did too well," he told his mom. "I can't really dribble or shoot. I'm only good at blocking because I'm tall."

"That's not the only reason you're good," his mom said. "You played at camp last summer. I was so happy to see you playing my favorite sport!"

Ryan was quiet. He could hear the sounds of his mom driving home.

"My arms and legs are tired," he said.

"Well, you never played on a team before, Ryan," his mom said. "Were any of your friends at the tryout?"

Ryan didn't tell his mom that he didn't have a lot of friends. He had books. He liked books. He could put them away when he got tired of them.

"There was one kid I know. Nick. He said I was pretty good," Ryan said.

"That's nice, honey." His mom sounded like she was thinking about something else. "Ryan, did your report card come in the mail?"

Ryan picked up his book. He pulled out the folded-up paper he was using as a bookmark.

"I've got it right here," he said.

"Show me when I get home, all right?" his mom asked.

Ryan said, "OK," but he didn't want her to see his report card. His grades were good, as usual, but the teachers also wrote comments. The teachers wrote that he was quiet and sat alone.

If Ryan's mom saw what they wrote, she would worry about him. It was like this every time. Ryan wanted to be left alone. That was much easier than trying to make friends. He wanted his mom and his teachers to just let him be like that.



After Ryan got off the phone, he opened his book again. Ryan wanted to be like the hero, Ulric. Heroes had it easy. They just fought dragons. When they beat the dragons, everybody liked them. Ryan wished that making friends could be as easy as that.

Chapter 2

Learning Layups

A week later, Ryan saw a group of boys in the school hallway. All those boys had been at basketball tryouts. Ryan went to see what they were doing. They were looking at a sheet of paper that said “Basketball Team Roster” at the top.

Ryan wanted to see if he had made the team. There were too many kids in the way. The bell rang, and he went to class. *Did I make it on the team? Probably not,* he thought.

Ryan went into class and sat in the back row. Nick came in later and sat in front of him. Nick was the second-tallest boy in the seventh grade but inches shorter than Ryan.

A boy named Will sat next to Nick.

“I’m glad we both made the team,” Nick said to Will. “It’s going to be a fun season.”

Then Nick turned his head and saw Ryan. “Hey, Ryan, you’re on the team, too.”

“Who’s Ryan?” asked Will.

Nick rolled his eyes. “Will, you wouldn’t know your face if you saw it in the mirror.

This is Ryan. He's been in our class all year."

"Oh," said Will, looking at Ryan. "You're that tall guy from the tryouts."

Ryan didn't know what to say. He had never talked to Will before. He looked down at his shoes. He was glad that the teacher came in and started class. It meant he didn't have to talk to anyone for a while.

The next day after school, the basketball team had its first practice. The other kids all knew each other. They looked like a team. *How am I supposed to fit in with them?* Ryan thought.



Ryan heard a whistle and turned his head. Coach Kuroda was standing in the center of the court. All the other players ran toward him, but Ryan stayed where he was. Coach Kuroda saw him and said, "You, too, big guy. Hurry up."

Ryan jogged to join the rest of the team.

"I'm really excited about the team this year," said Coach Kuroda. He wore a sweatshirt with the words *Cornell University* across the front. "It's great seeing most of you back, and it's nice seeing some new faces, too." He smiled at Ryan. Everyone looked at Ryan. Ryan looked away.

The coach looked at Will. "But it's going to be hard to win with our shoes untied."

Everyone looked at Will's shoes, and there was loud laughter. Will looked at his untied shoelaces and mumbled, "Sorry, Coach." He knelt down to tie his shoelaces.

Ryan heard someone behind him say, "At least he didn't fall on his face—yet. Remember the game last year against Greendale?"

A lot of the boys laughed. Ryan turned to look at the player who had made the joke. He was really short and had a mean look on his face.

The whole team laughed at his joke. They must like him, Ryan thought. He seems mean, so maybe he's a really good player.

Coach Kuroda blew his whistle and told the team to practice layups. Again, Ryan was the only player who didn't know what was going on. He stood in the back of the line. He wanted to watch what the other players did.

First, each player dribbled up to the basket and shot a layup. They tried to bounce the ball softly off the backboard. When they did it right, the ball would fall through the net. When it was Ryan's turn, he stumbled, and the ball hit the backboard hard. The ball didn't even touch the rim.

Ryan ran to catch his basketball, which was bouncing across the gym. He passed it to the next player in line and got in line behind Will.

Will smiled at him. "Jump off your left leg when doing right-handed layups," he said.

Nick got in line behind Ryan. He said, "And jump off your right leg when doing left-handed layups. Just watch our feet. You'll get it."

Ryan watched his teammates. Each one jumped off his left leg when shooting a layup.

Ryan could do that. But when it was his turn, Coach Kuroda blew his whistle again. "OK, go to the left side."

Now, Ryan needed to do a left-handed layup. He remembered what Nick said. He tried to jump off his right leg, and he almost fell. He looked up to see the ball bounce off the backboard and into the basket.

"Nice shot," said Nick as Ryan jogged back to the line.

Ryan smiled. He felt good!

"He's lucky it went in," said the player in front of Nick. Ryan looked at him. It was the short player who had been mean to Will. "Hey, Nick. I bet you a dollar he misses his next layup."

Ryan's smile went away, and he looked down at his feet.

"Give him a break, Efren," Nick said. "It's his first practice."

It was Ryan's turn a few moments later. He jumped off the correct foot. He shot the ball at the backboard. He felt Efren watching him.

The ball hit the backboard too hard again and bounced across the gym. Ryan ran to catch it.



As Ryan jogged to the back of the line, Efren said to Nick, “Told you. You owe me a dollar.”

Ryan did the best he could for the rest of practice. He tried to do what the other players did, but he messed up a lot.

At the end of practice, Nick told him, “Just keep working at it. You’ll be all right.”

Ryan smiled at Nick. “Thanks.”

When Ryan was leaving, however, Efren grabbed his arm. “A beginner like you doesn’t belong on this team.”

Ryan didn’t say anything. He just pulled

his arm away and left the gym. He didn't even change clothes before walking home. *Maybe I should quit the team,* he thought.

At home, after a long shower, Ryan sat down to eat dinner with his mother.

"How did practice go?" she asked.

"OK, I guess."

"How are your teammates?"

Ryan thought of Will and Nick. "I made a couple of friends," he said.

"That's great." His mother smiled. "I told you that you would."

Ryan stuffed a big piece of chicken in his mouth. He hoped his mom would stop asking questions. He didn't want to talk about how he really felt.