

## CHAPTER 99

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99 Ava: Life in Westwood (IV) A plastic thud startles me awake. I crack open an eye to see Lisa's alarm clock skitter across the floor, her arm still extended from the throw. O "I can't do this anymore," she moans into her pillow. "Everything hurts. I think my eyelashes are sore." I laugh, but it turns into a groan as I slide out of bed, my muscles screaming in protest. Four days of Jericho's training from hell, and my body still hasn't adjusted. I'm not sure it ever will. "Do you think the bodyguards would murder Jericho if we asked nicely?" Lisa's voice is muffled, her face still buried in her pillow. "Stop dreaming." I limp to the bathroom, each step an agony. "And get ready. You know he'll just make it worse if we're late." Lisa's groan follows me as I shut the door, a smile tugging at my lips despite the pain. As much as I hate the early mornings and the constant ache in my muscles, there's a part of me that relishes the challenge. Each day I push myself further, each day I grow stronger. Selene would be proud. The thought sobers me as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. Four days, and still no sign of her. I'm starting to wonder if she'll ever come back. If I'll ever be whole again. I splash water on my face, the cold shock chasing away the melancholy thoughts. I can't afford to dwell on what I've lost. Not when I have so much to gain. By the time I emerge from the bathroom, Lisa is up and dressed, her hair pulled back into a messy ponytail. She shoots me a baleful look as she tugs on her sneakers. "I hate you for being a morning person." "I'm not a morning person," I protest, grabbing my water bottle. "I'm just better at pretending than you are." Lisa snorts, but there's a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. "Fake it till you make it, right?" "Something like that." I take a deep breath, steeling myself for another day of torture. "Ready?" 13:37 217 99 Ava: Life in Westwood (IV) "No." Lisa stands, wincing as she stretches out her legs. "But let's do this anyway." A knock reverberates through the apartment, and Lisa and I groan in unison. We don't have to check. Of course it's Kellan. Here to pick us up, just like every godforsaken morning. Lisa yanks open the door, eyeing Kellan with exasperation. "Don't you have anything better to do?" Kellan's expression remains impassive. "There's nothing in my life more important than you." I raise a brow at Lisa as a blush creeps up her cheeks. Well, well. What do we have here? But before I can needle her about it, she shoves past Kellan, leaving me to follow in her wake. The drive to the training grounds is mercifully short, but not short enough to avoid the dread pooling in my stomach. Jericho. Another day of his disapproval and disdain. I'm really starting to like him, but also I hate him more than anyone in this world. As predicted, he's waiting for us, his scarred face set in a scowl. "You're late." Lion over the antimist aring at him "We'll make it un Ava Lile in Westwood (IV) to you. How about we bring donuts tomorrow? All you can eat, if we can just take a little break today..." Jericho's scowl deepens. "You want to play games? Fine. Run another mile. Both of you. Now." I bite back a groan, shooting Lisa a glare. She shrugs, unrepentant, and takes@ww.novélworm.com

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off at a jog. I follow, my legs protesting with every step. This is my life now. Early mornings, aching muscles, and a trainer who seems to hate us. But as much as I want to complain, I know I need this. Need to be stronger, faster, better. For Selene. For myself. For whatever comes next. So I grit my teeth and keep running, pushing through the pain. One foot in front of the other. One mile. Two. Three. By the time we manage five miles—slow as f@cking snails, Jericho points out, like he does every damn day -my legs burn. Lactic acid (something I've learned about in recent days) scorches my muscles, a deep, throbbing ache that pulses with each labored breath. I'm convinced my limbs have liquefied, reduced to useless, quivering jelly. Beside me, Lisa's chest heaves, D9. Ava Life in Westwood (IV) her face flushed crimson from exertion. "One hundred sit-ups. Now." Jericho's command cuts through the haze of exhaustion, his tone brooking no argument. Lisa groans, the sound a pitiful whimper. "You've got to be kidding me." I shake my head, wincing as the movement sends a fresh wave of agony through my body. "Sorry, Jericho. My legs have officially died. I'm going to have to pass. on the sit-ups." Jericho's lip curls, his scarred face twisting into a sneer. "Well, aren't you two being real f@cking cute today?" Lisa and I exchange a glance, a silent acknowledgment that we've pushed our luck too far. Jericho's patience, it seems, has reached its limit. "You have two options," he growls, his eyes narrowing to icy slits. "Practice or spar. You've got two seconds to choose." My heart sinks, a leaden weight in my chest. Neither option appeals, not with my body screaming for mercy. But the alternative—incurring Jericho's wrath- 99 Ava Life in Westwood (IV) is far worse. He likes coming up with punishments. I swallow hard, my mouth dry as I force the words past my lips. "Practice." Lisa nods, her expression grim. "Practice," she echoes, her voice a hoarse whisper. Jericho's smile is a razor's edge, sharp and unforgiving. "Good choice." He gestures to the mats, his meaning clear. With a groan, I push myself to my feet, my legs trembling beneath me. Lisa follows suit, her movements stiff and pained. I lower myself onto the mat, my abdominal muscles screaming in protest as I force my body into a sitting position. The first few reps are agony, each movement so forced in effort that it leaves me gasping for breath. Beside me, Lisa fares no better, her face contorted into a painful grimace. "Keep your feet flat on the ground," Jericho barks, his voice a whipcrack in the stillness of the training room. "Engage your core. Don't let your back arch." I grit my teeth, focusing on his words as I struggle through another rep. Slowly painfully I find a rhythm. < 00 Ava: Life in Westwood (IV) my body settling into the familiar burn of exertion. It's not pleasant, but it's bearable, a discomfort I can endure. Lisa, however, seems to have reached her breaking point. "I swear to everything holy," she mutters, her voice a breathless hiss, "I'm going to stab his eye out when he sleeps." A chuckle wheezes out of me, the sound strangled and breathless. "Get in line," I manage, my words punctuated by gasps for air. "I called dibs on his other eye yesterday." Jericho's gaze snaps to us, his eyes narrowing. "Less talking, more working," he growls, his tone brooking no argument. "You've got fifty more reps to go." Comment 2 View All > Post your first comment! Vote 12 1 Fandom Swipe left to continue >W(w)W.novélworm.Com