

Chapter 8 No.8

The moment I met Betty at my locker, her smile faded. "Whoa, Sylvia. You look terrible. Are you sick?"

I shook my head, avoiding her concerned gaze. "Just didn't sleep well," I mumbled, the lie tasting bitter. The encounter with Robert and the frantic escape from my own home had left me frayed at the edges.

My mood plummeted further when I remembered my schedule. It was the one day I'd been dreading: P.E.

I had zero athletic ability and was painfully clumsy. When given the choice between basketball and volleyball, I quickly chose the latter, hoping it would be less confrontational.

The good news was that it meant avoiding the twins, who were undoubtedly in basketball. The bad news hit me like a physical blow when I saw Fiona already on the volleyball court, stretching with the grace of a panther.

Why wasn't she with the twins? My luck was truly the worst.

Just as my anxiety began to spike, Betty pulled a girl with a bright, friendly smile over to me. "Sylvia, this is Daisy!"

The name suited her. She had a delicate, pretty face that made you think of a flower. But as she shook my hand, I felt the calluses on her palm and noticed the lean, muscular definition in her arms.

This was no fragile blossom; she was an athlete. With Daisy beside me and Betty in a different class, my fear of P.E. lessened just a tiny bit.

The coach blew her whistle and divided us into two teams. My brief moment of hope shattered.

Daisy and Fiona were on the same side, while I was on the opposing team. Before the game even started, Fiona shot me a glare so venomous it felt like a physical threat. "You're dead," it seemed to say. My stomach twisted into a cold knot.

The whistle blew. Fiona was up first to serve. She smirked, tossed the ball high, and slammed it with the palm of her hand. The ball became a

white bullet, shooting directly toward my face.

I yelped and ducked, barely avoiding the impact. The ball hit the floor behind me with a loud, echoing smack. My heart hammered against my ribs. If that had hit my head, I was sure I would have gotten a concussion.

"Hey!" Daisy yelled, stepping forward. "Aim for the court, not her face, Fiona!"

Fiona just shrugged, a picture of fake innocence. "I'm just playing to win. If some people are too clumsy to play, that's not my fault."

I tugged on Daisy's sleeve. "It's fine," I whispered, knowing it was pointless to fight.

Every time Fiona served after that, my entire body was tense with anticipation. And a strange thing happened. The more focused I became, the easier it was to predict the ball's trajectory and get out of the way. My dodging became almost graceful, a dance of self-preservation.

With each successful dodge, Fiona's frustration grew, her serves becoming harder and angrier. A small, defiant part of me felt a spark of satisfaction.

During the mid-game break, I sat on the bleachers, gulping down water. Daisy plopped down beside me. "You know," she said with a grin, "you might not be able to hit a ball to save your life, but you're a pro at dodging them."

I laughed, a real, genuine laugh that felt foreign. "If we're ever on the same team, I'll just hide behind you."

"Speaking of teams," she said, her eyes lighting up, "there's a party this Saturday. You should come!"

I immediately shook my head. "Oh, no. I've never been to a party. I wouldn't fit in at all."

"Just wear a cute dress and smile," she advised, nudging me playfully. "That's all you need to do."

I hesitated, then asked the question that had been nagging at me. "Will... the twins be there?"

Daisy snorted. "Them? No way. They're too stuck-up to go to parties thrown by anyone else."

Relieved, and not wanting to disappoint my new friend, I reluctantly

agreed. "Okay. I'll go."

The next game started, and I was relieved to see that Daisy and I were teammates. I planned to stick close to her, using her as a human shield. Daisy's incredible reflexes saved several of Fiona's powerful spikes.

I began to relax, thinking the worst was over. Our team was pulling ahead, inching closer to the winning 25 points.

I let my guard down for a single second. Fiona served. I saw the ball coming and moved to dodge it, a motion that was now second nature. But instead of the ball, a crushing force slammed into my side, throwing me violently to the floor.

The impact knocked the air from my lungs, and a sharp, stinging pain bloomed across my hip and elbow.

Daisy was at my side in an instant, helping me up. "Sylvia! Are you okay?"

I nodded, brushing dirt from my shorts, my eyes watering from the sting of fresh scrapes. "I'm fine," I lied, my voice shaky.

Daisy whirled around on the girl who had collided with me. "What was that, Jessica? That was completely unnecessary!"

"It was an accident! I was going for the ball," Jessica said, her apology hollow and insincere. "Sorry."

I didn't miss the quick, triumphant glance she exchanged with Fiona. It had been deliberate. A targeted attack. A wave of hurt and helplessness washed over me.

The commotion had drawn attention from the basketball court. Through a blur of unshed tears, I saw Aldric and Caius walking over. Their hair was damp with sweat, and they exuded a raw, untamed energy that was impossibly attractive. I quickly looked away.

"What's going on here?" Aldric asked, his voice calm but authoritative.

Fiona immediately latched onto his arm, her voice syrupy with fake concern. "Oh, it was just a little accident, that's all. Jessica bumped into the new girl. She's just making a big deal out of it."

Her words were designed to make me look weak and attention-seeking, as if my pain was trivial.

Caius stepped closer, his gaze on my tear-filled eyes and dirt-streaked legs. "You alright, little kitten? Need a hand?"

The fake concern, the nickname-it was the final straw. All the fear from Robert, the humiliation from Fiona, and the confusing, unwanted attraction I felt for the twins boiled over into a hot, sharp resentment. They were the reason for this. My sadness was instantly consumed by a surge of pure, hot anger.

I glared at him, my vision swimming. "Stay away from me," I snapped, my voice trembling with a mixture of pain and fury. "I don't need your help. I don't need anything from you."

I turned and limped away, leaving them all behind, the heat of their stares burning into my back.