

Chapter 12 I Earned It

Joyce looked like she was about to blow a fuse. "Are you all seriously buying into those random online posts? Have you completely forgotten who Elissa is? She's always had your backs!"

The students around her shifted uncomfortably, muttering half-hearted greetings.

"Hey, Elissa..."

"Morning..." The words came out stiff, like they were being dragged.

Just then, Arabella strolled in, her voice cutting through the tension like a knife. "Starting your day by bullying someone again?"

"You've got guts showing your face here!" Joyce shouted and tried to slap her. But Arabella moved just in time with a small smile, and Joyce lost her balance and fell to the floor with a loud thud.

"Ow, damn it!" Joyce cried, pain shooting through her already sore body from yesterday's brutal laps.

Elissa winced. Joyce always had more bark than bite and never knew when to back down.

Eyes narrowing, Elissa met Arabella's gaze and muttered, "You've really changed, Daisy. Or maybe this is who you were all along."

"You guessed it," Arabella said with a low laugh. "And this version? She's your worst nightmare."

Elissa's eyes flared with irritation, but then a smug smile formed on her lips. "Joyce is the best dancer we've got. The Griridge Troupe has had their eyes on her for months. You picked the wrong rival, Daisy. One word from her, and your spotlight dream goes up in smoke."

At that moment, the teacher entered. Her expression was hard to read as she scanned the room. "Daisy, a word outside," she said.

Joyce grinned at Arabella's retreating back. "Watch, she's about to get chewed out bigtime."

Then she turned to Elissa and whispered, "Hey, what's going on with Daisy? She's acting so weird lately. You think she's, like, possessed or something?"

Elissa rolled her eyes. "She's not possessed, just pissed off. Even doormats will bite back if you step on them enough. I told you not to push her that hard."

Joyce snorted. "Let her come at me again. I've already got the perfect plan lined up to wreck her."

Outside, Arabella stood face-to-face with the teacher.

"Miss Stanley," the teacher began. "You've been selected as a candidate for the Griridge Troupe. Care to explain how that happened?"

Arabella's voice was calm and steady. "I earned it. Simple as that."

Zoe Miller, her teacher, looked like she had swallowed a lemon. "Have I taught you nothing about humility? You haven't been practicing at all. And you really think you're better than Joyce?"

Arabella didn't blink. "Not just better. Joyce isn't even close."

Zoe's face flushed deep red. "You're way too arrogant. Just step aside and let Joyce have the spot."

Arabella tilted her head. "Why? Because she's your niece, right?"

Zoe stiffened. For a split second, her mask cracked. How did she know that?

Still, she quickly regained composure. "The Troupe only wants the best. You'll embarrass yourself. Step down now, and I'll make sure you get a scholarship instead. Sounds fair?"

Arabella's stare sharpened. This Zoe woman had turned a blind eye to everything because she was Joyce's aunt. By letting Joyce bully others, she was just as guilty.

"Not happening" Arabella responded flatly, and walked away.

Back in the studio, students looked up as she entered. Zoe followed shortly after.

Joyce was practically vibrating with anticipation. "Miss. Miller, did the results come in yet?"

She could already picture it—snagging the spot, then making sure Daisy never got another shot.

Zoe hesitated. "They did."

Joyce leaned in. "So... who made it?"

"It's... Daisy," Zoe said, biting her lip as she gave Arabella a pointed look. "Be prepared. Rehearsals at the theater start tomorrow."

