

Chapter 17 You're Not Even Competition

Arabella's partner noticed her gaze and gave her a light elbow. "Stop staring. We're nowhere near their league. The pros have talent and serious hookups. Elissa's on another level—she's young and already made it into the Griridge Troupe. Her dancing's sharp, and her routines? Next level."

"Seriously? She's got those freestyle parts figured out already?" Arabella asked, sounding mildly interested.

"That's what sets her apart. There's a solo section where we have to freestyle, and while we're all still piecing things together, she's already nailed hers. See that part there?" Her partner let out a sigh. "Everyone's so polished. I'm probably stuck in the background for life."

She looked totally defeated, like she had accepted being a forever backup.

Arabella didn't say a word.

"Daisy?" Elissa's voice rang out as she approached with a syrupy smile. "Hey, Daisy! Glad you're here. Are you holding up alright? I was honestly worried the training might be a bit much since it's been a while since you danced."

Everyone turned to look at Arabella. One dancer mumbled, "Wait, she's been out of it for that long?"

Whispers started flying—how did someone who hadn't danced in ages end up as a substitute?

Elissa gave a dramatic gasp, covering her mouth. "Oops, that came out wrong! Daisy's got a leg condition, but it's no big deal—she can still dance just fine!"

The more she explained, the more annoyed people looked.

She had barely trained and had a leg issue, but she still made it in? That smelled like favoritism.

To them, nothing stung more than someone getting ahead through connections instead of effort.

One of them rolled their eyes and walked away.

A few others just gave dirty looks and turned their backs.

Arabella didn't panic. Instead, she smirked a little. "Well played, Elissa. You've got them all buying whatever you're selling again."

Elissa was smug inside, but her voice was full of fake guilt. "Aw, I didn't mean to cause a scene. I'll watch my words next time, I swear."

"It's fine. It's kind of your signature move—slip-ups that always end up hurting me," Arabella replied evenly. "No need to apologize. But you might want to think twice, since throwing shade at me means doubting Jennifer's decision too."

Elissa's smile twitched for just a moment, her mask slipping.

Arabella's partner finally spoke up. "I danced with her. She's actually incredible, okay?"

Everyone turned to look at Elissa again, this time with more doubt in their eyes.

Her hands started to sweat, but she stuck to playing the innocent. "It was an honest mistake! You really think I'd go out of my way to mess with you? C'mon, Daisy—you're not even competition."

Zoe jumped in right away. "Yeah, Daisy, get over yourself. Not everyone's plotting against you."

Elissa gave a shake of her head, acting like she was hurt, then turned and walked off.

The rest trailed after her, glancing back at Daisy with a mix of judgment and uncertainty.

Arabella's partner turned to her with concern written all over her face.

"Are you alright, Daisy?"

Arabella looked at her calmly. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Karlie Alford."

"Nice," Arabella replied, her tone cool. "You aiming for the main squad?"

Karlie was taken aback.

With the showcase getting closer, everyone threw themselves into practice once the break ended.

After a long, tiring session, the substitute dancers slowly packed up and left, drained.

Only Arabella and Karlie stayed behind.

"I'll show you how it's done."

Arabella danced the whole routine smoothly for Karlie to watch.

Once she was done, Karlie stood frozen, her mouth hanging open.

Arabella hadn't been showing her full potential before. What she just did made the main team look average.

"Stop spacing out. Get moving!" Arabella's sharp voice jolted Karlie back to reality.

Snapping out of it, she dove right into practice, pushing herself to match Arabella's drive.

Even though they were both exhausted, Karlie didn't let up. She was locked in, totally focused.

Watching Karlie give it her all made Arabella think of Daisy—she must have pushed herself just as hard.

"Still going huh?"

Suddenly, Elissa's voice rang out from the doorway.

She strolled in slowly, her smile twisted and mean now that they were alone. "Train all you want, Daisy, but it won't change a thing. Losers stay losers. If hard work really worked, talent wouldn't matter."

"Oh, so you're pure talent now?" Arabella said, tilting her head with a sarcastic grin.

Karlie looked stunned. She hadn't expected Elissa to be this nasty.

