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Dream Volley
1. *Ready, Set... Fly!*

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ANNALISA STRADA and MYRIAM SYLLA



★ 1 READY, SET... FLY!



1



GAZING AT STARS

THE GLOWING RINGS of a nebula fluctuated on the screen. Swirled by interstellar winds, cosmic rays drew shifting shapes. Hands on her earbuds, Catherine leaned forward, looking like she wanted to dive into the stars.

Marianne tapped on the door a few times. Then she turned the knob and peered into her daughter's room.

"Hey!" she called out loudly, with no results.

She came up behind her daughter and patted her on the back.

Catherine jumped in her chair and took off her head-



phones. “Mom! Do you want to scare the living daylights out of me?”

Marianne laughed and smoothed her long, brown hair, which had gotten all tangled up in the headphones. “I knocked but you didn’t hear me. I’m heading out.”

“Night shift again, huh?” said Catherine.

“Yes. Missing my day off,” her mother sighed, “but you know how understaffed the hospital is.”

Catherine stretched her long legs and spread out her toes. “Being a nurse is becoming an extreme sport, huh?”

“You said it, kiddo,” her mother replied, her eyes marked with dark shadows. “But weren’t you supposed to see Victoria today?”

“No, not today.” Catherine turned her chair around to go back to her documentary.

Marianne grabbed the armrest and brought her daughter back around to face her. Her voice suddenly became firm. “What’s going on?” she said.

Catherine stared at her chewed-off fingernails. A few traces of white polish remained. “Nothing.”

“It isn’t *nothing*. Out with it. If you don’t tell me yourself, you know I’ll bump into Juana on the ward sooner or later.”

Victoria’s mother was a medical sales rep. She often came by the ward where Marianne worked.

Catherine huffed. “You mothers are so nosy!”

“Watch your tone...” Marianne softened a little, but her expression showed she wouldn’t let her daughter off the hook. She stared at Catherine the way only a mother can.

“Whatever. I’ll tell you if you don’t cross-examine me.” Marianne said, capitulating. Deep down, she really wanted to get it off her chest. “She didn’t come to my birthday party. She didn’t even let me know she wasn’t coming. And you know what?”

Her mother nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“I found out she was with Matthew and Alex at the mall. I mean, I’m just saying... We’ve been best friends since we were born and she acted like that? We’re through!”

Her mother bit her lip and tucked her fair hair behind her ear. Puzzled, she thought for a few moments. As gently as possible, she said, “Since you’ve been such good friends your whole lives, have you asked her why?”

Puffing out her lips, Catherine grimaced and hugged her knees to her chest.

“I called her, but she didn’t answer, and then... I



blocked her on social media and we aren't talking at school. So I haven't seen her in a bit. I didn't see her today and I won't in the next few days, either."

Her mother frowned, realizing how serious the situation was. The two had always been together. Even when their schoolwork kept them too busy, she knew they were constantly calling each other. She counted up the days in her mind and said, amazed, "You haven't spoken to each other for three days?!"

Catherine shook her head and untangled her limbs. "No, we haven't. And anyway, we said no counter-interrogation!"

She'd already put one of her earphones back in, but her mother said something that got her attention. "See who you want and when you want, but go out a little. Ever since you stopped dancing, you barely move." Then, as if she'd just gotten an idea that moment, she added, "Wouldn't this be a great time to play a sport?"

Catherine rolled her eyes. Her chair squeaked plaintively as she turned away from her mother. "I'm too tall to keep dancing. There aren't many ballerinas who are nearly 6 feet! I'm no good at tennis. I don't like to swim. What's left?"

"Volleyball!" said her mother.

"When have I ever played volleyball," Catherine said, huffing.

Marianne started listing on her fingers. "You were always happier at school when there was volleyball, when you were little you went to summer volleyball camp in the mountains, at the beach we can never pull you away from the net..."

Catherine didn't say a word, as it was all true.

Her mother took advantage of her silence. "In my opinion, you're a natural, and it doesn't hurt to try. Think about it." She turned to leave. Then she added, "Even a little walk would do you some good. For example, you could go buy some ricotta. Then tomorrow I can make you the cheesecake that you like."

Catherine tried to get rid of her. "Okay. I'll go later. Bye."

"Bye, sweetheart. See you tomorrow."

Catherine went back to focus her attention on the monitor, but by then the credits were rolling.



2



AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

WHEN CATHERINE closed the door to the house behind her, the sun was skimming the horizon and the sky was orange and blue.

She let her big sheepdog, Plato, bark and hurl himself against the double doors, making them boom.

Beneath the din of his barking protest, she heard the voice of her father, Henry, repeating the dog's name, trying to get him to calm down without getting out of his chair and coming up from his repair workshop in the basement.

She smiled, checking her watch. She estimated that if

she walked slowly, she might have a chance of meeting Peter, who should be returning right then. Her brother's habits were like clockwork, and he studied at the library: every afternoon. He always came back home at the same time of day. He claimed that now that he was in high school, this routine was the only way he could stand facing all the schoolwork that was thrown at him. She would have liked to chat with him. But between his books and his friends, he was so busy that they didn't talk to each other anymore.

"Are you looking for someone?"

"Me?"

"You were looking around like a pirate on a yardarm!"

Elisa had popped out alongside her and was matching her pace as if it were the most natural thing in the world. There were a lot of tall girls in their class but she was the only one taller than Catherine. Her curly hair in a headband, Elisa walked gracefully, staying beside her and carrying a large bag on her shoulder.

They didn't speak to each other much in class, and they'd been in different classes in elementary school. So they really didn't know each other well.

"How was practice?" Catherine said, just to make conversation.



Elisa was the leading player on one of the city's two volleyball teams, Dream Volley. She never bragged about it, but she was really good. The PE teacher kept saying she was destined to become a champion.

Elisa smiled. "Good. Well, I had fun. I had an extra practice with the older team."

They walked along in silence for a few minutes. Then Catherine mustered up her courage. "What's volleyball like?"

"I like it so much!" Elisa said, her face animated. "I can't even say how much in just a few words..."

"I'm sure you can," Catherine laughed. Elisa was never at a loss for words or opinions. When she was certain about something, she defended it from anyone. Once she almost fought with the principal about a bell that had rung late!

"I'll try," Elisa said. She was miles away for a moment, with a dreamy expression. Then she said, "Volleyball is like a dance with the ball. Throwing it, touching it, making it fly, spiking it, and watching it bounce in the air like fireworks sparkling. There's no physical contact between opponents and no fights. You only have contact with your teammates, but there it's like you're cogs in the same gear

and you throw all your competitiveness into your skills." She stopped. "Is that too much?"

"No! You're really poetic!" Catherine said. "You make it sound like an art."

"Actually, it is to me," Elisa said. Then she lowered her head and smiled, as if she were embarrassed about what she'd just said, the way you do when you've been really honest and then feel like you've gone too far.

Catherine relieved her embarrassment. "Thanks! I was thinking about trying it today and... you've almost convinced me!"

Elisa recovered and straightened her shoulders. "Oh, hey, if you decide to play, come to Dream Volley. Don't go to Campo Marte!"

Campo Marte was the other city team. But Dream Volley was run by the municipal sports center and was really the "city's" team. Campo Marte was privately owned, and everyone thought they were snobby and exclusive.

Every year, the two teams faced each other in the championship, and it was always a race to the last point. It was hard to determine who was best, too, because both were always at the top of the standings.

"I really can't see myself playing with Joy!"



Catherine made herself smile at the joke she'd served up, but it left a bad taste in her mouth. She'd never really liked Joy, with her drive to be first at all costs. But over the past few days, she'd really come to hate her, because she and Victoria seemed inseparable. Her stomach clenched every time she thought about her best friend (or maybe she should say, ex?), who was now walking around with her, their arms linked together.

Elisa was about to say something when a tall boy with long hair tied up in a messy ponytail started waving from across the street.

"Hey there!"

"Peter!" they both exclaimed.

He crossed the street, carrying a stack of books and notes under his arm.

"Where are you going?" he said, not talking to either of them in particular.

"The store," Catherine said. "Mom wants to make a cake. Want to come with me?"

"Yes...", he said, hesitating. He turned to Elisa, "Are you going home?"

It took Catherine a few seconds to figure out what was going on. "You two know each other?"

"We met at the library last week," Elisa said. "But I didn't realize he was your brother! Anyway, yes, I'm going home."

Peter's face lit up. "Then how about we meet up after your shopping, Sis? In the meantime, I'll go with your friend. Yesterday we were having a long discussion about who was the better player, Cantagalli or De Giorgi."

Elisa laughed and tossed her head. "Your brother claims he knows the history of all volleyball champions, but he wouldn't even know these names if I hadn't told him about them!"

Catherine let them go their own way and had to carry out her quest for ricotta alone.

Catherine doesn't know what to do: dancing is no longer for her, her passion for astronomy is beautiful but not enough, plus she had a fight with Victoria, her best friend. Maybe it's time to try a new sport? Elisa, the captain of Dream Volley, is so happy to play volleyball: why not try? Catherine let herself be persuaded and finds out that it's true, volleyball is great! Too bad that Victoria plays on the rival team...



In the book you find also **ADVICES from the CHAMPION**,
an exclusive collection of tips from **MYRIAM SYLLA**,
to play and experience sport at its best!



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