PRE-SEASON

"I hope everyone's excited for our first day! Our season lasts 20 weeks and there are roughly 10 concepts that we will learn over the course of this season so I divided it into 10 two week segments. At the end of practice I will hand out the schedule for each week. Our focus for the next two weeks will be Presence of mind. Does anybody know what Presence of mind means, or what it is?"

"Coach I thought we were going to be learning new skills."

"Maya we are!"

"No like volleyball skills."

"We are!"

"No I mean like learning new things to get us better at playing."

"Maya, We are!"

"Never mind!"

"Before we get started, the inspirational quote today is from Bethany Hamilton,

'Courage doesn't mean you don't get afraid. Courage means you don't let fear stop you.'

And with that being said, this practice and next practice we will be doing a lot of hand digging.

"Coach, can I bring a helmet next practice?"

No one answered the question.

Before the next practice, all the athletes and coaches were already waiting patiently under the tent for Coach's poem of the day. It was the ritual for the afternoon practices, and everyone loved his poems—especially Maya.

When Coach arrived, he greeted everyone with a huge smile and said, "Good afternoon! How is everybody doing today?"

"Great!" shouted Maya. "What's the poem for today? I want to hear it!"

Coach looked down at the sand and said, "I actually don't have a new one today."

Everyone was in disbelief, but he quickly remembered the one he prepared for a rainy day a couple months back. While he began flipping through his notebook, everyone gathered around. Once he found the right page, he prefaced, "This one might seem a little ironic: it's called 'There Is Nothing New Under the Sun,'" and then began reading it to the group.

"What has been, That will be; What has been done; That will be done.

There is nothing new under the sun."

Everyone applauded.

In the far back, Maya yelled, "Coach! Drop the mic! That was fire!" She pushed her way to the front with a plastic spoon from her lunch box in her hand, then said, "Here coach! Use this!"

Everyone quickly went to their courts after the mic drop to start warming up. Except Maya. Maya panicked, quickly realizing she must find the spoon she gave coach. Maya's mother would be disappointed if she lost the Tupperware or utensils from her lunch box..

The first tournament of the season is just around the corner and the group couldn't have been more prepared. Or at least everything looked perfect on paper.

"Is everyone excited for our first tournament?"

Everyone screamed

"Yes!"

Except for Maya. Maya answered with a contingency, "Only if someone watches my parents for the weekend so I can compete in peace."

A couple athletes knew exactly how Maya felt.

"Were your parents like this when you played?"

"No, but we had to deal with difficult partners."

The athletes looked confused.

Everyone thinks a beach volleyball partnership ends because of one big fight.

Mine ended because we stopped listening.

By the summer of 1998, Brooke and I had spent nearly four years together on the California beach circuit. We'd graduated from tiny local tournaments that hardly pay for dinner to playing against women we'd once asked for autographs. People called us one of the toughest defensive teams on the sand.

What they didn't know was that we hadn't laughed together in months.

Every practice became a performance review.

"Your serve was short."

"You were late closing the block."

"You should've called that ball."

Neither of us was trying to be mean.

We just wanted to win.

Somewhere along the way, winning became more important than enjoying the person standing beside us.

The breaking point came after a disappointing ninth-place finish.

I was stuffing towels into my beach bag when Brooke walked over.

"I think we should play with different partners."

She said it quietly, almost kindly.

Somehow that made it hurt more.

I wanted her to yell.

I wanted her to blame me.

Instead, she simply looked exhausted.

"So that's it?" I asked.

"I think we've stopped making each other better."

Those words echoed in my head for weeks.

The volleyball world felt tiny after that. Every tournament I attended, someone asked the same question.

"What happened?"

Nobody wanted the real answer.

They wanted gossip.

Instead, I smiled and said, "We're trying something different."

Inside, I wondered if everyone secretly agreed with her.

Finding a new partner wasn't easy.

Most experienced players already had teammates.

Others didn't want to risk partnering with someone who had just been left behind.

That's how I ended up with Jamie.

She was younger than me, fearless, unbelievably athletic...and completely unpredictable.

During our first practice, she chased balls I had already called.

She set too fast.

I defended too deep.

We actually collided going after the same shot.

She laughed while I rubbed my shoulder.

"This is going great," she joked.

I wasn't laughing.

Everything she did felt wrong.

Not because it actually was.

But because it wasn't what Brooke would've done.

Jamie noticed before I did.

"You compare every play to your old partner, don't you?"

I couldn't answer.

Because she was right.

I wasn't giving Jamie a chance to become my teammate.

I was asking her to become Brooke.

One afternoon after another frustrating loss, Jamie sat beside me watching the tide roll in.

"You know why I wanted to play with you?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"Because I didn't want Brooke."

That caught me off guard.

"I wanted you."

Nobody had said that to me in months.

From then on, I stopped trying to recreate the past.

Instead of telling Jamie where Brooke would've stood, I started asking where Jamie felt strongest.

Instead of assuming, I listened.

Instead of correcting every mistake, I celebrated every improvement.

Slowly, we became our own team.

Not better.

Not worse.

Different.

Months later, we met Brooke and her new partner in the semifinals.

The match was incredible.

Long rallies.

Impossible digs.

Crowds standing three deep around the court.

We lost 15-13.

As disappointed as I was, something surprised me.

When the match ended, I smiled.

Not because losing suddenly felt good.

Because I finally realized I wasn't trying to prove Brooke wrong anymore.

I was simply trying to become the best teammate I could be.

Sometimes people leaving your life isn't the end of your story.

Sometimes it's the beginning of learning who you are without them.

Everyone began clapping!

"Great story!"

"Tell us another one!"

"Wow, uh okay. Let me think."

People assumed I left because I wanted a better partner.

The truth was much harder to explain.

I left because I missed my best friend.

When Mia and I first started playing together, volleyball was fun.

We celebrated every point like we'd won the championship.

We practiced until sunset because neither of us wanted to leave the beach.

Somewhere along the road to becoming professionals, everything changed.

We became obsessed with perfection.

If I missed a serve, I'd apologize five times.

If Mia shanked a pass, she'd spend the next three rallies trying to make up for it.

We stopped trusting each other.

Not because either of us had changed.

Because fear had.

Fear of losing rankings.

Fear of disappointing sponsors.

Fear that another team was getting better while we stayed the same.

One afternoon I watched us win a match.

Win.

And neither of us smiled afterward.

That's when I knew something was wrong.

Breaking up our partnership felt impossible.

I spent weeks rehearsing the conversation.

No version sounded kind enough.

When I finally told her, I could see the hurt in her eyes before I even finished speaking.

For months afterward, I wondered if I'd made the biggest mistake of my career.

My new partner, Erin, couldn't have been more different.

She talked constantly.

She celebrated every great rally.

She laughed after mistakes.

At first, I thought she wasn't taking volleyball seriously enough.

One day I snapped.

"Can you focus?"

She looked confused.

"I am."

"No, you're joking around."

She smiled.

"I'm having fun."

That answer bothered me.

Because I couldn't remember the last time I had any fun.

Slowly, Erin changed me.

Not by teaching me new volleyball skills.

By reminding me why I had started playing in the first place.

When I stopped treating every mistake like a disaster, I actually played better.

When I trusted my partner instead of trying to control every point, we improved faster.

Then came the semifinal against Mia.

Looking across the net felt strange.

She looked confident again.

Happy.

Jamie was making her laugh between rallies the way I used to years before.

During one timeout, I realized something unexpected.

Leaving hadn't broken us.

It had freed us.

Neither of us needed the other to become successful.

We simply needed different people to help us grow.

After the match, I hugged Mia.

"I'm proud of you," I whispered.

She smiled.

"I'm proud of you too."

For years I thought great teammates stayed together forever.

Now I know that's not always true.

The best teammates are the ones who help each other become better people—even if one day that journey leads them in different directions.

Not every ending is a betrayal.

Not every goodbye is failure.

Sometimes courage isn't holding on.

Sometimes courage is letting go with kindness, wishing someone well, and believing there's enough success for both of you.

Because long after the trophies fade and the rankings disappear, people won't remember how many matches you won.

They'll remember how you treated the people who once stood beside you on the same side of the net.

PRESENCE OF MIND

The ability to remain calm and think clearly in stressful or unexpected situations.

Presence of mind is the difference between panic and problem solving.

"Don't send it," Maya said. "I left something out."

Coach Jordan emailed Maya's mother saying he wanted her to apologize to Taylor after the next practice.

"I told Taylor I wished I'd picked someone else."

"Why?"

"She kept missing serves. Then she said my sets were too low."

"And you said that?"

Maya nodded.

"Did you mean it?"

"Then I did, but not anymore."

Maya pulled at the cuff of her sweatshirt.

"Everyone heard me."

"Then Taylor was probably embarrassed."

"I know."

For a while, neither of us spoke.

"I don't want to go tomorrow."

"Because you don't want to play, or because you don't want to face her?"

"The second one."

"I'll drive you."

Maya looked up.

"You're making me go?"

"I think you need to talk to her. I'll walk over with you, but you need to do the talking."

"What do I say?"

"Tell her what you're sorry for."

"Can I explain why I was upset?"

"Yes. But don't make your apology another conversation about her missed serves."

Maya opened her messages.

She typed for a minute, "I'm sorry I wished I'd picked someone else. I shouldn't have said that. Can we talk before practice?"

"Does that sound okay?"

"Yes."

She sent it.

Twenty minutes went by, then Maya said, "She hasn't answered."

"Give her some time."

"Do you think she'll still play with me?"

"I don't know."

Maya put her phone down and pulled her chair closer to her mom.

SOLIDARITY

Mutual support within a group, especially during hardship or struggle. In times of crisis, neighbors demonstrated solidarity by sharing food and shelter instead of fighting each other for the remaining resources. Solidarity turns "I" into "we" without erasing individuality. "We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided" J.K. Rowling. "The only way to prove you're a good sport is to lose" Earnie Banks.



Maya found out she hadn't made the travel roster from a group text.

Not from Coach Jordan.

Not from Taylor.

Not even from Samantha, who knew everything approximately fifteen minutes before everyone else.

A group text.

Jordan had sent the list at 6:42 in the morning.

Maya read it while brushing her teeth.

Taylor.

Brittney.

Emma.

Samantha.

Six more names.

Not Maya.

She stopped brushing.

Read it again.

Still not Maya.

She refreshed the message.

Nothing.

Her mother walked past the bathroom.

"You okay?"

Maya pointed at the phone with the toothbrush still in her mouth.

Her mother looked at the screen.

"I don't know what I'm looking at."

Maya spit into the sink.

"I'm not going."

"Where?"

"The tournament."

"I thought you've been talking about that tournament for three months."

"I have."

"Then why aren't you going?"

"Excellent question."

She called Jordan.

Voicemail.

Called again.

Voicemail.

She typed:

Can you call me?

Deleted it.

Typed:

Why am I not traveling?

Deleted that too.

Then:

Can we talk before practice?

She sent it.

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

Yes.

That somehow made her angrier.

At practice, Maya arrived twenty minutes early.

Jordan was setting up a court.

She walked directly toward him.

"Why?"

Jordan didn't pretend not to understand.

"Because you're not in the ten we're taking."

"Obviously."

Maya crossed her arms.

"Why?"

"You're eleven."

She stared at him.

"That's not funny."

"I wasn't joking."

"I've beaten half those players."

"Yes."

"I've been playing well."

"Yes."

"I've been here every day."

"Almost."

"Almost?"

Jordan continued tightening the net.

"You missed Tuesday."

"I had an exam."

"I know."

"So you're punishing me for school?"

"No."

"Then why did you say almost?"

"Because you said every day."

Maya stared at him.

"You are unbelievably annoying."

"I've heard."

"Then explain it."

Jordan finally stopped working.

"Emma and Samantha give us more flexibility in the lineup right now."

"I'm better than Emma."

Jordan said nothing.

Maya immediately regretted saying it.

Not because she didn't believe it.

Because Emma was standing about thirty feet away.

And she had heard.

Emma looked down at the ball in her hands.

Maya closed her eyes.

"Great."

Jordan looked toward Emma.

Then back at Maya.

"That right there."

"What?"

"That's part of it."

Maya's anger sharpened.

"So now I can't think I'm better than somebody?"

"You can think anything you want."

"Then what's the problem?"

"You made your disappointment somebody else's burden."

Maya looked toward Emma.

Emma had walked to another court.

"I didn't know she was there."

Jordan nodded.

"Would it have been okay if she wasn't?"

Practice started.

Jordan paired Maya with Brittney.

Brittney immediately said, "I'm not getting involved."

"I didn't ask."

"Your face asked."

"Just play."

"Wonderful."

The first game was against Emma and Taylor.

Of course it was.

Maya served Emma.

Ace.

Next ball.

Emma again.

Bad pass.

Maya dug the next attack.

Brittney converted on an option deep cross court.

Point.

Third serve.

Taylor looked across the net.

"Subtle."

Maya ignored her.

She served Emma again.

This time Emma passed perfectly.

Taylor set.

Emma hit high line.

Point.

Emma didn't celebrate.

That made Maya feel worse than if she had screamed.

At 12–10, Brittney walked toward Maya.

"Can you stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Trying to settle your existential crisis through serving."

"I'm serving the weaker passer."

Brittney looked at Emma.

Then back at Maya.

"Sure."

"She is."

"Then serve her."

Maya rolled her eyes.

They lost 21–18.

Maya immediately walked toward her water bottle.

Emma followed.

"Do you actually think I'm bad?"

Maya stopped.

"No."

"You said you're better than me."

"That's not the same thing."

"It sounded pretty similar."

Maya looked toward Jordan.

He was intentionally looking somewhere else.

Coward.

"Emma, I'm angry."

"At me?"

"No."

"Then why did you serve me seventeen times?"

Maya almost corrected the number.

"I'm sorry."

Emma nodded.

She didn't say it was okay.

Then she walked away.

Maya sat down.

Brittney dropped beside her.

"How's your morning?"

"Fantastic."

"I could tell."

Maya took a drink.

"Do you think she's better than me?"

Brittney groaned.

"Why does everyone keep trying to get me killed today?"

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"Brittney."

Brittney sighed.

"Better at what?"

"Volleyball."

"That's not a thing."

"What?"

"Better at passing?"

"Blocking?"

"Serving?"

"Playing in wind?"

"Playing with Taylor?"

"Playing with you?"

"Making good decisions when they're furious?"

Maya looked at her.

"That last one felt unnecessary."

"It was extremely necessary."

Maya threw a handful of sand at her.

Brittney laughed.

Then she became serious.

"You want me to tell you you're better so you can feel like something unfair happened."

Maya didn't answer.

"And maybe you are better at a bunch of things."

Brittney shrugged.

For the rest of practice, Maya said very little.

The travel group finished with a competitive drill.

Maya's group went to another court.

That hurt too.

Every separation suddenly felt symbolic.

Travel.

Not travel.

Chosen.

Not chosen.

Important.

Not important.

She knew that wasn't what Jordan had said.

It was what disappointment translated it into.

After practice, Maya stayed.

Everyone else slowly left.

Jordan was rolling a boundary line as Maya walked over.

"Can I ask you something without being awful?"

Jordan smiled.

"Let's see."

"What do I need to do?"

"For what?"

"To travel next time."

"Don't get carried away."

Maya smiled slightly.

Jordan continued.

"You're trying to prove you belong in the lineup every time you touch the ball."

"Isn't that the point?"

"No."

"Then what's the point?"

"Making your pair better."

Maya frowned.

"Those are the same thing."

"They should be."

Jordan looked at her.

"For you lately, they aren't."

Maya didn't understand.

Jordan explained.

"When you're competing for yourself, you take bad swings because you want to bounce the ball and get spectacular kills for highlight reels."

"You serve harder when placement would be smarter."

"You get frustrated when your partner makes a mistake because you think her mistake makes you look worse."

"And when another player succeeds, you experience it like something has been taken from you."

Maya looked toward the empty courts.

"That's harsh."

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm selfish?"

"No."

Jordan picked up the rolled line.

"I think you're scared."

That was worse.

Maya laughed uncomfortably.

"Of what?"

"That there aren't enough opportunities."

She didn't answer.

To Maya there never seemed to be enough.

College roster spots.

Travel teams.

Scholarships.

Partners.

Starting positions.

Invitations.

Attention.

Jordan started walking away.

Maya called after him.

"So what am I supposed to do?"

He turned.

"Practice making other people good."

"That's your advice?"

"For now."

"How do I do that?"

Jordan smiled.

"Figure it out."

Maya groaned.

"I hate when you do that."

"I know."

The travel team left Friday morning.

Maya stayed home.

She told herself she wouldn't check the scores.

At 8:07 she checked scores.

Then at 8:14.

Then again at 8:19.

At 8:26, Brittney texted.

The text read, Stop refreshing the scores.

Maya stared at her phone.

How do you know?

Because I know you.

Maya put the phone down.

Three minutes later she picked it back up.

By noon, the team had won its first two duals.

Emma was playing well.

Maya stared at the results.

She felt jealous.

Then guilty for feeling jealous.

Then annoyed that she felt guilty.

Being a person was exhausting.

She typed Emma a message.

Good job today.

She stared at it.

It felt fake.

Deleted it.

Then tried again.

I saw the scores. Looks like you're playing well. Keep going.

It still felt weird.

Delete.

Finally:

How's the wind?

Emma replied two minutes later.

Horrible lol.

Maya smiled.

Of course.

She typed:

Then stop trying to be pretty and win ugly.

Emma responded:

That's actually helpful.

Maya stared at the message.

Something loosened.

Saturday morning, Emma texted first.

Their blocker kept showing line then taking the angle super late. What would you do?

Maya immediately started typing an answer.

Then stopped.

Jordan's voice appeared in her head.

Practice making other people good.

She asked:

What is your partner asking of you?

Three dots.

To go cross.

So?

A minute passed.

Then:

Oh.

Maya smiled.

Emma's pair won.

When the team returned Sunday night, Maya wasn't there waiting with some dramatic reconciliation.

Monday arrived.

Practice was starting soon

Emma walked onto the beach carrying her bag.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Thanks for Saturday."

"You figured it out."

"You helped."

Both things were true.

At the start of practice Jordan paired Maya with Emma.

Maya looked at him.

"Seriously?"

Jordan shrugged.

"Its Random."

"Liar."

Emma laughed.

They played Taylor and Brittney.

The first rally, Emma passed badly.

Maya chased it.

Terrible set.

Emma swung. Or at least attempted

Blocked by the abnormally high net

The old Maya would have immediately explained what Emma should have done.

Instead Maya asked:

"What'd you see?"

Emma brushed sand from her knees.

"Nothing."

"Excellent."

Emma laughed.

"Set me again."

Next rally, she scored.

Later, Maya missed a serve.

Emma walked past.

"Trying to settle an existential crisis?"

Maya stared at her.

"Brittney told you?"

"Everyone knows."

Across the net Brittney was laughing so hard she had to turn away.

Maya laughed too.

They lost the game.

Then won the next one.

Three weeks later, another travel roster was posted.

Maya opened the message.

Her name was there.

She smiled.

Then she kept reading.

Emma's was too.

For a moment, Maya felt something surprising.

Not relief that she'd beaten someone.

Not satisfaction that she'd reclaimed something.

She texted Emma.

We're going.

Emma responded immediately.

WE'RE GOING.

Years later, Maya didn't remember which tournament she'd missed.

She didn't remember who traveled instead of her.

She vividly recalls how rejection had felt.

But how temporary it actually was.

She remembers learning that competition creates a strange illusion.

It convinces us that everyone pursuing the same thing must be standing in our way.

Sometimes they are.

There are limited roster spots.

Limited scholarships.

Limited opportunities.

Pretending otherwise doesn't make competition kinder.

But scarcity doesn't require hostility.

Another person's success can challenge you without insulting you.

Someone can be selected instead of you without becoming your enemy.

You can want the spot.

You can believe you deserve it.

You can be furious when you don't get it.

Eventually Maya learned that solidarity wasn't pretending competition didn't exist.

It was refusing to let competition decide who she was allowed to care about.

And strangely enough, once Maya stopped spending so much energy proving she was better than everyone around her, she became a much better volleyball player.

Mostly because everyone around her started getting better too.

MINDFULNESS

Stay calm and respond rather than react. Acceptance of the situation or experience.

Practice meditation and breathwork.

The text came at 9:14 on Friday night.

Can't play tomorrow. Sorry.

Maya stared at it for a few seconds.

Then she called Samantha.

"What does that mean?"

"She's playing with someone else."

"What?"

"I saw the entry list."

Maya opened the tournament page.

There it was.

Her partner's name.

Next to somebody else's.

She read it twice.

Three weeks earlier, they had agreed to play together.

Maya had turned down another partner because of it.

Now, less than twelve hours before check-in, she didn't have anyone.

She called her partner.

No answer.

She called again.

Voicemail.

Then another text appeared.

I got an opportunity to play with someone really good and I couldn't pass it up. I hope you understand.

Maya didn't.

She typed three different responses.

Deleted all three.

Finally she wrote:

You could have told me earlier.

The reply came almost immediately.

I know. I'm sorry.

Maya threw her phone onto the bed.

Her mother was standing in the doorway.

"Everything okay?"

"No."

Maya explained.

Her mother listened.

When Maya finished, she asked, "So what are you going to do?"

"Not play."

"You sure?"

"I don't have a partner."

"That's different."

Maya looked at her.

"Different from what?"

"Not playing."

Maya hated when adults did that.

Took something obvious and turned it into a question.

She picked up her phone again and started texting people.

One couldn't play.

Another was out of town.

One had already committed to somebody else.

Another never responded.

At 10:36, Taylor texted.

I found a partner for you!

Maya called immediately.

"Who?"

"Brittney."

She paused.

"No."

"She's available."

Maya knew Brittney.

Everyone did.

She sometimes showed up five minutes before check in carrying nothing but a volleyball and a water bottle.

Maya liked plans.

Brittney consider plans as suggestions.

"I'd rather not play."

Taylor was quiet.

"Okay."

She expected her to argue.

She didn't.

That somehow made it worse.

"That's it?"

"You said you don't want to play."

"I don't."

"Then don't."

Maya stared at the phone.

"You're annoying."

"I know."

They hung up.

At 11:02, Maya texted Brittney.

You still available?

Her reply arrived seconds later.

Yep.

Can you be there at 7?

Probably.

Maya stared at the word.

Probably?

She almost canceled.

Instead she typed:

7 means 7.

Brittney responded with a thumbs-up.

At 6:58 the next morning, she wasn't there.

Maya stood near check-in watching the walkway.

7:01.

Nothing.

7:04.

She called.

No answer.

7:07.

Still nothing.

Maya could feel herself getting angry.

Of course.

She had known this would happen.

At 7:09, Brittney came jogging toward the beach with her backpack bouncing behind her.

"Morning."

"You're late."

"Nine minutes."

"That's what late means."

Brittney looked at her.

"Good morning to you too."

They checked in without speaking.

Their first match started badly.

Maya wanted a call for every serve.

Brittney didn't.

Maya wanted to block line.

Brittney peeled without warning.

Maya called a high line shot.

Brittney tried a cut shot and hit it into the tape.

At 6–10, Maya finally snapped.

"Can you just do what we talked about?"

Brittney picked up the ball.

"We've talked about fifteen things."

"Because you're not doing any of them."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're trying to coach me."

"I'm trying to play with you."

"No."

Brittney tossed her the ball.

"You're trying to make me play like somebody else."

Maya caught it.

"Maybe because my actual partner decided to play with somebody else."

Brittney's expression changed.

She hadn't known.

The referees called them back onto the court.

Neither said another word.

They lost 21–13.

Maya grabbed her water bottle and walked away.

Brittney followed.

"You want another partner?"

She turned.

"What?"

"I can leave."

"That's not what I said."

"You don't have to say it."

Maya looked toward the next court.

Her original partner was warming up.

Laughing.

Everything about it made Maya angrier.

"She dumped me last night."

"For somebody better."

Brittney sat in the sand.

Maya remained standing.

"That sucks."

She expected advice.

None came.

Brittney took a drink.

After a minute Maya sat too.

"I turned somebody else down to play with her."

Brittney nodded.

"That sucks more."

Maya laughed despite the situation.

"You're not very helpful."

"I wasn't trying to be."

They watched the match on the next court.

Maya's former partner and her new teammate looked good.

Really good.

Maya hated that too.

Brittney finally spoke.

"You know we're probably going to lose again if you keep watching them."

"I'm not watching them."

"You've been staring at their court for three minutes."

Maya looked away.

"Fine."

Brittney stood.

"Come on."

"Let's figure out how we're going to play."

"I tried that."

"No."

She picked up a volleyball.

"You figured out how you wanted me to play."

Maya almost argued.

Then stopped.

"Okay."

Brittney drew a court in the sand.

"What are you good at?"

She laughed.

"You know what I'm good at."

"Tell me anyway."

"Passing."

"What else?"

"Serving seams."

"What else?"

She thought.

"I see the defender pretty well."

Brittney nodded.

"What am I good at?"

"Doing whatever you want."

"Excellent."

Maya laughed.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

She pointed at the court she'd drawn.

"What if we use that?"

"Use what?"

"The fact that you know what you're doing and I don't."

"That's your strategy?"

Brittney smiled.

"No."

"The fact that you're predictable in a good way and I'm unpredictable in a good way."

Maya looked at the drawing.

For the first time all morning, she became curious.

Their second match wasn't beautiful.

Brittney missed a serve at 19–19 because she tried to hit the back corner instead of putting the ball safely in.

Maya stared at her.

She held up both hands.

"That one was stupid."

"Thank you."

They won 23–21.

Their third match was better.

Not because Brittney became predictable.

Because Maya stopped needing her to be.

She started asking what she saw.

Brittney started telling her before changing defensive calls.

When Maya wanted to serve short, she explained why.

When Brittney wanted to peel unexpectedly, she told her what she had noticed.

They disagreed constantly.

They also started listening.

By early afternoon they had somehow reached the quarterfinal.

Across the net stood Maya's original partner.

Of course.

Brittney saw the matchup and laughed.

"You've got to be kidding."

Maya didn't laugh.

Her stomach tightened.

During warm-ups, her former partner walked over.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"I'm sorry about yesterday."

Maya bounced the ball once.

"Okay."

"I should've told you earlier."

"Yes."

"I just thought this was a really good opportunity."

Maya looked at the new partner warming up behind her.

"Then you should've taken it."

Her former partner seemed relieved.

"But you should've called me."

The relief disappeared.

"I know."

The referee called captains.

That was the entire conversation.

No hug.

No sudden forgiveness.

Just enough truth to play volleyball afterward.

The match was ugly.

Nobody dominated.

Maya served three balls long.

Brittney got blocked twice trying shots she probably shouldn't have attempted.

At 18–18, Maya's former partner served her.

The pass drifted off the net.

Brittney chased it.

Maya expected the safe set.

Instead she poked the pass from behind her head.

Maya almost stopped moving.

Almost.

She chased it and also poked the ball but into the open corner.

Point.

She looked at Brittney.

"What was that?"

She smiled.

"You got there."

"That wasn't the question."

"I didn't have a better idea."

Maya started laughing.

The next serve came.

They lost 22–20.

For several seconds Maya stood with her hands on her knees.

She had wanted that match.

More than she wanted to admit.

Brittney walked over.

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"The set."

"The set worked."

"I meant losing."

Maya stood upright.

"Yeah."

She looked across the net.

Her former partner was celebrating.

The anger was still there.

Just smaller.

Maya walked over.

"Good game."

Her former partner looked surprised.

"Good game."

That was it.

Maya didn't forgive her that afternoon.

Not completely.

They didn't have a heart-to-heart conversation that fixed everything.

Trust took longer than that.

Months, actually.

But the next time Maya committed to a tournament, she noticed something different about herself.

She didn't ask whether her partner was the best player available.

She asked whether they meant what they said.

And when Maya had to cancel a tournament later that season because of a family commitment, she didn't send a text.

She called.

Her partner was disappointed.

Maya let them be disappointed.

She didn't defend herself.

She didn't try to make the conversation easier.

She simply gave them the respect of hearing it from her.

Years later, Maya remembered almost nothing about the quarterfinal she lost with Brittney.

She couldn't remember the final score without thinking hard.

She couldn't remember who won the tournament.

She did remember the Friday-night text.

She remembered waiting at check-in while Brittney was nine minutes late.

She remembered wanting her to become somebody she wasn't.

And she remembered the ridiculous pokie set at 18–18.

Mostly, she remembered discovering that people don't always hurt us because they're cruel.

Sometimes they're scared.

Sometimes they're ambitious.

Sometimes they're careless.

Sometimes they want something badly enough that they convince themselves the way they get it doesn't matter.

That doesn't make the hurt disappear.

It doesn't mean trust has to return immediately.

But it leaves room for something besides revenge.

LOVE

"Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend" Martin Luther King Jr. "Where there is love there is life" Mahatma Gandhi. "The only way to do great work is to do what you love" Steve Jobs.



Maya knew something was wrong when Taylor didn't celebrate match point.

They had just beaten the number one seed.

Three sets.

Almost ninety minutes.

The final rally ended when Taylor chased a cut shot nearly into the neighboring court, somehow kept the ball alive, and Maya finished the point with a roll shot into the deep corner.

The crowd erupted.

Maya turned expecting Taylor to be running toward her.

Instead, she was standing still.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You don't look okay."

Taylor forced a smile.

"We won."

"That's not what I asked."

She picked up the volleyball.

"Let's get ready for the next one."

Maya watched her walk away.

She knew Taylor well enough to understand that "I'm fine" usually meant the conversation wasn't finished.

Twenty minutes later, she found her sitting alone near the water.

Her phone rested face down beside her.

Maya sat without asking.

For a while, neither spoke.

Finally Taylor said, "My dad's in the hospital."

Maya looked over.

"What happened?"

"He collapsed this morning."

"Taylor."

"I know."

"Why are you here?"

She stared at the water.

"Because we had a tournament."

Maya waited for her to hear her own answer.

She didn't.

"Does your family know you're here?"

"My mom told me to play."

"That's not what I asked."

Taylor rubbed both hands across her face.

"They know."

"And?"

"My sister thinks I'm an idiot."

Maya almost smiled.

"I like your sister."

Taylor laughed despite herself.

"He'll probably be fine."

"Probably?"

"They're running tests."

Maya looked toward the courts.

Their semifinal was scheduled in forty minutes.

Taylor had spent years trying to earn opportunities like this.

Neither needed to say it.

This tournament mattered.

They had talked about it for months.

Taylor looked at Maya.

"If we make the final, there are three coaches here I really need to see me play."

"I know."

"This could change things."

"I know."

She stared at the sand.

"I've sacrificed everything for this."

Maya said nothing.

Taylor's voice grew sharper.

"You don't understand."

She looked at her.

"Then help me."

"I've been waking up before five for two years."

"I've missed trips."

"Birthdays."

"I stopped playing basketball because tournaments overlapped."

"My parents have spent money they don't have."

"I've done everything people say you're supposed to do."

Her eyes were wet now.

"So what am I supposed to do? Walk away when I'm finally getting somewhere?"

Maya let the question sit between them.

Then she asked, "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"That's different from what you're supposed to do."

Taylor looked frustrated.

"I need you to tell me."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because then you get to live with my decision."

She pushed herself up from the sand.

"You need to live with yours."

Taylor looked at her.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"If I leave, you're done too."

There it was.

The part neither had wanted to say.

Beach volleyball was unforgiving that way.

Two people entered together.

One person's decision became the other's consequence.

Maya had sacrificed for this tournament too.

She had driven thousands of miles that season.

Worked evenings to pay for travel.

Skipped a family reunion.

Turned down an indoor opportunity because she believed this partnership could take them somewhere neither could reach alone.

If Taylor left, Maya's tournament ended with hers.

She looked toward the courts.

Then back at her.

"I'll be angry."

Taylor seemed surprised.

"What?"

"I'll be disappointed."

She continued.

"I might spend the whole drive home wondering what would've happened."

Taylor looked down.

"But that's mine to carry."

She looked up again.

"You're not going to tell me to stay?"

"No."

"You're not going to tell me to leave?"

"No."

Maya picked up her phone and placed it in her hand.

"I'm going to remind you that you're more than my partner."

Taylor stared at the screen.

For the first time all day, volleyball became quiet.

She called her mother.

The conversation lasted less than three minutes.

When she hung up, she stood.

"I have to go."

Maya nodded.

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

They walked back toward the tournament together.

Taylor expected anger from the tournament director.

Instead she received a clipboard.

"Sign here."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"We're forfeiting a semifinal."

The director nodded.

"I know."

"Aren't you upset?"

The director looked at her strangely.

"Taylor, I've run tournaments for twenty-five years."

He pointed toward the courts.

"I don't remember who won most of them."

Taylor signed the paper.

The semifinal disappeared from the bracket with one line of ink.

Months of preparation.

Thousands of serves.

Early mornings.

Long drives.

Gone in seconds.

At least that's how it felt.

Word spread quickly.

Some people understood.

Others didn't.

"I would've stayed."

"She could've left after the tournament."

"Her dad wasn't dying."

"They gave up a semifinal?"

Beach volleyball communities could be wonderfully supportive.

They could also be small enough for everyone's opinion to reach you before you reached the parking lot.

Taylor heard most of them.

Maya heard the rest.

Neither responded.

At Taylor's car, she threw her bag into the back.

Then she stopped.

"I cost you the tournament."

Maya leaned against the passenger door.

"Yes."

She looked surprised by her honesty.

"I thought you were supposed to tell me it didn't matter."

"It mattered."

She smiled.

"You matter too."

Taylor hugged her.

Then she drove away.

Maya stayed.

She could have gone home.

Instead she returned to the courts.

Jordan was helping warm up two younger athletes before their semifinal.

One of them looked nervous.

"Can you pass?" Jordan asked.

Maya picked up a ball.

"For how long?"

"Until they stop needing you."

She smiled.

"That could take years."

"Hopefully."

For the next hour, Maya worked.

Nobody watching would have known she'd been scheduled to play a semifinal herself.

She chased balls.

Encouraged athletes.

Helped a player figure out a serve that kept drifting long.

Eventually one of the younger athletes asked, "Weren't you supposed to play?"

Maya nodded.

"What happened?"

"My partner had somewhere more important to be."

The athlete thought about that.

"Were you mad?"

"A little."

"Are you still?"

Maya looked toward the parking lot where Taylor's car had disappeared long ago.

"No."

"Why?"

She tossed another volleyball.

"Because loving someone means their choices never cost you anything."

The athlete caught the ball.

Maya smiled.

"Sometimes that's exactly when you find out whether you mean it."

Taylor's father soon recovered.

The doctors found a heart problem that required treatment but had been caught early enough to manage.

Taylor spent three days at the hospital.

She sat beside her father's bed watching television, eating terrible cafeteria food, and occasionally wondering what would have happened in the semifinal.

On the second night her father asked.

"Did you win?"

Taylor laughed.

"We forfeited."

Her father looked confused.

"Why?"

"Because I came here."

A long silence followed.

"You shouldn't have."

Taylor stared at him.

"Seriously?"

"You worked hard for that tournament."

Taylor smiled.

"So did you."

"For what?"

"For me."

Her father looked away.

Taylor continued.

"Driving me everywhere."

"Paying entry fees."

"Standing around beaches for twelve hours."

"Working while I got to play."

Her father shook his head.

"That's what parents do."

"Exactly."

Taylor sat back.

"I figured maybe I could do it once too."

Her father didn't answer.

He didn't need to.

The following weekend Taylor returned to practice.

Maya was already there.

Neither mentioned the hospital.

Neither mentioned the tournament.

Taylor picked up a volleyball.

"Want to play?"

Maya smiled.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Their first game back was terrible.

Taylor missed two serves.

Maya shanked an easy pass.

They argued about a defensive call.

Then laughed because the argument felt familiar.

At 18–18, Taylor looked at Maya.

"Line?"

She shook her head.

"I've got an idea."

"What?"

"If I tell you, you'll argue."

"Probably."

She smiled.

"Trust me."

Taylor did.

They lost the point.

Taylor stared at her.

"That was your idea?"

"It was better in my head."

She started laughing.

Soon Maya was laughing too.

They lost the game.

Neither cared very much.

COLLABORATION

A process of sharing ideas, responsibilities, and credit to produce something better than any individual could alone. Collaboration is like cooking with others: different ingredients, one pot, and a shared recipe that evolves.

The partnership ended in the middle of a parking lot.

There wasn't a fight.

No yelling.

No dramatic scene that made people stop loading coolers into their cars.

Just two folding chairs leaning against the tailgate of an old pickup truck and two teammates who had finally run out of things to say.

"We're done."

Taylor looked at Maya for a long moment.

"Are we?"

She nodded.

"I think so."

The words landed harder than any loss either of them had taken that season.

For three years they had played almost every tournament together.

They knew which side of the court the other preferred when the wind shifted.

They knew when silence meant focus and when it meant frustration.

They knew how each celebrated after a great rally and how each reacted after a bad one.

They also knew exactly how to hurt each other.

Somewhere along the way, volleyball had stopped being something they shared.

It had become something they defended.

Taylor believed Maya never trusted her to make decisions.

Maya believed Taylor stopped listening the moment she thought she had the answer.

Neither of them was completely wrong.

Neither was completely right.

They entered one last tournament together because both felt they owed the partnership a proper ending.

It became their worst finish in years.

Not because they lacked skill.

Because every rally contained two separate plans.

Walking back to the parking lot after losing in the second round, neither spoke.

Finally Maya broke the silence.

"I don't think we're making each other better anymore."

Taylor nodded.

The next week they entered with different partners.

Everyone watched.

That was another strange thing about beach volleyball.

The community was small enough that every partnership felt personal.

People pretended not to speculate.

They speculated anyway.

Taylor's new partner was Jordan.

Calm.

Patient.

An exceptional defender.

Maya partnered with Nathaniel, whose creativity had frustrated opponents for years.

The first tournament arrived.

Taylor and Jordan won three straight.

Maya and Nathaniel reached the final.

People immediately started talking.

"They should've switched sooner."

"They're better apart."

"I knew it all along."

Taylor heard the conversations.

So did Maya.

Neither believed them.

Because they knew something everyone else had missed.

Both new partnerships were struggling too.

Just in different ways.

Jordan rarely disagreed with Taylor.

At first Taylor loved that.

Then she realized something uncomfortable.

Taylor had become so accustomed to defending every decision that agreement suddenly felt suspicious.

During one match Taylor called for a line block.

Jordan quietly shifted cross-court instead.

The hitter attacked exactly where Jordan had expected.

Point.

Walking back to the service line Taylor asked, "Why didn't you do what I called?"

Jordan smiled.

"I trusted what I saw."

Taylor frowned.

"You should've told me."

"I tried."

Across the beach Maya faced a different struggle.

Nathaniel questioned everything.

"What if we served short?"

"What if we switched after the first point?"

"What if we never blocked line today?"

Maya found it exhausting.

One afternoon she finally said, "Can we just stick to one plan?"

Nathaniel laughed.

"We are."

"What?"

"The plan is adapting."

Maya drove home that evening more frustrated than after any loss.

She wanted stability.

Nathaniel wanted possibility.

For the first time she wondered whether Taylor had felt the same way.

Halfway through the season, both partnerships found themselves at the same tournament.

Taylor and Jordan lost in the quarterfinals.

Maya and Nathaniel were eliminated one round later.

Walking toward the parking lot, Taylor noticed Maya sitting alone near the boardwalk eating a sandwich.

For a moment she considered walking the other way.

Instead she sat down.

Neither mentioned volleyball.

They watched families leaving the beach.

Children dragging folding chairs too large for them.

Parents brushing sand from coolers before loading them into cars.

An older couple walking barefoot near the water.

Finally Maya spoke.

"I owe you something."

Taylor looked over.

"So do I."

She laughed.

"I'll go first."

Taylor nodded.

"I spent years trying to make you play the way I thought."

Taylor smiled sadly.

"I spent years trying to win every conversation."

They both laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was finally honest.

"I thought you were the problem," Maya said.

"So did I."

She looked toward the ocean.

"Turns out we were both carrying something."

Taylor nodded.

"Pride."

"And fear."

"What were you afraid of?"

She thought for a moment.

"That if I wasn't right..."

She shrugged.

"...maybe I wasn't good enough."

Taylor stared at the sand.

"I was afraid that if I admitted I didn't know..."

She paused for a second.

"...people would stop following."

Neither spoke for a while.

The tide was coming in.

One wave reached the edge of a court before sliding back into the ocean.

Maya watched it.

"You know what the funny part is?"

"What?"

"I think we made each other better."

Taylor looked surprised.

"We did?"

"We just didn't realize it until we stopped playing together."

The following month the club held a mixed training day.

Current partnerships were split apart.

Everyone played with someone new.

One younger athlete complained immediately.

"I don't want a different partner."

Jordan smiled.

"Neither did I once."

"What changed?"

Jordan looked toward Taylor and Maya, who were helping another pair solve a defensive problem together.

"I learned something."

"What?"

"A partner isn't someone who thinks like you."

He picked up a volleyball.

"It's someone who helps you discover the parts of yourself you couldn't see alone."

Late that afternoon the final drill ended.

Athletes carried the net bags back toward the storage area.

Parents folded shade tents.

Volleyballs disappeared into mesh bags.

Taylor and Maya happened to reach the last boundary line at the same time.

Without saying anything, each picked up one end.

They rolled it together.

Halfway through, Taylor smiled.

"We're finally working together."

Maya laughed.

"Maybe we always were."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at the neatly rolled line between them.

"We just thought the goal was staying partners."

Taylor nodded slowly.

"It wasn't."

"No."

She rested the line against the others.

"The goal was becoming better people."

The partnership had ended months before.

The friendship had nearly ended with it.

Neither had imagined that losing one would eventually save the other.

As the last families left the beach, Jordan watched Taylor and Maya talking beside the parking lot.

"You think they'll ever play together again?" one athlete asked.

Jordan smiled.

"Maybe."

"You think they'd win?"

He looked toward the ocean, where the wind had already erased the footprints leading away from the courts.

"I think they already did."

Not every victory ends with a medal.

Some end with two people finally becoming humble enough to thank each other for the struggle.

Sometimes the hardest partnerships are the ones that leave us with the greatest gift.

They teach us that growth often begins the moment we stop trying to win against one another and start learning from one another instead.

SELF COMPASSION

Treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer a friend in distress. "You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection" Buddha. "Pain doesn't tell you when you ought to stop. Pain is the little voice in your head that tries to hold you back because it knows if you continue you will change" Kobe Bryant.



"Please don't talk about volleyball on the way home," Maya said.

Her father was watching the last point on his phone.

"I wanted to show you something."

"I know."

She put her bag in the trunk and got into the car.

They had lost in the quarterfinals. Maya had missed two serves in the final set. She had already talked with Brittney and their coach. Now she wanted to eat and go home.

Her father drove past the playground and up the hill.

"You two played well most of the day."

"Thanks."

"You just need to get those serves in when it's close."

Maya looked out the window.

"What?"

"I asked you not to talk about it."

"I'm not upset with you."

"I know. But I'm upset, and I don't want to explain the match again."

He turned off the radio.

"I'm trying to help."

"Then can we stop for lunch?"

They drove quietly until they reached a sandwich shop.

While they waited for their order, her father opened the video again. Maya saw him, and he put the phone away.

"I didn't realize how much I was doing that," he said.

"You do it after every tournament."

"Even when you win?"

"Especially when we win. You want to show me everything we did right."

"I thought you liked that."

"Sometimes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did. In the parking lot."

He nodded.

"You did."

Their food arrived. He asked about a class she had mentioned earlier in the week. Maya told him about a presentation she was worried about.

For the rest of lunch, they didn't discuss volleyball.

Back in the car, Maya took out her phone.

"Brittney wants to practice Friday."

"Do you need a ride?"

"Probably."

"Okay."

She read another message.

"Can you send her the match video?"

"Sure."

"And send it to me."

He looked over before starting the car.

"You want to watch it?"

"Yeah With her. Not you. We're going to look at it before practice."

He sent the file.

Maya put her phone away.

"Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome."

She reached for the radio.

This time, he left it on.

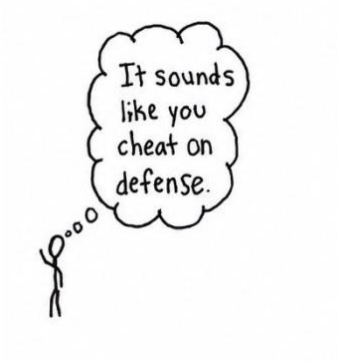
AUTHENTICITY

"You are not a drop in the ocean. You are an entire ocean in a drop" Rumi.

"Be yourself: everyone else is already taken" Oscar Wilde.

PART ONE

"I don't have to wait for nobody. I move when I wanna move" Floyd Mayweather.



Taylor felt the ball touch one finger.

Barely.

The referee called it out.

The scorekeeper flipped the board.

Fourteen—thirteen.

Match point for Taylor and Brittney.

The crowd surrounding the court began to clap.

Brittney turned toward Taylor with both fists raised.

Taylor didn't move.

The opponent who had attacked the ball was already walking back to serve receive.

Nobody had seen it.

Not the referee.

Not Brittney.

Not even the hitter.

Taylor looked at the mark outside the boundary line.

Then at the referee.

"Touch."

The applause stopped.

The referee leaned forward.

"What?"

"I touched it."

For one second, nobody reacted.

Then the referee changed the call.

Point to the other team.

Fourteen—thirteen against Taylor and Brittney.

Brittney stared at Taylor.

"You touched it?"

Taylor nodded.

Brittney looked toward the referee, then back at Taylor.

"Nobody called it."

"I touched it."

The referee whistled for the next serve.

There was no time for anything else.

The serve came short.

Taylor passed it too close to the net.

Brittney barely reached the ball and sent it high toward the middle of the court.

The blocker pressed over and threw it down.

Fifteen—thirteen.

Match over.

For several seconds, Taylor stood in the backcourt listening to the other team celebrate.

They had been one point from the final.

One point from playing on the championship court.

One point from another full match in front of the college coaches who had been standing behind Court Two all afternoon.

Then Taylor had given the point back.

The teams met at the net.

"Good game."

"Good game."

One of the opponents looked at Taylor.

"You didn't have to do that."

Taylor wasn't sure whether it was gratitude or disbelief.

"I touched it."

The player nodded slowly.

Brittney said nothing.

She walked directly toward their bags.

Taylor followed.

Brittney picked up her water bottle, took one drink, and began stuffing clothes into her backpack.

"Can we talk?"

"No."

"Brittney."

"Not yet."

Taylor stood beside her.

"I know you're mad."

Brittney stopped packing.

"Do you?"

"Obviously."

"No."

Brittney looked up.

"You know I'm mad. That's not the same as understanding why."

Taylor crossed her arms.

"Because we lost."

"Because you made a decision for both of us."

"The ball touched me."

"Nobody saw it."

"I saw it."

Brittney laughed once.

"Congratulations."

"What was I supposed to do?"

Brittney stood.

"I don't know."

"You wanted me to lie?"

"I wanted five seconds to be angry before you turned yourself into the most honest person on the beach."

Taylor's face tightened.

"That's not what I did."

"It kind of is."

"I called my own touch."

"And now you get to feel great about your integrity while I get to wonder what would've happened in the final."

Taylor stared at her.

"You think I feel great?"

"I think you think the answer is simple."

"It was simple. I touched the ball."

"The call was simple."

Brittney pulled the backpack onto one shoulder.

"The consequence wasn't."

She walked toward the parking lot.

Taylor remained beside the court.

Coach Jordan found her ten minutes later sitting in the sand with her knees pulled against her chest.

He sat beside her without asking.

Taylor watched volunteers reset the scoreboard for the next match.

"You heard?"

"The entire beach heard."

"Brittney thinks I betrayed her."

"Did she say that?"

"Not exactly."

"What did she say?"

Taylor repeated the conversation.

Jordan listened.

When she finished, he asked, "Do you regret calling it?"

The answer came immediately.

"No."

Jordan nodded.

"Do you regret what it cost her?"

Taylor looked toward the parking lot.

"That's not the same question."

"No."

She stayed quiet.

Jordan stood.

"That's probably why she needed you to answer it."

He walked away before Taylor could ask what he meant.

On the drive home, Taylor replayed the film from that point.

She imagined saying nothing.

Brittney celebrating.

The next serve.

The final.

Maybe a college coach starting a conversation afterward.

Maybe an email later that week.

Maybe nothing.

Taylor turned up the radio.

It didn't help.

Her mother glanced over from the driver's seat.

"You want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Okay."

Five minutes passed.

Then Taylor said, "If nobody sees something, did it still happen?"

Her mother kept looking at the road.

"That sounds like a question you already answered."

Taylor leaned her head against the window.

"I think Brittney hates me."

"That sounds like a different question."

Taylor looked over.

"Why does everyone keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Turning one problem into two."

Her mother smiled slightly.

"Maybe it was already two."

At practice on Monday, Brittney warmed up with Maya.

Taylor worked with Samantha on the next court.

Nobody announced the change.

Jordan simply wrote the pairings on the board and walked away.

Taylor pretended not to care.

She cared.

Halfway through practice, a ball landed near the sideline between the two courts.

Samantha called it out.

Taylor had seen it catch the line.

"In."

Samantha looked at her.

"What?"

"It caught the line."

Samantha walked toward the mark.

"I don't think it did."

Taylor pointed.

"Right there."

Samantha looked at the sand, then at Taylor.

"Replay?"

"No. It was in."

Samantha shrugged.

"Fine."

They gave away the point.

Across the neighboring court, Brittney had stopped to watch.

Taylor noticed.

For the rest of practice, Taylor called everything she saw.

Touches.

Lines.

Net contacts.

Even during drills when nobody cared about the score.

By the end, Samantha looked exhausted.

"You know you don't have to officiate our entire lives."

"I'm just being honest."

"I didn't say you weren't."

Samantha shagged the balls then placed them in the bag.

Taylor watched her walk away.

Jordan appeared beside her.

"What are you proving?"

"Nothing."

"Good. It's going well."

Taylor rolled her eyes.

"I called a touch. Now everyone thinks I'm dramatic."

"No."

Jordan picked up the last ball.

"Everyone thinks you're dramatic because you're calling touches during a warm-up drill nobody is scoring."

Taylor looked toward Brittney.

"She thinks I wanted attention."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Then stop performing for the argument."

Jordan tossed the ball into the bag.

"You don't have to turn one honest decision into your whole personality."

That afternoon, Brittney left without speaking to Taylor.

The next day was the same.

By Thursday, Taylor had become angry too.

She had apologized for the loss.

She had explained the touch.

She had given Brittney space.

What else was she supposed to do?

After practice, she found Brittney sitting on the retaining wall with Maya.

Taylor stopped several feet away.

"Can I talk to you?"

Brittney looked at Maya.

Maya stood.

"I've suddenly remembered I have somewhere else I need to be."

Taylor sat beside Brittney.

Not close.

But still close enough.

"I would make the exact same call again."

Brittney stared toward the water.

"Great start."

"I'm not going to lie and say I didn't."

"I didn't ask you to."

Taylor took a breath.

"I think I kept defending my call because I thought that feeling sorry meant I was admitting the call was wrong."

Brittney looked at her.

"And?"

"And it wasn't wrong."

Brittney groaned.

"Taylor."

"But I am sorry."

"For what?"

"For thinking that you wanted me to cheat."

Brittney's expression changed.

Taylor continued.

"You lost the match too."

"You made sacrifices for that tournament too."

"You wanted the final too."

"And every time you tried to tell me that, I explained the touch again."

Brittney looked down at her hands.

"I didn't want you to lie."

"I know that now."

"I wanted you to care that telling the truth cost me something."

Taylor nodded.

"It cost me too."

"I know."

For the first time since the match, neither was arguing.

Brittney leaned back against the wall.

"I was so mad at you."

"I noticed."

"I spent the whole drive home imagining the final."

"Did we win?"

"Obviously."

"How badly?"

"Twenty-one eight. Twenty-one six."

Taylor laughed.

"Seems realistic."

"I got recruited by four schools."

"Only four?"

"One coach even offered me a job as an assistant during the handshake."

Taylor laughed harder.

Brittney finally smiled.

Then she became serious again.

"I'm still mad."

"Okay."

"I might be mad for another week."

"Okay."

"I don't want you trying to fix that."

Taylor nodded.

Brittney looked suspicious.

"Can you?"

"Probably not."

They both laughed.

It wasn't forgiveness.

Not yet.

But it was the first conversation that wasn't trying to produce a winner.

The following Saturday, they entered a smaller tournament together.

Neither mentioned the previous weekend.

Their first couldn't have been worse.

Taylor passed too tight.

Brittney missed two serves.

They argued over a defensive call at 8–8.

All very familiar problems.

Late in the second game, Brittney tried to block a hard-driven ball.

The ball grazed past her left arm and landed just outside the side line.

The referees called it out.

Point Brittney and Taylor.

Brittney stood beneath the net.

Taylor saw her expression immediately.

"Touch?"

Brittney nodded.

The referee hadn't seen it.

Neither opponent had asked.

Brittney looked toward Taylor.

For one second, Taylor understood everything Brittney had felt the week before.

The point.

The score.

The work.

The fact that one person's honesty had become two people's consequence.

Taylor nodded toward the referee.

"Tell them."

Brittney did.

They lost the game three rallies later.

Afterward, Taylor sat beside the bags.

Brittney walked over.

"Don't say anything."

Taylor shrugged.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were."

"I was going to ask how your integrity feels."

Brittney dropped beside her.

"Expensive."

Taylor laughed.

"Very expensive."

They sat quietly.

Finally Brittney said, "I still hated it."

"Calling it?"

"Yes."

"Me too."

Brittney looked over.

"That's helpful."

"What is?"

"Knowing you hated it."

Taylor nodded.

They entered another tournament the next month.

Then another.

They didn't call themselves the honest pair.

They didn't make speeches before matches.

They didn't turn every close call into a ceremony.

Sometimes they disagreed about the ball marks.

Sometimes they replayed points.

Sometimes Taylor was certain and Brittney wasn't.

Sometimes neither had any idea.

They learned to ask questions.

"What did you see?"

"What did you feel?"

"Are you sure?"

And when one of them knew, the other trusted the answer.

Not because it always helped them.

But because trust built around convenient truths wasn't much trust at all.

Months later, Taylor and Brittney reached another semifinal.

Different beach.

Different coaches watching.

But the exact same score.

Thirteen—thirteen in the third set.

The opponent swung hard down the line.

Taylor was sitting in the angle and dove into the line.

The ball was just outside.

The referee signaled out.

Brittney looked at Taylor.

"Touch?"

Taylor checked her fingers.

Nothing.

She shook her head.

"Out."

Brittney nodded.

Fourteen—thirteen.

No celebration yet.

Next rally.

Brittney served deep.

The pass drifted toward the net.

Taylor went up to block and swatted it straight down.

Fifteen—thirteen.

This time they reached the final.

They celebrated.

Loudly.

Not because their honesty had finally rewarded them or because the universe had balanced the scoreboard.

It was simply because they had won a volleyball tournament.

Years later, Taylor became a coach.

During a junior tournament, one of her athletes came off the court furious.

"We lost because my partner called a touch nobody saw."

Taylor looked toward the partner, who was sitting alone beside the court.

"Did she touch it?"

"She said she did."

"Do you believe her?"

The athlete hesitated.

"Yes."

"Are you still mad?"

"Yes."

Taylor nodded.

"Both can be true."

The athlete waited for more.

Taylor gave her nothing.

Instead she handed her a water bottle and sat beside her.

After a minute, she stood.

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to my partner."

Taylor smiled.

The athlete took two steps, then turned back.

"What am I supposed to say?"

Taylor thought about the match from years earlier.

The touch nobody saw.

The final they never played.

The argument in the sand.

The second touch.

The anger that had taken longer to release than either of them expected.

"Tell her the truth."

"Which truth?"

Taylor looked toward the court.

"Start with the one that costs you something."

The athlete walked away.

Taylor watched the two sit together.

The conversation didn't look easy.

It wasn't supposed to be.

The call only took one second.

But learning how to carry on and move forward together would take much longer.

PART TWO

"You have to remember that the hard days are what makes you stronger. The bad days make you realize what a good day is. If you never had any bad days, you would never have that sense of accomplishment" Aly Raisman.

Taylor stopped keeping score when she was losing 17–8.

"What's the score?"

"You know."

"I want to hear you say it."

"Seventeen to eight."

Brittney smiled.

"Thank you."

Taylor served directly into the net.

"Eighteen to eight."

"I know."

"I thought we were saying the score."

Taylor stared at her.

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"A little."

They had been playing against each other every Friday morning for almost three years.

First game started at six.

No coaches.

No parents.

No drills.

Just playing.

They had started when they were fourteen because both wanted extra touches before school.

At first they kept track of wins.

Then the notebook disappeared.

Nobody remembered who had won more.

That wasn't why they came anymore.

Some mornings they played three games.

Sometimes seven.

Once they played until Taylor's mother called at 8:20 asking whether either of them planned to attend school.

They competed hard.

They also made each other better.

Taylor learned how to defend Brittney's cut shot.

Brittney learned that Taylor could serve the same seam until frustration became a physical sensation.

They knew each other's tendencies almost better than their partners did.

They also knew things about each other that volleyball had nothing to do with.

Taylor knew Brittney hated bananas but ate them at tournaments because they were easy to pack.

Brittney knew Taylor called her grandmother every Sunday.

Taylor knew when Brittney was pretending not to be nervous.

Brittney knew when Taylor needed to be left alone.

They were competitors.

They were friends.

For years, those things had fit together easily.

Then the college coaches arrived.

Neither knew she was coming.

She stood near the boardwalk wearing sunglasses and carrying a coffee.

Brittney noticed first.

"Don't look."

Taylor immediately looked.

"Seriously?"

"What?"

"I said don't look."

"I thought you meant there was something weird behind me."

"There is."

Taylor recognized the coach.

So did Brittney.

Both had emailed the program.

Both had received responses.

Both wanted the same roster spot.

Neither had ever said that part out loud.

The score was 8–8.

After the coach arrived, the volleyball changed.

Taylor served harder.

Brittney stopped trying shots she'd normally attempt.

Taylor argued about a line call she would usually have laughed off.

Brittney chased a ball into the next court and nearly collided with another player.

At 14–13, Taylor hit a ball long.

"Touch."

Brittney looked at her.

"What?"

"You touched it."

"No, I didn't."

Taylor stared.

"Brittney."

"I didn't touch it."

"You absolutely touched it."

Brittney walked back to serve.

"Fourteen all."

"No."

Brittney turned.

"What?"

"It's fifteen-thirteen."

"You hit it out."

"You touched it."

"I didn't."

Taylor looked toward the boardwalk.

The coach was watching.

Brittney saw her look.

"Oh, come on."

"What?"

"That's what this is about?"

"You touched the ball."

"You don't care about the ball."

Taylor stepped toward the net.

"And you do?"

Brittney laughed.

"You're unbelievable."

They stood on opposite sides of the net.

For the first time in three years, neither wanted to be there.

Taylor picked up her backpack.

"Where are you going?"

"School."

"We're not done."

"I am."

She walked away.

The college coach left ten minutes later.

That afternoon Brittney texted.

You were right.

Taylor stared at the message.

About the touch?

Three dots appeared.

Yes.

Taylor waited for something else.

Nothing came.

She put the phone down.

Five minutes later another message appeared.

I don't know why I lied.

Taylor knew why.

That's what bothered her.

Friday came again.

Taylor didn't go.

At 6:07 Brittney texted.

You coming?

No.

Okay.

The following Friday, neither went.

Three years of Friday mornings ended without anyone deciding they were over.

At regular practices, they avoided each other.

Nobody else understood.

Jordan eventually asked Taylor.

"You two fighting?"

"No."

"That's convincing."

Taylor kept gathering volleyballs.

Jordan waited.

She finally told him.

The coach.

The touch.

The argument.

All of it.

Jordan listened.

When she finished, he asked, "Which part are you mad about?"

"She cheated."

"She admitted it."

"That doesn't make it okay."

"I didn't say it did."

Taylor threw another ball into the mesh bag.

"Then what are you asking?"

"Whether you're angry about the point and what the point meant."

Taylor stopped.

She knew the answer.

The point didn't matter.

They had probably played five thousand points against each other.

Taylor couldn't remember four thousand nine hundred of them.

That one she remembered perfectly.

"It meant she'd do that if something important was on the line."

Jordan nodded.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Taylor looked at him.

"That's convenient."

"It is."

Jordan picked up the bag.

"It's also true."

Across the beach, Brittney was having a different conversation with Maya.

"I screwed it up."

"Then fix it."

"I apologized."

"That's not the same thing."

"What else am I supposed to do?"

Maya shrugged.

"Maybe nothing."

Brittney frowned.

"Helpful."

"You don't get to control when somebody trusts you again."

Brittney hated that answer.

Mostly because she knew it was true.

The next Friday, Brittney went to the beach alone.

Six o'clock.

Same court.

She put down two backpacks.

One was hers.

The other was empty.

She started serving.

At 6:20, Taylor hadn't arrived.

At 6:45, Brittney stopped checking the walkway.

At seven, she left.

She came back the following Friday.

Two backpacks.

Again.

Taylor didn't come.

The third Friday, Brittney almost stayed home.

Instead she went.

At 6:12, Taylor appeared.

Brittney was peppering against the net by herself.

Neither said hello.

Taylor put her bag down.

Brittney picked up the ball.

"Want to play?"

"I don't know."

"Okay."

Taylor looked at the court.

"Did you really come out here every Friday?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Brittney shrugged.

"Because Friday."

Taylor almost smiled.

Almost.

They stood there awkwardly.

Finally Taylor asked, "Why did you lie?"

Brittney looked at the sand.

"Because Lance was watching."

"I know."

"I wanted the point."

"I know."

Brittney took a breath.

"And for about three seconds, I wanted the opportunity more than I cared about you knowing I cheated."

Taylor hadn't expected that answer.

It felt worse than an excuse.

Brittney continued.

"I've thought about that point every day."

"So have I."

"I wish I could tell you I'd never do something like that again."

Taylor looked at her.

"You can't?"

"I don't know."

Brittney shook her head.

"I didn't think I'd do it the first time."

Taylor was quiet.

Brittney tossed the volleyball gently between her hands.

"I think I can tell you I'll remember what it cost me."

Taylor looked at the empty court.

"That's a terrible apology."

"It didn't work."

"I noticed."

Taylor laughed.

"One game, 1 vs. 1, short court."

Brittney smiled.

"To twenty-one?"

"Eleven."

"Are you scared?"

"Don't ruin it."

They started playing.

At 6–5, Brittney hit a ball near the sideline.

Taylor looked down.

"Out."

Brittney walked toward the mark.

Taylor's stomach tightened.

Brittney looked at the sand.

Then at Taylor.

"Your call."

Taylor nodded.

"Six-all."

They kept playing.

At 10–10, Taylor served.

Finally Taylor swung from six feet off the net.

The ball clipped Brittney's fingers and landed out.

Taylor looked at her.

Brittney looked at the mark.

Then at Taylor.

"Touch."

Taylor smiled.

"Eleven-ten."

"You still have to win by two."

"I know."

They played another fifteen minutes.

Neither remembered the final score afterward.

The college coach eventually offered the roster spot to someone else.

That hurt both of them.

Then another tournament came.

Another coach watched.

Another opportunity appeared.

Years later, Taylor and Brittney still played whenever they ended up on the same beach.

They argued about calls.

Sometimes Brittney was right.

Sometimes Taylor was.

Sometimes neither had any idea and they replayed the point.

They had learned something competition rarely announces before teaching it.

Pressure doesn't create character as neatly as people like to say.

Sometimes pressure exposes the parts of our character that still need work.

Ambition can make generous people selfish.

Fear can make honest people lie.

Competition can make friends temporarily forget what friendship requires.

That doesn't excuse what happens next.

But it does leave people with a choice.

They can defend the worst moment.

Hide it.

Explain it away.

Blame the pressure.

Or they can look directly at what they did and decide what it will cost them the next time they're tempted to do it again.

Taylor never forgot the point Brittney stole.

Brittney never asked her to.

Maybe that was why the friendship survived.

Some things don't need to be forgotten to be forgiven.

PART THREE

"Treat a person as they are, and they will remain as they are. Treat them as he could be, and they will become what they should be" Jimmy Johnson.



Taylor knew they were in trouble when Brittney arrived to the tournament carrying only a watermelon.

Not sliced watermelon.

Not watermelon in a container.

A watermelon.

An entire one.

She was holding it under one arm like a football while dragging her backpack through the sand with the other.

Taylor stared at her.

"What is that?"

"Breakfast."

"That's a watermelon."

"I know."

"You brought a watermelon to a beach volleyball tournament?"

Brittney looked down at it.

"Apparently."

"Do you have a knife?"

Brittney stopped walking.

"No."

Taylor nodded.

"Excellent."

It was 7:12 in the morning.

Their first match was at eight.

Brittney had forgotten sunscreen, sunglasses, and apparently every reasonable breakfast food available in Southern California.

But she had remembered a twelve pound watermelon.

Maya was already at the court stretching.

She looked up.

Brittney dropped the watermelon beside her backpack.

"What?"

"I'm not participating in whatever this is."

"It's fruit."

"It's a commitment."

Coach Jordan arrived a few minutes later.

He stopped when he saw it.

"Whose watermelon?"

Everyone pointed at Brittney.

Jordan nodded.

"Of course."

The tournament began normally.

Then the wind arrived.

Not gentle beach wind.

The kind that makes every umbrella on the beach reconsider its career.

Sand moved sideways.

Hats disappeared.

The paper bracket escaped from the tournament table and headed toward Mexico.

A parent chased it for nearly forty yards before giving up.

Brittney watched it disappear.

"That bracket is free now."

Taylor ignored her.

Their first match started.

Taylor served.

The ball moved six feet in the air.

"Was that supposed to go there?" Brittney asked.

"No."

"Good."

Brittney passed the next serve directly to the endline.

Taylor chased it.

"Nice pass."

"Wind."

"That ball went backward."

"Strong wind huh?"

They somehow won the first set.

During the break, Brittney sat beside the watermelon.

"I'm hungry."

Taylor looked at her.

"You've had an hour to solve this problem."

"I've been playing volleyball."

Maya walked past eating a banana.

Brittney watched her.

"Can I have that?"

"No."

"You have two."

"Correct."

"Why do you need two bananas?"

"Why do you need an entire watermelon?"

"Fair."

Their second set began.

At 4–4, a ball from another court rolled underneath their net.

Taylor stopped playing.

Their opponents didn't.

"That ball was on the court."

"It wasn't affecting the play."

"It almost hit me."

"It was ten feet away."

Taylor looked toward Brittney.

Brittney shrugged.

"I've been hit by things farther away."

Nobody knew what that meant.

The point was replayed.

At 9–8, Taylor called the ball out.

Their opponents called it in.

Everyone walked toward the ball mark.

Four players stared at the sand.

There were approximately eight or nine marks.

"That one," Taylor said.

"No, that one."

"That's a footprint."

"Whose?"

Everyone looked at Brittney.

"What?"

"Your feet are enormous."

"They're normal."

"That's definitely your footprint."

"Why am I on trial?"

After two minutes of forensic investigation, nobody knew where the ball had landed.

"Replay?" Brittney suggested.

Everyone agreed.

Taylor looked at her while walking back.

"That was surprisingly mature."

"I'm evolving."

The next ball hit Brittney in the face.

She stood completely still.

Taylor tried not to laugh.

"You okay?"

"Did we win the point?"

By noon, they had reached the semifinals.

The watermelon remained untouched.

It had now become part of the team.

Brittney moved it whenever they changed courts.

At one point Jordan found her drawing a face on it with a marker.

"What are you doing?"

"Team morale."

The watermelon now had two eyes, a crooked smile, and eyebrows.

Taylor walked over.

"Why does it look angry?"

"It's competitive."

Maya joined them.

"Does it have a name?"

Brittney thought.

"Wilson."

Taylor stared at her.

"You named a watermelon Wilson?"

"Do you have a better name?"

"Literally any other name."

"Wilson stays."

The semifinal was against a pair Taylor and Brittney had lost to twice that summer.

Good players.

Disciplined.

Focused.

The kind of team that warmed up like they were preparing for the Olympics.

Brittney watched them pepper.

"They look terrifying."

Taylor nodded.

"Don't worry."

"Why?"

"We have Wilson."

The first set was ugly.

Their opponents served Brittney repeatedly.

Brittney struggled.

At 6–11, she shanked another pass.

Taylor chased it but couldn't reach it.

Brittney looked toward the sideline.

Wilson stared back.

She started laughing.

Taylor looked at her.

"What?"

"I just got disappointed in front of a watermelon."

Taylor tried not to laugh but failed.

The opponents looked confused.

Something changed.

Not tactically.

They simply stopped being afraid.

Taylor missed a serve and laughed.

Brittney got roofed and complimented the block.

Their opponents made a ridiculous dig, and Brittney yelled, "That's disgusting!"

The player laughed.

The match loosened.

So did they.

They lost the first set.

Won the second.

It was 13–13 in the third set.

Taylor served.

Long rally.

Brittney made a perfect hand dig from a hard-driven ball attacked directly at her face.

Then Taylor set and Brittney swung.

Blocked.

The ball came back over.

Taylor covered.

Brittney set.

Taylor attacked the recycled ball deep.

Dig.

Another rally.

Then another swing.

Finally, the opponent hit a shot toward the sideline.

Brittney dove.

Missed.

13–14.

Match point.

Brittney stayed face down in the sand.

Taylor walked over.

"You alive?"

"No."

"Get up."

"Tell Wilson I tried."

Taylor started laughing.

"Get up."

Brittney stood.

The next rally was a first ball side out.

14–14.

Brittney looked at Taylor.

"All that drama for that?"

"Apparently."

They won 17–15.

Brittney immediately picked up the watermelon and carried it toward the final.

"Wilson believes."

Taylor followed.

"Wilson is produce."

"Don't talk about him like that."

The final started twenty minutes later.

They lost.

Badly.

21–12.

21–14.

No comeback.

No miracle.

No inspirational movie ending.

At match point, Brittney served six feet long.

She watched the ball land.

Taylor laughed.

They shook hands.

Second place.

Brittney sat beside Wilson.

"Sorry, buddy."

Maya walked over.

"Are we finally eating that thing?"

Everyone looked at Brittney.

Brittney looked at the watermelon.

"No."

Taylor's mouth dropped open.

"What do you mean, no?"

"We can't eat Wilson."

"You carried a watermelon around for eight hours because you were hungry."

"That was before he had a face."

Jordan walked over.

"Absolutely not."

He picked up the watermelon.

Brittney gasped.

"What are you doing?"

"Finding a knife."

"Coach!"

"You need help."

Ten minutes later, someone produced a plastic picnic knife that was nowhere near strong enough for the job.

Jordan attempted the first cut.

The knife bent.

Maya laughed so hard she had to sit down.

Taylor tried next.

Nothing.

Brittney stood with her arms crossed.

"Wilson is fighting back."

Eventually, a parent returned from a nearby store with an actual knife.

The watermelon was cut.

Brittney insisted nobody eat the piece containing the face.

Nobody argued.

They sat in the sand eating warm watermelon.

It wasn't particularly good.

It didn't matter.

The team they had lost to in the final wandered over.

"Can we have some?"

Brittney looked at Taylor.

Taylor looked at Maya.

Maya looked at Jordan.

"Apparently we're hosting."

Soon both teams were sitting together.

Someone brought chips.

Another family had oranges.

A parent appeared with cookies.

The tournament director walked over and somehow ended up with watermelon.

Twenty minutes earlier, they had been opponents.

Now everyone was arguing about whether Wilson had technically been murdered.

Brittney insisted it was more of a ceremonial sacrifice.

Jordan asked everyone to stop talking.

Nobody did.

Years later, Taylor remembered almost nothing about that tournament.

She couldn't remember the score of the semifinal.

She couldn't remember who they played in pool.

She couldn't remember which college coaches were there.

She remembered the wind.

She remembered Brittney getting hit in the face.

She remembered the opposing team looking confused when they started laughing in the semifinal.

And she remembered Wilson.

Especially Wilson.

Because somewhere between wanting desperately to win and eating warm watermelon with the people who had just beaten them, Taylor learned something she'd forgotten.

Volleyball was supposed to be fun.

Not easy.

Not meaningless.

Fun.

You could work incredibly hard and still laugh.

You could want to win badly and still appreciate the people trying to beat you.

You could be disappointed without making everyone around you miserable.

You could lose a final and still have one of the best days of your summer.

But somewhere in Taylor's heart, Wilson was still undefeated.

Collaboration Part Two

'The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it' Michelangelo. 'Having an opportunity in life is important but what defines you is what you do with that opportunity" Richard Whitehead.' 'I will do what others won't, so I can accomplish what others can't Jerry Rice'.

Brittney knew Maya was going to ask before Maya opened her mouth.

They were sitting on the curb outside a taco shop after practice, still wearing sandy sweatshirts over their volleyball clothes.

Maya had been unusually quiet.

Finally, she said it.

"Will you play the qualifier with me?"

Brittney stopped chewing.

"When?"

"Next month."

Brittney put the taco down.

"You already have a partner."

"I know."

"Emma."

"I know."

Brittney wiped her hands on a napkin.

"Then why are you asking me?"

Maya looked toward the parking lot.

"Because I think we can win."

There it was.

Brittney leaned back.

"You don't think you can win with Emma?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Maya and Emma had played together almost the entire summer.

They were good.

Not spectacular.

But good!

Emma was steady.

She passed well.

Rarely missed serves.

Communicated constantly.

If she said she'd be at practice at six, she arrived at 5:45.

Maya trusted her.

But trust and potential weren't always the same thing.

Brittney was different.

On good days, Brittney could take over a tournament.

She saw the court differently.

She attacked balls most players would bump over the net.

She served aggressively when everyone else became cautious.

College coaches noticed her.

People stopped walking past courts when Brittney was playing.

Maya had spent years wanting an opportunity like the qualifier.

And if she was honest, she believed Brittney gave her a better chance.

"Does Emma know you're asking me?"

Brittney asked.

"No."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"If you say yes."

Brittney stared at Maya.

"That's backwards."

"What is?"

"You want to know whether I'm available before you decide whether you're loyal."

Maya's face tightened.

"This isn't about loyalty."

"What is it about?"

"My future."

Brittney didn't answer.

Maya continued.

"There are going to be college coaches there."

"There are college coaches everywhere."

"Not these coaches."

Brittney knew exactly which programs Maya meant.

They had talked about them for years.

"I need to put myself in the best situation."

Brittney nodded slowly.

"Then talk to Emma."

"Will you play?"

"Talk to Emma."

"Brittney."

"No."

Maya looked surprised.

"No, you won't play?"

"No, I'm not going to help you decide what kind of teammate you want to be."

The drive home was quiet.

Maya didn't call Emma.

Not that night.

The next morning she almost did.

Then practice started.

Emma arrived carrying two coffees.

"I guessed."

She handed one to Maya.

Maya looked at it.

Vanilla.

Two sugars.

Exactly right.

"Thanks."

"You look exhausted."

"I didn't sleep."

Emma started stretching.

Maya hated the coffee.

Not because it tasted bad.

Because it made the conversation harder.

They practiced for two hours.

Emma played well.

During the final game at practice, Maya overpassed at 19–19.

Emma chased the ball toward the net and somehow kept it alive.

Maya recovered.

Emma dug two balls in a row.

Then Maya finished the point and they celebrated.

For a moment Maya forgot about the qualifier entirely.

Then Coach Jordan walked past.

"Nice volleyball."

The compliment should have felt good.

Instead Maya wondered what the rally would have looked like with Brittney.

That evening, she called Emma.

"Can we talk?"

Emma was quiet for a second.

"That's never good."

They met at the beach.

No volleyball.

Just two people sitting on the retaining wall watching the last few players finish games before sunset.

Maya told her everything.

Emma listened without interrupting.

When Maya finished, she asked one question.

"When were you going to tell me?"

"I don't know."

"Before registration?"

"Yes."

"Before or after Brittney said yes?"

Maya looked down.

Emma nodded.

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not mad that you want to play with Brittney."

Maya looked up.

Emma's eyes were wet.

"I'm mad that you wanted to keep me until you knew you had something better."

Emma stood up.

"I don't want to play the qualifier with you."

Maya hadn't expected that.

"What?"

"You don't have to drop me."

Emma wiped her face.

"I'm dropping you."

She walked away.

Maya stayed on the wall.

For the first time since the conversation with Brittney, the qualifier seemed very far away.

The next day, word spread.

It always did.

Some athletes sided with Maya.

"It's recruiting."

"You have to look out for yourself."

"College coaches don't care about hurt feelings."

Others sided with Emma.

"Your word should mean something."

"You don't use people as backup plans."

"That's messed up."

Maya heard all of it.

The worst part was that she agreed with pieces from both sides.

Finally Maya asked Coach Jordan.

"What do you think?"

Jordan continued putting volleyballs into a mesh bag.

"About what?"

"You know what."

"I do."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Was I wrong?"

Jordan stopped.

"Why do you want me to answer that?"

"Because you're my coach."

"That's why I'm not answering it."

Maya rolled her eyes.

"Helpful."

Jordan smiled.

"You had two things you valued."

"Your opportunity and your commitment."

He picked up another volleyball.

"They came into conflict."

"That's life."

"So what am I supposed to learn?"

"That's the part you don't get to outsource."

Maya hated that answer too.

A week passed.

Emma found another partner.

Taylor.

They entered the qualifier together.

Maya saw their names on the entry list.

Her stomach dropped.

Brittney still hadn't committed to playing with anyone.

Maya approached her after practice.

"Emma's playing with Taylor."

"I heard."

"Will you play with me now?"

Brittney looked at her.

"Did you apologize?"

"Yes."

"Did she forgive you?"

"No."

"Good."

Maya frowned.

"Good?"

"Means the apology probably wasn't just a transaction."

Brittney picked up her backpack.

"Yeah. I'll play."

Maya should have been thrilled.

Instead she felt strangely empty.

The qualifier arrived four weeks later.

The beach was packed before eight that morning.

College coaches stood outside courts with sunglasses, notebooks, and expressions nobody could read.

Maya noticed every one of them.

Brittney noticed none.

"Stop looking."

"I'm not."

"You've counted the same coach three times."

Maya laughed.

"I'm nervous."

"Good."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Because saying 'don't be nervous' has never worked in human history."

Their first match went great.

Then badly.

Then great again.

They reached the quarterfinal.

On the court beside them, Emma and Taylor were still alive.

Maya tried not to watch.

She watched.

Emma looked good.

Calm.

Comfortable.

Taylor was talking constantly.

They looked like they'd played together much longer than four weeks.

Maya felt something she hadn't expected.

Relief.

Emma was okay.

Maybe better than okay.

Suddenly they were in the final.

The opportunity Maya had imagined for months was happening.

College coaches surrounded the court.

She could feel every pair of eyes.

During warm-ups Brittney walked over.

"You know what's funny?"

"What?"

"You finally got exactly what you wanted."

Maya nodded.

"And?"

"You look miserable."

Maya laughed.

"I think I'm going to throw up."

"Try not to do it on our side."

The match began.

Maya played terribly.

She missed her first serve.

Then another.

And another.

She passed an easy ball too tight.

They fell behind 4–9.

During the timeout, Maya stared toward the spectators.

Brittney stepped directly in front of her.

"Look at me."

Maya did.

"Who are you playing?"

Maya pointed across the net.

"Them."

"No."

"What?"

"You're playing all of them."

Brittney motioned toward the college coaches.

Maya didn't answer.

"You wanted them to watch you."

"They're watching."

"So play volleyball."

Simple.

Annoyingly simple.

Maya laughed.

"That's your coaching?"

"I'm free."

They returned to the court.

Maya stopped looking outside the boundary lines.

The comeback wasn't dramatic.

One point.

Then another.

A good serve.

Then a better dig.

At 16–16, Maya finally forgot who was watching.

They lost 21–19.

For several seconds Maya stood disappointed.

Then Brittney hugged her.

"That was fun."

"We lost."

"Both can be true."

Maya laughed.

While they gathered their things, she heard cheering from another court.

Emma and Taylor had won their side of the bracket for qualification.

Maya hesitated.

Then walked over.

Emma saw her coming.

For a second neither knew what to do.

Maya solved it.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"You played really well."

"So did you."

"We lost."

"I know."

Maya laughed.

"Of course you know."

Emma smiled.

The tension softened.

It didn't disappear.

But it softened.

"I'm still mad at you," Emma said.

"I know."

"I don't know if I'd partner with you again."

"I know."

Emma looked toward Brittney.

"Was it worth it?"

Maya could have answered quickly.

A month earlier, she would have.

Instead she thought.

"I don't know yet."

Emma nodded.

"That's probably the right answer."

They hugged briefly.

Years later, Maya would remember that qualifier differently than she expected.

She wouldn't remember which college coaches stood around the final.

She wouldn't remember whether any of them emailed afterward.

She wouldn't remember most of the scores.

She remembered Emma asking when she planned to tell her.

She remembered sitting alone after Emma walked away.

She remembered Brittney refusing to make the decision easier.

And she remembered discovering that growing up rarely means choosing between something obviously right and something obviously wrong.

Those decisions are easy.

The hard ones arrive when two things matter.

Ambition matters.

So does loyalty.

Opportunity matters.

So does your word.

Self-determination means having the courage to pursue the life you want.

It doesn't mean pretending your choices don't affect anyone else.

Sometimes pursuing an opportunity will disappoint somebody you care about.

Sometimes keeping a promise will cost you something you wanted.

There isn't always a perfect answer.

Years later, when one of Maya's younger teammates asked her for advice about changing partners before an important tournament, Maya didn't tell her what to do.

She told her about Emma.

All of it.

The opportunity.

The secrecy.

The argument.

The qualifier.

The apology that didn't immediately fix anything.

When Maya finished, the younger player asked:

"So what should I do?"

Maya smiled.

"I don't know."

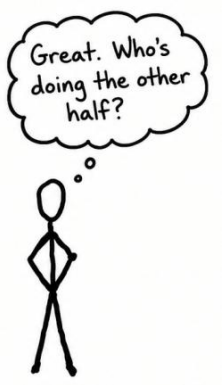
The athlete looked disappointed.

Maya handed her the phone.

"But I know who you should call before you decide."

SELF-DETERMINATION

"The most courageous act is still to think for yourself" Coco Chanel. "Be the change you wish to see in the world" Mahatma Gandhi. "Believe you can and you're half way there" Theodore Roosevelt.



Taylor knew Maya was lying because she had heard the same lie from herself.

"I'm not tired."

They were sitting in the parking lot before sunrise.

Maya had one shoe on.

The other was somewhere beneath the passenger seat.

Her hair was still wet from a shower, and an unfinished piece of toast rested on a napkin beside the gearshift.

Taylor looked at the clock.

5:42 a.m.

Practice started at six.

"What time did you go to sleep?"

"I don't know."

"Maya."

"Like midnight."

Taylor waited.

"One."

She kept waiting.

"One-thirty."

"What were you doing?"

"Homework."

"Until one-thirty?"

Maya found the missing shoe.

"And watching film."

"Why?"

"Because I need to get better."

Taylor leaned against the car.

"You're falling asleep sitting up."

"I'm fine."

There it was.

The lie.

Maya was sixteen and halfway through the most important summer of her volleyball life.

At least that's what everyone kept calling it.

College coaches could begin contacting athletes in her recruiting class.

Every tournament seemed important.

Every practice seemed important.

Every video mattered.

Every email mattered.

Every ranking update mattered.

There was always another athlete committing somewhere.

Another highlight posted online.

Another player announcing an offer.

Maya had started waking up every morning feeling behind.

So she did what ambitious people often do when they feel behind.

More.

More practices.

More lifting.

More film.

More tournaments.

More emails.

More private lessons.

If someone trained five days, Maya wanted six.

If someone arrived thirty minutes early, Maya arrived forty-five.

Her answer to every problem had become the same.

More.

Taylor recognized it because she'd done the same thing the year prior.

"Take today off."

Maya laughed.

"No."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"You can barely keep your eyes open."

"I drove all the way here."

"Then drive home."

Maya slammed the car door.

"Why are you trying to make me soft?"

Taylor didn't answer.

Maya started walking toward the beach.

Taylor followed.

"I asked you a question."

"I heard you."

"Then answer it."

Taylor stopped.

"Because I don't think destroying yourself is the same thing as being determined."

Maya turned.

"I'm not destroying myself."

"Okay."

That made her angrier.

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Acting like you know everything."

Taylor almost laughed.

"I definitely don't know everything."

"You act like it."

"And you act like exhaustion is an accomplishment."

That ended the conversation.

Maya walked toward practice alone.

She trained terribly.

Her first ten serves included four misses.

She got caught under sets she normally reached easily.

Her reactions were slow on defense.

During a transition drill, she dove for a ball and stayed face down in the sand longer than usual.

Coach Jordan walked over.

"You good?"

Maya pushed herself up.

"Fine."

Jordan looked at Taylor.

Taylor said nothing.

"Water," Jordan said.

"I don't need water."

"I didn't ask."

Maya walked off the court.

Twenty minutes later, she was back.

The rest of practice wasn't much better.

Afterward Jordan gathered everyone.

"Tomorrow is optional."

Maya immediately asked, "What time?"

Several athletes laughed.

Jordan didn't.

"You're not coming."

The laughter stopped.

"What?"

"You're taking tomorrow off."

"You can't make an optional practice mandatory to miss."

Taylor covered her mouth to hide a smile.

Jordan almost smiled too.

Almost.

"Apparently I can."

"Why?"

"Because you're exhausted."

"I'm not."

Jordan looked at her.

"Maya, you fell asleep during film yesterday."

"I was resting my eyes."

Taylor couldn't help herself.

"That's impressive."

Maya shot her a look.

Jordan continued.

"Tomorrow, sleep."

"I don't need a day off."

"Then consider it practice."

"Practice doing what?"

"Nothing."

Maya stared at him.

"That's stupid."

Jordan nodded.

"You might be terrible at it."

The next morning Maya woke at 5:17 without an alarm.

For several seconds she didn't know why.

Then she remembered.

No practice.

She reached for her phone.

Three recruiting emails needed responses.

A teammate had posted training clips.

Another player had announced a commitment.

Maya opened the post.

Congratulations filled the comments.

Her stomach tightened.

She got out of bed.

By 6:18 she was dressed to run.

Her mother found her tying her shoes.

"Where are you going?"

"For a run."

"I thought Coach Jordan told you to rest."

"He told me not to practice."

Her mother looked at the running shoes.

Maya sighed.

"Running isn't volleyball."

Her mother poured coffee.

"I'm staying out of this."

"Thank you."

"But if you're looking for a loophole at six in the morning, you probably already know the answer."

Maya untied her shoes.

At 8:30 she was still home.

It felt wrong.

At ten she cleaned her room.

At eleven she reorganized her volleyball bag.

At noon she watched film.

Then remembered that probably defeated the purpose and shut the laptop.

By two, Maya was losing her mind.

She texted Taylor.

This is horrible.

Taylor responded:

What is?

Nothing.

Three dots appeared.

Then:

You're losing to nothing?

Maya laughed.

Shut up.

Taylor sent another message.

Come to the beach.

Maya stared at it.

I'm not allowed to practice.

We're not practicing.

When Maya arrived, Taylor was sitting near the water with two sandwiches.

No volleyball.

No net.

No workout clothes.

Maya looked suspicious.

"What are we doing?"

"Eating."

"That's it?"

"For now."

Maya sat.

For ten minutes they talked about nothing important.

A terrible movie.

Someone Taylor had gone on a date with.

A dog that kept running into the water and then acting surprised every time a wave hit it.

Eventually Maya asked, "Don't you ever feel behind?"

Taylor stopped eating.

"All the time."

"Then how do you deal with it?"

"Badly, usually."

Maya laughed.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"When I was sixteen, I thought every day had to move me closer to something."

"That's how it works."

"No."

Taylor shook her head.

"That's how I thought it worked."

"What changed?"

"I got hurt."

Maya looked over.

"Bad?"

"Bad enough."

"What happened?"

"Nothing dramatic. My body just stopped cooperating."

Taylor wiped the sand from her feet.

"I had been training through pain for months. I thought taking a day off meant somebody else was passing me."

"Were they?"

"Probably."

Maya looked surprised.

Taylor smiled.

"That's the part nobody wants to hear."

She continued.

"Someone will always be doing more than you."

"Someone will train while you sleep."

"Someone will play a tournament while you're at your cousin's wedding."

"Someone will lift while you're studying."

"Someone will send emails while you're having dinner with your family."

Maya looked toward the ocean.

"So how do you keep up?"

"You don't."

Maya frowned.

"That's terrible advice."

"It's the best advice I have."

Taylor looked at her.

"You build a life you can actually keep living."

They sat quietly.

A few minutes later Maya noticed two kids playing near the water with a volleyball.

They couldn't have been older than ten.

There was no net.

They had drawn a line in the wet sand.

The rules appeared to change every thirty seconds.

One kid caught the ball.

The other complained.

"You can't catch it."

"You could last time."

"New rule."

"That's unfair."

"Fine. You can catch it too."

They kept playing.

Maya watched them longer than she expected.

"When did we let volleyball get so serious?"

Taylor smiled.

"Probably around the time adults got involved."

Maya laughed.

The next day Maya returned to practice.

She expected to feel behind.

Instead she felt good.

Really good.

Her feet moved faster.

The ball looked slower.

Jordan walked past.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"Apparently doing nothing works."

Maya rolled her eyes.

"Don't get excited."

Two weeks later, Maya played one of her best tournaments of the summer.

She and Brittney reached the final.

They lost.

Maya was furious for approximately seven minutes.

Then Brittney asked if she wanted tacos.

Maya did.

They sat on a curb afterward still covered in sand.

Brittney pulled out her phone.

"You see who committed?"

Maya looked.

A player they both knew.

A school Maya had emailed twice.

For a moment, the old feeling returned.

Behind.

Maya almost opened her email.

Instead she put the phone face down.

Brittney looked at her.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Maya paused.

Then smiled.

"Actually, I'm tired."

Brittney laughed.

"That's allowed."

Recruiting didn't suddenly become easy.

There were still unanswered emails.

There were still tournaments where Maya played badly at exactly the wrong time.

There were coaches who watched her worst match and missed her best one.

There were schools she loved that didn't love her back.

Once, after a particularly difficult weekend, Maya cried most of the drive home.

She still wanted it badly.

That never changed.

What changed was her belief that wanting something badly required sacrificing everything else.

She began taking one evening each week completely away from volleyball.

At first she hated it.

Then she protected it.

She went to birthdays.

She slept.

She occasionally ignored her phone.

She played volleyball with younger kids without coaching them.

Sometimes she went to the beach without touching a ball.

Nothing terrible happened.

She didn't become lazy.

She didn't lose her ambition.

She became harder to exhaust.

Months later, Maya received a call from a college coach.

The conversation lasted nearly forty minutes.

Volleyball came up, of course.

So did school.

Family.

Books.

What Maya wanted to study.

What she liked doing when she wasn't playing.

The last question caught her off guard.

"Who are you without volleyball?"

A year earlier, Maya wouldn't have known how to answer.

Now she did.

The answer took several minutes.

Volleyball was still in it.

Just not all of it.

After the call, Maya found Taylor.

"How'd it go?"

"Good."

"Offer?"

"No."

"You disappointed?"

"A little."

Taylor waited.

Maya smiled.

"But I'm not going to go train."

Taylor pretended to look shocked.

"Who are you?"

"Apparently somebody with hobbies."

"What hobbies?"

Maya thought.

"I haven't gotten that far."

They laughed.

Years later, Maya wouldn't remember how many practices she attended that summer.

She wouldn't remember how many serves she hit.

She wouldn't remember most of the recruiting posts that once made her feel as though her future were disappearing one commitment at a time.

She would remember the practice Jordan made her miss.

She would remember sitting beside Taylor eating sandwiches while two kids invented rules near the water.

And she would remember discovering something ambition had nearly hidden from her.

Sacrifice matters.

There are mornings when you have to get up while everyone else is sleeping.

There are parties you'll miss.

There are difficult practices you have to finish.

There are days when commitment means doing the work even when you don't feel like doing it.

But sacrifice without judgment can become its own kind of fear.

Fear that stopping means failing.

Fear that resting means weakness.

Fear that someone else's progress means you're running out of time.

Maya still worked hard.

Maybe harder than before.

She simply stopped measuring dedication by how much of herself she could give away.

Some days, becoming better required another hundred serves.

Some days, it required putting the volleyball down.

Learning which day was which turned out to be one of the hardest skills she ever learned.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership is the act of guiding or directing a group toward a goal. The capacity to inspire, influence. It is less about being in front and more about making it safe for others to step forward. Think of it as creating a stage where everyone can perform their best.

After every match, win or lose, Coach Tyler asked the same question.

"What point do you wish you could play again?"

Not the best point.

Not match point.

Not the spectacular diving save everyone remembered.

Just one point.

At first, athletes hated the question.

"I don't know."

"I wasn't thinking about one point."

"It doesn't matter now."

Tyler never argued.

He simply nodded and helped take down the court.

The next tournament, he asked again.

"What point do you wish you could play again?"

"The missed serve at 18–17."

"The free ball I should've set higher."

"The easy dig I overthought."

Tyler listened.

Then he asked another question.

"If you could replay it tomorrow, would you make a different decision or just execute the same decision better?"

Most athletes answered immediately.

"I'd execute it better."

Tyler smiled.

"Maybe."

He never said they were wrong.

He simply let the question linger.

One windy Sunday morning, Maya lost in the semifinals after a long rally ended with a shot into the net.

She walked off the court shaking her head.

"I can't believe I hit that."

Tyler handed her a bottle of water.

"What point do you wish you could play again?"

"The last one."

"Why?"

"I should've gone line."

"You sure?"

She frowned.

"I hit cross."

"I know."

"But why line?"

"I don't know."

They sat quietly for a minute.

The ocean was louder than the conversation.

Finally Tyler asked, "When did you decide to hit cross?"

"After Jordan blocked line twice."

"And what happened right before the last swing?"

Maya closed her eyes.

"The defender cheated cross."

Tyler waited.

"I saw it."

"You did?"

"I think so."

"What did you do?"

"I ignored it."

"Why?"

She looked down at the sand.

"Because I had already decided."

Tyler picked up a shell and rolled it between his fingers.

"Volleyball doesn't care about your plans."

She laughed.

"No."

"It rewards your attention."

That sentence stayed with Maya longer than the loss.

Over the next few weeks she started keeping a small notebook.

Not for statistics.

Not for wins and losses.

But for observations.

One Tuesday, Coach Jordan walked by while Maya was writing.

"What are you working on?"

"I'm trying to notice more."

Jordan smiled.

"That's harder than practicing."

"Why?"

"Because paying attention means admitting how much you've been missing."

Jordan laughed.

"Welcome to coaching."

A month later, Maya volunteered to help with the younger practice group.

While the athletes were working on attacking one girl asked, "Coach, where's the best place to hit?"

Maya almost answered.

Instead she stopped herself.

"What do you see?"

The girl looked confused.

"I don't know."

"Take your time."

"The defender keeps moving early."

"What could you do?"

"I could pokie."

"You could."

"What else?"

The girl thought.

"I could hit where she just left."

"Try it."

She did.

Point.

The athlete looked back smiling.

"I figured it out."

Maya smiled even bigger.

Beach volleyball changes too fast for memorized answers.

The sun moves.

The wind shifts.

The sand softens.

Partners grow tired.

Opponents adjust.

Every rally asks a new question.

The players that last aren't the ones with the biggest toolbox.

They're the ones willing to build a new tool when the old one no longer fits.

Later that summer, the club hosted a mixed-age scrimmage.

College athletes played alongside high school players.

Parents officiated.

Younger athletes kept score.

The goal wasn't winning.

It was learning from different people.

"We spend so much time wishing we could replay old points."

"The beautiful thing about beach volleyball..."

Tyler smiled.

"...is that it always gives you another one."

And sometimes, if you've been paying attention, that next point becomes the one that changes everything.

IMAGINATION

"Imagination is more important than knowledge" Albert Einstein.

"Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere" Albert Einstein.

Coach Tyler was never the first person to arrive Saturday mornings.

Most people thought it was.

They'd see him carrying net bags across the sand before sunrise and assume nobody had beaten him there.

They were wrong.

It was Maya.

She never carried anything at first.

She simply walked the courts.

She looked at the ocean.

She watched the wind move across the water before it reached the beach.

She wasn't inspecting anything.

She was reminding herself that every practice began long before the first volleyball was touched.

One Saturday she found Jordan already standing near the water.

Neither spoke for a while.

Finally Jordan broke the silence.

"I almost quit coaching this week."

Maya looked over.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

She waited.

"I think that's the problem."

Jordan picked up a shell and tossed it back into the surf.

"I've been coaching for almost ten years."

"I know."

"I've taught the same passing drills hundreds of times."

"The same serving progressions."

"The same conversations."

He laughed quietly.

"I think I've become really good at repeating myself."

Maya smiled.

"And?"

"I don't think I've been learning."

Maya bent down and picked up a piece of driftwood

"See this?"

Jordan nodded.

"It didn't start here."

She tossed it gently back toward the water.

"It traveled."

"So?"

"So did every idea you've ever had."

Jordan frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't invent everything you teach."

"No."

"You borrowed it."

Jordan smiled.

"That's true."

"You borrowed it from coaches."

"Players."

"Partners."

"Opponents."

"So why would learning stop now?"

That morning Jordan changed one thing.

Instead of beginning practice with his first drill, he gathered the athletes together.

"I need your help."

The athletes looked surprised.

One whispered, "Coach needs our help?"

Jordan nodded.

"I've been teaching this practice the same way for years."

He held up a volleyball.

"I think there's a better way."

Silence.

Then one younger athlete slowly raised her hand.

"What if we warmed up with games instead?"

Jordan smiled.

"What kind of games?"

Another athlete jumped in.

"What if every team invented one?"

Some were impossible.

Some were hilarious.

One involved serving at towels.

Another involved calling colors instead of scores.

One athlete suggested everyone switch partners every five minutes.

Jordan wrote everything down.

Not because every idea was good.

Because every idea mattered.

Practice became noisy.

Not with instructions.

With imagination.

Coach Tyler walked over from the next court.

"What happened over here?"

Jordan laughed.

"I finally admitted I didn't have the best idea."

Tyler looked around.

The athletes weren't waiting for permission anymore.

They were experimenting.

Some drills worked beautifully.

Others fell apart almost immediately.

Nobody seemed disappointed.

They simply changed them and tried again.

That afternoon one of the parents stopped Tyler as athletes packed up water bottles and folded chairs.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"My daughter came home last week talking about creativity."

Tyler nodded.

"Today she came home talking about courage."

He smiled.

"What's the difference?"

The parent looked toward the beach where athletes were helping one another carry equipment toward the storage shed.

"She said creativity isn't having a new idea."

"It's having the courage to say it out loud."

Tyler looked at Jordan, who was laughing with a group of athletes about one of the games that had completely failed.

"I think she's right."

Over the next several weeks something changed across every practice.

Athletes started asking more questions than coaches.

Parents stopped asking whether a drill was correct and started asking what their children had discovered.

Coaches wandered between courts looking for ideas instead of comparisons.

No one worried about who invented what.

They only cared whether someone else could build on it.

One afternoon a younger athlete walked over carrying a notebook.

"Coach Maya?"

"Yeah?"

"I've got three new games."

Maya smiled.

"Let's see them."

"They might not work."

The athlete laughed.

"If all three work the first time..."

"...you probably weren't imagining enough."

The athlete spent the next thirty minutes testing every idea.

One game lasted less than a minute before everyone agreed it was terrible.

Another became so complicated nobody could remember the rules.

The third...

The third made everyone stop.

Athletes were laughing.

Communicating.

Problem-solving.

Encouraging one another without realizing they were doing it.

Jordan walked over.

"This one's staying."

The athlete looked stunned.

"Really?"

Jordan nodded.

"What should we call it?"

The athlete looked around.

"I don't know."

Tyler smiled.

"I love that name."

The athlete rolled her eyes...

As the sun settled lower, the coaches gathered the athletes one final time.

Nobody gave a speech.

Nobody summarized the day.

Maya simply asked one question.

"What did you create today that wasn't here this morning?"

The answers came from every direction.

"A new drill."

"A new friendship."

"A better question."

"A different way to serve."

"The courage to speak up."

Jordan listened quietly.

Weeks earlier he had stood on this same beach wondering whether he still had anything new to offer.

Now he understood.

The greatest coaches don't spend their careers protecting yesterday's ideas.

They spend their lives creating space for tomorrow's ideas to appear.

The beach had taught that lesson long before any of them arrived.

No wave is exactly the same.

No wind stays in one direction forever.

No two practices should leave people exactly as they found them.

The athletes picked up the last volleyballs and started the walk toward the parking lot together.

The courts would be gone by morning.

The footprints would disappear with the tide.

But imagination has never needed perfect conditions.

It only needs people willing to sacrifice the comfort of always being right, struggle through the uncertainty of trying something new, and love one another enough to keep building together.

REFLECTION

PART ONE

Dear diary,

I remember my mom always yelling at me, criticizing some aspect of my game. I wish I had the opportunity to rely on myself more. I've always had my mom pushing me and guilting me into working harder so its never felt like anything I accomplished was mine, it always felt like it's my mom's doing. Which I think led to my lack of confidence. I wish I was tougher mentally when I played in college. I still believe that was the main thing hindering me from performing better. I remember being so hard on myself and that every mistake I made meant I was actually terrible at volleyball... That would literally ruin my week. I'm still learning how to get out of that mindset. I've come a long way since high school. It helps not having my mom in my ear all the time. Coach always said being more self compassionate will change my life. He was right...

The first time I noticed the empty chair, I assumed someone was running late.

It sat at the edge of Court Four every Tuesday afternoon, beneath the same blue umbrella. Around it, parents unpacked coolers, coaches rolled out boundary lines, and athletes warming up before practice, but nobody ever sat there.

"Who usually sits there?"

She smiled without looking up from tying her daughter's shoe.

"Whoever needs it."

I didn't understand what she meant.

At the time, I had been the director for six months, long enough to know everyone's names but not long enough to know everyone's stories.

The club had grown quickly. More athletes. More coaches. More parents. More expectations.

Growth looked exciting from the outside.

From the inside, it sounded like phones ringing during dinner and emails arriving before sunrise.

Every coach wanted more court space.

Every parent wanted more communication.

Every athlete wanted more opportunities.

I wanted to give everyone everything.

Instead, I found myself becoming shorter with people I genuinely cared about.

One Wednesday afternoon, Coach Mason knocked on my office door.

"You've got a minute?"

"Make it quick."

The words left my mouth before I realized how they sounded.

Mason hesitated.

"Never mind."

He closed the door.

That evening I drove home wondering why he hadn't come back.

The next morning I realized I had answered my own question.

Over the next few weeks, little things began adding up.

Coaches stopped stopping by my office.

Parents emailed instead of talking after practice.

Athletes smiled when they saw me but rarely started conversations.

Nothing dramatic had happened.

The distance had been built one rushed response at a time.

I finally asked Ryan, our oldest coach, if something had changed.

He looked out across the beach before answering.

"You've become difficult to interrupt."

"I've been busy."

"I know."

"I've got responsibilities."

"I know."

I waited.

Ryan smiled kindly.

"So does everyone else."

The sentence stayed with me long after practice ended.

The following Tuesday I arrived early.

The empty chair was already there.

Practice began.

Halfway through, a father walked over and sat down.

A few minutes later, Coach Emma joined him.

They talked quietly while their athletes worked on defensive movement.

Neither looked upset.

Neither appeared to be solving a crisis.

They simply talked.

After practice, I asked Emma about the chair.

"It started years ago."

"For what?"

"When someone needed another adult."

She shrugged.

"Sometimes advice."

"Sometimes encouragement."

"Sometimes just somebody who would listen without trying to fix everything."

I laughed.

"We should put that in the handbook."

Emma smiled.

"Handbooks don't listen."

The next week I sat in the chair.

Not because I needed to.

Because I was curious.

Ten minutes later, a first-year assistant coach named Daniel wandered over.

"You waiting for someone?"

"No."

He nodded awkwardly.

Then started walking away.

"You can sit."

He hesitated before unfolding another chair.

"I've been thinking about quitting."

That surprised me.

Daniel had become one of our most dependable coaches.

The athletes loved him.

Parents constantly complimented his energy.

"Why?"

"I don't think I'm good enough."

We talked for nearly forty minutes.

Not about volleyball.

About comparison.

About confidence.

About feeling like every experienced coach had already figured things out.

When we stood to leave, Daniel laughed.

"I thought directors had all the answers."

"I thought coaches thought that."

"We do."

"I don't."

Daniel smiled.

"That actually helps."

The next Tuesday another conversation happened.

This time between two parents whose daughters had competed against each other for years.

One worried her daughter wasn't improving fast enough.

The other admitted she'd been worried about exactly the same thing.

By the end of practice they had exchanged phone numbers.

The chair remained empty for exactly twelve minutes before someone else sat in it.

The weeks passed.

The chair became part of the club.

Nobody reserved it.

Nobody owned it.

It simply existed.

One afternoon I watched Coach Mason sitting there with Coach Olivia.

Mason had recently taken over an older age group and felt overwhelmed.

Olivia listened.

Asked questions.

Shared a story from her own first season.

The conversation ended with both of them laughing.

As they walked back toward practice, I realized something.

Neither had asked me for permission.

They hadn't needed leadership.

They'd needed each other.

That thought unsettled me.

I had quietly believed every important solution should flow through my office.

Instead, the healthiest moments in the club were happening without me.

Not because I wasn't needed.

Because the club was learning to depend on one another instead of depending on one person.

The empty chair taught me something no leadership seminar ever had.

Healthy organizations aren't measured by how often people need the director.

They're measured by how often people support each other before the director is needed.

That realization changed how I approached every meeting.

Instead of answering first, I asked, "Who has experience with this?"

Instead of solving every disagreement, I asked, "Who else should be part of this conversation?"

Instead of protecting every responsibility, I began sharing them.

Some coaches led clinics I had always run myself.

Parents organized volunteer teams without waiting to be asked.

Athletes mentored younger players before practice.

The work became lighter.

Not because there was less of it.

Because more people carried it together.

Late one summer afternoon, a storm rolled in earlier than expected.

Wind knocked over umbrellas.

Boundary lines lifted from the sand.

Rain sent everyone scrambling toward the parking lot.

Without anyone giving instructions, coaches grabbed nets.

Parents collected scoreboards.

Older athletes helped younger ones carry ball carts.

One father climbed into the equipment trailer while another organized wet chairs beneath the pavilion.

Within fifteen minutes the beach was empty except for Ryan and me.

He leaned against the trailer and looked across the sand.

"Remember when you thought this club depended on you?"

"I do."

"You were wrong."

"I know."

He smiled.

"You should be happy about that."

"I am."

It took me a moment to understand why.

The strongest clubs are never built around one great leader.

They're built around ordinary people who believe they're responsible for one another.

Years later, new families joined the club having never heard the story behind the empty chair.

They simply accepted that every Tuesday someone would sit there.

Sometimes it was a nervous parent.

Sometimes an exhausted coach.

Sometimes a teenager worried about confidence or recruiting.

Sometimes nobody at all.

One afternoon I noticed an athlete helping another player through a rough day beneath the umbrella.

Neither knew I was watching.

One listened.

The other cried.

When they stood, they hugged before jogging back to practice.

The chair remained empty again.

Ready for whoever needed it next.

People occasionally asked why we never replaced it with something newer.

The fabric had faded.

One armrest had been repaired with athletic tape.

The aluminum frame leaned slightly to one side.

I always gave the same answer.

"Because it still works."

What I meant was something different.

The chair had never been about sitting.

It was about making space.

Space to listen before correcting.

Space to understand before judging.

Space to admit uncertainty without embarrassment.

Space for people to discover they weren't carrying their burdens alone.

Volleyball clubs spend countless hours teaching athletes how to call a seam, trust a partner, and move together toward the same ball.

The adults need those lessons just as much.

Self-determination begins when someone decides to show up honestly.

Solidarity begins when someone else pulls up a chair.

Everything worth building grows from there.

PART TWO

Dear diary,

When I was a kid, I had the most absurd expectations. Any time I played or practiced, I had to play perfectly. When I fell short of my expectations, it would consume my thoughts, and at some point, after ruminating on it long enough, I would let it ruin entire my day. My only focus should have been trying my best. I don't know why I put so much pressure on myself to perform. A lot of what happens is out of my control anyway.

When I first started coaching, I thought the best coaches were always the first ones to arrive.

They beat the sunrise.

They had the courts built before anyone else parked.

They carried more volleyballs than seemed physically possible.

They answered every parent's question, every athlete's concern, every text from the director, every email from families who somehow believed ten o'clock at night was an appropriate time to ask about tournament schedules.

I admired those coaches.

Then I became one.

For the first three years, I tried to be everything for everyone.

If a parent wanted to talk, I stayed.

If an athlete wanted another half hour of serving, I stayed.

If another coach needed help with a practice, I stayed.

If the director needed equipment loaded after everyone else had left, I stayed.

People thanked me constantly.

"You always go above and beyond."

"I don't know how you do it."

"We're lucky to have you."

I smiled every time.

Inside, I was becoming someone I no longer recognized.

By the middle of my fourth season, I had stopped enjoying the beach.

I still loved volleyball.

I still loved the athletes.

But somewhere along the way I had confused serving others with carrying everything alone.

The breaking point came after a Saturday tournament in late August.

The final match ended just before sunset.

Families packed their umbrellas.

Athletes exchanged hugs before heading toward the parking lot.

The beach slowly became quiet.

As usual, I started loading the trailer by myself.

Halfway through stacking referee stands, I heard footsteps behind me.

Coach Natalie was carrying a bundle of boundary lines.

"You should've asked for help."

"I've got it."

She smiled.

"I know."

She kept rolling the lines anyway.

A few minutes later Coach Chris appeared with two ball carts.

Then one of the parents walked over carrying scoreboards.

Then three athletes.

Within fifteen minutes nearly a dozen people were helping.

The trailer filled in half the time.

When we finished, Natalie sat on the tailgate and looked at me.

"Can I tell you something?"

"Sure."

"You don't let people love this club."

I laughed.

"I don't stop anybody."

"You do."

"How?"

"You never give them the chance."

I didn't answer.

Because I knew she was right.

For years I had quietly believed that leadership meant protecting everyone else from inconvenience.

If something needed carrying, I carried it.

If something needed fixing, I fixed it.

If something went wrong, I absorbed it before anyone noticed.

I thought I was serving the club.

Instead, I had been robbing people of the opportunity to serve alongside me.

The following Tuesday, practice started the way it always did.

Parents arrived.

Athletes warmed up.

Coaches unloaded equipment.

Only this time I left the trailer closed.

The coaches looked at me.

"You forgetting something?" Chris asked.

"No."

"So..."

"We're waiting."

"For who?"

"Everyone."

Within a few minutes the entire club had arrived.

I climbed onto the trailer step.

"I've got a favor to ask."

The beach became quiet.

"I've spent a long time believing that asking for help meant I wasn't doing my job."

Several coaches exchanged glances.

"I've realized something."

I looked across the families gathered around the courts.

"This club doesn't belong to the people who work the hardest."

"It belongs to everyone willing to care for it."

I opened the trailer doors.

"If you've never helped build courts before…"

A younger athlete stepped forward.

"I'll learn."

A parent followed.

"So will I."

Another coach grabbed a net pole.

"I've got Court Three."

Within minutes the beach became a workshop.

Veteran athletes showed younger ones how to measure boundary lines.

Parents learned how to tighten nets.

Assistant coaches explained why antennas mattered.

Nobody hurried.

Nobody complained.

People laughed every time someone accidentally measured a court backwards.

The work that had always felt heavy suddenly felt light.

Not because there was less of it.

Because it finally belonged to more people.

Over the following months we stopped asking one question.

"Who is responsible for this?"

Instead we asked another.

"Who would like to learn how?"

The answers surprised all of us.

Parents volunteered to organize tournament snacks.

Athletes helped younger players understand tournament etiquette.

Assistant coaches began mentoring new coaches before anyone asked.

One grandfather quietly repaired broken scoreboards in his garage because, as he explained, "I've been fixing things my whole life. This one just happens to have volleyball attached to it."

The club changed without anyone announcing a new culture.

Culture had simply found more hands.

Near the end of the season we hosted a coaches' roundtable after practice.

Instead of discussing drills, I asked one question.

"When did you feel most supported this year?"

Coach Natalie spoke first.

"The day I admitted I didn't know how to help one of my athletes."

Coach Chris nodded.

"I remember."

"You came over before I even asked."

Chris shrugged.

"I've been there."

Coach Elena smiled.

"My favorite moment wasn't even volleyball."

"What was it?" I asked.

"When my mom got sick."

The room grew quiet.

"I missed two weeks."

"I expected everyone to be frustrated."

She looked around the circle.

"Instead, every one of you covered practices without making me feel guilty."

She paused.

"I've never worked anywhere that did that."

Nobody rushed to speak.

Some moments deserve silence.

Finally Coach Marcus said quietly, "That's because this isn't just where we coach."

"It's where we belong."

The sentence stayed with all of us.

A few weeks later, one of our oldest athletes graduated.

During the banquet she thanked her parents, her coaches, and her teammates.

Then she surprised everyone.

"I want to thank the people who are always here after we leave."

She pointed toward the equipment trailer.

"I used to think the courts magically disappeared."

The room laughed.

"I never noticed who stayed."

She looked toward the coaching staff.

"Then one day Coach Natalie asked me to help roll boundary lines."

"I thought we were just cleaning up."

She smiled.

"I didn't realize we were taking care of each other."

After dinner ended, families lingered longer than usual.

Nobody seemed eager to leave.

Parents stacked chairs without being asked.

Athletes collected forgotten water bottles.

Younger siblings chased loose volleyballs back toward the trailer.

I stood quietly beside the equipment while watching it all unfold.

Ryan, one of our oldest coaches, walked over.

"You finally figured it out."

"What?"

"The club never needed one person willing to do everything."

"It needed everyone willing to do something."

I nodded.

"I wish I'd learned that sooner."

Ryan smiled.

"Maybe."

He looked across the beach where a group of younger athletes were laughing while learning how to roll boundary lines for the first time.

"But if you'd learned it sooner..."

He gestured toward them.

"... they might never have had the chance to learn it themselves."

The last family finally drove away as the sky turned orange.

The trailer doors closed with their familiar metallic click.

For years I believed the most important person in a volleyball club was the last one to leave.

Standing there in the quiet, I realized I'd misunderstood.

The most important person isn't the last one to leave.

It's the person who makes sure no one ever has to leave alone.

And that is how communities outlive the people who build them.

One act of service.

One shared burden.

One willing heart at a time.

PART THREE

Dear diary,

I was a competitive swimmer before I began taking volleyball seriously. I always loved the relay events: they turned an individual sport into a team sport. After all these years as an athlete, parent, and coach, I don't understand why so many coaches still allow select athletes to compete, especially on the starting squad, when they miss practice repeatedly, or on a regular basis. For me, the hardest part of the sport was cheering for a teammate who hadn't been there to support the rest of the team. I wish everyone practiced more, not because I think everyone needs to get better, but because we all need to get better at BEING a teammate. If we removed the friction from our team dynamic and culture, we would have spent less time focusing on our team's performance. I wish I never let losing get in the way of my friendships.

When I accepted the position as Director of Operations nobody warned me about the second scoreboard.

I thought my job was courts, tournaments, scheduling, coaches, parents, and equipment.

Instead, I inherited relationships.

Eventually I found myself leading coaches instead of players.

That sounded exciting.

Over the next month I noticed patterns.

Coach Emma stayed late almost every evening helping athletes who wanted extra reps.

Coach Luis quietly repaired broken equipment before anyone else arrived.

Coach Ben remembered every athlete's birthday.

Coach Olivia called parents after difficult tournaments.

Everyone cared.

But nobody seemed connected.

The coaches passed each other every day but rarely talked beyond logistics.

It looked like teamwork.

But it wasn't.

They were working beside each other.

Not with each other.

The next Friday I canceled practice.

The coaches thought we were having a day off.

Instead, every coach met at the beach before sunrise.

No whistles.

No clipboards.

No athletes.

Just a pile of court poles waiting to be unloaded.

"We're rebuilding every court ourselves today."

Ben frowned.

"Why?"

"Because I think we've forgotten that none of us own this place."

Nobody loved the idea.

We carried poles anyway.

At first, Taylor measured the court wrong.

Luis laughed.

Emma teased him.

Ryan corrected the angle.

For the first time in weeks I heard coaches laughing together.

After breakfast I handed every coach a blank sheet of paper.

Across the top I wrote one sentence.

What does this club become if we're at our best?

After fifteen minutes we read them anonymously.

The answers surprised everyone.

Not because they were different.

Because they were almost identical.

"A place where athletes love learning."

"A place where mistakes are safe."

"A place where coaches keep learning."

"A place where creativity is encouraged."

"A place where families feel welcome."

"A place that develops good people before great players."

The vision had never been the problem.

We had simply stopped talking about it.

Great teams don't require identical personalities.

They require shared purpose.

Sometimes people need a common task before they can have an honest conversation.

One twelve-year-old accidentally explained everything.

"They act like teammates."

Years later, people would complement our athletes for their teamwork.

They'd talk about our culture.

They'd ask what secret training method we used.

There wasn't one.

The athletes simply practiced every day in an environment where they watched adults disagree respectfully, ask for help freely, celebrate each other's successes, and remember that no individual coach was bigger than the mission.

PART FOUR

Dear diary,

The best memories I have came from playing volleyball as a family, even though one of us would end up crying almost every time. I wish my siblings and I weren't so competitive. I remember we would make a competition out of almost everything. It didn't matter how dumb the game was, we wanted to win. Our family played the wii a ton too. I think we liked it so much because it was an even playing field for the entire family, but honestly, we took the "we" out of the wii. We would fight and argue so much. Deep down I still don't think my siblings actually know how much I care about them. I hope they know that never took away from how much I love them. I feel like they know that, but we don't talk much anymore and it makes me sad. Another coach at the club said he would cry after every family game night as a kid too. Unless he won, then he said his sister would cry.

I had accepted the position of club mentor after nearly thirty years around beach volleyball. I wasn't the director. I wasn't a coach. I wasn't there to evaluate anyone. My job was simple on paper and impossible in practice: help the people inside the club work together again.

On my first afternoon, I watched practice from the far edge of the beach.

The volleyball was beautiful.

The relationships were not.

A coach corrected an athlete without making eye contact.

A parent questioned another coach before practice instead of after.

Two assistant coaches taught the same skill in completely different ways and quietly criticized one another once the athletes walked away.

None of the disagreements were loud.

They didn't need to be.

During our bi-annual coaches meeting I interrupted the coaches small talk about weather and traffic.

"We're together every day but we're almost never with each other."

That sentence changed the conversation.

The coaches started telling stories.

Not about work.

But about how they found volleyball.

Who taught them.

The tournaments that changed their lives.

The mentors who believed in them before they believed in themselves.

One coach admitted he almost quit coaching after his first season because he thought he wasn't good enough.

Another confessed she still gets nervous before every practice.

Someone else laughed and admitted they still forget athletes' names during the first month of every season.

By the time breakfast ended, nobody had solved a single club problem.

They had simply become more human to one another.

The athletes noticed long before the adults did.

A twelve-year-old walked over to Coach Aaron.

"You guys are smiling more."

He laughed.

"Are we?"

Every session became less about proving who was right and more about exploring what each person could contribute.

Parents stayed afterward asking questions.

Not because they had received perfect answers.

But because they had watched adults model respectful disagreement.

The athletes were sitting in the bleachers during the final session.

I asked one of the older players what she thought.

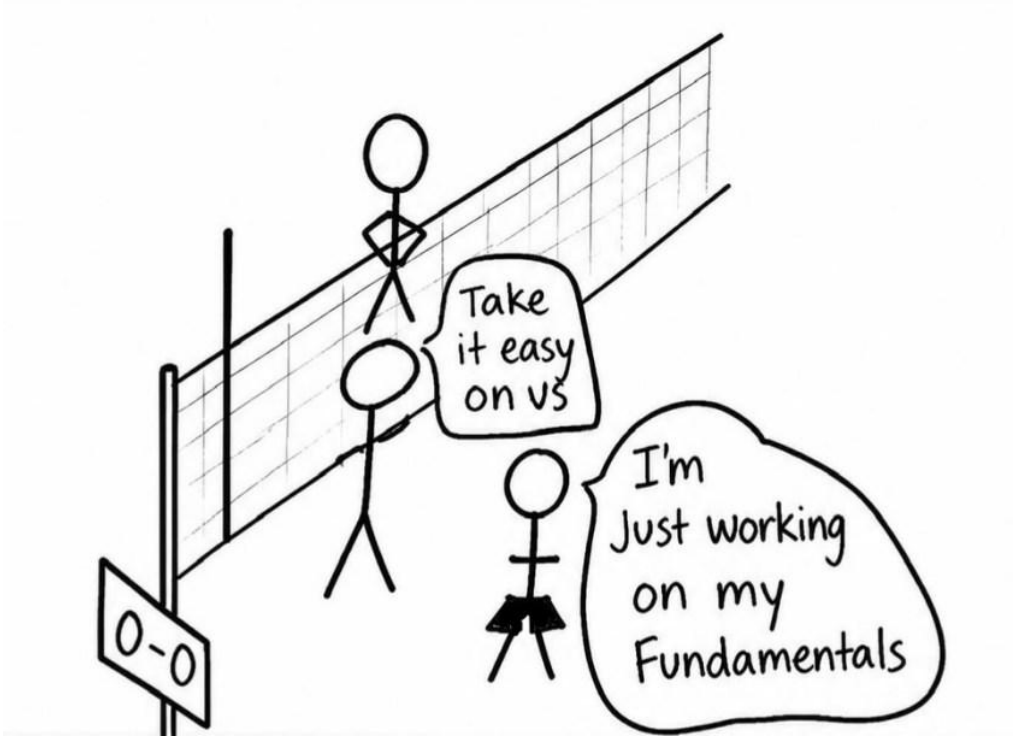
"It makes me feel better."

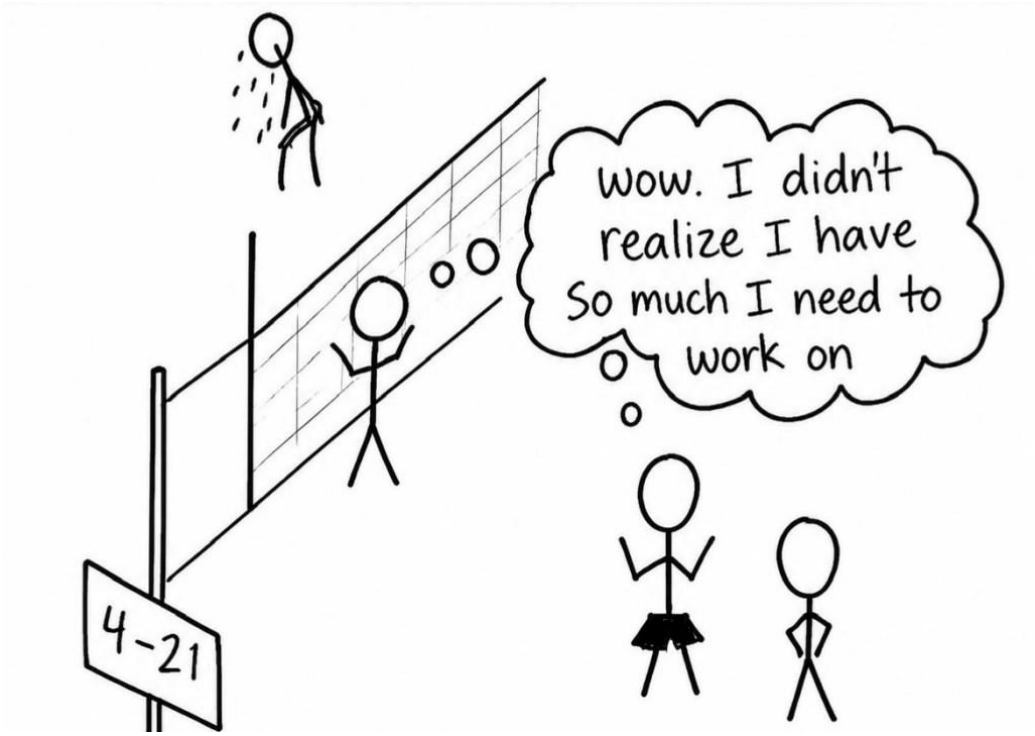
"Why?"

"Because if the coaches don't know everything, I don't have to know everything either."

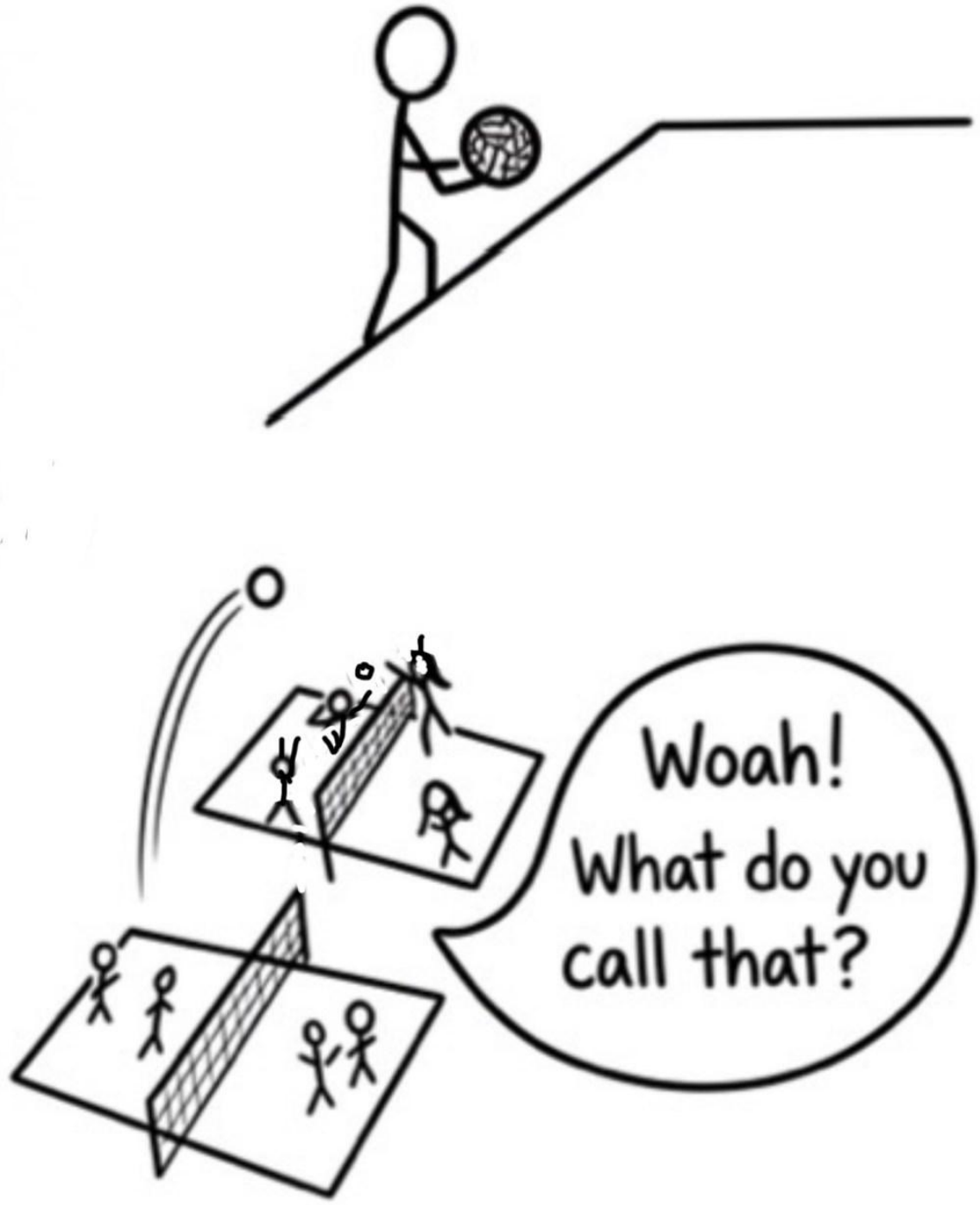
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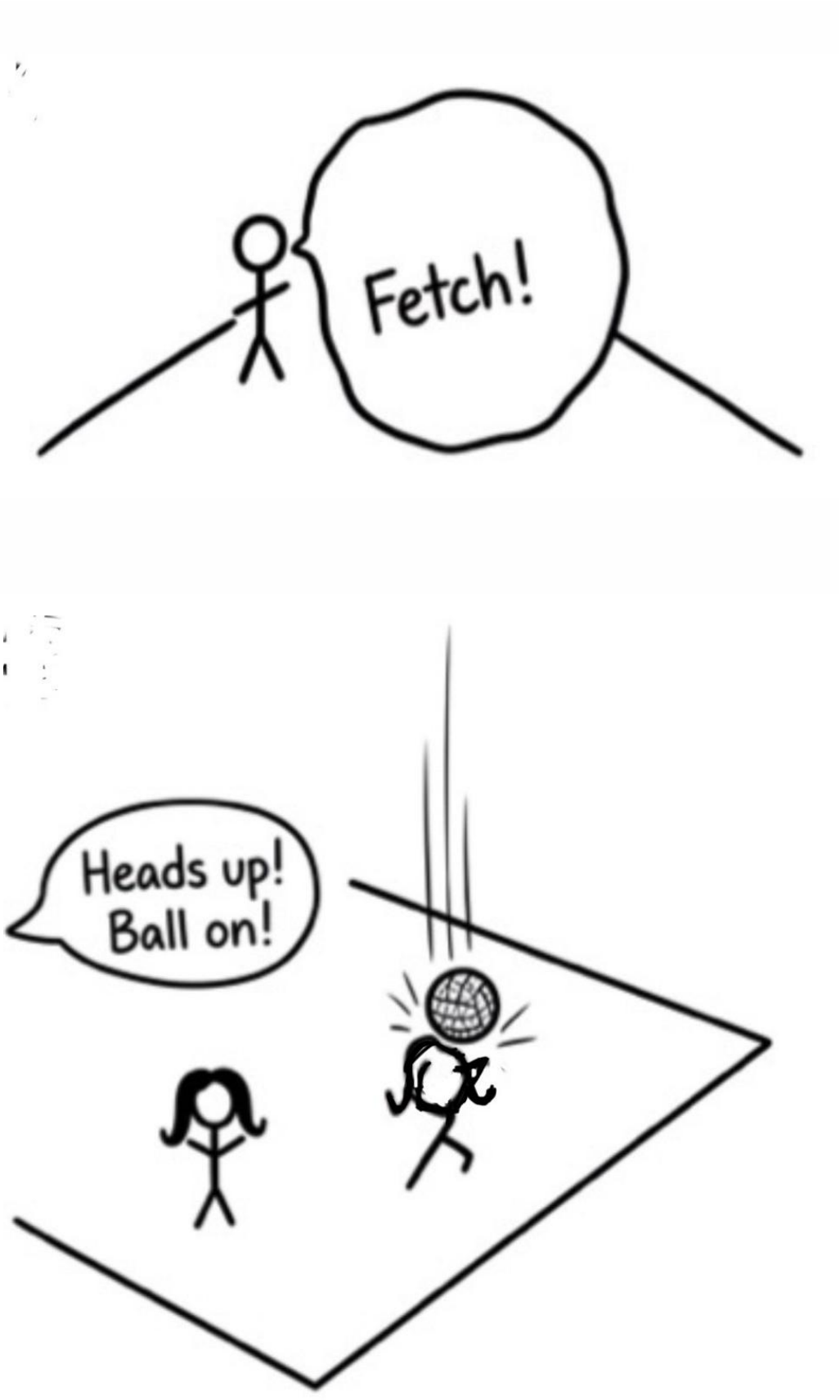
There are two types of volleyball players:





SKY-BALL




Fetch!
Heads up!
Ball on!



"A champion needs motivation above and beyond winning" Pat Riley.



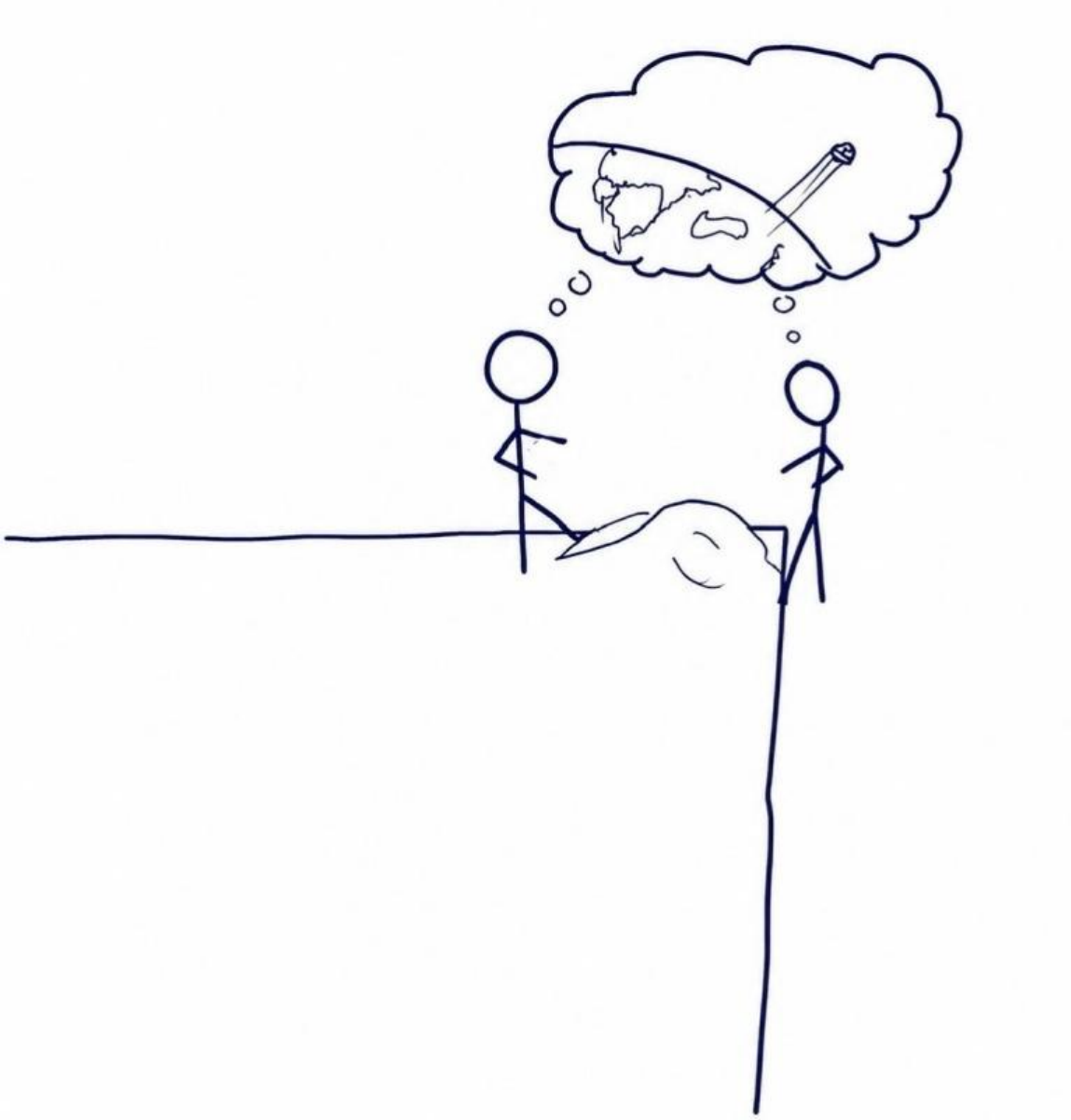
"I can accept failure, everyone fails at something, but I can't accept not trying" Michael Jordan.

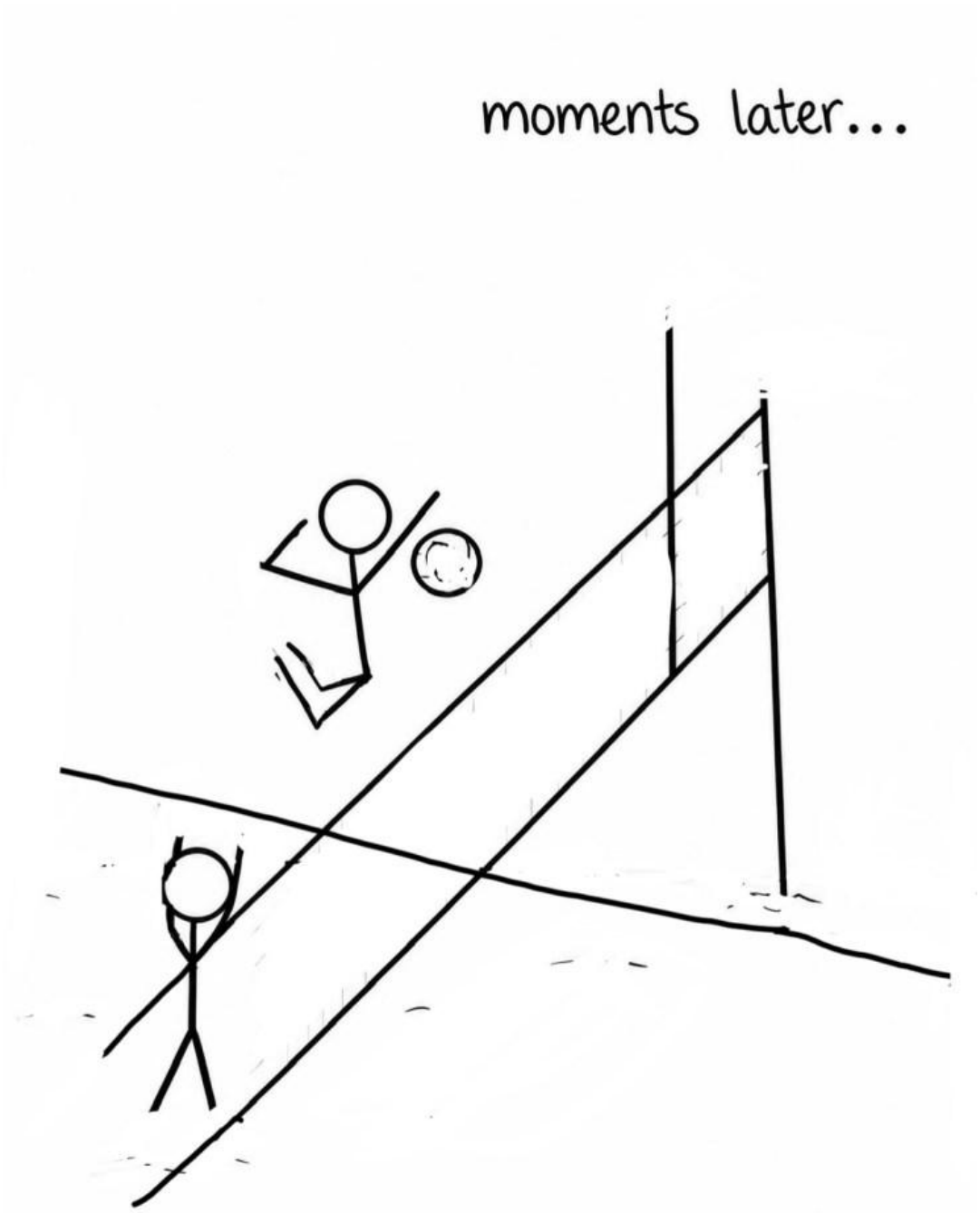


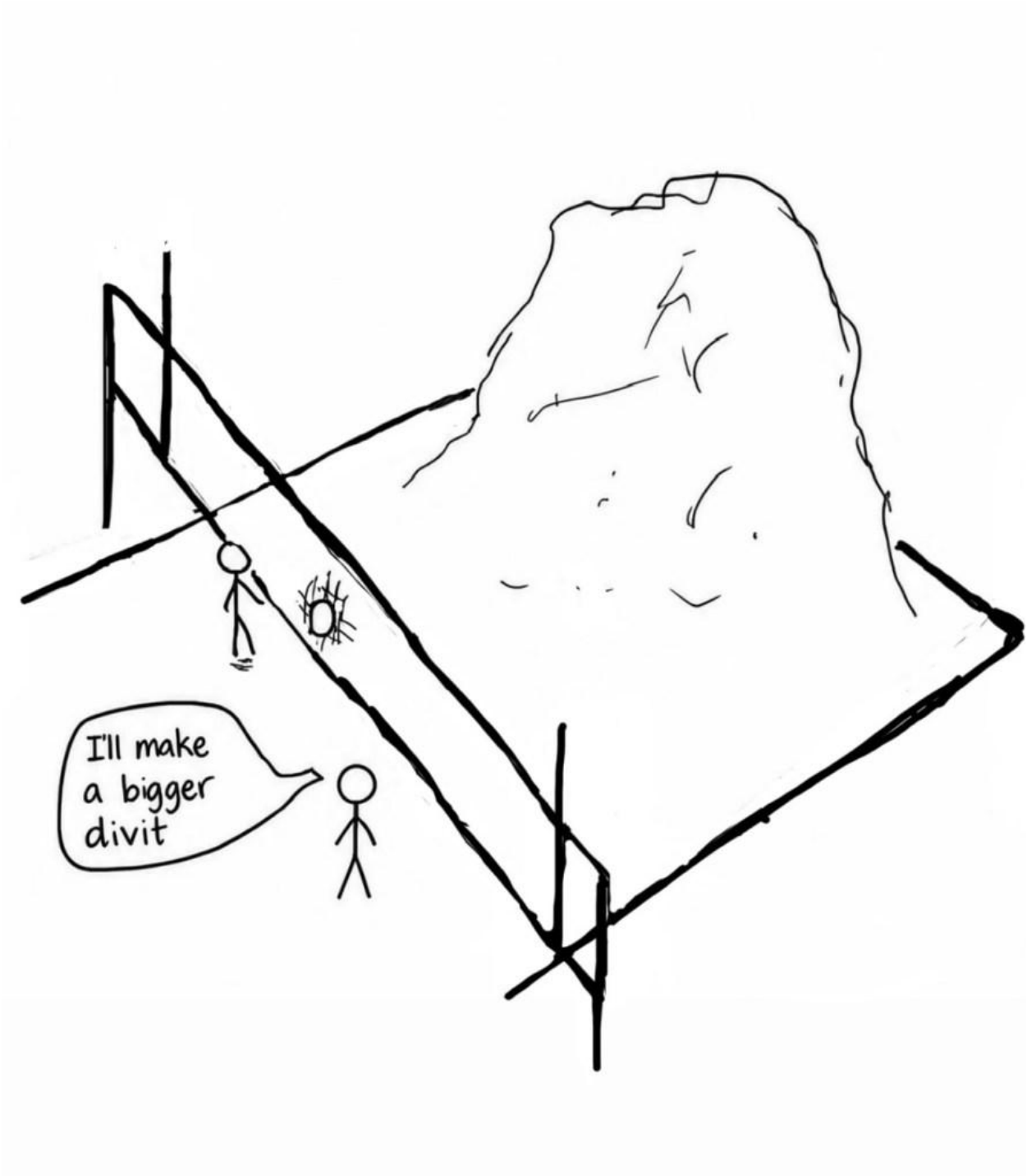
"It isn't the mountain ahead to climb that wears you out, it's the pebble in your shoe" Mohammad Ali.



BOUNCE CONTEST




moments later...


I'll make a bigger divit

Dedicated to my Mother,

THANK You.

"It always seems impossible until It's done" Nelson Mandela.



FIN