THEORY MARKSPURN

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ONE

It was the *click* that concerned Theory Elm Markspurn—not the bent finger dangling off the side of her hand as the volleyball passed through her left ring finger and pinky. Over the punch of the ball and the roar of the crowd, she'd heard a distinct *click,* a grinding shriek, as if it had moaned from airplane propellers twisting against one another. It sent a shiver across her cannonball shoulders. Theory stood on the court in Sycamore Pavillion, dazed at the applause from the crowd of over 7,000 people, before the flashing banner beneath the scorer's table caught her eye: NCAA Division I Championships First Round.

Her block was textbook, but the opposite hitter from Cornwither College, whose name blurred with all the other players from the pre-match scouting report, had barreled all 25 inches of the ball through the gap in the last two fingers of Theory's left hand. She'd fanned her fingers wide, just as Coach Lewis at Lemer Volleyball Club had taught her years ago. The memory of running sprints with her hands and fingers locked in that uncomfortable position burned bright. But the Cornwither hitter hadn't angled out to tool the block and earn an easy point. Instead, she'd punched it through. Theory examined the crinkled pinky. As a human biology major, she knew its outward slant suggested the proximal phalanx was fractured, or dislocated, or both, but the strange clicking sound made the injury negligible.

The whistle screeched, calling an injury timeout for the Petrusia Pines. Theory looked at the Cornwither opposite—number 4—sneering through the thin protection of the net's webbing, pleased at having scored on the three-time AVCA D1 player of the year. Theory's ocean blue eyes frosted over. She glanced at the score—23 to 22 Petrusia, Petrusia up two sets to one—then back at number 4 pacing on the other side of the net, wiping

sweat from her face, that smug smirk persisting. Then Theory remembered the injured finger. For this she was thankful. Stacy Slate, Petrusia's athletic trainer, sprang up from the sidelines before Theory could wave her off. Theory held out her hand, grabbed her pinky, and slowly slid the digit back into place. Some Cornwither players shook their heads in disgust while others placed hands over their mouths, but they all looked away. Number 4's face turned ghost white.

Stacy examined Theory's trembling hand and started taping it. Theory winced, mouthing a silent curse. The pain smoldered and fanned tiny embers of fear into a fire. A reserve of fuel pushed down into the recess of her belly. She fought the fear off and remembered reading about firemen using explosives to extinguish a fire, depriving it of oxygen, forcing it to expire. She liked that plan. Contain the pain until it reached a crescendo, then let it burst and remove the awareness it needed to thrive. If she was someone else, someone who cared less, she'd run from the pain and wrap that blanket of comfort shut. But she didn't know how to be that person. She didn't want to be anyone else. She couldn't imagine being anyone else. She could only be Theory.

Stacy finished taping her, David Sutter, the Petrusia Pines head coach, called a formal timeout. The Petrusia players retreated to the sidelines and huddled around him.

"Alright guys, that's four in a row for Cornwither. Why are they catching up?" he asked. Silence. "This isn't just any match. We need to fight for this. Now talk to me."

A light touch grazed Theory's shoulder. Molly Kellog, the Petrusia middle, plucked something from the back of Theory's jersey and held it up to the pavilion's bright lights. Molly examined the snarled dust bunny, scrutinizing it as if it held some concealed beauty, like one of the foreign metaphysical snoozefest movies that the film major always prattled on about to anyone who'd listen. She'd let the last few blocks slip past. Now Theory knew why. She tapped Molly's leg, bringing her attention back to the match. Molly startled and watched the dust bunny float away.

"We scrambled on the last four," Theory said, her voice booming. "Broken plays. They're getting lucky ball placement."

Sutter nodded in approval. "Establish the middle. Keep them guessing where the hits are gonna come from, make it unreadable. What's our rule?"

"Keep it simple, stupid," the team answered in unison. The rule had been drilled into them since first stepping onto the court at Petrusia. No flash, no flare, just pragmatism and the basics of scoring.

"That's right. Split the blockers and face them one-on-one. Expose the seams. Keep it easy. Make sense?" Theory returned his hard glare, pocketing the pain stretching into her palm. Standing two inches taller than Theory at 6'8", Sutter was one of few people she physically looked up to. She glanced over at the net, where the Cornwither front row would be in a moment.

"What's on your mind, TM?" he asked. The flecks of grey in his coal black hair hinted at his middle age. If not for that, his boyish face tanned by the Pacific sun would have disguised any experience in the game at all, defacing his credibility. His experience lay underneath in his decade of collegiate coaching where he'd racked up two NCAA titles following a brief professional career.

"Their middle doesn't matter," Theory said. Sutter stared back.

"Why?"

"They pulled their starter because she couldn't keep up. Now the backup is struggling. She's tired. All we need is two more. It doesn't matter if she couples the outsides. I can push it through."

"Their line looks like they're gonna puke after watching you doctor yourself up," said Jen McDonnel, the Petrusia setter. Laughter rattled through the huddle. Sutter stepped back to the sideline.

"Okay. Push it through. Make sure to cover dumps and tips," he said. Jen's eyes met Theory's as they settled into their positions.

"If it's broken—" said Jen, tipping her head to the ceiling.

"Send it high and I'll do the rest," said Theory, finishing her thought. Pain knifed into her hand, bringing a swell of nerves with it as she called for a towel then swiped away a spot of sweat on the court. She pictured the Cornwither scouting report, saw their players weaknesses and strengths. The hours of film. Studying the plays, fighting sleep, waving off hunger until all their ins and outs—all the secrets Cornwither College had to spill—were exposed. It hushed the swirling worries and muted the pulsing pain. *Stay in the fight.*

Theory's hands rested on her knees, waiting on serve receive as the whistle screeched and the match resumed.

Plays followed the same path. The start was waiting, the end was reflection, but the middle was mostly static, like searching for a radio station, and the action consisted of fleeting moments of signal, making a two-hour match whirl by in minutes. The Cornwither libero spun the ball in her hands then floated a serve over. Time muted, replaced with blips of conditioned response, muscle memory, and reflex.

Sami Evers, back row, laser pass to Jen. A micro-glance to gauge distance. Cornwither's middle blocker and opposite read the set like a Dick and Jane book.

Theory leapt, back arched, arm cocked like a gun's hammer. Cornwither's middle and opposite mashed together. Theory's hit was stuffed and ricocheted off Molly's face and she crumbled to the ground. Jen dove but missed the pancake. Theory's lips folded, hiding gritted teeth.

"You good, Mol?" Molly forced a smile as she rubbed her cheek.

"Just my pride."

"We'll get 'em next time." Theory plucked the 6'3" sophomore from the floor as if she were a throw pillow.

Sutter mouthed the word "middle." Theory pushed into the huddle.

"Split 'em this time. Backset to me, Jen. Pop it high if it comes back broken."

Back row pass to Jen, who turned toward opposite Nelly Hendricks, her face unwavering under wisps of curly black hair she puffed out of the way as she awaited the set. Cornwither's middle took the bait. Jen backset, waiting to pop it until she was on the way down to throw off the blocker's timing. Number 4 grimaced as she blocked one-on-one. Theory angled thumb down and to the right into the empty space in Cornwither's back row.

24 to 23 Petrusia. The home crowd rose to its feet, anticipating match point. Theory drew a breath and rotated to middle, focused on the Cornwither hitters.

Nelly nodded at the hitting assignment from Sutter. Topspin serve over to Cornwither. Their libero blurred, passing to their setter in one graceful motion. Ball set tight against the opposite pin. Theory wasn't surprised.

Cornwither had hit away from her all match. The ball fell over the tape, then Jen tipped it back. The Cornwither setter steadied, head to their outside. The steep crane of her neck, the upward angle of her arms. *Backset.* Theory coupled close against Jen. Number 4 mistimed the approach and hit the ball hastily. The block slapped off Theory's swollen left hand, birthing lightning bolts of pain. Number 4 tipped it back. Molly dug it to Jen, short set to Theory. A glaring lane opened in the Cornwither back row, but instead of aiming there, Theory drilled the ball down at number 4, tooling off her hands and bouncing out of bounds on the Cornwither side. 24 turned to 25.

The team rushed the court, their arms and heads forming an immoveable mass. Relief flooded into Theory. The hair on her neck stood up to touch as much of the emotion as it could before it dissolved. The feeling visited often but fled as quickly as it arrived. She welcomed it like an addict, pining for the next hit even before the high dissolved.

As they moved through the handshake line, number 4 smiled and said something that sounded like, "You're ice cold, Markspurn" before disappearing down the line.

TWO

The media allowed on the court flocked to it. Post-season matches attracted a larger mix from the major networks, most of which were indifferent to volleyball during regular season. And considering Petrusia aimed to win the tournament for a third time in four years, the reporters on the court viewed the team as newsworthy, exacerbating Theory's usual anxiety.

The nervousness had grown worse over the years as she gained prominence in the volleyball community. The press wheeled out the paper and ink pedestal of praise and twisted winning matches into some magical event. The doting media smothered the normalcy and comfort the court provided. The worry of saying the wrong thing or stumbling through an answer set her chest thumping and outweighed the reality that those concerns rarely, if ever, occurred. The one or two post-match interviews she usually gave proved more than sufficient. Sutter guarded his players from the media as much as he could, seldom inviting them to post-match press conferences unless it was during the Final Four, explaining that they had enough on their plates. For this she was thankful.

With the match finished, her confident shoulders slumped, and a fabricated smile pursed out at the first reporter. The camera's bright lights collapsed her eyes into a squint. A tune blared across the radio of her mind, plucked from an antiquated catalog lost to memory. She hummed the phantom melody, its fragile words remembered in fleeting fragments. She started in the middle, never able to remember its beginning.

What need you flow so fast?
Look how the snowy mountains
Heaven's sun doth gently waste

Each note tip-toeing up and down the weathered scale soothed the uncertainty flitting about, almost erasing the ache and returning the sureness of the court. Almost.

The reporter regurgitated generic questions that slurred into a hodgepodge. As the questions continued, the usual symptoms eroded the melody.

The sweats came first, disguised as post-match drippings waiting to dry, pooling under the frizzles of golden hair. Her hands dipped behind her back, hiding from view, fingers clawing and gripping one another tightly. Theory started the ritual of counting. *The average interview lasts two minutes. I can do 120 seconds.*

"What's the pressure like playing at this level?"

"It'd be pressure if I was out there alone." *10, 11, 12.* Her eyes glanced at the tunnel on the other side of the court, leading to the safety of the locker room, then back at the reporter's smile, glistening with fresh lip gloss. *26, 27, 28.*

"What plays the biggest role in achieving a win?"

"Trusting each other as a team." *36, 37, 38.*

"Were you having issues connecting with passes tonight?" Theory's teeth sank into her bottom lip. She wished people with *normal* careers could experience having to explain poor performance to the public. She mulled over the choices in her head.

1. *I'm built for a lot of things, but speed isn't one.*
2. *I got pigeonholed as an outside by coaches in club ball who had no interest in teaching me to play all around because it didn't suit their purposes.*
3. *I'm human.*
4. *All of the above*

"It's something I'm working on," she answered, a tremor at the end of her baritone voice. *58, 59, 60.*

"What do you imagine it would feel like to win a third championship in your four years at Petrusia?" Theory's hand pawed at her leg, stopping it from turning and sprinting away.

"I couldn't say, we're not there yet." *73, 74, 75.*

"And what would your reaction be if you miss the challenge of becoming a three-time champion?" Theory swallowed the tightness gripping her throat.

"Challenge is where the growth is at. You run toward it, not away. All we're focused on as a team is completing one step at a time and doing the best we can and playing smart volleyball."

"Good luck tomorrow with the Novington University Knights," said the reporter.

During the next interview, Theory projected herself to the safety of a distant court, far away in the ether, accompanied by an endless bin of balls and an invisible setter placing sets in the sweet spot a few inches above the tape. No one questioning her intentions—just the comfort of repetition. The court's every inch warmed her. The trusted planks lining its floors, the net that identified the opponent, and the ball that answered every instruction. Its simplicity required a never-ending stream of critical thought that could take a lifetime to master. Her on-court persona possessed endless capabilities. But off the court, the complex rules of life muddled together into a paralyzing monster. The confidence shrank and a bashful interior, painted thick with humility, surfaced. She was the media's wet dream: intelligent, well-spoken, tall, domineering, performed Herculean feats on the regular, all wrapped in the temperament of a Collie. As much as reporters sent cats crawling up her spine, she remembered the young players watching, studying every word, searching for something to emulate, just as she had done.

After the interviews, she started toward the locker room and replayed the match point in her mind and saw the glaring opening, knowing she should have taken it. She caught a reflection in the shine of the court floor. A face sheened with sweat, speckled with red blemishes, wreathed in frizzles of blonde hair. She pressed them down and watched them eject back out. The reflection begged the same question it always did.

Was that your best? Beyond the addiction of winning, she bowed to a force that drove every challenge, prying away the satisfaction of victory and the crutch of ego with it. Theory answered to *something* bigger that pressed her to settle for nothing less than winning. It shook her out of bed

before each sunrise to run, ensured she stayed in the weight room until muscles couldn't muscle anymore, kept her hitting balls before and after practice until welts and bruises made it impossible to continue, watching film until her eyes shriveled dry and burned red—all to appease her innate drive to reach the highest level of achievement possible. When she tried to pinpoint its origin, her mind blanked, leaving a wisp of its outline, like a dream evaporating upon waking, its true form hidden—but she had known it once. Something Professor Malwick would call *hiraeth*. A terrible longing she was certain lay undiscovered on the other side of the wild forest of volleyball.

She'd asked her mom about it once, hoping at the very least to get a parental explanation for the surreptitious feeling. It was one of the rare instances she saw Joanne Markspurn look uncomfortable. The question wiped away the static smile of a banker's wife like it had jarred open something she'd wished stayed closed.

"Memory is a fickle thing," she answered after a long while staring at Theory. "Be patient. It'll come to you when it's supposed to." Theory never mentioned the feeling to anyone again.

Theory whispered to the reflection that she'd be better next time; she'd be perfect. She'd earn the professional jersey waiting overseas for her after winning the tournament. The shine of its bright colors—perhaps a sapphire blue or an emerald green—would eventually ease into the golden glow of the Olympic medal she envisioned around her neck. But as that dream whipped itself into reality, she felt farther away, and the longing grew, as if she were moving away from it instead of toward it.

"Nice ass!" Theory's head whirled around and peered into the stands. A group of boys staggered down the stands to the court, drunk with laughter and whatever liquor they'd smuggled in.

"I said nice ass," one of them slurred louder. Theory traced their drunken jeers to a player on the Cornwither side conducting an interview. A scowl cut across Theory's crimson face as the boys giggled and leaned over the lower railing, cat-calling and whistling. Heat churned within, vetoing the cheek begging her to turn and accept them for the losers they were.

"Hey," she called to them from the fringes of the court. "A tad inappro-

priate, don't ya think?" They fell silent for a moment and stared back before breaking into laughter.

"Can you hook us up?" they asked, pointing to the Cornwither player.

"I'd get to first base before anyone!" shouted one of the boys. Theory flexed her gimpy hand and pictured the boys running in circles, screaming in pain, incapable of taking the same injury without the slightest whimper. She walked up to the railing, standing almost eye-to-eye with them. Her voice came out in a gruff whisper, which the boys had to lean over to hear.

"If that girl was dumb enough to throw you a bone, which she isn't, I'd be surprised if you even made it into the batter's box before finishing in your pathetic little pants."

"Well, I sure as fuck wouldn't finish with you!" said one of the boys. They roared and staggered off. Theory walked away, listening as their laughter died. Such comments were usually aimed at her glaring height but she knew there were other *visible* reasons.

"Can I have your autograph?" asked a red-headed teen holding out a marker and a mini souvenir Petrusia volleyball. Theory smiled.

"Sure. What's your name?" she asked, kneeling and taking the ball.

"Megan. I want to play outside like you someday but I'm probably gonna get stuck being a libero or a DS because I got the shrimp genes in my family. It's alright though, I'm good with playing back row and not getting any glory." Theory suppressed a smile at the adolescent fallacy as she scribbled a barely legible swoop across the ball.

"Stuck is a matter of perspective. Let me ask you something. What do you think the toughest position is?"

"Duh, that's easy, the setter. They're the quarterback."

Theory nodded. "That's fair. If you don't have a good setter, you're in trouble." She remembered rare occasions playing setter in club ball, calling plays, taking the blame for everything. "Who else?"

"Outside and opposites. They score all the points."

Theory handed the ball and marker back and stood up. "They have a lot of help. But most hits are dug up in the back row and get passed to the setter, who sets to the outsides or opposites, who then score. Now think of that chain. Who's the first person that touches the ball on defense?"

The curtain of freckles on the girl's face curled into a smile. "The libero or the DS?"

"The back row, correct. They make scoring a lot easier for everyone. And don't call yourself a shrimp. Back row players are quick and do amazing things I can't because I'm too slow." The little girl's face blossomed red and she walked away, clutching the ball to her chest. Theory retreated to the tunnel on the far side of the court and into the locker room. Her finger thumped vivid bolts of pain. But as she inspected it closer, a shudder traced her spine and the phantom *click* rattled to life.