

The First

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CHAPTER ONE

I should have never gone to the new girl's house. The walls didn't need to melt, and the ground didn't have to disappear under my feet to know that I should have stayed far away from Violet Starkey.

Violet was weird.

She looked like one of those abducted kids who'd recently escaped from a locked basement. She was super small and skinny, all elbows and knees, and even though it's sunny some 200 plus days a year in Oakland, California, Violet was pale as a zombie. From the state of her hair, she must have been terrified of a brush. And her clothes? They looked like they'd been bought twenty years ago, and I don't mean they're retro.

The strangest part was she hardly ever spoke, not even to the other losers in our class. If you asked her a direct question, she just stared at you from behind her mega-thick glasses. Even the teachers didn't know what to do with her, and the rest of us, we ignored her. It was simply social suicide to hang out with someone like Violet.

But I couldn't stay away. My dad always says I'm like a monkey, and when I see something interesting, I have to find out more, no matter how stupid or dangerous.

I wasn't at all interested in Violet until that day we played volleyball in gym. Ms. H did a bad job of dividing up the teams, again. Angie, that's my used-to-be best friend, said Ms. H does it on purpose because she likes to watch the humiliation. This time, though it wasn't a perfect mismatch. Angie and I were somehow mixed up with the weaklings on the green shirt team, and our friends, Mattie and Emily, were on the much better red shirts. In fact, five of the six girls on the red shirts played JV volleyball. The sixth was Violet.

Why Ms. H put her with the jocks I'll never know. Violet was so small. And jump? You would think she was rooted to the ground. That's the funny thing. I mean the thing that I noticed.

It happened because Angie and I tried to make a real game of it. Two good players can hold a side in volleyball, sort of, but you have to push a lot of the dead weight out of the way. Angie and I were running around like crazy trying to keep our side alive. We quickly learned to aim at Violet because everyone else on her side was too good. Violet would just put her arms out and wait for the ball, which would fly right by her.

We were doing pretty well with this strategy until I managed to arc the ball right in front of the net, a feat which required giving Melissa Chang a bit of a nudge. Angie lept over Niki Martinez to get the spike.

It was beautiful in a way. Everything slowed down. Angie hung in mid-air, in perfect position, her

arm hiked back. She turned slightly looking for Violet. And then Wham! Angie let go, sending the ball straight for her head. At first, I thought Violet would duck, or at least cover her head with her arms in that cowardly way non-athletic kids always do. But Violet just stood there and took the ball full in the face.

All of us sucked in our breath. I think we expected screaming or full-on knock out, but Violet didn't even fall down. She barely moved. The ball bounced off her forehead and went straight up into the air.

Everyone was looking at Violet's face or the ball. I was the only one who looked at her feet. After the ball hit, she'd rocked back on her heels with her toes pointed in the air. She should have fallen, but her sneakers somehow remained attached to the floor. There were these long, white strings on the bottom of her shoes. My first thought was that she had wads of chewing gum on her soles. Before I could get a really good look, her feet came back down. I looked up and met Violet's black eyes.

I was so creeped out that I didn't notice Emily dink the ball lightly over the net. It dropped right in front of me. Finally, Ms. H blew her whistle. "That's game!" she shouted. "Violet, is it? Let's get some ice for that face."

"Sorry about that," Angie yelled in the direction of Violet's back. The other girls headed toward the locker room, talking and laughing about Angie's slam.

"Way to go dreamy!" Angie punched my shoulder. "We almost had them. What were you thinking about? Mike Garcia?" I ignored her. I was concentrating on Violet's feet as she walked across the gym. The soles of her sneakers looked flat, normal. I followed.

"What's up with Cassie?" I heard Mattie ask behind me.

I knew they wouldn't understand, but I had to find out what was going on. Violet sat down on the bench and accepted the ice pack Ms. H offered her. She dutifully held it to her forehead, even though there wasn't a hint of color anywhere on her face.

"Let me see your shoes," I demanded, when I reached the spot where Violet was sitting. She blinked at me, but raised a foot, offering it for my inspection. I felt like a shoe salesman as I hunkered down and rubbed my hand along the bottom of her sneaker. I don't know what I expected, perhaps grooves where something popped out like those roller-shoes, but there was nothing, not even a piece of gum. "I don't get it," I said, wiping my hands on my gym shorts. "How did you do that?"

Violet stared silently at me like she always does when someone talks to her. This time, though, something flickered in her eyes. She shrugged.

"You know what I'm talking about." I felt my voice rise in irritation. I quickly lowered it. "There was something on your feet attached to the floor."

When Violet opened her mouth, her voice sounded creaky like it hadn't been used in a long time. "Do you want to come to my house for a play date? You could sleep over."

Laughter erupted behind me. My friends had heard. No one asks a 15-year-old girl over for a play date. That's little kid stuff. I stood up and crossed my arms. "Why would I want to do that?"

Violet's lips curved slightly, the first smile I'd ever seen on her face. "Because you want to know."

She had me, and she knew it. Violet put down the ice pack and stood up. She was so short she barely came to my shoulder. "See you after school on Friday," she said. I knew my friends had probably overheard, but I nodded anyway, slightly.

When I turned around, Angie, Mattie, and Emily were staring at me with open mouths. "You are not going to that freak's house!" Angie said.

“Yeah right,” I replied. It only sounded sarcastic, so technically it wasn’t a lie.