



**Narrow the Road**

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*But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

*Matthew 7:14*

Everything unravels if you pick at it long enough.

Abena sat on the hill overlooking Scholes, her new middle school. Her mom's job at Walmart started at 6:00 so she dropped Abena off before work. But students couldn't get into school until first bell. This was fine now but would be an issue once the weather changed, but Abena and her mom had a pact: don't let a problem skip the line. Wait its turn and when it makes it to the top, that's when you deal with it.

First to arrive were the custodial and kitchen staff, followed by the early bird teachers and then the straggler teachers. Abena waited as the school buses began to show up and unload. Some kids in carefully choreographed outfits, some kids in intentionally grungy clothes. Abena didn't have the luxury of choice, instead, she was wearing her least dirty outfit. Six months ago, Abena would have given careful thought to what to wear on the first day of school; six months ago, Abena had a closetful of clothes; today, she had a car trunk full.

Abena walked down the hill and into school. She was introverted enough to prefer being invisible, but she was tall and black enough that everyone noticed her. No one acknowledged her but everyone noticed. She wondered how things were going at the middle school she had been planning to attend, the one with all her friends. Long ago and far away. Still, she resolved to make the best of things. "Today is the day the Lord has made" – her mom's favorite saying.

Her first class was American History. Abena took a seat in the last row. She wasn't worried about the school part; she was always excellent at school. Class was a reprieve from the anxiety of the hallways. When the teacher asked what party George Washington belonged to, Abena jumped on it and answered that he was non-partisan. Two heads, one boy and one girl, immediately swirled around to see who gave that answer. Neither looked pleased. Abena smiled – that's right there's a new sheriff in town!

All that resolve broke at lunch. Walking into a sea of white faces, all strangers, she knew that the last thing she wanted was for anyone to see her pay for lunch with a voucher. She threw the voucher in the garbage on her way out the door. She peeked into the library, but it was crowded too, so she went to the gym and sat down on the floor.

The janitor came in, carrying his lunch bucket. He walked up to Abena. She fully expected to be asked to leave but instead he just said "Hi, I'm Cyrus."

"Abena."

"Shouldn't you be at lunch?" Cyrus asked.

"Not today," Abena said.

Cyrus sat down beside her and opened his lunch bucket. "Okay." Then, still looking straight ahead, he handed her half of his sandwich. They ate in silence.

After school Abena made her way to the public library to use their Wi-Fi to do her homework. By then her mom would be at her second job at McDonald's. The plan was Abena would walk over to McDonald's, and they would find some dinner together. Then they'd decide on a safe landing spot for the night.

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Cyrus and Abena fell into a pattern at school. She'd spend her lunches sitting in the gym and he'd come and split his lunch with her. On the Wednesday of Labor Day week, she helped him push in all the bleachers so he could wax the gym floor. Afterwards he handed her a flyer. Volleyball tryouts started next Monday.

She handed it back. "I've never played."

He handed it back. "Two important points. You're three inches taller than any other sixth grade girl. And they practice before school." Cyrus had seen Abena waiting on the hill in the mornings.

This time she kept the flyer.

She spent her library time the rest of that week watching YouTube volleyball videos.

There are six players on a side in volleyball, separated by a large net. One side serves and then the other must return the serve within three touches of the ball or less. You can hit the ball with any part of your body, but you can't catch it in your hands. The other team can also try to block the ball as it comes over. The block doesn't count as one of the three hits. The six players are three in front and three in back. Typically, the serve goes to one of the players in the back who tries to gently bump it to the middle player in the front. That player then puts the ball high in the air so one of the other front row players can smash it down on the other side as hard as possible. Back row players can smash it too, but they must start their jump at least ten feet from the net. Meanwhile the other team has a player or players jumping in front of the smasher to try to block their attempt. A point is scored when the opposing team can't get the ball back over the net in the three hits or if the ball hits the ground, and the next serve goes to whichever team won the point. Every time the serve changes hands, the team getting the serve rotates the players one spot clockwise. So, eventually, every player plays all six spots. Games are to 25 points, win by two. Matches are best three out of five. If it goes to a fifth game that one only goes to 15 points.

All pretty straightforward until you watch videos of people playing. Players are running all over the court to try to get at the ball, what is a valid hit and what is an invalid hit is not clear, there's a lot of diving and jumping, and, generally, chaos.

Abena saw enough to know that watching might be okay for getting some of the rules down but the only way to learn the game is to play it. And that Monday practice would be the first time she ever touched a volleyball. All points lead to disaster. At least she'll get into school early until they make the player cuts.

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The Sunday before the tryouts Abena felt terrible. Nauseous and sore all over. She chalked it up to nerves. Come Monday, she was about to try something she knew she'd be terrible at.

Mom dropped her off at school. Cyrus saw her and waved her in. She went down to the locker room to change. There were about a dozen or so girls getting ready but they were so intent on the weekend gossip that they didn't notice Abena changing too. Soon everyone departed for the gym, leaving Abena alone in the locker room.

She decided to go to the bathroom one more time before going up to the gym. She felt like she might throw up.

She didn't throw up. But when she went to wipe she noticed it. Blood. Her first period. She started crying out of sheer frustration. Why me? Why now? Even her body was conspiring against her.

Then she saw the hand reaching under the stall with a pad. "Do you know how to attach this?" the person asked. "I think so," Abena replied. She cleaned up and attached the pad to her underwear.

She came out of the stall and the girl was waiting. "I'm Emily." It was the girl that glared at her in history class. Very pretty and very popular. "I'm Abena."

"Here are some more pads if you should need them," she said, handing Abena a bag.

"This is really nice of you," Abena said. Other than Cyrus, this was the first person to start a conversation with her since school started.

"Hey, we're teammates now!" she said, slapping Abena on the back. Abena just scoffed. "Better hold up on that idea."

Emily laid her hand on Abena's shoulder. "Trust me on this. See you up there!" And, with that, she was off. Abena put the pads in her locker, adjusted as best she could, took a deep breath and went out to the gym.

Abena was right. She was terrible. Once she realized not to get the ball at the top of her jump like basketball she was able to spike the ball fairly well. But any of the volleyball moves that required any subtlety were beyond her. Anytime the ball came to her she tried to gently pop it back up off her extended arms but instead the ball ended up veering left or right. A couple of times it even shot up and grazed the gym ceiling. She decided to concentrate on the things she could control. If the other girls dawdled, Abena would skip the line to get extra drills. When she hit it out of bounds, she'd sprint to retrieve the ball. When the other girls took a water break, she took one of the balls off to the side to practice hitting it against the wall.

The other girls were various degrees of bad as well. With one exception. Emily. Seemed like every volleyball move came naturally to her. As if she was born to volleyball. And maybe she was, her mom was the assistant coach.

Eventually the practice broke up. "Shower up," the coach shouted. "Russett, stay behind." That was Abena. She suspected the grand experiment was over.

He was the gym instructor. He had that classic athlete gone to seed look. He sat down beside her and looked Abena in the eye. "First things first, you are the crappiest volleyball player I have ever had at a try out. I'm not even sure you know the rules." He wasn't wrong. "But you're going to make the team, on one condition. Emily and Coach Hewston see something in you. God knows what. They want you to come in a half hour early for special one on one before practice. Can you commit to that?"

Abena sat there in silence. "The second reason you made the team has nothing to do with Coach Hewston. I can honestly say, in all my ten years doing this, I have never seen a player just try so dang hard. Let's see if we can translate that into results. Now get out of my sight."

For the other girls, volleyball was a hobby, or possibly a distraction. For Abena, it was a lifeline. And that's how Abena came to make the middle school volleyball team.

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That night her mom gave her some tampons and showed her how to use them so that was one less worry. Cyrus let her in early the next morning. She changed and made her way to the gym. Emily and her mom were already there, hitting the ball back and forth.

They decided to concentrate on two skills, serving and returning the serve. Keeping it simple, they showed her how to serve the ball underhanded with no spin. She got the hang of this pretty quickly, and got to the point where she could reliably keep the serve in bounds and get it deep in the court, all with no spin.

Returning the serve was a problem. It reminded Abena of a random number generator. Coach Hewston would serve the ball directly at her but where it went from there was anybody's guess. Sometimes left, sometimes right, occasionally even ending up behind her somehow, and, even more rarely, it would make its way to Emily waiting in the middle front. They insisted she was getting better, but if there were improvements, they were too subtle for Abena to notice.

The week progressed. Early morning with the Hewstons, followed by practice and a shower. The volleyball crew asked her to sit with them for lunch, but she begged off and continued with Cyrus in the gym. School was still awkward, but less so now that she was part of a "posse". She knew someone from volleyball in each of her classes, and when she walked the halls she got acknowledgements. Girls even asked her to help with their assignments. She was no longer invisible.

Their first game was the next Monday, after a week of practice. Abena girded for the worst.

The team ran out of the locker and into the gym. Abena was surprised that there was an actual crowd there to watch. She teared up a little when she noticed her mom had taken off work and was sitting in the crowd. She noticed Cyrus too; he gave her a thumbs up. The match started and, at first, the random number generator was hard at work. But about halfway through the match something magical happened. Abena forgot about everything she couldn't do; she forgot about dreading if the ball came her way; she forgot about all the fundamentals she lacked. Instead, she started to let her natural athleticism overcome her deficiencies; she started to have fun. She started to enjoy the game rather than fear the outcome.

Girls' volleyball is an incredibly supportive environment. If you make a good play your team crowds around you to celebrate. If you make a bad play your team crowds around you to make sure you keep your head up.

At one point one of her knuckleball serves fell in for an ace. The team erupted around her. "Abby!!," they shouted. And, at the end, when a perfect Emily set led to a perfect Abena spike to seal the match, well, there was a lot of screaming, hugging and high fiving.

Cyrus gave her a big wave. Her mom came down and gave her a big hug. Abena introduced her to Coach Hewston. Coach mentioned the girls were going for pizza. "Could Abena come too? I'd be glad to drop her off at home afterwards." Abena and her mom shared a look. After a pause, Abena's mom said, "I know it's kind of an imposition, but could I come too?" With that the team and Abena's mom went out to celebrate. When they got in the car her mom looked at her. "Abby?" They both just laughed. Her mom spent the night in conversation with Coach Hewston, as tight as thieves – no longer Mrs. Russett and Coach Hewson but now Mary and Tina.

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The year progressed. Their pre-practice practices became more sophisticated as Abena started to master the basics. It evolved to include an overhand serve and then to running plays – Coach Hewston would serve, Abena would bump it to Emily (as best she could) and sometimes she'd hit from the back row, sometimes Emily would set behind her and Abena would slide across and hit the ball on the run. Even the random number generator seemed to make less appearances.

School was going surprisingly well. Abena was pretty sure she was headed for straight A's.

Abena didn't really need to get to school early anymore. Thanks to the Unitarians their nighttime situation had improved. Mom still left early for Walmart but now Abena could head out later and get to school just as Cyrus was opening the doors.

By the end of the volleyball season Abena was a good hitter, a decent blocker, had a respectable serve, and wasn't a total klutz when bumping the ball when it came to her. She still had trouble when spikes headed her way, but she was easily the second-best player after Emily. She was looking forward to seventh grade.

Now that volleyball was over, Abena could leave even later and take the bus to school. Abena arrived early the first day she took the bus, as she wasn't sure about the process. There was another sixth-grade girl and two eighth-grade boys waiting too. Two sixth grade boys showed up late, Abena recognized one of them as the boy from her history class.

The eighth graders started picking on the lone sixth grader, hitting her up for her lunch money. Abena just stood there, unsure of what to do. The boy from history looked at them and said, "Give it a rest, will ya?" The eighth graders walked towards him and said, "well what if we just take yours instead?"

Abena saw the boy tense up. Then his eyes got steely, and his hands formed fists. The boy he came with noticed too and stood up. The only people that didn't notice were the two that should have.

One punch to the nose and one of the eighth graders was down on a knee, blood everywhere. The second made a move and the second sixth grade boy pushed him over. The boy from history class was all over him, punching him repeatedly in the face, until the second boy pulled him off.

Abena just looked at the sixth-grade girl. They both shrugged, like did that really happen? Abena wondered if this was a daily occurrence. Just then the bus pulled up and all the sixth graders stepped in. The driver waited for the eighth graders but, when it looked like they needed a moment, he closed the door and drove off without them.

Abena slid in the row behind the two combatants. The second boy said to the history boy, "You just had to, didn't you?" The history boy just shrugged. "John, some people just need to be punched."

They got to school, and history had just started when an announcement came on the PA. "Hector Lopez please report to the principal's office." The boy got up and shared a look with his brother before walking out of the classroom. Not his first trip to the principal's office.

John and Hector, although inseparable, weren't really brothers. They were foster kids living in the same house with the same foster parents.

They were way past the "meet cute, get adopted" phase of being foster children. Instead, they were well into the "just waiting to age out" phase. Having said that, they were lucky with their foster parents. Foster parents are driven by one of two motives: for prayer or for profit. For prayer parents could be a little suffocating and more than a little judgmental. Theirs were for profit parents, so as long as they didn't rock the boat or eat too much, it was live and let live.

Everybody at school assumed Hector and John were truly brothers. Which was weird, given they were the same age, of different ethnicities, and had different last names. But in every other way they were closer than brothers. They had each other's back no matter what. And, in the world of foster kids, that's a rare occurrence.

At school they were quite different. Hector was at or near the top of the class in grades while John took the speak when spoken to approach. Their foster parents didn't want them home alone at the house so after school they would hang out at the skateboard park.

Skateboard parks are where 25-year-olds teach twelve-year-olds how to smoke weed and a board trick or two as well. Hector and John were pretty good at both.

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The summer before eighth grade was when Hector and John formulated their plan. They decided to save up and get their licenses and a car as soon as they turned sixteen. These days there's less urgency to get your driver's license but for foster kids it represents a level of independence unavailable any other way.

John started working, unofficially, at the local auto repair shop. He'd sweep up and put the tools away and they'd pay him out of the till. Hector took a different tack. He approached the drug dealer at the skate park. Hector knew him pretty well; he liked to sit in the sun at the skate park and listen to his music.

"What grade are you in, Hector?" He asked. Hector was pugnacious but short.

"Just starting eighth grade."

"That's a little on the young side," the dealer replied.

Hector went into his pitch. "C'mon, I have a bike, I know all the locations, you know me. It's basically risk free."

The dealer thought awhile and couldn't come up with a reason to say no. "I have two rules Hector. Don't do anything stupid and don't get ambitious. Obey those and we'll get along fine."



So, Hector became a drug runner. If there was too much money at one site he'd show up and take it to another; or if there was too much product he'd bike over and move it to another location. Nothing nefarious, and it wasn't customer facing. Kind of an Uber for drug resources. They settled on ten dollars for every trip.

And that's how Hector and John started saving up for their first car.

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The first day of eighth grade started with Hector getting called to the principal's office. He looked at John and raised his eyebrows, assuming the worst. But when he got there Abena and Emily were both sitting in the reception area. "What are you two doing here?"

"No idea. We have an idea why you are though," said Emily. Emily and Hector were both crazy competitive and viewed the other as their arch enemy in the race to be the top student at Scholes.

Hector just sat down. If those two were here it couldn't be too catastrophic.

The principal called all three in at the same time. They sat down, waiting for the shoe to fall. "Every September there is a math contest with every junior high in Milwaukee. Each school sends three students and the highest composite score wins. You're our three. It's on Saturday. Get this permission slip signed," he said, giving them each the form. They gave a collective, albeit silent, whatever.

Saturday came and they rode together with Mrs. Florello the math teacher in her car. It was a rare view into a teacher in the wild. Her car was littered with Chick-fil-A wrappers, and she was blasting "What Makes You Beautiful." The three just smiled as they plopped into the car. Finally, Emily said "Mrs. Florello, you do know we can hear that too, right?" "Don't get between a teacher and her One Direction," replied Mrs. Florello. And she meant it.

The test was administered in a gym with seats separated by about three feet. It was timed to run two hours, but you could hand in your test early.

Emily finished first and Abena shortly thereafter. They were waiting outside for Hector and Mrs. Florello when two kids from another school came up to Emily.

"Hey, you're the volleyball chick," he said, standing way too close. She backed up but he kept pressing up against her. "Leave her alone!" said Abena, putting her hand on his shoulder.

He brushed it off, and his friend got between Abena and Emily. He had her against the building at this point. Emily turned her face away and kept repeating "stop it." He pushed her down. Abena was smart but kind of a slow thinker. She stood there, stuck. She had no idea what to do.

From behind them came "Hi Steve." The boy turned around and immediately took a punch to the jaw. He went down like he was shot. Hector still had his right hand in a fist as he turned to the other boy, who quickly chose discretion over valor and hightailed it away. Hector helped Emily up and looked at Abena and said, "Mrs. Florello is waiting for all of us in the back." Steve was still down on one knee when they walked away.

Emily was gob smacked. “What the hell just happened?” Abena looked at Hector and said, “Some people just need to be punched.” Hector pointed at Abena, “Hey, that’s my line!” Emily asked, “How did you even know that guy?”

“I sell him weed at the park. He’s a dick.”

“Thanks,” Emily said in just above a whisper. She waited for some wisecrack from Hector.

But that was Hector’s final word on the matter. They rode back to school in silence, listening to Mrs. Florello grooving along with One Direction.

Eighth grade held a big moment for Abena too. After two years under Emily and Coach Hewston her volleyball skills had improved immeasurably. Both Emily and Abena were good enough to have offers to play high school volleyball while still in middle school, but both opted not to. Their most competitive games were with their club team that ran all winter, coached by Emily’s mom, so the middle school games were more like palate cleaners.

Emily was still eating lunch with Cyrus. Something had been bugging her for a long time and, one day, out of the blue, she decided to tell him. “My mom and me are homeless, Cyrus,” she said. He looked over at her but kept silent. “Have been the whole time you’ve known me. I’m so tired, it’s so tiring. We’ve slept in the car, in a gym, in a church basement, and now we’re in a tiny house. It’s a mess.” Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Cyrus handed her his second sandwich.

“I’m so sick of wondering if I stink, of wearing the same ten pieces of clothing, of making excuses for everything.” Cyrus handed her the napkin from his lunch.

Cyrus let her cry for a while. Then he softly said, “I’m sorry Abena. But sometimes the magic is in how you handle the bad things. Is it healthy to keep this all in? Maybe you have more friends than you realize.” Abena kept sniffing, putting her head on Cyrus’ shoulder. She had to admit it felt good to finally get something that was festering on the inside out in the open. Even better that Cyrus didn’t ask for the back story.

The end of volleyball brought a hard decision. Emily really wanted to attend DSHA, a private school with a strong volleyball program. She thought, with her mom’s lobbying, that they might be able to get Abena in as well.

Just at the end of the volleyball season the tiny house program lost their funding and Abena and her mom found themselves back living in the car. It was a hard reminder that DSHA was out of the question. But sometimes problems solve themselves. That fall, Mrs. Hewston finagled a coaching job at Pulaski, their local high school. Emily decided to stay put and play for her mom. Abena and Emily would be going to school together after all. John and Hector too.

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Freshman year volleyball went well. Abena played better than she ever had before. Emily and Abena were joined by two other good players, one was a libero named Connie. A libero is a defensive specialist that only plays in the back row, switching in and out with one of the other players that only plays in the front row. Connie was expert at returning serves and “pancaking” spikes, where she dives, slides her hand under the ball just before it hits the ground. The other was Charise, a

middle blocker, who teamed with Abena to build a formidable wall for blocking the other team's spikes. Coach Hewson's first volleyball team was pretty imposing. Everything was clicking.

Until it wasn't. One day after practice, Abena went to the library like she always did. After finishing her homework, she called her mom. No answer. So, she walked over to McDonald's where they told her that her mom never showed up. She called the only contact at Walmart that she knew, the lady that worked the register next to her mom's. Mom had listed her as her emergency contact.

"Sorry, Emily. Your mom was let go today," she said. "How can that be?" Emily asked. "She failed the random drug test."

This hit Emily like a ton of bricks. Her mom had relapsed, and she wasn't answering her phone. Without mom, she had no place to sleep that night. She stood in front of McDonald's, dazed. Abena was stuck, no idea what to do.

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The Hewson's had eaten out that night. As they pulled into the driveway they saw Abena sitting on their porch.

"Hi Abena," Emily said, assuming she was there to see her. Abena stood up. "Coach, can I talk to you for a second?" Emily, her dad, and her siblings went inside.

"My mom has gone missing. I don't have anywhere to go." Abena started off. Tina Hewston took Abena by the hand and walked her into their den. "Maybe start from the beginning."

This was the story Abena had avoided since the sixth grade. "We lived over by Riverside High school. My folks argued a lot and it got worse when they started using. Then my dad lost his job and got into heavy drugs, taking my mom with him. When he was high he was violent, really violent. Finally, mom decided we had to get away. That it wasn't safe at home. We packed what we could fit in the car and left."

She looked Coach Hewson in the eye. "That was the summer before sixth grade. We've been homeless ever since, sometimes sleeping in the car, sometimes at shelters, and, even for one short stretch, in a tiny home." She looked back down. "I think mom is using again, today she got fired from Walmart for failing a drug test. And now she's not answering her phone."

Coach Hewson jumped into mama bear mode. "You'll stay here tonight. I'll go tell Emily to make up the guest room. Wait here." She walked into Emily's room and explained the situation. "Now don't badger her about it. And make the bed in the guest room." She then dialed Mary's number. She didn't pick, but Tina left a message telling her they had Abena, and that she was safe.

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Emily knocked gently and let herself into the guest room. "Is everything okay?" she asked. Abena was on the bed and didn't even look over. Emily lay down beside her.

"Why didn't you just tell me?". She held Abena's hand. "I couldn't," was all Abena could say. They fell asleep together on the bed.

The next morning Emily went to school, but Abena and Coach Hewson stayed at the house. Around noon Abena's mom pulled up. She just sat in the car for the longest time. When she finally got out Abena ran to embrace her.

Tina Hewston gave them a moment and then led them both into the house. "Abena, do you mind if your mom and I go into the bedroom and have a chat?" Abena wasn't sure she could speak so she just shook her head yes.

They were in there for an inordinate amount of time. When they came out, Abena's mom motioned for her to go into the bedroom. Tina waited outside.

"Coach Hewston has a plan," Abena's mom started. "We called your Aunt Sylvia, and she agreed to take me in. Sylvia also knew of a rehab site that might be able to take me." Then she paused.

"So, we're moving to Los Angeles?" Abena asked.

"Honey, you've seen Aunt Sylvia's studio. I'm not even confident it will fit two people. This is the hard part. And whatever you decide, that's the right decision. Tina offered to have you stay here while I go through rehab in Los Angeles. They even said we could keep the Civic in their driveway, so it's there should we need it. Then we'll reunite, either Milwaukee or LA. That would be a problem that needs to wait its turn."

Abena went quiet. She knew what the right decision was, but for three long years it had been the two of them against the world. Before last night they hadn't slept more than an arm's length away from each other that whole time. But Abena knew now was the time, this was what Cyrus was referring to. She looked down, took a deep breath, and shook her head yes.

And that's how Abena came to live with the Hewsons.

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The high school pipeline being what it was, the entire school knew about Abena and the Hewsons before the next morning announcements were complete.

Freshman year went by like a dream. Abena must've played fairly well, she made second team all-conference; she must've done okay in school, she was third in the class behind Hector and Emily; but for all of that all she remembered were the twice weekly phone calls with her mom

Her mom made it through rehab, but she was still a little shaky. She got a job as an Amazon driver and was again saving money in hopes of a down payment on an apartment. She attended Narcotic Anonymous meetings twice a week. Sylvia was encouraged but didn't think they had gotten over the hump quite yet.

It pained Abena to admit it, but life got a lot simpler when you had a roof. And a bed.

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Abena's first class sophomore year was biology lab. She walked in and the teacher said, "Pair up." She looked around but didn't see any volleyball compadres, so she took an empty table.

As soon as she sat down, Hector plopped down his books and sat down next to her. "This seat taken?"

She wasn't sure she had seen Hector their entire freshman year. He did have a reputation though – he was the resource if you wanted to buy drugs. "Nope, they must all be intimidated by me." Abena said.

"Six-foot six black girl? Nah, must be something else."

So, they became lab partners. "Ever dissected a frog?" Abena asked. "Only recreationally," Hector said as he took the pan and the forceps.

"So, I hear you're 'blind-siding' these days," Hector said as they cut open the frog.

"No idea what that even means," Abena said, taking notes on their experiment.

"You know, The Blind Side – where the stud black athlete gets taken in by the rich white family."

"Nobody got taken in by anybody, Mr. Good Will Hunting."

Hector smiled. "Okay, that works. This is the liver," using the scalpel to point inside the frog.

And that's how Hector and Abena became lab partners.

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Sophomore year ended with Emily, Hector and Abena still competing for top honors. And, come junior year, Abena and Hector teamed up as lab partners again, this time for chemistry. Blind side and Good Will.

The duo hit a snag though. Hector got arrested for drug running. Luckily for him he was still and minor and they only caught him with marijuana and nothing heavier. He missed two weeks of school and got put on probation. His foster parents put him on life support too – one more mishap and he was out the door.

After the suspension, he came back to the chemistry lab. "Maybe Good Will isn't the best nickname for you," Abena said as she slid her notes over to him.

"No, it still fits. I'm officially retired."

Even though Hector's car income had dried up, John's was going strong. He was now an official employee, earning an official wage, at the auto repair shop.

Later that school year, Hector approached the subject with Abena. "Hey that rickety blue Civic in Emily's driveway, is that your mom's car?" Once again Hector was doing the lab while Abena took the notes.

"Yes," she said, hesitating.

“John and I could take that off your hands.” They both had passed their driving tests.

“Hmm,” said Abena. That car was her life from sixth grade to sophomore year. Like, literally. “Let me talk it over with my mom.”

Later that evening she called mom and told her about the offer. “We both love that old thing, but another winter with it just sitting in the driveway might do it in.”

“Well, we could use the money too,” Mary said. “See what his offer is.” They both knew not having a car would be an issue at some point, but that was a problem for another day.

And that’s how Hector and John became proud owners of an aging blue Civic.

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Junior year and volleyball got serious. Generally, the top-notch players got scholarship offers their junior year, and both Emily and Abena were in the upper echelon of high school players. Emily had her heart set on Wisconsin but Abena, although she didn’t dare whisper a word of it, dreamt of a scholarship to UCLA to allow her to reunite with mom.

They both got offers, even good offers to play together for Nebraska or Iowa State. Wisconsin and UCLA, however, were proving elusive.

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Senior year and Abena was surprised when Hector wasn’t in the physics lab. She tracked down John. “Hi John, where’s Hector?” Abena couldn’t remember ever speaking to John, but she was pretty sure he knew who she was.

“Hector decided to GED it,” John said. “He got a job.”

“What about his quest to be valedictorian?”

John just shrugged.

“Where’s he working?” Abena asked.

John started to walk away. “At the Maaco on thirteenth.”

That year volleyball started with the Nicolet Invitational, a tournament featuring the best schools in the Midwest. College coaches from all over the country were there to scout the players. It was prestigious just to get invited but Emily’s mom felt her team was strong enough to go deep in the competition.

Their first match was against a school from Lakeville Minnesota. Pulaski won in straight sets, that team didn’t have an answer for Abena. Next up was Mother McCauley from Chicago, an all-girls school of over 1,700 students that regularly sent players to the top university programs. This was

slightly a down year for them and Pulaski was able to prevail in a hard fought five game set. Next up was DSHA, the school that Emily almost attended.

DSHA had Julia Ingold, an outside hitter who was the pre-season consensus for the Gatorade high school player of the year. Pulaski lost the first set badly, 25-12. Coach Hewson rotated her lineup so Abena would be across from Julia when Julia was on her stronger side in the front row. Helped by some aces from Connie, Pulaski took the second set 25-21, and then carried that momentum to win the third set as well. One more and they would advance.

DSHA had different plans and started feeding Julia as the hitter even when she was in the back row. Pulaski had troubles with those spikes and DSHA persevered 25-19.

The Wisconsin Athletic Association rules the fifth set was only to 15, win by two. DSHA jumped out to an early lead, Pulaski fought back but still found itself down 14-13, with DSHA serving.

Abena was in the back row so she couldn't help with the blocking. Emily was in the front row on the far right but, right after the serve she would switch spaces to be in the middle server spot. Julia was in the back row for DSHA, which was where she had generated much of her scoring.

Abena's service return had improved greatly over the years, but the DSHA server sent a knuckleball right at Abena. Abena bumped it but it flew off to the right, away from Emily. Connie tracked it down and set as best she could to the middle hitter but by then they were out of sequence and had to settle for just getting the ball over the net.

DSHA took the easy return and sent it up to the setter waiting at the net. She set the ball behind her to Julia Ingold in the back row. Julie took off, careful not to cross the ten-foot line, and crushed the ball, sending it straight down in the middle of the Pulaski defense. It looked like game, set and match to DSHA.

But then Abena dove, with her arm outstretched, sliding against the floor. And Julia's spike, instead of landing on the court for the deciding point, landed on the back of Abena's hand. The ball popped up directly to Emily who, instead of setting a hitter, pushed it over to the DSHA side. This took them by surprise and the ball landed harmlessly on the court. 14-14. Emily looked over at her mom. They had never seen Abena successfully dive and "pancake".

Emily rotated to be the server and Abena rotated up to the front row. Emily's first serve hit the tape at the top of the net, hung there for what seemed like an eternity, and then flopped over to the DSHA side. A girl dove to get it but her hit went under the net. 15-14 Pulaski.

Coach Hewson signaled a play before Emily's next serve. She wanted a slide play to Abena, something they hadn't done in the entire match. Emily had another good serve, DSHA handled it, but they were out of sequence and unable to get the ball to their server, so they just punched it over. In the meantime, Emily slid into the setter's position in the middle front. Abena and Emily had been practicing it since the sixth grade.

Connie bumped the ball up to Emily. A slide play is when the hitter from one side of the server runs past the server to their other side, the server sets the ball low and close, and the hitter takes off on one foot and slaps the ball over to the other side, ideally before they're ready for it.

Abena started running around Emily and Emily set the ball low behind her. Just as Abena was taking off on one foot Emily noticed that Julia was in perfect position to block Abena's slide slam. So as Abena came around her she shouted "Six." Abena heard her and instead of slapping the ball, she corkscrewed her arm and sent the ball to the far right of the court, the area known as zone six. It just barely made it inside the line. Pulaski had won 16-14. The girls jumped for joy and hugged each other. Abena was far less jubilant though – she heard a pop in her shoulder when she contorted to hit the game winning spike.

Coach Hewson introduced Abena to the head coach at UCLA. He intimated that they would love to offer her a scholarship and that he'd be in touch. They shook hands and it sent a jolt of pain through her arm, but she was careful to hide any reaction.

Abena iced her shoulder all weekend, but it didn't respond. She tried not to drag her arm through the halls of school, she didn't want any of the other players to notice.

From there Abena's volleyball season took a noticeable dive. Coach Hewson attributed it to just the natural comedown from such a momentous tournament. Abena knew it was something much, much worse. And when she got the scholarship offer from UCLA, replete with enough NIL money to serve as an apartment downpayment, she knew what had to be done. She took the bus out to the Maaco on thirteenth. She had an idea.

Hector was just finishing his shift at Maaco when Abena walked up to the store. "Hey, Good Will!" she said.

"Back at ya, Blind Side." Hector waited.

"Interested in splitting a pizza?" Abena asked. "Sure," Hector said, no idea what was happening.

In the booth at the pizza parlor Abena revealed the plan she had hatched. She told him about her injured shoulder, about the scholarship and NIL money, and, about how this all ties together to reunite her and her mom. She wanted to buy some oxycodone, enough to get her through volleyball season. No doctors, no prescriptions. She was afraid if UCLA found out they'd renege on the scholarship.

"I figured you might know a guy." She said.

Hector just looked at her. "I'd out of the business."

"What happened to your valedictorian plans?" Abena asked.

"My probation put paid to my chances at a scholarship, or even a four-year school. And, if it was community college, a GED is worth as much as a high school degree."

"I could give you some of the NIL money," Abena suggested. "Might help pay for school."

"If I were to do this, it wouldn't be for money."

"You could just point me at the right person. I wouldn't even tell them you were involved."

"That could very well get you killed," Hector said. He wasn't joking.



He took the second to last slice and slid the last slice over to Abena. They ate the last of the pizza in silence.

“Okay, listen. If we do this you have to come with me, so they know it’s a one-off and not me trying to get back into the business,” He looked her in the eye. “But no messing around, these guys are the real deal.”

Abena shook her head yes.

Hector was quiet for a long time. “This is a half-ass idea. Dangerous for you because you don’t know what you’re getting into and dangerous for me because I do.” He thought a while. “Come back on Friday, I’ll have the car, and we can see where everything leads. Do not tell John about this.” Abena thought that would be easy seeing as how she had never spoken to John before last week.

Abena showed up on Friday and got in the car. It was like visiting an old friend. Hector drove to the west side of Milwaukee and parked on some non-descript block in some non-descript neighborhood. “Okay, now this is important. Don’t say a word, don’t make eye contact. Your only purpose there is to show that this is a one-time deal. Don’t screw up – these people are serious.” He waited. “Say yes.”

“Yes.”

They got out and walked to the door. Hector knocked. A tall man with sunglasses and a bandana opened the door and gestured them in. There were five guys sitting around the living room. Hector and Abena remained standing and Hector spoke to the fat guy who was concentrating on Forza on the Xbox.

Hector explained they wanted 30 oxycodone pills and they’d be on their way. “What for?” the fat man asked. “For her,” Hector said, pointing at Abena.

The fat man nodded to one of the other guys. That guy got up, counted thirty pills into a sandwich bag and tossed it onto the table just in front of Hector. “Hector, remember our talk so long ago? Nothing stupid, no ambition? This feels like you broke both of those.”

Hector looked at him. “Just doing a favor for a friend.”

This was going well, too well. Then the fat guy paused the Xbox. “You know the rules, Hector.”

When a stranger first buys drugs the convention is they do some drugs onsite, just so the dealer knows who they’re dealing with. Hector was afraid this might come up. “I can vouch for her,” Hector said.

The fat man just shook his head no. Abena didn’t know what was being negotiated but she could tell it wasn’t going well. The fat man took out one blue pill. “One taste.” Hector tensed up and his hands formed fists. Abena knew a confrontation was coming.

But just at that moment car lights lit up the transom window of the door. Like an alarm just sounded, suddenly it was chaos in the room, the five guys running around, trying to clear anything suspicious out of the room.

Everyone was running around the room, trying to get rid of anything incriminating. Abena was stuck in place, she had no idea what was happening. She just stood there watching them. Then Hector turned and looked at Abena. "Run," he said. Abena could do that; that was something she knew how to do. So, she turned and ran out the back door and down the alley. But not before she grabbed the baggie full of oxycodone.

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Walking down Wilshire Boulevard after volleyball practice was the best part of her day. She could take in the setting sun all the way to Santa Monica. The rest of the team lived in the athletic dorms, but she shared a house with her mom just off Colorado and Fifth. A lot of blood sweat and tears went into affording that rent, so she made sure to enjoy every second of it.

Her freshman had come to a screeching halt when they detected a labral tear in her shoulder. She spent a year in rehab and now she felt strong going into her sophomore campaign. UCLA was rated fifth in the country and there was even some talk of her making All-American. Her mom came to every match.

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The doors to the correctional institute opened and the inmate stepped out, a free man. He had served 18 months of his two-year sentence. He started walking down 68<sup>th</sup> Street. He wasn't sure this was the right direction but as long as it was away from this place, it was okay with him.

A blue Civic pulled up alongside him and the driver opened the passenger side door. No words passed between the two as he got in and shut the door. They made a U-turn and, together, headed back to Milwaukee.