



FREE PERIOD

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MUST READ."

-LISA GREENWALD,
AUTHOR OF
THE TBH SERIES

ALI
TERESE

FREE PERiOD



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For Teenie



CHAPTER 1



WINNING

HELEN

Late April, eighth grade, aka two months to FREEDOM

I love gym. Where else can you drive jocks absolutely bonkers without sweating?

The sweat thing was key. I still had math after gym, final bell, and the bus ride home to get through. I meant to do it pristinely. We didn't have it as bad as first-period gym—I assume those kids have wronged our principal severely over multiple past lives to get that kind of schedule—but still. Gross.

It was a week after spring break, but rain poured down outside, so the game du jour was volleyball. Coach Kline must have thought he had finally found a way to get me “involved” when he made me a captain, but I immediately called my team “This Side of the Net Doesn't Sweat.” Most of the girls, and even a couple of boys, joined me. I kept checking the door for Gracie, my best friend, but she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I stared down our arch-nemesis Madison, the rest of the jocks, and some triers. Not exactly lions versus zebras. More like vultures versus kids counting on high school being much better than this.

After we successfully missed six consecutive balls, Coach Kline forced the other team to rotate. Madison grabbed the ball,

pushed up her bangles, and pulled her arm back to serve underhand. Not what I expected. The ball barely cleared the net and hit the floor. Her next serve went into our second row, hit a new(ish) girl's arm, and flew out of bounds.

"Ouch," Larisa said, grabbing her elbow. Might as well have been the smell of blood for the vultures.

"Yeah! Get it!" yelled the jock horde. Bless those boys. Where do they come from? Maybe there is an elaborate scam where someone slips a note on their lunch trays that says, *An international sportsball scout is coming to gym today. Time to dazzle!*

Madison did get it. Again and again, she served to Larisa, who finally tried putting her arms together to bump the ball back, but she got hurt again. Time for me to do some captaining.

"Madison will keep hitting it at you, so focus on the ball, watch it leave her hand, and as it comes over the net, you slide out of the way," I said. It felt good to contribute.

Everyone else on our side already knew what was up. We were a perfect ballet of avoidance, all of us swaying like reeds in the wind. And there was a bonus. Nothing makes jocks go more feral than not playing their game. A few even growled. It was glorious.

The score reached 15-0. Time to switch sides. Right then, like an angel descending through a cosmic storm, Gracie popped through the gym doors. She waved at me and skipped over to the net. She still hadn't changed out of her street clothes. Strictly verboten.

"Where have you been?" I asked and gave her a bear hug. When middle school started, our schedules had matched

completely. This year we only had half our classes together. I hadn't seen her since lunch or five billion years ago. It was hard to tell.

"Nurse. I'm period cramping too bad for gym. She gave me a note and an ice pack," Gracie said.

"Isn't exercise supposed to help?" I whispered.

"That's what Big Gym wants us to believe. They wouldn't be all *get running* if we were bleeding out of anywhere else. I tried to get you a note too, but she said best friends don't get sympathy cramps."

The crimson wave wouldn't hit me again for a while. It was ridiculous our cycles weren't in sync, even if the science is still out on that whole phenomenon. It was also ridiculous that Gracie was more comfortable talking about my period than I was. I'd go for something classic, like a good rash no one's seen since the 1800s, before telling the nurse I was cramping.

There was no time to wallow over my womb, though. Madison was up in my personal space, trying to drape her arm over my shoulder even though I'm half a foot taller than her and practically everyone else at school.

"Will your team actually start playing now, Helen? We have the pep rally and county Cheerfest this Thursday. I want all the cardio I can get," Madison said. Then she leaned close to my bestie and sniffed.

"We're going to high school soon, Gracie. Time for you to explore the antiperspirant aisle."

Gracie raised her arm and took a long, deep breath. "Lavender lemon all-natural rock deodorant. Better than strolling into a spa. Come on, Madison, get in my armpit."

Coach Kline blew his whistle and jogged over to a chorus of jock “yos.”

“What’s the holdup, ladies?” he said.

“Gracie stinks and clearly needs a health class refresher on personal grooming,” Madison said matter-of-factly. It was mortifying that I’d ever been friends with her, even if it was just playdates back in elementary school. Every day of middle school, Madison had another cutting comment, another takedown of someone minding their own business, another reason to avoid her, but attacking Gracie and bringing a teacher into it—a dude, no less? This meant war.

Gracie raised her arm again. “Coach, it is like frolicking through a field of flowers.”

“You girls should be more supportive of each other. Social. Emotional. Empower.”

I wasn’t sure if he was having some sort of brain event or saying every “girl” word he’d ever heard.

“I’m an expert on wellness,” Madison said, crossing her arms. “It does not require everyone in class having to smell you.”

“My moms don’t want me absorbing heavy metals like aluminum,” Gracie said. “I mean, we’re mammals, we’re meant to sweat.” She laughed, but she brought her arms down real close to her sides and looked at me with those baby browns that are slightly too big for her face and way too big for my heart.

That’s when I knew. If Madison was so bothered by smells, I would serve her one she’d never forget.

“This is a middle school gym, Madison, everything stinks,” Coach Kline said. “Go to your side. Sasso, follow her.”

Gracie doubled over, clutched the ice pack to her stomach, and handed him the nurse's note. "Ms. Shapiro said I can be the timer."

"There are no time limits in volleyball," Coach Kline said.

"How existential."

"You skipped in here just fine."

"Well, the cramps aren't in my legs."

"Another prank—"

"If this is a prank, blame Mother Nature, not me."

Coach Kline looked at the clock. "Stand somewhere on Helen's side, and we'll call it a wash."

He may have been a grown man wearing striped soccer shorts to his job, but he knew how to pick his battles. I love well-trained adults.

Except there was a twist. As I scooted under the net, Coach Kline tossed me the ball.

"I'm allergic to leather," I said.

"It's synthetic," Coach Kline said. Then he whispered, "I know what you're capable of, and I expect you to play."

He must have seen the disbelief on my vexed visage because he hissed, "Seward Park courts."

I gasped. "That's two towns over."

"It's where I live."

"Teachers are allowed to cross town lines?"

"Serve it, Wells."

This was not part of my no-sweating plan. Here's the thing: Seward Park is where Dad forces me and my little sister to play tennis on Sundays. Family time, if you can even imagine it for a group of people who barely talk to one another. What saves me

is that I'm actually good at tennis. All of it. I got ground game, my serve rocks, and I can even put top spin on the ball. Dad mistakes this awesomeness for me making an effort, which makes him ridiculously happy. But it's really just like my DNA got together and said, *Okay, we'll do it if you leave us alone the rest of the week.*

I held the ball in my left hand and drew my right arm down, ready to serve it underhand. Coach Kline coughed loudly and shook his head. Diabolical. That made me want to hit it out of bounds even more, but I had no idea what gym punishment might look like. More gym? OMG!

I threw the ball up and sent it over the net the way I would in tennis. The jocks went wild.

"Get it!"

"Dig it!"

"Set me up!"

They were all so excited the ball fell in the middle of them and hit the floor.

Now, raising your hand over your head to hit one ball may not lead to sweat, but two was risking it, and three would have turned me into a farm animal. Admittedly, my parents didn't care if I absorbed an entire mine's worth of aluminum through my pits, but I can't stand feeling clammy.

I was calculating the angle that I'd have to hit the ball to make it bounce out the gym door and ricochet down the hallway to put an end to this horror when the unthinkable happened. Larisa, that girl Madison kept hitting, started clapping.

"Go Helen!" she said.

What was Larisa thinking? I looked over to Gracie.

"Um, yeah! Ball Things, Helen! Team Sayings!" she added to Larisa's cheers.

It was WEIRD. Still, I got some butterflies in my stomach, a thump-thump in my heart. I threw the ball higher this time and hit it into the back row, right next to Madison. She put her hands together and tried to dig it, but the ball bounced off her and into the back wall. She re-tucked her shirt to a bunch of "Come ons!" from the jocks and polite clapping from our side.

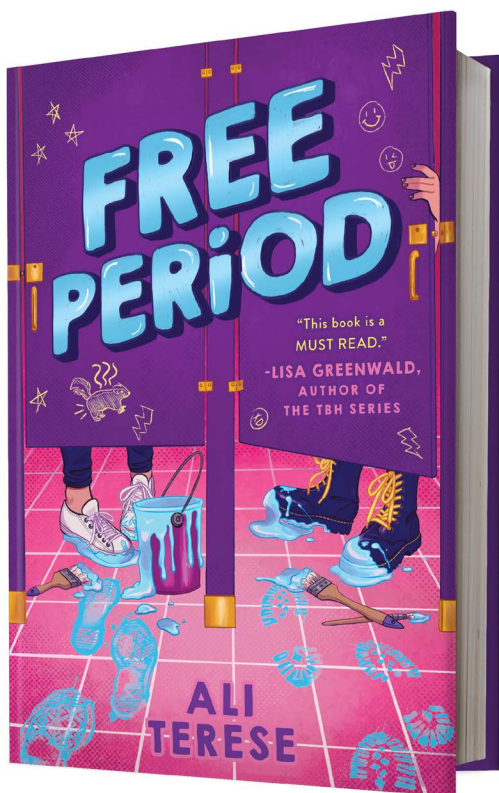
A dilemma. Being my mortal enemy is one thing. Getting yelled at by those turds was another. If you're sending a ball hurtling through the air at approximately 40 mph, how do you decide between aiming at a mean girl or a bunch of jerk boys? All I could think was, everyone should get theirs in their natural habitat. Madison could wait.

This time, I threw the ball real high and stepped into the serve. The ball exploded off my palm and spiked the dude next to Madison so fast he never had a chance to move. For the boy next to him I landed it right at his feet. I was still working my way through the front row when the whistle blew. I held the ball on my hip and tried to catch my breath. The last few minutes of class had elapsed at warp speed. My teammates patted me on the back and threw in a few "good jobs" as we headed toward the locker room. I was all "whatever," of course, but one of those butterflies kept fluttering in my belly.

Gracie put her arm around my shoulders. "You were awesome out there. And you really worked up a sweat."

"Don't rub it in," I said and hugged Gracie back, but kept my eyes on Madison.

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