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# 1

Floyd bounced the ball on the ground three times, held it to his racket for a moment, and then threw it into the air in a move he had practiced at least a hundred times a day for the last eight years. His body lifted onto his toes, he swung the racket back up and slammed the ball toward the far side of the court.

As he did so, a movement to his right caught his eye. It was only a momentary distraction, but it meant the ball was a half inch lower in the air when the racket struck and, instead of skimming over the top of the net, it grazed the canvas webbing and deflected fractionally upward before landing back in the court.

“Net!” called the umpire. “First service.”

Floyd took a second ball from the clip around his waist and glanced up at the spectators. What he saw didn't entirely surprise him.

It was Mike. Of course.

He was walking along the top row of the tiered seating, his ankle-length black coat billowing behind him in the breeze, and then he turned and began moving down the steps.

Spectators are not supposed to walk around in the stands while a game is in progress. Once a match has started, they stay in their seats and don't move because moving will distract the players. Bouncing the ball a few times, Floyd decided to wait. Presumably, Mike wanted to sit in one of the rows lower down, where he would be closer to the action, and there was no point trying to continue the game until he had settled.

Mike walked all the way down the steps but, to Floyd's surprise, instead of finding himself a seat, he opened the gate in the barrier that surrounded the court and walked over to the umpire's chair.

"When you're ready, Mr. Beresford!" called the umpire.

Clearly, he hadn't noticed Mike, who was now standing a little behind and beneath him.

Floyd pointed with his racket. "You've got a visitor," he said.

The umpire frowned. “Is something wrong, Mr. Beresford?”

“Yes,” said Floyd, still pointing at Mike. “Him.”

The umpire’s frown deepened and he glanced down at Mike before looking back at Floyd. “I . . . I don’t quite understand.”

“Well, I can’t play while he’s on the court, can I?” Floyd wondered why the umpire was being so slow. “Could you ask him to leave, please?”

There was a restive murmuring among the spectators, but the umpire made no move to get Mike to leave. His fingers hovered uncertainly over his scoring pad as he looked around.

Floyd’s father came onto the court, a look of concern on his face as he walked over to his son. “What is it?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” said Floyd, “except that I can’t play with him there, can I?”

“Who?”

“Him!” Floyd pointed at Mike. “Why does everyone seem to think that someone walking onto the court in the middle of a match doesn’t matter?”

Over by the umpire, Mike carefully studied the sky before turning to face Floyd. “Why don’t we go for a walk?” he said. “By the sea.”

“I am not going for a walk!” Floyd told him firmly. “I am playing tennis. Now, would you please just . . . go away!”

“I didn’t say anything about going for a walk,” said his father. “And I’ll be happy to go away as soon as you tell me what’s wrong.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” said Floyd. A part of his mind was trying to work out why everyone was behaving so strangely. “I was talking to Mike.”

“Mike? You mean he’s here?” Floyd’s father looked sharply around the court. “Where?”

“There!” Floyd pointed. “He’s standing right over there!”

His father looked at the umpire’s chair and then all around the court. “I’m sorry,” he said eventually, “but I can’t see anyone.”

“But . . . but . . .” Floyd blinked. How could his father not see Mike? He was standing only a few yards away, wasn’t he? What did he mean, he couldn’t see him? A small tremor of alarm ran through his body as he stared at the figure that, apparently, no one else could see.

“It’s all right!” Mike smiled as he raised a hand in a gesture of reassurance. “Nothing to worry about. I’m a friend.”

“What is it?” Mrs. Beresford had followed her husband onto the court. “What’s happening?”

“He says he can see Mike,” said Mr. Beresford in a low voice as he pointed to the umpire’s chair. “Over there.”

Mrs. Beresford looked in the direction her husband was pointing and frowned. “But there’s nobody there!”

“Yes, there is!” Floyd protested. “There’s Mike.”

“All right, old fellow.” Mr. Beresford put an arm around his son’s shoulder. “Let’s call it a day, shall we?”

“No!” said Floyd. “I don’t want to call it a day. I’m playing tennis.”

“No, you’re not. Not this afternoon. Come along.” Mr. Beresford took his son by the arm. “We’re going home . . .” And he led his son gently from the court.

It wasn’t quite the ending to the tournament that any of them had planned.