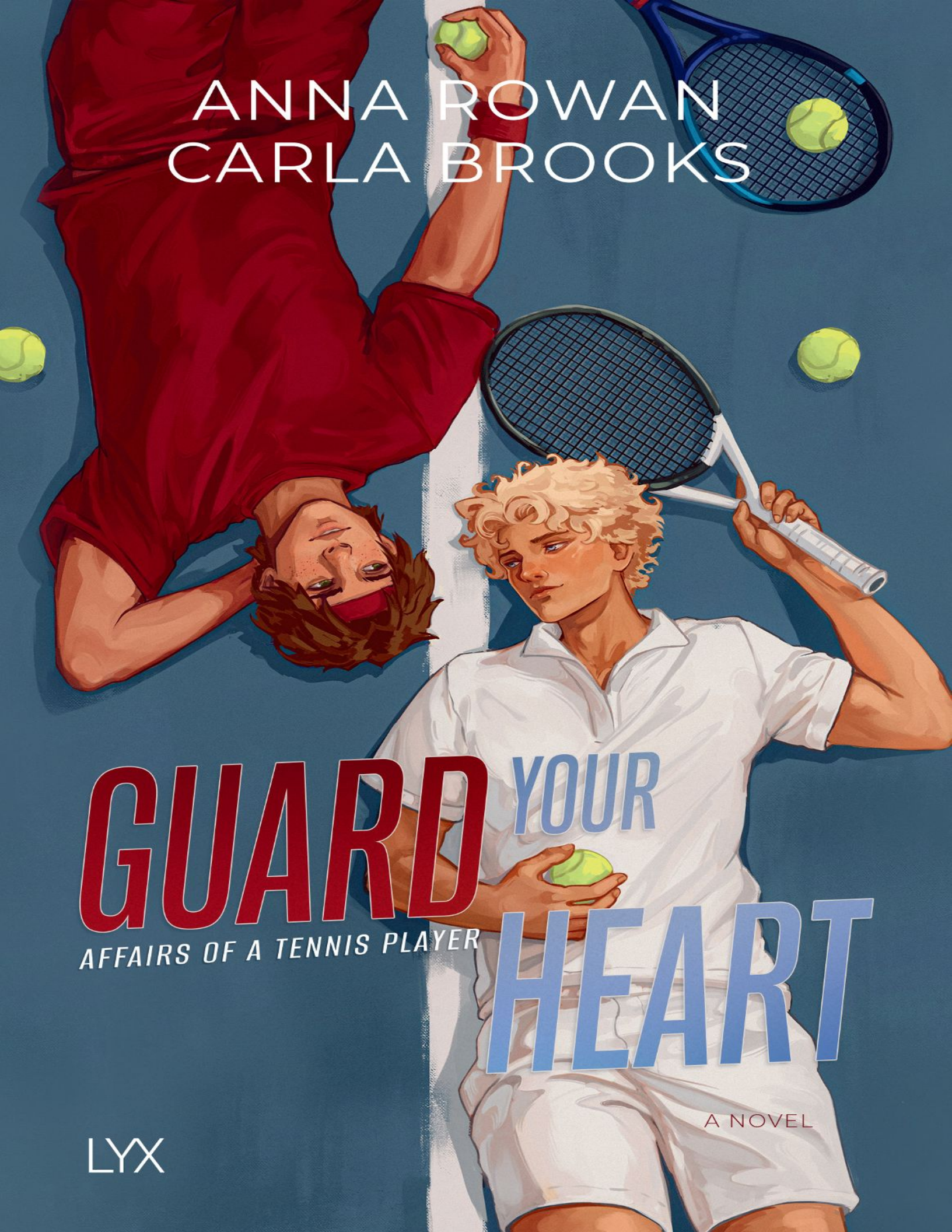

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To those who dare to try

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Before

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// US Open Final

There were different silences, and the silence that fell over a crowd of over twenty thousand people created a special kind of tension. A *nerve-racking* one.

I looked at the shot clock, seeing that there were only five seconds left to serve. I took a deep breath. A bead of sweat ran down my cheek, and the sound of my heartbeat pounded heavily in my head. I took off my cap and brushed back my sweaty curls—the same motion I made in every game, as much a part of my service routine as tossing the ball. But it did nothing to calm me down this time.

I let the ball bounce three times in front of me. I tried to pull myself out of my head. I needed to focus. Being inside your head is a dangerous thing in tennis. If you lose your concentration, you lose the match. It was as simple as that. And that couldn't happen to me. Not now. Not when I was serving to even out the score of the set. Not when I was playing the most important match of my career—a match that could finally bring me the title I had sacrificed so much for.

Another deep breath, then I tossed the ball. An exact process that my body had memorized years ago, but the second the ball touched my racket, I already knew I had messed up.

I only needed one more point to win the game and even the score at 6–6. The importance of this shot, the pressure of knowing how dangerous a mistake would be, had caused me to slip.

Second serve.

The crowd erupted in a deafening applause. Their shouts and stomps merged into a roaring sea of noise. When this kind of thunderous cheering wasn't directed at you but—as in my case—against you, it took everything you had not to buckle under it.

For a second, I let my gaze travel over the blur of people in the stands, feeling the collective energy of the crowd crash over me. Then suddenly, a quiet voice spoke up in the back of my mind: *It is happening again. You told yourself you would never let it happen again. But it is. There is nothing you can do to stop it. Again.*

I tried to shake myself out of it, determined to stifle this agonizing seed of self-doubt before it could take root. I couldn’t let it happen again. I would never forgive myself. I told myself today was a completely different situation. A different crowd. And especially a different opponent. It wasn’t *him*, I tried to remind myself. Harris, on the other side, could never be capable of doing what *he* did years ago.

And I was a different player then. Now I was dangerously calm under pressure and had a mindset of steel in moments when other players would crumble. I was *hated* for this. So I was more than prepared to handle the crowd’s anger toward me—the Ice King, as they liked to call me—for playing against someone they were rooting for. *How dare you* was the expression I could read in their faces most of the time. Not just today, but all season, throughout which I had managed to move up in the world rankings and beat several better-ranked and—I might add—better-liked players along the way. But still, shamelessly cheering because I missed my first serve and breaking my concentration like that was a new low.

I tried to swallow my anger as I grabbed the second ball from the pocket of my shorts. It took more effort than usual, but I managed not to let any of my emotions show on my face, maintaining the facade of indifference I had perfected over the last few years. Oh, how they hated that they couldn’t get to me with their obvious dislike, and I would never do them the favor of showing that they did. Here I was, doing everything they’d asked for. I tried to put up a good fight for them, I went over my limits, I ran, and I ran, and still, it wasn’t enough. They wanted to see me fail—in fact, they were cheering for it—and it felt like a slap to my face every single time.

I deeply drew in the burning stadium air and tossed the ball again. *I just have to keep going. Play myself free.*

This time, the serve was perfectly placed, touching the left outer edge of the line. But Harris was ready, hitting the ball with his forehand and sending it straight down the line. All I could do was trace the ball with my eyes, seeing it land with precision. I had to actively resist the urge to cover my ears as the crowd erupted in raucous screams and applause once again. Right at this moment, I could almost physically feel the glimmer of hope spreading through the stadium. The glimmer of hope promising that I would not be able to even out the score and challenge Harris in a tiebreak. That I would lose the match and the title instead.

40–30.

The chair umpire’s voice echoed through the stadium, yet it was barely audible over the screaming masses. My ears were throbbing, and I could feel the sweat trickling down the side of my neck. Desperately, I turned my head toward my box and locked eyes with my coach, Tom Dawson, trying to convey to him everything I was fearing. The sensation that was building up in the back of my head, tightening my throat. That this match was slipping away. That the crowd was slowly but surely poisoning my faith in a victory today. That I was scared. So *fucking* scared of losing, scared that they managed to get under my skin at the most important moment of my career.

Yet none of this seemed to reach Dawson. Even he didn’t seem able to see beyond my mask of indifference. I had fooled everyone except for myself.

I served again. *Fault.* And again. *Double fault.*

Deuce.

I felt my hands tremble and quickly hid them in my pockets. *Just like the last time. You were so close, and then, out of nowhere, you lost your nerve.*

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying and failing once again to push away the taunting thoughts of my past defeats. I just needed to take it point by point. Yes, the last few ball exchanges all went to Harris, but I could still win this game—the match, even. This was tennis, after all; everything could change in an instant.

Three seconds left to serve. Two seconds. The ticking shot clock behind me left me no choice. All I could do was play the next ball.

My serve flew over the net at full speed, but the return came back just as fast. Instantly, Harris and I were locked into an intense backhand rally, pounding the ball back and forth until Harris suddenly went for a change in direction. I scrambled for it even though I knew there was nothing I could do. Unlike me, he had taken the risk, and he was rewarded for it with a championship point.

Advantage Harris.

I leaned on my knees and tried to regain control of my breathing. By now, the crowd could no longer be held in their seats. Even the repeated attempts of the chair umpire to quiet them couldn’t quell their enthusiasm.

For them, the match was over. They were already celebrating my loss even though the game was still going.

Not yet. Not yet. Not yet, I told myself, repeating the words like a mantra.

I served again, putting everything I had into this shot. The crowd could celebrate all they wanted, but I was going to fight until the last second.

I attacked, playing long into Harris's right corner. I ran up to the net, getting ready to play a volley winner that could even the score again. Yet instead, Harris played a backhand straight down the line, and all I could do was watch helplessly as the ball dropped inside my corner of the court.

Game, set, and match Harris.

Momentarily, the noise faded away, and all I could hear was my own loud breathing. It was over. I fucked it up. When it had counted the most, I hadn't been strong enough. I had crumbled even though I had promised myself it would never happen again. Not like this. Not because of *them*.

In a trance, I walked up to Harris, congratulating him with a voice that didn't sound like my own. It took everything I had not to run off the court as fast as I could, to leave behind the cameras and masses of people who had done everything in their power to see me lose. And finally, the combined force of thousands of people had triumphed—they had brought me down to my knees.

With the cold metal of the runner-up trophy in my hands, I watched as gold tinsel rained down on Harris's head. I was almost drowning in the cheers of the crowd. I knew that losing a final always hurts. Today, I learned that losing a Grand Slam final was a special kind of pain. A pain that was crashing over me like a heavy, suffocating wave. My chest felt hard as stone, and no matter how much I gasped for air, it just wouldn't reach my lungs. All around us, people were gathering, congratulating Harris, shaking my hand half-heartedly. I could barely register them. Their faces were nothing but shadows.

I realized then that from the moment I stepped onto the court, I didn't stand a chance. For the audience, there had been only one player who was deserving of the victory tonight, and it wasn't me. That was clear to every single person in the stadium, especially me. I had been too weak, too incapable of letting the negativity just bounce off me. I had let them ruin

what could have been the greatest moment of my life, making the countless sacrifices over the years finally pay off. And *God*, how I loathed them for it.

// US Open Press Conference

Interviewer: Congratulations on your first Grand Slam final, William.

William Hagen: Thank you.

Interviewer: Very tough loss for you today. How are you feeling after the defeat? Have you had time to make sense of it yet?

William Hagen: How am I feeling after my defeat? Not too good, unsurprisingly. And yes, I have made sense of it. I lost because I wasn't good enough today. The better player won.

Interviewer: We noticed you played especially aggressively in the first set tonight. Was this in some way fueled by your past falling out with Harris and the rest of the team during the Battle of the Ages?

William Hagen: I played especially aggressively because I was trying to win my first Grand Slam title tonight. And I can't believe we are still talking about this. Next question, please.

Interviewer: William, how did it feel after you won the semis, knowing that no matter who you were going to play next, nobody was going to cheer for you?

William Hagen: Felt fucking great to be in the final.

Interviewer: We noticed your family wasn't in your box today. Were they following the match from home? They must be really proud of what you have achieved in this tournament.

William Hagen: No comment.

Interviewer: After today's final, you have cracked the Top 3 and are now behind Zhang and Bergmann, two of the best players in the world at the moment. How does it feel being somewhat of a bad guy chasing after the other players in the Top 3?

William Hagen: That's how you see me then? I'm not chasing anybody. Next question, please.

Interviewer: William, it would be interesting to get your opinion on Theo Eastwood's recent outburst in the quarterfinals. Were you able to follow the latest discussion in the media about the pressure and toxic perfectionism in the sport that followed the incident? What are your thoughts on that?

William Hagen: Yes, I've seen the highlights of the match and his kind of . . . let's call it a mental breakdown. I think we are all aware of Eastwood's rather . . . explosive personality on-court. Every player deals with the mental obstacles of this game differently. Because he and I are very different, both in our demeanor and in our game, I think it's difficult for me to comment on his . . . handling. What I can say, though, is that I find it a bit boring how much attention his show is getting, and I would personally encourage the press to focus on the outstanding tennis that has been played on these courts over the last few weeks. That is what we all came here to do and what you all came here to see, is it not?

Interviewer: Do you have any tips for players like Eastwood who are scratching at the Top 5 but always seem to buckle under the pressure and fail to advance?

William Hagen: It's hard work. Work harder, I guess.

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Chapter 1

I slammed the door with a loud bang, leaving the cameras and the tense atmosphere of the pressroom behind me. The moment the door fell shut, it felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Finally, I could stop pretending. Pretending this wasn't one of the worst days of my life. Pretending that the match and the subsequent press conference didn't make me feel more alienated than I'd felt in a long time.

I let my gaze wander over the lounge area, locking eyes with Dawson, who was sitting on one of the couches. He had followed my conference on TV.

"Don't even start," I said, letting myself drop down onto the couch opposite him.

"That was—"

"Humiliating? Painful to watch? Another journalistic triumph?" I interrupted him.

". . . pretty rough," he finished.

"That wasn't a press conference for a Grand Slam finalist; that was a public pillory. I mean, did you hear the kind of questions they asked me? How I'm the bad guy chasing their favorite players? What do they want from me? I mean, honestly, what did they expect me to say to that?"

"They did that on purpose, Will. They try to draw you out. You know they want to get under your skin," Dawson said. He passed me a bottle of water. I could see he was trying to calm me down, but the look in his eyes and his wrinkled forehead gave him away. It wasn't just me. He was just as agitated.

I took a sip before I leaned forward, dropping my head into my hands. Most of the adrenaline had now left my body, and the exhaustion from this intense four-set final was slowly overtaking me. But my mind wouldn't give in to the fatigue just yet. Not while all the built-up frustration and anger were still overshadowing every other emotion.

“I just can’t win with these guys. Whatever I do or say, I always seem to hit the wrong note,” I continued, my annoyance clearly audible.

I saw an amused expression appear on Dawson’s face.

“What?”

“No, no, nothing. You’re absolutely right. It’s just, you weren’t particularly . . . laid back today either,” he said with a hint of a smile on his face.

I let out a breath and leaned back on the couch. “Well, no, but I couldn’t just sit there and take it. I mean, they couldn’t even go through one sentence without mentioning something to make me feel . . . inferior. They didn’t even have the decency to try to disguise their insults today.”

For some time now, I’ve come to expect interviews that criticize my character instead of gathering information on my previous match. But after today’s conference, it was clear the questions were only going to get worse. I could practically feel the expectations changing. I may have lost tonight, but they knew they weren’t getting rid of me anytime soon, and it made them furious. But with this final, they had gotten their way. God, how pleased they must be with themselves after tonight. Everything turned out *exactly* how they wanted.

“I honestly don’t think I can get through another one. They were out for blood today.” By now, a dull pounding had set in at the back of my head, forcing me to shut my eyes in pain.

“Of course you can. But you shouldn’t have to.”

I opened my eyes again, carefully shaking my head. “It’s unbearable. You don’t understand the hostility in the room. And I get that I’m not their favorite player—that’s OK, I don’t need them to like me. I never have. But I need them to respect me. And they’ve proven today, once again, that they are too unprofessional to do so. I’m doing my job, why can’t they do theirs?” I whispered the last part, my voice wavering slightly.

Dawson nodded, a sad smile on his face. “You’re right. They have done a poor job today. They were biased, and they let you feel that. I can see on your face that they achieved exactly what they wanted. To get to you. To poison the way you think about yourself, about your performance today. I hate to see that, and believe me, I am just as pissed at them as you are.”

I nodded and took another sip of water. For a moment, we just stayed quiet. The throbbing sensation in the back of my head took over my focus again.

“And it could be worse,” Dawson said, his tone lighter now.

I drew up my eyebrows. “Could it?”

He nodded. “At least you’re not Theodore Eastwood watching the conference and listening to your rival tell the whole world you should just *work harder*.”

I dropped my head into my hands, letting out a defeated laugh. “I was annoyed, alright? I mean, what was the point of all those Eastwood questions anyway?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Are you really surprised? You know how they love to compare you two.”

Dawson was right; I shouldn’t be surprised. The press had two favorite topics, and asking me about Theodore Eastwood was one of them. Questioning me about my love life was the second. Always asking me if I was dating and who I was dating and what I was really looking for in a partner. All obvious attempts to delve deeper into the private life that I kept far too guarded for their liking. I still couldn’t quite comprehend what they would gain by knowing—for sure—that I was into men. Sated curiosity, I supposed. Fortunately, they had been holding back in that regard, but I should have known that they would find a way to bring Eastwood into the press conference. Especially after he had made himself the talk of the town a few days ago.

I had tried to block it out, but it was impossible not to come across the videos of his latest meltdown. They were all over the internet and being discussed on every single tennis podcast. I hadn’t seen the whole match, because I didn’t have the time. To be honest, I didn’t really care. He wasn’t much of a threat to me anymore. He was too unhinged, too lacking in control, and this incident proved it once again. Even though I had only seen a short summary of the match, it had been enough to see how every mistake, every out call made him lose his nerve. His face had mirrored all his pain and frustration. He just couldn’t hide it. He never could.

When another one of his second serves landed in the net, Eastwood snapped. He threw his racket, which wasn’t a new sight in itself. But he

picked it up again, only to slam it on the floor several times before throwing it into his bag in such a rage that he cut his hand on the broken frame. Naturally, things went downhill from there. He continued playing with blood dripping down his fingers, too proud to ask for a medical time-out. He unsurprisingly lost the final set to seal his elimination from the tournament. It would have been tragic to watch if I hadn't found it so pathetic. How could a sport that calmed me in a way that nothing else ever did cause someone to feel such a ridiculous amount of anger and pain? It seemed so absurd.

Not that this had anything to do with me and my devastating loss. I wondered what it would take to stop these constant comparisons between him and me. Playing the US Open final certainly didn't seem to do the trick.

God, it was ridiculous how many times we'd been through this and how the outcome was always the same. Despite his outbursts, Eastwood would be forgiven because he knew how to charm an audience—at least off the court. Since I lacked that particular skill, the media reports *always* came to the same conclusion—that he was a little out of line, yes, but that was still better than the coldness and indifference I seemed to exude. For them, we were like fire and ice. That's why, over time, Eastwood had become my least favorite player on tour. Not that I was particularly close to any of my other opponents, but my rivalry with Eastwood was personal. The press had made it that way, and there was no way of bridging the wide gap between us now.

When I lifted my gaze, I realized Dawson was quietly scrutinizing me.

"What?" I asked after he still didn't say anything.

"I'm just thinking about what you just said to me in the locker room," he put forth pensively. "How it felt to be out there today. How exhausting it was to fight against the crowd. And I just think it's time to do something about all of this. I know I said before that I really don't mind proving them all wrong with nothing but your performance on-court. But I can see what all the talk is doing to you. I know you're pretending it doesn't bother you that they've made you the antagonist in their story, but I can see that it does. I wouldn't be a good coach if I just let you continue to go through that."

I would love to confidently say that everything just bounced off me. But he was right. I had reached my limit. And the worst part was that I felt like there was nothing I could do about it. I would never be the player they

wanted me to be. And if I were being honest with myself, today had scared me. All their persistent criticism would scatter doubt into my game, and they would get exactly what they wanted. To see me fail. Not just today. But every time it counted.

I nodded hesitantly.

“I cannot watch you play a Grand Slam final, one that you fucking deserved from putting on an outstanding performance over the last two weeks, and still only have them criticize you,” Dawson continued. “It’s as if they only want to see the bad side of you, which they have single-handedly—and, I might add, almost impressively—made up entirely. So we are done with this bullshit. You take some time off, let your body recover, and I will use this time to come up with a plan to put an end to all this nonsense once and for all. Alright?”

I looked at him for a few seconds while I tried to ignore the relentless ache pulsing at the back of my head. I wanted to believe we could turn it all around. I really did. But right at that moment, everything just felt . . . hopeless.

“Good luck trying to achieve the impossible,” I finally replied.

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Chapter 2

“Alright, good training today!” Dawson exclaimed. He walked past me and sat down on a nearby chair in the lounge area of the Monte Carlo Country Club.

It was the first time I had been back on the court since my matches in New York. I took a couple days off. As much as I hated not training every single day, I wasn’t able to ignore how desperately my body needed to recover. This morning was the first day my reflection hadn’t greeted me with dark circles under my eyes or pale skin that made me look more dead than alive. Not that any of this came as a surprise. Playing a Grand Slam for two weeks came with a consequence. I had pushed myself beyond my physical and mental limits, and it showed.

But to my relief, I was finally ready to pick up my racket again today and get back into my rhythm. Repeating the same shots until they were ingrained in my brain. I had given my body a short rest, but that was the longest I could manage to sit back and take a break from my usual routines.

“How is your thigh doing?” Dawson asked suddenly, looking concerningly at the hand that was carefully massaging my leg under the table.

I hadn’t even realized what I was doing and quickly drew my hand away, shoving it into the pocket of my hoodie.

Whenever I played such long tournaments, my old injury started to act up. It was more like a phantom pain or a slight stiffness due to the length of time I had been dealing with it. The injury was from a time in my life I rarely wanted to think about. Not being on the court because of it had left me feeling stranded and in a state of constant despair and restlessness. I had spent hours at a time just lying in my bed and staring at the wall of my apartment, observing every little crack in my wallpaper. And the worst part was that no one could tell me then how long it would take for me to return to the tour or what level I would ultimately be playing at after my recovery.

Dawson was the only person who understood what I was going through. The dark thoughts that had eaten away at me night after night. He knew firsthand what all of it felt like. I could still see it in his eyes at times—the longing for something that would forever be out of his reach. A young prodigy who'd been forced to retire due to a serious shoulder injury that happened too early in his career. Who had the world at his feet right before he decided to take up coaching. Now I was the closest thing he could have to living his dream.

But unlike him, I was lucky. My body had recovered, and I was able to compete again. Since then, I've never taken another day on tour for granted. I tried to remind myself of that every time I stepped onto the court. Because that month of recovery had taught me that without tennis, I was nothing. This sport has been, and always will be, the most important anchor in my life, and without it, I feared I would drift away.

I cleared my throat. "It's nothing. Don't worry."

He looked at me intently for a while longer but then gave me a slight nod. "I got some news for you, by the way."

I put down my water and regarded him with raised brows. "You really came up with a plan then?"

"Of course I did. I was being serious in New York. Things need to change, and they certainly won't without us actively trying to initiate it."

He was right, I knew that. But right now, I wanted nothing more than to just let the whole matter rest. I wanted to pretend the constant media backlash would just disappear into thin air. It wouldn't, though. The last few years had proven otherwise. God, how I missed the times when I had been able to focus only on playing tennis and not on making the world like me. It didn't matter how many journalists I spoke to over the years; I still couldn't get myself to change. I couldn't act like the person they were all looking for. It just wasn't me. I wish it was, but talking to people I didn't know was never natural for me. And I should have accepted it by now. Because here I was, closer than ever to finally holding the trophies I had worked for since my adoptive parents signed me up for my first tennis lesson. It had been a hopeful attempt on their part to get me to take out my frustrations on the ball instead of the people around me. That should have been the only thing I cared about. But that wasn't the case anymore.

“I just got off the phone with Fernando, the director of the Ortega Cup in Cádiz, and was able to finalize everything,” Dawson went on.

My head snapped up. “The Ortega Cup? Honestly? That is your big master plan?”

“Yes, Will, playing a popular charity event will be part of our strategy.” Now he was the one regarding me with raised eyebrows.

“I don’t think I need to remind you what happened the last time.” I shook my head in disbelief. “I mean, you heard them. It’s been three years, and they *still* ask me about it.”

“Because that’s all they know about you,” Dawson replied firmly. “What we need, Will, is to give them something new to talk about. Just try looking at it this way: You never participate in these tournaments. At least you haven’t in the past few years, because we didn’t want to put your body under even more strain. The Ortega Cup will surprise them, and I think that’s what we need. To show you from a different angle.”

I let out a frustrated breath. I knew that this tournament was another bullet point on the long list of things that made the tennis world furious with me. It didn’t matter how many times I explained myself, they kept turning it around, making it sound like I didn’t want to participate because I didn’t give a shit about charity. If there was one thing they loved, it was painting me as the bad guy.

The Ortega Cup was an annual tennis tournament on the ATP Tour, yet the players didn’t earn points for their world rankings or prize money for themselves. It was all for a good cause, a charity event brought to life by Fernando Ortega, a former Top 10 singles player who always had a passion for doubles. In the last year of his career, he only ever played in a team. And that was exactly what made this doubles tournament so special—it was only played by professional singles players. Every year, sixteen European players could partner up and try to become the winning duo. Naturally, the media was an important part of this event. They followed the players on this thirteen-day-long tournament every step of the way. It was one of the reasons I had never been too keen on participating. And despite what the media said, I actually did care about their cause. Not that it mattered either way, because like Dawson said, the length and intensity of the event had made it practically impossible for me to compete in the past.

“So,” Dawson went on, “I just talked to the rest of the team, and they agreed it would be a good idea if you participated instead of playing one of the smaller tournaments in China. Fernando promised me that they can schedule you in last minute, which was pretty fucking lucky because the first day of training starts in a week.”

All I could do was stare at him for a moment.

“Who’s my partner, Tom?” I finally asked, giving in to the nagging suspicion that I wasn’t going to like the answer.

A tense expression appeared on his face. “Well, that’s the second part of the plan. We needed someone popular, who not only brings along a huge fan base but needs the press coverage just as much as you do.”

My fingers clenched around the water bottle. He couldn’t possibly be suggesting the player I was thinking of. “If you say Eastwood . . .”

His answer came in the form of a shrug. “He’s the one that checks all the boxes. I talked to Baldridge, his coach. Theo is on board. Which, to be fair, has more to do with him being down a doubles partner, and somehow believing he still owes me a favor, than being crazy about you either.” He finished and leaned back in his chair.

I let out a disbelieving laugh. “Tom, you cannot be serious. Again, you *know* what happened last time. He and I don’t do well in a team. I don’t think anyone wants a repetition of that. I didn’t think *you* would want a repetition of that.”

Dawson rubbed his face with his hands, and I noticed how tired he looked. It was safe to say that the last few months hadn’t just been hard for me. They’d been hard on all of us. The last thing I wanted to do was to make things more difficult, but I just couldn’t help but feel like a plan involving Theo and me was going to be anything but a disaster.

“Time to set the record straight, then.”

“That’s not how it will work, I can guarantee that,” I continued with my attempts at persuasion. “He is the complete opposite of me, and you know it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “No offense, Will, but the complete opposite is exactly what we need right about now. And I know that you guys are not exactly friends—”

“—or friendly—”

“—but you know the press loves him.”

I huffed out a laugh. “They are in love with him. There’s a difference. They just vote him the most handsome player on tour every year, disregarding skill and character completely.”

Dawson’s mouth twitched, but he regained his earnest composure in seconds. “If it was only about looks, then the press would be madly in love with you by now. There are quite a few other reasons why Eastwood is the crowd favorite, and you know it. He knows how to charm an audience and is always able to present himself in a favorable light. That’s exactly what we need right now.”

“Always, really? Except when he trashes another racket on the court,” I added, shaking my head in frustration.

I knew why Dawson would think this was a good idea, but he was disregarding how there was no way that Theo and I could pull any of this off. Yes, Theo was loved by the public, but he was just putting on a show in the press conferences, enjoying his time in the spotlight, but then couldn’t deliver on the court. I saw right through him, and I had thought Dawson would too. It made my skin crawl realizing how wrong I was about that. Theodore Eastwood really was able to put everyone under his spell.

“And the crowd forgives him every single time. That’s how charming he is. And I know you don’t like to hear this right now, but everything you . . . lack is something he can help you with, and the other way around. I think you’ll do each other good.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I do lack the expertise on how to best smash my racket.”

Dawson ignored my remark and continued, “Can’t you see how good this will be for your image? Not only will you finally participate in the tennis world’s biggest charity event; you will be playing with the most beloved player on tour. You guys will laugh together in the interviews, make the press believe you are great friends, and play great fucking matches. And after these two weeks are over, the crowd will have to rethink their opinion of you and finally cut you some slack.”

I regarded him quietly for a moment. “You know there is a good chance that after these two weeks I will still be the Norwegian Ice King in their

eyes? That we would be doing all this media bullshit with absolutely no results?”

Dawson shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, sure, that’s a possibility, but then again, no harm done. You’ve played a few games, you’ve supported a charity. It’s not going to make things worse.”

Instead of replying, I took a sip of my drink.

“Look, Will, you can say the word and we’ll call it all off. If you really don’t feel comfortable with any of this, you don’t do it. It’s as simple as that. I just needed to make a quick decision this morning. He and you together as a team . . . it’s just too good a match to pass up. You know that I would never have come up with this plan if I wasn’t convinced that it would work.”

I let his words sink in for a moment, quietly fiddling with the label on the bottle. “I can’t believe he actually agreed to any of this,” I said. “That must be some big favor he owes you.”

“Not in my eyes, no.” He shook his head. “And let’s not forget you’re a Grand Slam finalist. Training with you for two weeks isn’t the worst thing for a player like him at the moment. So it’s a win-win situation for everybody.”

To call this a win-win situation seemed like a big stretch to me, but I refrained from commenting. Everything in me was screaming to call off the whole thing. Theo and I . . . we just weren’t a good match. The atmosphere between us was already loaded whenever we stepped onto the court as rivals. But two weeks in Spain, pretending to be a harmonious duo that might even bring home the trophy? Not in a million years.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t . . . I just don’t think it will work,” I replied, trying to suppress the exasperation in my voice. “Sorry.”

“I figured you might see it that way. But can you do me one favor, Will?”

I nodded.

“Sleep on it for a night, alright?”

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Ortega Cup

Week 1

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Chapter 3

// Monday

By the time the tennis courts came into view, I still hadn't come to terms with the fact that I was actually going to do this for the next thirteen days. If we even managed to get that far. As much as I had resisted the idea at first, tossing and turning in my bed all night, I'd realized the only thing I could do was to surrender to my fate. I wanted things to change, and this was *definitely* a change. So I'd caved, agreeing reluctantly to put on a show for the world. Hope for them to applaud and be fucking smitten with us when we were done with all this. And that wouldn't be the only upside. There was no way Theo wanted to do this any more than I did. And making Theodore Eastwood do something he didn't want to do gave me more pleasure than it should. If that didn't show how desperate I was, then I wasn't sure what would.

But I couldn't pretend that it didn't still seem impossible. A tournament like this entirely depended on the spectacle that the players provided. The matches themselves were secondary. I didn't want to be the pessimist here, but I had a hard time imagining how Theo and I could be convincing in any way.

But it wasn't just that. The idea of being in front of the cameras all the time, trying to adjust my personality to make a critical crowd of journalists like me, worried me even more. And I had to fit in with the other players, many of whom already had a clear opinion of me. That seemed like extra torment in this whole plan.

The fans wanted to see us as this fun, laid-back group of friends off the court. So did the sponsors of the tournament. They seemed to be completely unaware that we had been rivals since we were teenagers, competing against each other on a daily basis.

But for the next two weeks, we would spend our evenings together at black-tie events and other social gatherings. If I recalled correctly, tonight was supposed to be a welcome event, complete with champagne, canapés,

and an inordinate number of speeches. I could say with certainty that it wouldn't be the highlight of my day—or night.

The driver pulled up to the parking lot and I got out, grabbing my bag. Looking around, I had to admit that as much as I dreaded the upcoming tournament, Cádiz really was an incredible place to play tennis. It wasn't my first time—I played the Cádiz Open almost every year—but the sight of the place never failed to impress me. The courts were surrounded by palm trees, and every free space on the grounds was covered in flowers. I didn't even want to know what their water bill was every month, but they had certainly created a little tennis paradise.

I made my way to the clubhouse, a modern building with huge glass windows and a terrace with plenty of space for players and coaches to retreat into between sessions. Since I had decided to fly in later that morning rather than arrive the night before, like most of the other players, I wasn't surprised to see many familiar faces already gathered in small groups on the hard-court area at the rear end of the site.

But I spotted Eastwood sitting alone on the steps in front of the main entrance. His long legs spread out in front of him, leaning back on his elbows, his face turned toward the sky with his eyes closed. Sunlight shining through the palm trees cast a shadow across his face, cutting his chiseled features in half. His light-brown hair swept away from his face, revealing light freckles scattered across it.

When he heard me approach, he opened his eyes but made no effort to sit up. Quietly, we looked at each other, both painfully aware of the absurdity of the situation. The two of us, here in Cádiz, entering a tournament together as "good mates." It was ridiculous, and we both knew it.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said after a moment with a small smile on his face.

Impressive, I thought. His smile almost didn't seem forced.

"Eastwood. Good to see you," I managed to say, but unlike him, I was not all that convincing.

His smile turned into a full-blown grin. "Hmm, I bet it is."

When he stretched out his hand to me, it took me a moment to realize that he was actually trying to get me to help him up. I was too distracted by the large cut just above the back of his hand. Healed now, but still

noticeable. God, he should be grateful he didn't hurt himself worse, considering how deeply he must've cut himself on his broken racket in New York.

"You're a world-class athlete, get up yourself," I said, moving my eyes away from his hand and regarding him with raised brows.

He let out a quiet laugh before pushing himself off the stairs, standing up to his full height, now towering over me.

"Did you get smaller since the last time I saw you?"

God, I really hated the smug expression on his face.

"You're standing on the stairs, Eastwood."

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "Ready for all of this?" He nudged his head toward the courts.

I nodded warily.

"Good. Just make sure you're on your best behavior, alright? You know what they say—there's no second chance for a first impression."

The only thing that would complete his arrogant intonation would be a wink.

"Right. So I *shouldn't* break my racket on the first day, then?" I said, the patronizing tone audible in my voice.

"Funny." The small smile disappeared from his face again. "Scared I'll transfer any of my *explosive personality* onto you?"

Clearly, someone had watched my nightmare press conference last week. To be fair, it wasn't surprising that what I had said about him had offended him, although I had tried to be as diplomatic as possible.

"Imagine what that would do to your image, showing some emotion," he then added brightly, his voice dripping with condescension. "Oh wait, that's exactly what we're all here for, innit?"

I clenched my jaw, my hand tightening on the strap of my bag. Less than a minute in and we'd already managed to wind each other up. This might be a new record.

For a moment, the only sound between us was the rustling of the wind in the trees. But then, to my surprise, Theo took a step forward and placed his hand on my shoulder. My whole body stiffened at the sudden contact. I

realized it was the first time he had ever touched me outside of the court. His hand felt like a heavy weight on my shoulder.

His grip tightened, and I had to fight the urge to shake him off.

“Let’s start again, alright?” he asked.

I regarded him skeptically, still deeply confused by his hand resting on my shoulder and the sudden change in his mood.

“Come on, Hagen, loosen up.” He tightened his grip again. “I know you would rather be doing this with someone else, and believe me, you’re not quite the doubles partner of my dreams, either. But let’s just get it over with and not make this any more painful than it already is. And who knows, maybe we can polish up your . . . *our* images and still have some fun over the next few days.”

He sounded as if he hardly believed his own words.

There was nothing I loved more than someone telling me to “loosen up” after saying something to offend me, but I refrained from commenting. As much as I hated to admit it, he was right. There was no point in making things harder than they already were. None of us wanted a repeat of what happened the last time we had agreed to be professional and play on the same side. After this tournament, he and I could go back to our normal lives and stop our charade.

But having him be the voice of reason still didn’t sit right with me.

“Fun might be a bit of a stretch.”

His face darkened for a second. Finally, I had managed to annoy him by not responding to his seemingly reasonable words the way he wanted me to. I knew it was childish of me, but I couldn’t help but enjoy making his mask slip just a little.

“You know what I mean.”

I held his gaze, purposely taking my time before responding. “Don’t worry. I am sure we both can manage to rise to the occasion.”

Eastwood studied me intently for a moment before giving me a brief nod, shouldering his bag, and heading toward the courts.

I followed him quietly. With every step, I got closer to the training venue, knowing that in less than a minute, we would make our first official entrance together. I found it harder and harder to believe that this was

actually happening. It was only when I felt my clenched jaw relax that I realized how tense I was.

“In case you didn’t know, I’ve won the last two years in a row,” Eastwood said and shot me a grin over his shoulder.

“I was wondering when this would come up,” I said dryly.

“Well, all good things come in threes, so I would be rather obliged to you if you would help me defend my legacy here.”

“I’m sorry, did you just say your *legacy*?” I asked, struggling to hold back a laugh. He was taking the event more seriously than I thought.

“Yes, Hagen. Legacy. Don’t tarnish it.”

“Yes, sir,” I shot back, my voice laced with irony.

Eastwood turned his head toward me and regarded me with raised eyebrows. “Sir?” he asked, and a grin played around the corners of his mouth. “Works for me, Hagen. Pretty much the division of roles I had imagined between us.”

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A tall woman in her mid-forties was leaning against the iron fence of the court, watching us approach. Right. I had nearly forgotten that Cristina Pérez, the former doubles champion, would be coaching us for the next couple of weeks. I almost felt sorry for her. All her life, her passion had been playing on a team, where she had become the best of the best. And now she had to coach *us*—two self-absorbed singles players who dreaded every second they had to share the court.

“Good morning, you two. Theo, good to have you back,” she said, shaking Theo’s hand in a familiar manner. “And great to have you on board, William. I am really looking forward to working with you for the next two weeks.” Cristina shook my hand.

“Thanks. I’m glad to be here.” I tried to put more enthusiasm into my voice than I felt.

“If it’s alright with you two, I want to dive right in and walk you guys through our training schedule for the next couple of days. Not many surprises for you, Theo, but we want to bring our first-time competitor, William, up to speed.”

“Hey, Theo!” a voice suddenly shouted from behind us, interrupting Cristina.

We turned around and were met with the grinning faces of Rufus Cardy and Maxton Lewis, two British players who had also signed up as doubles partners for the tournament.

“Don’t even think about copying any of our tactics just because you’re lucky enough to train next to us!” Lewis shouted. His smile grew even wider when he met Eastwood’s amused gaze.

Maybe I was imagining it. Maybe I wasn’t. But it felt as if they were deliberately looking past me—no, looking right *through* me—and I could feel a sense of anger welling up inside me.

Theo laughed. “You said that last year and you came in third, Lewis.” He turned back to me and Cristina. “Excuse me for just a moment. You can go on, Cristina; I already know everything that you’re about to tell my mate Hagen over here.” With that, he clapped me on my shoulder and jogged over to Cardy and Lewis, who were already waiting at the fence separating the courts.

Speechless, I watched him close the distance to join the other Brits, still feeling the lingering pressure of his hand on my shoulder. I couldn’t understand what they were saying, but their laughter kept echoing over in our direction.

Right, I’d almost forgotten how close Eastwood was with both of them, especially Lewis, who he had played with at the same club when they were growing up. But then again, I was pretty sure he got along with just about every other player on the tour.

I felt my fingers digging painfully into my palm, and I had to make a conscious effort to loosen my grip. Yet I couldn’t turn my gaze away from them.

It had been a while since I had seen them all together on the court, and the reality of it transported me back in time—an unwelcome reminder of the only team event I had ever played and the main reason I had been reluctant to Dawson’s plan. I had promised myself back then that it would be the only time I would participate in this kind of tournament, but here I was again. We only needed to swap Cardy for Andrew Harris and we would have the whole group back together. Luckily, this time it was just Theo and

me and not all of us thrown together in one team. I hoped that fewer people meant a better chance of dodging another press disaster like the last one. Because even three years later, I still couldn't understand why we hadn't been able to just pull ourselves together; instead, we'd managed to blow our chances of winning in one of the most eagerly awaited exhibition tournaments in recent times.

It had been a really big deal, not just for the fans, but also for the players. The old generation against the new. Multiple Grand Slam champions who had become tennis legends coming to the end of their careers against the new promising elite, who were desperate to prove themselves. When I was invited to join the team, I didn't have to think twice. I was creeping closer to the Top 10 at that time, and playing the Grand Slam champions felt like another reward. So of course, the four of us teamed up. It was our chance to show everyone that the next generation was here and ready to take over.

But we failed spectacularly. Not because we overestimated our abilities on the court but because we couldn't put our egos aside and work as a team. In the end, the only thing we achieved were new headlines: "Is the New Generation Too Competitive to Perform as a Team?" "Where Has Great Sportsmanship Gone?" "Is Everybody Only Fighting for Themselves?" It had been embarrassing for all of us. But even three years later, I still felt that everyone blamed me for that mess.

As if they had read my thoughts, they all turned their heads and looked at me at the same time. I swallowed, trying and failing to ease the tightness in my throat. They must have been surprised to see me, especially on Theo's team. Undoubtedly, one of them had already pointed out the unlikelihood of my presence here and our previous failed attempt to work together for the title.

Then Lewis raised his hand in a weak attempt at greeting me, and I half-heartedly returned the gesture.

Cristina cleared her throat behind me to regain my attention.

"Alright," she said. "Just a few final details. You'll have interviews every second day, but Isabel will provide you with more information on that. She's part of our social team and conducts the interviews this year. Afterward, you'll join me on the court, and we'll have a two-on-one technical session and work together to find the perfect rhythm for your game. Any questions?"

I shook my head. “Nope, sounds like a solid plan.”

“Great, then let’s get to work and start making a dream team out of you and Theo. Past winners have found it really helpful to start their day with a run together to get into the right mindset for training. And since you are both here to win and haven’t played together yet, it might be a very good idea to try their proven method. Ideally, start with it first thing tomorrow morning.”

My mouth fell into a disappointed line. There went my hopes of keeping at least one aspect of my routine to myself. Luckily, Cristina didn’t notice my disapproving look.

“Theo!” she shouted after taking a couple of steps in his direction. “Enough fraternizing with the opponent; come take William to the fitness room, please.”

Great. That made me sound like I was tagging along, lost without Theo’s guidance. I would hate it if they regarded Theo as my mentor—Theo, who generously agreed to share his wisdom with me. That was a clear division of roles, as he had called it, that would most definitely drive me crazy. And I knew where the fitness rooms were. It wasn’t the first time I’d been here. Of course, Cristina couldn’t really know that, but I was just generally annoyed that he was able to fit in so easily while I was constantly uneasy.

After saying goodbye to his friends, Eastwood walked over to the exit of our court and looked over at me expectantly.

“Coming, Hagen?” he asked, as if he hadn’t been the one holding us up for the last few minutes. We walked back in silence until we came across a small group consisting of a woman and three men.

“Hey, you’re alright?” Eastwood said in his polite, British manner as we passed them on the stairs. My attention was drawn to the last man in the group. I froze. No, this had to be a joke. Fate certainly couldn’t be *that* cruel.

“William, hi.” He broke away from the group and came closer to me. His hair was slightly longer than it was the last time I saw him—blonder, even, like he had just spent a week by the sea under the sun.

“Good to see you, Kjell,” I lied. In fact, it was not good to see him. Especially not here. I had enough on my plate as it was. I had not planned

on adding a past lover on top of everything else. Particularly not one to whom I hadn't spoken in over a year.

Kjell Andersen turned his head back to his colleagues. "You can go ahead," he told them. "I'll catch up with you in a minute."

I was hoping Eastwood would consider this as a sign to give us some privacy. But no. He stayed exactly where he was, watching us with interest from the side.

"I didn't know you would be here," I said after a moment, trying to ignore Eastwood's presence in this already-uncomfortable situation.

"Yes, I kind of figured. Unlike you, my involvement in this tournament was not announced on Tennis TV," Kjell replied, a slight smile playing around his lips. "I was looking forward to seeing you. How long has it been? A year?"

I nodded, though it wasn't quite true. We saw each other fairly regularly at different tournaments. But we've kept our distance, never speaking to each other, only catching glimpses from afar or in passing. Like there was this unspoken rule between us that we would pretend the past had never happened.

"Too long ago then. Maybe we have some time to catch up?"

I knew this tournament was too small to avoid each other, but I felt myself tense up at his suggestion. These two weeks should be about many things, but none of them were supposed to include Kjell.

"Sure," I said hesitantly. "We'll find some time." A weak attempt to not appear too curt.

"I'll take your word for it," Kjell replied and held my gaze for a moment. I felt my cheeks warm under the intensity of his stare. "See you around then." He let his eyes wander over to Eastwood, who was still quietly observing us from a couple of steps beside me. "Theo," he said. With a parting nod, he started to make his way down the stairs to catch up with his colleagues.

Still frozen to the spot, I stared after him. Just when I was about to turn around, Kjell caught my gaze once more. Slowly, a familiar smile spread across his lips.

It was the kind of smile I still knew well, even after keeping my distance.

I had met Kjell about two years ago, after Dawson had brought him into the team as my new physio. For over a year, we traveled together from one tournament to another. Two Norwegians who bonded not only over our shared roots but also over our love of this grueling life on tour. But after a long match and a late-night treatment in my hotel room, the boundaries suddenly started to blur, and his touch no longer felt purely professional.

We went on for six months like that, meeting late at night and returning to our separate hotel rooms in the early hours of the morning so that no one would see us. We had never said out loud that this thing between us should stay a secret, but somehow, he must have realized that I didn't want anyone to find out. Why draw unnecessary attention to it when, at least for me, it had always been strictly physical? It had felt good *exactly* as it was. It offered me a constant in my life—a new routine that, at least at night, had nothing to do with tennis.

But then things had begun to shift. Only Dawson and, to a certain extent, the rest of my team knew about my past, but in the seclusion of my hotel room, I had started to open up to Kjell. Suddenly our relationship started becoming a lot less casual. Which was not what it was supposed to be. He was never meant to be anything more than a welcome distraction. I had reached a crucial point in my career, and I knew I couldn't allow myself to lose focus. Not even for a second. So I ended things with him—both our professional and our personal arrangements. I expected him to resent me for the sudden change of heart, for putting my career first, but he just accepted my decision in silence. Then he became an official ATP physio.

In a way, we had parted on good terms, but we never mentioned our affair again. Avoidance had been the best strategy for dealing with our past.

Until now.

"Do I dare ask?" Eastwood suddenly said, interrupting my thoughts and drawing my attention back to him.

"Ask what?"

He raised an eyebrow at the tone of my voice. "Was that actually a friend of yours?"

"I know what you're implying here, but I'm going to take the high road and ignore your subtext, Eastwood. No, he is not a friend, but he was on my team some time ago, in case you have forgotten," I replied.

“Right. The Norwegian duo; it’s all coming back to me.”

I just shot him a glare and continued striding over to the entrance.

“Oh, come on, Hagen. At the risk of repeating myself—loosen up. I’m only kidding,” Theo said as he caught up with me. “I mean, you are officially my *best* friend right now, in case you haven’t read the press statement about our little reunion here.”

“Funny,” I said without a trace of humor in my voice.

“Right?” He opened the door and motioned me through with a broad grin on his face. “After you, mate.”

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Chapter 4

I put my phone back into my pocket and began to make my way over to the main entrance of the clubhouse. Half an hour ago, the shuttle service had picked us players up from the hotel, but after we arrived, I had gone off separately to talk to Dawson.

It was slowly starting to get darker, but the temperature remained roughly seventy degrees, making it the perfect late-summer evening. I rolled up the sleeves of my linen shirt and walked up the stairs to the terrace, where most of the players and sponsors of the Ortega Cup were gathering. From a close distance, I watched them greet the tournament organizers while smiling for the flashing cameras of the photographers.

No expense has been spared, I thought as I took in the rest of my surroundings. The terrace was framed with torches set in the ground for tonight's event, and the bar tables were decorated with flowers and white tablecloths. Well-dressed waiters made their rounds with trays of champagne and finger foods. Soft Spanish music played over the speakers, blending in with the guests' conversations.

I scanned the crowd and immediately spotted Eastwood. It wasn't too difficult—his height made him tower over the majority of the players he was talking to. He must have felt me staring at him because he suddenly looked up, and just for a moment, our eyes locked. Then, with a slight tilt of his head, he wordlessly gestured for me to come over.

I let out a deep breath, clenching and unclenching my hands before I forced myself to accept Theo's invitation. I picked up a glass of champagne off a tray along the way, taking a long sip to calm my nerves. It was ironic how many times I'd played against each and every one of those guys, but I didn't really know them off the court apart from a few formalities we'd exchanged over the years.

When I reached them, Theo opened up their circle for me to join them.

"What did I miss?" I asked, making an effort to blend in.

“Oh, just reminiscing about the good old times we had here last year,” Lewis answered. “You guys remember when I let that fan who kept interrupting our match with suggestions come on-court—”

“—and play out the next point?” Theo chimed in. “He served a fucking ace, mate. Don’t think I could forget about that.”

“Yeah, that kind of defeated the whole point I was trying to make,” Lewis said with a laugh. “It was supposed to be a learning experience for the guy. To shut him up and let us play.”

“Oh, well done then, Lewis. He definitely learned his lesson when he received the round of applause of his life,” Leo Bergmann put forth ironically before finishing the rest of his champagne. He was a German player, current world number one, and one of my toughest opponents. Playing him was like playing against an impenetrable wall. To get through him, you had to be brutal. But to win against him . . . oh, there was no feeling quite like it.

“Yeah, I know. I blame Theo, though.”

I let my gaze wander to Eastwood next to me, who was shaking his head in amusement.

“What do I have to do with that?”

I drank my champagne while they continued their conversation about the previous year. I listened for a moment, debating about whether or not I could find a way to join them, but quickly realized that it was impossible because, well, I hadn’t been there last year. Besides, it seemed like no one could finish a sentence before the next person was already jumping in. I guessed that was what happened when you conversed in a room filled with notoriously self-absorbed people. I didn’t blame them, though. After all, they had to be. We all did. When you were used to everything revolving around you and your every move, how could it be any different? On the court, nothing else could matter; the only things that did were *you* and *your* game. We were always the main characters. So I understood why they acted the way they did, but I just couldn’t bring myself to join in. I didn’t know where to start or what to say.

Quietly, I stepped out of the group and made my way through the crowd to the entrance of the clubhouse.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Hi, William,” Pavel Štěpánek, a young player from the Czech Republic, said with a self-conscious smile on his face when I turned around. “Congrats on your amazing run in New York.”

I felt my whole body tense up at his words. Receiving congratulations for one of the toughest losses of my career hadn’t become any easier. Yes, being a finalist was a big deal, but sympathy seemed more fitting for the situation.

“Pavel, right? I don’t think we’ve personally met before,” I replied with a strained smile.

Recently, he’d appeared on everyone’s radar after beating Delgado, the player who was still ranked number four at the time, at the Indian Wells final earlier that year. Not only was it the first time Pavel had beaten a Top 10 player, but the victory also made him the youngest ATP champion in a decade.

“No, not yet. So I thought I’d take this opportunity to introduce myself,” he said. “I guess we are both first timers at this tournament?”

I nodded.

“So, what do you think?” Pavel asked.

“Of what?”

“Of all of this.” He raised his hand with his drink and gestured toward the crowd. “This tournament, this event tonight.”

I slowly cast my eyes over the crowd gathered on the terrace, over the photographers taking one photo after another, until my gaze landed on the group I had just left behind. Theo was now talking to Bergmann, saying something that made him laugh, and I could just see that he was entirely in his element, fitting in with them. How could it look so natural on him when it felt so forced to me?

I averted my eyes and turned my attention back to Pavel. “Oh, I’m having a great time,” I said dryly, taking a sip of my champagne. “Great drinks.”

Pavel let out a laugh. “Not a big fan of exhibition events, huh?”

“Just not a big fan of these kinds of receptions.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he agreed, glancing at the crowd in front of us. “But in order to make some good use of this encounter, do you have any grand

words of wisdom for someone at the beginning of their career?”

Caught off guard, I froze, my glass hovering just short of my lips. While I wouldn’t have thought I would be the person to ask for advice, I considered his question for a moment.

“Are you happy with your coach?” I asked.

“Yes, more than happy. He’s great.”

“Good,” I went on. “Then don’t change that the second things get a bit difficult in your career. And, I suppose, don’t want it *too* much. Winning, I mean. If that’s the only thing you focus on, it’ll do you more harm than good.”

“Alright, don’t want it too much. Got it.” He gave me a friendly smile, but I could see in his eyes that he thought it to be an impossibility. He *did* want it all. He was hungry for the feeling he’d had at Indian Wells, and I understood. In the end, despite our differences in experience, winning was an addiction that united every single player in this room.

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By the time we decided to rejoin the others, the group had already moved on to the lounge area. The official part of the event was about to begin, and nobody seemed particularly excited about it. These kinds of formalities were always the same and always incredibly boring.

I hesitantly let myself drop down beside Eastwood on the couch, and he threw me a small smile, scooting to the side to give me more room.

“There you are. We thought we had lost you,” he said, amused.

The others stopped talking and looked over at us.

“Nope, just making some conversation,” I replied, trying to ignore the sudden silence at my presence.

“We were worried you might have fled the scene and gone straight to the airport. Leaving our poor mate here all alone on the court next week,” Cardy chimed in, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I frowned. Had they been talking about me while I was away?

“Why would I?”

“It’s not a secret that you have a habit of avoiding events like this, is it?” Lewis answered in Cardy’s stead. “No offense, mate, but it’s a bit of a

surprise to see you here among our humble ranks. It's been a while since the last time."

My jaw clenched at his words. Before I could reply, Eastwood beat me to it.

"Come on, guys, let's take it easy on our Ice King."

My head snapped toward him while my hand forcefully curled around the armrest. I *loathed* being called by that nickname, but having *Theo* refer to me in that way, knowing full well that we were here to overwrite that offensive image of me, made my feelings of contempt for him rise up again.

"I'm glad I'm still able to surprise you," I said as I slowly pulled my eyes away from him and focused back on Lewis across from me. I mean, what else could I say? He was right. It was unusual that I was participating; they knew that as much as I did. But to point it out in front of everyone seemed like an unnecessarily low blow.

"William Hagen, off-court, in a social setting is more than a surprise. It's a fucking miracle," Lewis said.

Beside me, I could see a grin spread across Eastwood's face. It made my knuckles clench even more tightly around the cool wood of the armrest. That expression, that arrogant smile, made my anger spike even more than Lewis's words had.

"I would love to be as frequent a guest at these parties as you guys are, but sadly, my priorities lie elsewhere. But I don't need to remind you; it already shows in the rankings." My voice was cutting.

Lewis looked taken aback. "Charming as ever."

My words seemed to have taken all lightness out of the conversation, and I could feel their eyes boring into me. God, how I wished I could just tell them to fuck off and be done with it already.

"Right," Theo said, clapping his hands together. "Change of topic."

His admirable intervention turned out to be completely unnecessary, as one of the presenters entered the stage at that exact moment. Good. I was more than done with this conversation, and at least now I could tune out all the chatter around me. A deep breath escaped my lips, and I leaned back into the couch, trying to ignore Theo's presence beside me with every ounce of strength I could muster. I let the introduction of the various charities and

the repeated declarations of how lucky they were to have us there wash over me. If they only knew that this was the last place I wanted to be right now.

When the mandatory speeches were finally over, I immediately took the opportunity to make my escape. As far as I was concerned, I had done my part. It hadn't exactly gone well—actually, it had been an absolute nightmare—but there was nothing I could do about it. No need to prolong it any further.

Standing up, I muttered a quiet "Excuse me" to no one in particular and pushed myself past Eastwood, carefully avoiding touching him in the process.

For a few seconds, our eyes locked. A questioning expression appeared on his face, but I just turned to leave.

As I walked away from the group, I felt a weight lift from my chest, making it easier to breathe. That was until I suddenly heard Lewis ask, in a pathetic attempt at a whisper, "So you are serious then? You're telling me you guys are suddenly *mates*?"

Instantly, I halted in my steps and turned slightly. I didn't know why, but for some reason, I just had to hear Eastwood's answer.

He shrugged his shoulders, an unreadable smile spreading across his lips. "Something like that."

Lewis raised his eyebrows. "News to me."

Slowly, Theo leaned forward and put his hands on the table in front of him. "I didn't know I had to ask for your permission, darling," he said.

I watched him pick up his champagne and slowly bring it to his lips, all the while still looking at Lewis over the rim of his glass. When he leaned back again, my eyes followed his other hand as it pushed the loose strands of hair out of his face. It was then that he must have felt my gaze on him. He slowly turned in my direction.

I tore my eyes from him, quickly heading down the stairs. Shaking my head, I snapped myself out of whatever trancelike state I had just been in. At least Eastwood had done one thing right. He hadn't told Lewis about our deal. So far, that seemed like the only positive thing he had done for me today.

I was aware that in reality, we hardly knew each other. But what I knew of him, I hated. Today certainly hadn't helped improve my opinion of him. I

knew I should try my best to use this opportunity as a fresh start, but everything in me resisted it. I just couldn't stand the way he expressed himself. His confidence—bolstered by his awareness that no one could ever *not* like him—was effortless. Wherever he went, he gladly accepted the spotlight. He magnetically captured everyone's attention. *Everyone's.* And as much as I hated to admit it, even mine. Maybe it did bother me that I had never been the recipient of this oh-so-charming side of him. It was interesting to see how Theodore Eastwood's charm stopped at me. Why that was, I couldn't really say. I had my reasons for wanting to keep my distance from him, but what were his for staying away from me? Why was it me who brought out this different side of him?

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Chapter 5

By the time I made my way to the lobby, it was almost midnight. Apart from the receptionist, no one else seemed to be awake in the hotel. After failing to fall asleep, I decided to get some fresh air in the hopes of calming my mind.

I let my gaze wander around the dimly lit pool area, where a few lounge chairs were placed between the palm trees planted by the hotel to create a more tropical atmosphere. The pool itself was rather plain, but I knew from my last stay here that it was big enough to swim laps in. I made a mental note to bring my swimming trunks tomorrow. When nothing else worked, swimming had always been able to calm me down. That or running until every last bit of energy had left my body. Although now that Eastwood was my new designated running buddy, running might be a thing of the past.

Rolling my sweats up to my knees, I sat down on the edge of the pool and slowly lowered my legs into the still, tepid water. I watched as it rippled back and forth, sloshing up the sides of the pool and into the drainage grates. It was soothing to look at, the steadiness of it.

“Not going in?”

Even without turning around, I knew it was Theo who was standing directly behind me. I’d been so lost in thought that I hadn’t heard him coming, yet I could feel his presence with just my body.

“Nope.” I kept my gaze firmly on the water.

“Don’t know how to swim?”

“Oh, fuck off.” I turned around, finally looking at him.

Theo chuckled and pulled his sweatshirt over his head, leaving him in just his swim trunks. Unfortunately, it took more effort than I wanted to admit not to stare at his bare chest.

I forced my gaze away, a little angry at myself for allowing his lack of clothing to affect me. At least it seemed like he had actually come to swim and not just to make my life miserable.

He jumped in headfirst and began swimming laps, while I went back to staring at the water, which had lost all of its former calm. Theo's hands breaking the surface became the only steady sound as he continued to glide across the pool. I knew I could have just gotten up and left, but I didn't want to give him the impression that I was running away, that he had affected me in any way.

When I heard him pull himself out of the water, I tried my best to keep my eyes down and not allow him into my field of vision. The seconds that passed felt like an eternity until I reluctantly looked up and found him sitting on the edge of the pool opposite me.

He had his gaze fixed on his chest. His wet hair covered his eyes as his fingers fiddled with his silver necklaces, struggling to rearrange them back in place. I had observed him doing the exact same thing on the court too many times to count. Struggling to separate them after another intense ball exchange tangled them up. Why he kept wearing them during matches and allowing them to break his concentration I could never understand. I guessed it was as much about vanity as superstition.

Theo dropped the necklaces back onto his chest and lifted his head. Instantly, his gaze locked with mine. I felt my cheeks burn when I realized he had caught me staring at him.

"So . . . you left pretty early," he stated into the tense silence, almost making it sound like a question.

"Well spotted." Was he actually going for some small talk now? I thought it was clear to him that there was no need to keep up the act when we were alone.

He looked at me quietly for a moment. "You know, next time it would be great if you could just give me a heads-up when you're leaving. I mean, we're supposed to be a team. And I just feel like it sends the wrong signal when you disappear and I have absolutely no fucking clue where you went." He tilted his head, brows lifting just a fraction. His tone was calm. Calm and *infuriatingly* condescending.

My previous embarrassment turned into sharp anger. *He* was pissed now? The audacity of this man was unbelievable. "Oh, I'm sorry, did you miss having me around as your entertainment for the night?"

“What?” Theo looked at me in genuine confusion. “Wait. This isn’t about what Lewis and Cardy said earlier, right?” he asked.

I didn’t reply, instead continuing to stare at him in silence.

“It is?” He let out a quiet huff of a laugh. “Oh, come on, mate. They weren’t actually serious.” Then he added, “And in case you forgot, you’re the one who made it personal . . . *again*.”

I didn’t have to ask what he meant by that. I should have known that this stupid “Battle of the Ages” tournament would come up sooner or later.

“That was three years ago. Do you really want to talk about this now?”

“I just don’t want a repeat of last time, that’s all.”

“Oh, and you think I do?” My frustration was now clearly audible in my voice.

“After tonight . . .” he said with a shrug of his shoulders, “you tell me.”

I laughed dryly and shook my head. The obvious blame, his arrogant tone—all of it sent a wave of heat coursing through my body.

Did he really think that I didn’t have any regrets about what I had said at the tournament? That I didn’t beat myself up about messing it up? Because I did. If things had happened differently back then, everything might be easier for me now.

But it wasn’t all my fault. They weren’t blameless either.

I exhaled and looked at my hands in my lap.

It should have been a minor thing—nothing that should have spiraled out of control. We were just supposed to decide who was going to face Delgado in the upcoming match. Delgado, the player who was a legend to all of us. The most dangerous one on the court. Out of the four of us, I had been the only one who had won against him before, so obviously, I should have been the one to face him. I told them my reasoning, but I guess I should have thought a bit more about my phrasing. *“I should play the next one. Or maybe even Theo, but definitely not Lewis”* hadn’t been the right thing to say. I still remember the dead silence that followed my words. I immediately regretted them, knowing full well that I had unnecessarily hurt Lewis’s feelings, implying that he was the weakest link.

I had only been thinking about winning, something all of us were desperate for. In that moment, I didn’t think sugarcoating anything would

be necessary. But I saw the shadow dart across Lewis's face the moment those words left my mouth. And I'd known I had forfeited my right to be part of the team. It became me against them. From then on, everything went downhill. It was Theo who played and lost against Delgado. The rest of us watched quietly from the sidelines. Our broken team spirit was on full display for everyone in the stadium to see. Even now, years later, the photos of our icy expressions after our defeat still circulated in the press from time to time.

"Look, you know exactly why I am here. I'm the last person who wants to risk sabotaging anything, alright?" I said, trying my best to remain neutral.

"Good."

I waited for him to say something else. But he gave me nothing—just looked at me with the same dismissive gaze.

"What else do you want to hear? Do you want me to apologize or something?" The words came out harsher than I'd intended.

A frown creased his brow. Water dripped from his hair and rolled down his shoulder. "No. I do not want you to apologize. I mean, yes, you were a dick to Lewis back then. Your words *definitely* fucked with his confidence. But no one is mad about that anymore. We all know that the press has blown the whole thing out of proportion and read into things that weren't even there. But it shouldn't really come as a surprise that I don't particularly trust your ability to be a great team player."

I closed my eyes for a second, trying to calm myself and just let his words roll over me. "Right," I forced out. It's not like I trusted myself any more than he did, but he certainly wasn't an inspiring example of team spirit either. "I guess I deserve that. But you know what really annoys me about this whole situation?"

"What?" Theo asked, his mouth curling slightly into a mocking smile.

God, he pissed me off.

"You guys all act like you are so much better than me, that all of it was my fault. And I'm not trying to say I should have said what I said. Yes, it was petty of me not to play another match after that. But I don't remember any of you being particularly sad about not seeing me on-court anymore. And what you said to the press later on . . . That was why they've been after

me for years, and you know it. So get off your high horse, alright?" Now my voice was clearly laced with anger. I was no longer able to hide how much he was riling me up.

That's what they all liked to forget—how they interviewed us after our defeat, asking about the icy atmosphere. Whether the new generation was capable of working as a team. They had called us a pit of snakes, where no one could fight for anyone but themselves. *"Not all of us"* had been Theo's reply, followed by a gaze in my direction that left no doubt as to who he was talking about. It must have been payback, the decision to single me out like that. It gave the media more ammunition to judge me. In one sentence, in four words, he had set my public downfall in motion. He had shaped every match I played from that moment on. They became battles against the crowd along with my opponent.

I wasn't the only one who made mistakes. But unlike him, I'd paid my dues. I was *still* fucking paying them.

Theo silently held my accusing gaze until he pushed his wet hair out of his face and averted his eyes. For a moment, the sound of water lapping over the edge of the pool took over again.

Then Theo cleared his throat. "It was a low point for all of us. Let's just agree on that. All we can do now is try to do better here in hopes that this nonsense will finally be put to rest."

I swallowed. I don't know what I wanted him to say. I just wished he would . . . understand. Finally see what he had done to me. To acknowledge, at least to some extent, his part in all of this. Slowly, I nodded. Just to give him some form of a response.

"And I'm sorry if Lewis and Cardy came on a bit too strong tonight," he continued, "but they were just taking the piss. For the record, I did tell them to shut up."

"Oh, right. Thanks for that."

Theo sighed and leaned back on his hands. Covertly, my eyes followed his movements. How he shook his head before dropping it and staring up at the sky in exasperation. It was clear that this conversation was extraordinarily painful for him.

I let my gaze drop into my lap again. Well, at least the feeling was mutual. But . . . he was right. We could dislike each other as much as we

wanted. But it all came down to one thing: We needed to do better this time. Yes, he annoyed me, and he'd done me wrong in the past. But I hadn't made a particularly great impression the last time we played together either. And I supposed my silent exit out of our first event tonight wasn't that confidence-inspiring either. Neither of us put on a great team performance today.

But if I were honest with myself, I had to admit he tried harder than I did to make things work. He wasn't always successful, but at least he'd tried.

We could either spend the next few days going around in circles, pissing each other off again and again and learning nothing from our past, or I could swallow my anger and try to close the gap. It was for the future of my career, after all. For that, I would do *anything*.

I let out a deep breath, forcing myself to let go of my last traces of anger. "We'll make it work this time. And I'm . . . sorry I just left without telling you beforehand. I didn't think you'd care."

"What makes you think that?" Theo asked and regarded me with a frown.

"It's not like we were having a real conversation. Besides, calling me Ice King doesn't really sell our supposed friendship very well, don't you think?"

"Doesn't everyone call you that?"

"Yeah, that's the point, Theo. I'd rather they didn't."

"But . . . why?" he asked again.

"*Why?*" I mimicked, looking at him in disbelief. I wasn't sure if he was mocking me or if he really couldn't understand. "Because that name points out my lack of emotions. You know, cold as ice? But you're right, who wouldn't love to hear that about themselves over and over again."

"Wait." He looked stunned. "This . . . isn't about you being from Norway?"

I laughed dryly. "Are you serious, Eastwood? Of course they *say* it is. But they can't exactly insult me directly, can they? It's not too difficult to get the subtext, though."

"Shit," Theo replied after a moment. "I know it doesn't help, but I genuinely thought it was a compliment. I mean, I thought that it could refer to your reserved demeanor on-court, but that's kind of your . . ." He trailed

off, searching for the right word. “Superpower. I guess I missed the whole offensive undertone.”

I searched his face. Was he just coming up with a weak excuse, trying to avoid any kind of accountability once again? But he seemed . . . genuine. The way he was looking at me, puzzled and almost embarrassed, I just knew he meant it.

I could feel myself ease up. Some of the tension finally left my body. “Superpower?” I said, a slight grin on my face.

“Fuck off.” He let out a laugh. “Just take the compliment, alright?”

We held each other’s gazes, and for the first time, I could sense a kind of understanding grow between us. This silence, it felt like a truce. Theo carefully slid back into the water. For a minute, he just let himself float, letting our tacit agreement linger between us. Then he slowly swam toward me. He lifted himself out of the pool and sat down beside me. Droplets of water landed on my skin, and I followed their trail down my arm with my eyes. I was acutely aware that, while I was wearing my sweats and a shirt, Theo was sitting beside me in barely anything. And I couldn’t help but wonder if he was thinking about that too.

With one quick movement, he suddenly pushed himself up from the edge of the pool, interrupting my thoughts. “Come on, we should get some sleep.” His mouth twitched. “I’d help you up, but you are a world-class athlete and all that.”

I rolled my eyes as I pushed myself up, slowly following the still-dripping Theo back to the entrance of the hotel lobby.

As we walked over to the elevator, Theo pulled his hoodie over his wet skin and threw an apologetic smile at the receptionist.

Oh, don’t worry, I thought. *She’s enjoying the view.*

I pressed the button for my floor and turned to Theo, glancing at him expectantly.

“Where are you going?”

He looked at me with surprise. “My room is right next to yours, William.”

Oh.

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Chapter 6

// Tuesday

I turned again, following Theo through another small, almost deserted alleyway. It was early in the morning, and neither of us was making an effort to start a conversation. The echo of our footsteps on the pavement sounded loud in my ears. I usually liked my morning runs to be quiet, but this heavy silence between us was different from the kind I experienced on my solo runs. This was the kind that was begging to be broken. The kind that pointed out the unfamiliarity and awkwardness between us, as if asking us why we were even together.

Last night had felt like something of a truce. But as we ran wordlessly alongside each other, it became clear that we didn't know how to be anything but rivals. Two people who barely spoke. We were well rehearsed in *that*. But now, neither of us could rely on it to deal with the other.

"So," Theo suddenly said, as if he had been reading my thoughts. "Shall we . . . play a game?"

"What kind of game?" I asked hesitantly. I wasn't a big fan of games, but I was eager to break this crushing silence between us.

"Maybe not so much a game. A Q&A." Theo rolled his right shoulder forward a few times in a stretch, slowing down slightly before matching my pace again. "You can start if you want. You can ask me anything for the next mile, and then it's my turn."

"Anything, you say?"

"*Anything.*"

This was more interesting than I'd expected.

"Alright." I took a beat to steady my breathing, tilting my head as I scrutinized him from the side. "Why did you owe Tom a favor?"

Theo seemed taken aback by my question as he ran his fingers through his hair. Something, I began to notice, he did a lot when he seemed nervous.

“I was expecting a question about my hobbies or something, but I shouldn’t be surprised that you skip the small talk.” He paused for a moment, shaking his head with a smile. “At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, I guess you could say I owe him, well, my whole career,” he said, shrugging.

“*Dawson?*” I said, disbelief resonating in my voice. “How?”

“He was the only one who managed to convince my parents to let me compete again,” Theo said hesitantly. He paused momentarily, as if he wasn’t sure how to continue. “The year before,” he then went on, “I had just started competing regularly and taking tennis more seriously. My parents started to worry about how angry I got after I lost a match. They thought I was neglecting everything else. My friends, school . . . basically wasting my youth. So they wanted me to step away from tennis for a while.”

It wasn’t difficult to picture his helpless parents watching their son lose his temper on the court, smashing his racket over and over again until it broke. Even I found it difficult to witness the pure self-hatred he exuded in those moments.

Theo’s mouth was set into a tight line. “It’s funny, really. I mean, I could have gone out and gotten drunk every night, but I was the problem because I was too focused on my sport.”

I let my gaze wander over his tense expression. It was oddly thrilling to get to know this other side of him. In all these years, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Theo like this. So solemn and brooding. I had only known him as the hot-tempered, unpredictable player *or* as the carefree conversationalist between matches. Always joking, never serious.

“God, I was so pissed at them.” Theo shook his head as if he still couldn’t believe it.

“Broke a few rackets, didn’t you?” I asked teasingly.

Theo’s mouth twitched. “Among other things.”

“You are too predictable, Eastwood.” I felt a smile tug at my lips.

It was strange, really. How talking while running and having an excuse not to meet each other’s eyes brought a new sense of lightness into our conversation. For the first time, it felt like we were speaking more freely with each other.

“Are your parents more supportive now?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Yeah, definitely. Generally, it was never really a question of us not getting along. They just found it hard to understand why I would want to devote my life to something that seemed pointless to them. They are both doctors—and so is my brother. They can’t really believe that I’ve built a career in such a competitive sport.”

As we turned into another deserted alley, I let his words run through my mind against the echo of our footsteps. He was one of the few players on tour whose parents also didn’t devote their entire lives to their children’s careers. Most of our opponents came from homes made up of tennis coaches, former players, or other professional athletes. Which made sense. There weren’t many tennis players who had made it this far without parents who’d unrelentingly pushed them there.

When you were young, it was easy to fall in love with the sport. But to stay in it, to endure it alone without the support of your family, was not. The endless rounds of competition and tournaments meant coming to terms with the harsh reality of losing—constantly. Somehow I hadn’t pictured Theo, who came from a wealthy family and had spent his youth playing in the most exclusive London tennis clubs, as someone who had fought his way to the top without the support of his parents. Apparently, I’d misjudged him. He may have had their financial support, but he had to pick himself up on his own after his defeats. We had that in common, it seemed.

“Anyway, I obviously have a career, so they can’t really say anything now. But I have a feeling that winning a couple more tournaments this season wouldn’t hurt,” Theo added, forcing a smile back on his face.

Now I also knew why he drove himself to the brink on the court whenever he felt a match slipping away. He wasn’t just playing for himself. Even after all these years, he still seemed to need to prove to his family that he really was good enough.

“Winning more trophies is your big strategy?” I said, mirroring his smile. I felt a drop of sweat roll down my forehead under the increasing warmth of the morning sun.

Theo let out a small laugh mid-stride and shrugged his shoulders. “It’s the only one I got. Let me know if you come up with a better one.”

We turned around another corner, and finally, the deep blue sea was out in front of us, its surface shimmering softly under the sun. Despite running all morning, I felt a sense of relaxation spreading through me.

“Nice view, huh?” Theo said.

I nodded, deeply breathing in the warm, salty air.

He checked his watch before returning his gaze to me. “My turn now, Hagen.”

“*Finally*,” I replied, masking my growing sympathy for him with irony.

“What part of Norway did you grow up in?” Theo asked immediately. He also seemed to have his question ready and waiting. The hesitant note in his voice, along with the way he was looking at me, made it clear that this was a loaded question. Theo must’ve known at least some details of my upbringing, which didn’t really come as a surprise. Whenever there was an article about me in the press, they occasionally liked to include the fact that I had been adopted. But that was all they knew about my childhood, and I was more than happy to keep it that way.

Theo certainly didn’t know that I had been given up for adoption at the age of four, when my biological mother had finally admitted that she was an alcoholic and that she couldn’t look after me. And my father—if I could even call him that—I had never met. Consequently, I was moved around a lot in my early years, which is why I found it difficult to answer Theo’s question. But he had been honest with me, and I felt like I should give him something in return.

“Oslo,” I said, lifting my shirt to wipe the sweat from my face. “For a while I lived in the city center, then more in the suburbs, and later in Drammen.”

“And when did you start playing tennis?” Theo asked, and I silently thanked him for the slight change in subject.

“When I was seven, almost eight.”

It was after I had been placed with my second family, who ended up adopting me. And while I was too young to really remember my biological mother or my first family—my memories were very fragmented—I do remember feeling so incredibly angry when they gave me away. For years, this emotion had been taking over every part of my body, making it almost impossible to settle in with my new family. Even at that young age, I was painfully aware that I wasn’t the child they had hoped for when they made the decision to adopt. And I couldn’t even blame them. I couldn’t imagine

anyone being overly excited about having an angry six-year-old in their home, especially when the child was essentially a stranger.

Eventually the social workers suggested that sport might be a good outlet for my frustrations. My dad decided to take me to a friend of his, a tennis coach at our local club. I had my first tennis lesson a few weeks before my eighth birthday. And then I had another. And another.

I remembered thinking at the time that *nothing* compared to the feeling of hitting the ball and realizing I was actually good at something. Although I never truly connected with my parents, I would always be grateful for that first tennis lesson all those years ago.

“Did your . . . parents support the start of your career?” Theo asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I stiffened. I definitely preferred to take on the role of the questioner. “I guess,” I said hesitantly. “They paid for my lessons until I got in contact with the federation. Then they covered all my expenses and eventually sent me to tournaments all over the country. My *family* wasn’t a big part of my life at that time anymore.”

I knew it sounded harsh, but honestly, things had been looking up for me by that point. Step by step, I built my career, got better and better until I could compete as a junior all over the world. I was able to put the whole family nightmare behind me and stop pretending that we were something we were not. My success on the court showed me that I could only rely on myself. That tennis gave me all the stability I needed in life.

“Now I feel like a complete prick for whining about how my parents didn’t always support me,” Theo said, cringing. He was slowing his steps and let his gaze wander over my face.

I avoided his eyes and kept my own fixed straight ahead. “Why? I asked you a question and you answered. I mean, we’re not comparing who had a harder life, are we?”

“No, of course not,” he quickly replied.

I felt he still had a thousand more questions on the topic, but I hoped that my closed-off expression conveyed to him that I was done talking about it.

Sharing information about my past and my family was off-limits. I just didn’t like to think about it. It left a tight feeling in my chest whenever I did. The same one I was feeling right now. I tried to steady my breathing

again, drawing the salty sea air deep into my lungs. But with Theo's eyes burning into me from the side, it did nothing to calm me down.

Just let it go, Theo. Do not force me to talk about this.

He cleared his throat, and involuntarily, my head snapped to him. Finally, our eyes met. For a moment, I felt as though he could see right through me, reading every thought in my mind.

I quickly tore my gaze away from him again.

"Hobbies?" he asked, a sudden warmth in his voice.

"What?"

"Do you have any of those, William?" A broad grin was spread over his face now.

Against my will, I had to laugh.

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Chapter 7

Isabel regarded the cards in her hand. “OK, first question. What are you looking forward to most during the Ortega Cup?”

She didn’t seem much older than us, maybe in her late twenties, though most of the social media teams tended to be young. For our first interview, three chairs had been set up, with Theo and me sitting next to each other, framed by palm trees in the background. Isabel was facing us in the third, sitting right beside the camera.

I looked at Theo, hoping he would jump in and give me more time to think about the question. It should be simple enough to answer, but I honestly couldn’t think of many things I liked about this tournament.

“Go ahead,” Theo said, leaning into his chair while casually draping his arm over my backrest.

Perfect. Our minds were *truly* aligned.

“The weather,” I said after a pause that felt way too long.

Isabel raised her eyebrows, and I quickly began racking my brain for something less meaningless and more tournament related. This wasn’t quite the new version of myself I wanted to debut in the interviews. Even I knew that commenting on the weather in Spain wasn’t exactly the right answer.

“And . . .” I went on, even though I still wasn’t sure how I was going to finish my sentence, “playing with Theo. On these beautiful courts.”

I could feel myself turning red as soon as the words left my mouth. “Playing with Theo”? That’s really what I came up with? There was no way he would let me live that one down. I could already feel his gaze on me, but I kept my eyes locked on Isabel in front of us. I gladly spared myself what I imagined would be the current expression on his face.

“Right. I am also looking forward to playing with my mate William here,” Theo said with a light clap on my shoulder. “On these *beautiful courts*.” I could hear the suppressed laughter in his voice. “And the atmosphere during the matches next week. It’s special here. The Spanish fans really know how to push us players, to motivate us.”

He could at least have waited a little bit to mock me instead of doing it in front of the entire media team.

“Yeah, the Spanish crowd really is something else,” Isabel said, throwing Theo a smile. “For the next question, we need some creative energy from you two. What team name would you give yourself for the tournament?”

I swallowed my embarrassment and, instead, put a lighter expression on my face. “You go ahead,” I said to Theo, copying his previous words with a fake, calculated politeness. “Love to hear your thoughts on this one.”

He caught my gaze and raised an eyebrow before he turned back to the camera. “The . . .” he began. A concentrated look appeared on his face. “Terminators,” he finished.

“Over my dead body,” I said, but I couldn’t stop the grin from forming on my lips.

For a second, Theo seemed to be genuinely embarrassed about his response, yet caught himself quickly. “Yeah, over mine as well, actually. I regretted it the moment the words left my mouth.”

“How about team ‘Fire and Ice’?” Isabel suddenly chimed in. “Theo bringing in his firepower, and William always keeping his cool on the court. You need a name that captures the unique essence of your team, don’t you think?”

William always keeping his cool on the court. My eye twitched at her words. I knew that I was too sensitive, sometimes reading into things that weren’t there. But it was always the same story that I was getting so tired of hearing. I certainly wasn’t going to comment on her idea. Theo could let his charm help us out here.

“Hmm, yeah, I like that,” he said, right on cue. “Definitely beats my Terminators suggestion.”

Isabel laughed. Neither of them seemed to notice the growing tension inside me. “No, it’s a good choice. Shows the fighting spirit. Which is a nice transition to our final question. On a scale from one to ten, how confident are you that you will go home as Ortega Cup champions?”

“Oh, a ten, definitely,” Theo said, now looking at me. “Right?”

I nodded indifferently. “Yeah, ten. Let’s be optimistic.”

“Was there anyone who didn’t say ten?” Theo asked. “That would be a good thing to know. Exploit their lack of confidence on-court right away.” He grinned.

“Everybody said ten,” Isabel replied.

Theo laughed. “God, we’re all arrogant.”

“No, no, confidence is good. I like that,” she said. “And that was the last question. Short and sweet today. Thank you, guys. Really looking forward to meeting up with you over the next few days.”

She turned her attention back to me, probably realizing that I hadn’t been part of the conversation for the last minute.

“And I am really looking forward to seeing some of the Ice King’s magic next week. It will be fun to see you play doubles for a change,” she said.

Although Isabel gave me a friendly smile as she said these words, I couldn’t help but tense up even more, heat creeping up my cheeks. *The Ice King.* Cold, isolated, and acting like he was above everyone else. That was what I heard when she called me by that nickname, whether I wanted to or not. It might not have been what Isabel meant to say, but her words still got to me. They did every time, and I hated myself for it.

“Of William’s,” Theo said, suddenly interrupting my thoughts.

I turned my head, looking over to him, but he kept his gaze directed at Isabel. Unlike earlier in the interview, there was no humor in his expression.

Isabel and I both regarded Theo questioningly, confused by what he was saying. “Sorry?”

“Of William’s,” Theo simply repeated. “I’m sure you will see a lot of *William’s* magic next week.”

“Right. Sorry, I’m looking forward to seeing you play, William,” she said, but I could see from the look on her face that she still wasn’t sure why Theo had corrected her.

I was just as confused, to be honest. Was he trying to come to my rescue after we had talked about the dreaded nickname last night? I supposed it was a nice gesture, demonstrating that he had actually listened to what I said. But I didn’t need him to defend me. If I wanted to put the press in their place, I could do it without his help.

“Thanks,” I replied, getting up from the chair and picking up my bag, which I had stashed behind the camera equipment.

“See you tomorrow, guys,” Theo said before following me down the stairs. “That went alright, don’t you think?” he said once he had caught up with me and we were out of earshot.

I shrugged my shoulders. “It was fine, I guess.”

Together, we walked toward Cristina, who had just brought a large basket of tennis balls onto the court.

“You know, you didn’t need to do that,” I said before I could stop myself.

“What?” Theo asked, confused.

“What you just did. Defending me. I’m able to handle those situations by myself, alright?”

For a moment, Theo regarded me quietly. Then he let out a low laugh.

“How is that funny?” I said, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

Theo shook his head slightly. “It’s not, really. You’re impossible to please, that’s all.”

Before I could really think about what he meant by that, he came to a halt beside me. “Look, William, I know you can. But we’re a team, right? I didn’t like what she said, and so I let her know,” he said, holding my gaze for a moment. “Don’t make a big deal out of this.” With that, he slapped me on the shoulder and walked over to Cristina, leaving me standing there, stunned by his words.

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Chapter 8

“We know you both can play; there’s no need to prove it. Start communicating with each other.”

Cristina’s frustrated voice was still ringing in my ears when I stepped into the elevator, making my way down to the hotel pool. I was looking forward to finally immersing my body in the water, to wind down and stop worrying about Theo and our questionable chances of victory. Because at the moment, I couldn’t stop thinking about our performance earlier that day, in the scorching afternoon heat. Our results had been rather . . . mixed. And that was putting it mildly. Most of our practice had consisted of Theo trying to hit ace after ace, resulting in more double faults than I had seen him play in a long time. All the while, I struggled to stop playing like I was the only player on the court and to start thinking like a doubles player. Things had improved by the end of our session, but it was clear that we were still a long way from instinctively understanding each other or working together as a team.

When I arrived at the pool, stepping into the calm night air, I saw Theo already sitting by the water. For a moment, I just observed him, debating whether or not I should join him. He wasn’t aware of my presence yet. I could still return to my room unnoticed. But the urge to dive into the calming water was greater than my desire to avoid Theo. And to be honest, the last thing I wanted at that moment was to be alone in my hotel room.

I walked over to Theo, lowering myself down beside him.

He turned his head and acknowledged my presence with a smile.

“No swimming tonight?” I asked as I pulled my shirt over my head.

“Thought I’d wait for you,” he said, but still made no move to take off his hoodie and get in the pool.

“Impressive team spirit,” I said, following Theo’s example and lowering my feet into the tepid water.

When he didn’t respond, I carefully slid the rest of my body into the pool. Shivers ran down my spine as I felt his eyes on me, but I chalked it up to

the sensation of the cold water on my skin. I took a deep breath and pushed myself off the edge.

The second I went under, a familiar sense of calm spread through me. I let myself glide the entire length of the pool. Exhaling, the air rushed around me as I rose to the surface for a short breath. I continued to swim, falling into a well-rehearsed rhythm.

With each stroke, my muscles relaxed, and for a short while, I almost forgot that I wasn't alone. *Almost.* I soon became acutely aware that Theo was probably still sitting where I had left him, perhaps even watching me, just as I had watched him the previous night. And that thought, for some reason, sent another shiver through my body. After an internal debate, I decided to do three more laps before seeing if I was right.

The moment I broke the surface and opened my eyes, they instantly found his. As if they hadn't left me for a second. I expected him to avert his gaze after I caught him staring at me so blatantly, but he didn't. Instead, he continued to study me intently, his eyes flickering in the dim light.

"You know, I watched some of your US Open matches," Theo said suddenly, breaking the silence.

I felt my face stiffen and regarded him warily. That was not the kind of topic I wanted to talk about right now. "Have you now?" I asked evasively.

"Your run in New York was incredible. I just wanted to tell you that."

"Thanks?" I said, surprised. Getting somewhat of a compliment from Theodore Eastwood was definitely a first.

"The way you play, especially in high-pressure situations . . . I don't know. There's something about it. I don't think I have ever seen anything like it. It's . . ." A slight blush crept across his face when Theo caught my confused gaze.

"It's *what*?" I asked after a few seconds. If he started the sentence, he could very well finish it.

Theo cleared his throat. "Impressive."

I raised my eyebrows. I had a feeling that sentence was supposed to end differently. But since I did not want to revisit one of the worst moments of my career right now, I decided to leave it at that.

Thankfully, it seemed like Theo wasn’t going to continue the conversation. With one quick motion, he pulled his hoodie over his head. I could see goose bumps spread over his skin when it was met with the cool night air.

I wasn’t used to watching him undress in front of me; I felt like I was witnessing something forbidden. Which was ridiculous. Because I’ve lost count of the times Theo had taken off his sweaty clothes in a shared locker room or played shirtless on the court beside me. But here, in the dark, it just somehow felt . . . different.

When Theo began to quietly float on his back, I put some distance between us and swam over to the other end of the pool. Tonight was a weird night. There was no other way to describe it. Meeting here, the previous conversation that was still hanging heavily between us. The two of us, we’d just *never* talked like this before.

And I was beginning to wonder if some of the nicer things people said about Theo might actually be true. I liked to categorize people. I always have. Once I had formed an opinion, I rarely changed it. Theo had always been my rival and polar opposite in every way. He was partly why the public regarded me in such a hostile way. Sure, it wasn’t entirely his fault, but he still contributed to the problem. Now he was supposed to be part of the solution.

I exhaled. Being just rivals had been easy. This . . . this wasn’t.

Suddenly, Theo dove down, swimming across the pool and surfacing just a few meters away from me. I couldn’t take my eyes off him as he ran his hands through his hair. His face was still partly submerged, as if the water were framing it. Everything about him looked so different here, in this pool, so unguarded.

“So, the Terminators, huh?” I said lightly, trying to ignore this new realization of mine.

A small grin spread across his lips. “You know, I was hoping we could pretend I never said that.”

I shrugged. “It’s going to be your fault if there are any Terminator signs at our first match,” I replied. “Though still better than Team Fire and Ice.”

“Yeah, the answer should always be no team name at all. Although I don’t think Isabel meant it that way, you know? I think she was genuinely

trying to say a nice thing."

I raised my brows. "Maybe. But I've heard it too many times by now. It's rarely said without judgment. She may be an exception to the rule, but believe me, my past experience with the press has taught me they usually think otherwise."

For a moment, Theo was silent again, but I could see that he was holding something back, biting his tongue.

I let out another breath to brace myself. "Alright, say it then."

He met my scrutinizing gaze. "Say what?"

"Come on, it's written all over your face. You clearly have an opinion about what I've just said. So just say it."

He hesitated for a moment. "I just think you're making your life harder than it has to be, that's all."

Maybe I shouldn't have asked. "Meaning?" I prompted reluctantly.

Theo pushed a strand of his wet hair out of his face, struggling to find the right words. Once again, my eyes involuntarily followed his every move.

"I know you've had your share of bad experiences with the press. And I get that you approach journalists with a certain amount of caution now, but I think you've gotten into the habit of reading too much into their words, taking everything as a personal attack. And then you just withdraw completely, and your silence is taken as . . ." He trailed off.

"*As?*" I asked, although I did not want to hear his answer.

Theo avoided my gaze, instead looking past me and into the water. "Arrogance."

"Oh wow, no need to sugarcoat your words here, Theo." I huffed bitterly.

"I am not saying you are," he quickly amended. "All I'm saying is that it would make your life easier if you'd just stop seeing everybody as your enemy. That's how you come off in your interviews, and it doesn't reflect well on you."

"Well, thanks a lot for the tip, but it's not that easy," I replied, irritated. I wished we'd never started this conversation. Why did I even have to ask his opinion? I had just been thinking about warming up to Theo, and seconds later we were entangled in yet another argument. Maybe he was exactly the same as I'd thought him to be.

“I’m not trying to offend you or defend them or anything.” In one quick stroke, he swam to the edge of the pool, letting his head drop back against the wall. “I mean, it’s not like I’m never confronted with any backlash in the media. We all are. It’s part of the job. I certainly didn’t like the articles about my outburst on-court. So what I’m trying to say here is—I get it, and I know it’s draining and all that. But I think you’re making yourself too much of a target for them,” he finished, and although he avoided my gaze, he sounded compassionate.

I rubbed my face with my hands. Theo didn’t get it. He just didn’t get any of it. It was easy to say that when you were the crowd favorite and loved every second in the spotlight. His ideal environment was my nightmare.

“I think our situations are a bit different here. You might get criticized for something now and then, but we both know that five minutes later, you’re everybody’s darling again. That’s not how it is for me, is it? We are very different people, you and I. Maybe it is easy for you to just grin and bear it and always find the right thing to say in interviews. It’s not for me, alright? I’m not good at talking to strangers or being in front of a camera. But no one has ever given me the benefit of the doubt that I might just be . . . shy. No, I have been labeled as arrogant, as you so nicely put it, from the very beginning of my career. So thanks again for the tip, but I think you’re missing the bigger picture here.”

Theo turned his head and regarded me silently for a moment. I could see that he was turning my words over in his mind, clearly surprised by what I had just told him. So was I, to be honest. I hadn’t really planned on being so blunt with him, but I couldn’t just let his false assumption about my character go unchallenged. He could try to give me all the advice he wanted, but he didn’t know me well enough to truly understand my point of view.

“We really don’t know each other that well, do we?” Theo said after a few seconds, as if he had just read my mind.

I shook my head. “No. We don’t.”

Letting my fingers skim the surface of the water, I watched the ripples move back and forth.

“I really was trying to be helpful,” Theo said. “Insulting you wasn’t the plan. I’m sorry if—” He stopped in the middle of his sentence as a phone ringing cut him off. With one effortless movement, he pulled himself up,

and I watched his tall silhouette, water dripping from it. He bent down and fumbled for his phone in the pocket of his hoodie. Pulling it out, he looked at the screen and frowned.

“Sorry, I have to take this, it’s Baldridge. He wouldn’t bother me this late if it wasn’t important.”

I nodded, even though he didn’t look at me before he lifted the phone to his ear.

“Hey, what’s up? No, no, go ahead, I’m just at the pool with William.” He listened for a moment. “What does it say?”

Within a second, his whole demeanor seemed to change. Theo stood completely still and closed his eyes, his fingers curling into a fist. It was hard to read his expression. He seemed almost . . . defeated.

“No, I’m fine,” he continued, but his voice was shaky now. “Thanks for giving me a heads-up.”

His eyes snapped to mine, suddenly aware that I was still there, and he quickly moved farther away from me.

“I know, I’m just surprised, that’s all,” he said more quietly. “I didn’t expect him to say something like that, but . . . I don’t know. Actually, can I call you back? I don’t really feel like talking about it right now.”

He nodded and pushed his hair out of his face. “Thanks. I know, I know, don’t worry. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Theo ended the call but kept staring at the phone in his hand.

“Everything OK?” I asked hesitantly, aware that the chances of him wanting to discuss whatever was bothering him with me were pretty slim.

He turned in my direction, a blank expression on his face. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just think I’ll call it a night.”

Without saying another word or waiting for a reply, he grabbed his hoodie and towel and turned around, leaving me behind in the darkness.

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As I placed my towel on the dresser, I found myself replaying Theo’s abrupt exit in my mind for what must have been the hundredth time. I cursed myself—and Theo—for feeling even more stressed now than I was before my swim.

Tomorrow I'll ask him what happened, I decided as I walked over to my bedside table to check my phone. Three messages from Dawson popped up on my lock screen; one of them included a link to an article featuring Theo's name.

I let myself drop down onto my bed and opened a website with a photo of Theo underneath the headline.

"WHILE HE [THEODORE EASTWOOD] MIGHT BE GREAT, I DOUBT HE WILL EVER BE ONE OF THE GREATEST," RYAN SCHMIDT, FORMER COACH OF THE CURRENT WORLD NUMBER 8, TELLS US.

My fingers curled around my phone, and I hesitated for a moment before I started reading.

> **Joey Thompson:** As former coach of fan-favorite Theo Eastwood, and possessing years of experience training with the best, would you share your professional opinion with us on whether we can expect Theo to rise in the ranks in the upcoming season?
>
> **Ryan Schmidt:** He is without question an outstanding player. After all, he has been in the Top 10 for a while now. But we can all see how hard he has to fight to stay there. He barely holds his spot. He's standing in his own way with his inability to keep his emotions at bay. We all love Theo, of course we do, but do we love his tennis? To answer your question—no, I don't think he will. While he might be great, I doubt he will ever be one of the greatest.

I fell back onto my bed and dropped my phone beside me as if I had burned myself. God, that was a low blow from Ryan. Theo had switched coaches two years ago, and the official statement was that they had parted on good terms. I mean, those statements were rarely the truth, but when you've been together for as many years as they had, a change could've been necessary. No wonder Theo looked like he had been struck. Those words from his former mentor must have felt like a slap in the face.

I dropped my arm over my head and took another deep breath. Next door, Theo was probably questioning all of his talent, and I couldn't help but feel bad for him. As much as he'd annoyed me earlier, I didn't wish for him to be publicly humiliated by someone he used to admire. Yes, he needed to work on a couple of things if he wanted to move up the rankings, but to say that he didn't have a chance of improving was just bad judgment. Even I could admit that.

Normally, I wouldn't have given this article a second thought. It didn't concern me—none of it did. But I knew that's exactly why Dawson had sent me the link earlier. To remind me that Theo and I were a team now. If one of us didn't perform during this tournament, our plan would fail, and all of this would've been for nothing. For our sake, I needed to swallow my earlier frustration to keep Theo from tearing himself apart over this.

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Chapter 9

// Wednesday

He was already waiting in the hallway when I left my room, two minutes before we were supposed to meet.

“Hi,” I said. It was the first word I had spoken out loud this morning, and my voice was hoarse.

“Morning.” Theo barely met my gaze.

We made our way to the elevator in complete silence while I tried to look at him discreetly. The dark circles under his eyes made it blatantly obvious that he had been awake for most of the night.

I cleared my throat. “How are you?”

“Splendid,” he muttered, still not looking at me.

Right. I shouldn’t be surprised by his curt answer. I would be the last person he’d want to talk to about something like this. He and I may be a team temporarily, but in our hearts, we were still rivals. Last night had demonstrated that. And talking to your rival about your flaws was the last thing any of us would voluntarily do. But if he wallowed in his self-doubts all day, our upcoming practice session would be even worse than our last one. So I had to step out of my comfort zone and at least try to get to Theo. But the longer I took to say something, the harder it got. I wasn’t good at this kind of thing. Finding the right words to comfort people.

I let my gaze drift over him once more, taking in his messy hair and tired eyes. Maybe he would initiate a conversation eventually. After all, he was the talker out of the two of us. But his furrowed brow and tense jaw did not give me much hope.

By the time we reached the part of the route that ran along the sea, neither Theo nor I had said a single word. Finally, I forced myself to bring up the subject.

“You know it’s bullshit, right?”

“What?” he asked, clearly still in his thoughts.

“What he said about you. He couldn’t be more wrong.”

Theo met my eyes for a moment. “And what makes you think that?” he muttered before moving his gaze to the waves crashing against the rocks beside us.

“Because I *am* in the top,” I said jokingly.

“Right,” he answered dryly, shaking his head.

I clenched and unclenched my hand, feeling a slight nervousness rise inside me. “Because we are here right now.”

He seemed unimpressed by what I was trying to say.

Alright. We weren’t getting anywhere this way. I cleared my throat, searching for the right words. “How many people try to be where we are? Who are talented and work hard, but ultimately, they just aren’t good enough? But *you* are really fucking good.”

Theo’s head snapped toward me, disbelief spreading over his face.

I tore my gaze away. I wasn’t done yet. “Is there still room for improvement? Of course there is. I doubt you’re *that* arrogant to believe otherwise.” I threw him a teasing grin and met his eyes again for a split second, noticing how he raised his brows at my words.

“But that shouldn’t offend you,” I continued before he could reply. “It should motivate you. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. It’s just a stupid interview. If anything, prove him wrong by working even harder than you already do.”

My words hung heavy in the air, a charged silence stretching between us.

“Maybe. But it’s just . . .” He broke off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

I watched the breeze blow his hair out of his face as I waited for him to continue. “It’s just *what*?” I asked impatiently.

“It’s just fucking embarrassing, alright?” he choked out, his voice sounding bitter. “He might as well have told the whole world that I got into the Top 10 from sheer luck.”

“Well, have you not?”

His gaze burned into mine as he gradually slowed to a halt. “What are you saying?”

I stopped beside him. “What I’m saying, Theo, is that I think we’re all lucky to be here. I’m not trying to take away from all the hard work we’ve done, but to some extent, I think it’s true. We have been privileged to find the right coaches at the right time, the right teams, if only temporarily. I know I consider myself very lucky in that regard.”

He let out a dry laugh and leaned back against the low sandstone wall that lined our path, the morning sun spilling over the sea behind him. “I highly doubt he meant it that way.”

“Maybe not, but I mean it,” I said, shrugging. “And I mean it when I say that his ‘professional judgment’ is complete bullshit. It has *nothing* to do with your potential.”

My own agitated words echoed in my ears. If someone had told me a couple of days ago that I, of all people, would be trying to cheer up a shaken Theodore Eastwood, I would have thought they were delusional.

But right now, I almost wanted to grab him and make him snap out of it. Because I understood. Imagining Dawson criticizing me so cruelly in an interview, I wouldn’t know what I might do. It was unfair and unprofessional, and that was exactly what I wanted Theo to understand. And yes, I was saying this partly because I needed him to perform well this week but also because the defeated expression on his face really made me feel sorry for him.

“I didn’t think there was any bad blood between us after we went our separate ways,” Theo finally spoke again. “And it’s just . . . I used to value his opinion a lot. I mean, he coached me for five years. Longer than Baldridge even. If he doesn’t know me, then who does?”

Theo propped his hands on the stone wall, leaning back and angling his body away just enough to avoid my eyes. I watched a drop of sweat make its way down his temple and travel along his chiseled jawline.

“You can’t seriously tell me, *Theo*”—I put extra emphasis on his name, trying to get him to look at me again—“that you honestly believe his opinion? He wouldn’t have coached you for so long if he didn’t think you could make it. It’s payback for something. I don’t know what, but it’s an embarrassingly unprofessional interview. That’s for sure. You should be fucking mad at him, not questioning your talent.”

Theo turned his head, looking directly at me for what seemed like the first time this morning. I felt a sense of warmth spreading through my chest.

“You know what?” he asked, a small smile curling his lips upward, instantly lighting up his face.

“Hm?”

“Baldridge said something very similar to me yesterday, but it didn’t really . . . get through to me.”

“Because you’re paying him and you’re afraid he’s biased?” I replied, returning the smile.

Theo laughed. “Something like that. But it really means something coming from you. No offense, but you wouldn’t hesitate to tell it to my face if you thought my tennis sucked.”

My grin widened. “None taken. I definitely would have.”

“I was almost a bit scared of that, honestly. That you’d agree with him.” He was still smiling, but I could see that he meant it. He wasn’t joking. Theo really had been worried about my opinion.

“Well, for the record, I do not agree with him. At all.” I kept my eyes firmly on his.

For a moment, Theo searched mine for the truth behind my words. I couldn’t stop my heartbeat from quickening under the intensity of his stare. Briefly, it felt like time was passing more slowly. I hadn’t noticed how green his eyes were. I had never paid any attention to them, but now I found it hard to believe that I hadn’t realized it before. They were a dark green, speckled with brown around his iris.

Abruptly, I tore my gaze away and forced myself to look at the crashing waves. No wonder time was passing more slowly. We were standing around and putting off our run.

“We should head back,” I said.

Before Theo could reply, I started running.

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Chapter 10

Seems about right, I thought when Lewis hit an ace straight down the middle, giving me absolutely no chance of reaching the ball in time. Yes, yes, the beauty of serving without pressure. I would love to see him hit a shot like that for a match point.

Unfortunately for me, it wasn't just Theo and me today. Six of the other players also joined us that morning to play games and provide the media team with content.

Cristina had taken on the role of head coach, coordinating the training among the whole group. The other players were all now standing on the sidelines, watching Lewis win against me in today's final match. I could feel Cristina's eyes on me, her notebook poised in her hand. I was almost certain she'd spent the session cataloging every weakness in every player's game. And since Theo and I hadn't come out on top today either, I'm sure she had found plenty to say about ours too.

I swallowed my annoyance at losing my match with Lewis and reminded myself that I was making an effort to be nice today. The initial icy atmosphere between me and the other players had caused an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach this morning. Honestly, I had been kind of nervous to see them again. Theo had been right; I had made it personal. *Again.* And I didn't know if that'd caused them to hold a grudge against me—Lewis in particular. It made the idea of training with the team in front of the cameras an especially draining one. But so far, my worries were unfounded. Nobody had interacted with me much that morning. To be fair, they never did, but everything had gone smoothly despite how I'd behaved during our last encounter. They'd let me off the hook, so the least I could do was try to be . . . nice.

I stepped up to the net and gave Lewis a congratulatory handshake before following him to the benches.

"It was a pleasure to beat you all," he said with a smug smile.

“Someone is awfully proud of himself for winning a practice match that no one actually took seriously,” Theo replied. He regarded Lewis with a raised eyebrow, one arm casually propped up on the backrest of the bench, twisting and turning his racket in his lap.

I had to stifle a grin at Theo’s words. This game meant nothing in the long run, but we both knew that each and every one of us wanted to win. Everything was a competition for us, and though we had joked around today, we were still opponents. We *never* liked to see the other one win. Beating each other was where the real fun began.

“Don’t be jealous, Theodore,” Lewis shot back. He took a step closer and ruffled Theo’s hair with his hand. “But I get it. I would be a sore loser too if I got eliminated in the second round. Better get some more practice in before next week, mate, or I see a *very* bleak future for you.” He teasingly dropped down beside Theo and put an arm around his shoulder. “You don’t want to make it too easy for us.”

I sucked in a breath through my gritted teeth. It didn’t seem like the most tactful thing to say to Theo after last night’s headlines. Not when his former coach had predicted his bleak future less than twenty-four hours ago.

I carefully let my eyes wander over Theo’s expression. He had a smile plastered on his face, yet it didn’t reach his eyes. I watched his grip tighten around his racket so firmly that I could see his knuckles turning white.

I couldn’t stop the slight anger from rising in me at his reaction.

Fuck being nice.

“And if you could bring the same energy to the actually important matches, Lewis, it might help *you* avoid a *very* bleak future.”

Theo’s head swiveled toward me. A surprised expression appeared on his face while Lewis’s seemed to slightly darken at my words.

“Thanks for the advice, Hagen,” was all Lewis said. He slowly rose to his feet. Now it was his smile that didn’t seem to reach his eyes.

I refrained from replying. After all, there was nothing to say. I took his place on the bench next to Theo, watching the other players put their rackets back into their bags and slowly leave the court.

“You know, you didn’t need to do that,” Theo said quietly, as if he were afraid we would be overheard. “Defend me.”

Was he serious? *That* was his reaction to Lewis's words? I snapped my head around to look at him, but before I could say anything, I noticed an amused grin spreading over his face.

I paused. *Oh.* The familiarity of his words suddenly struck me: They were the very same ones I threw at him the last time he stood up for me.

For a moment, I just watched the amusement glinting in his eyes.

I leaned farther back against the bench, not breaking the eye contact between us. "I'm just realizing it might be impossible to please you," I said, matching his teasing tone. *I didn't forget our conversation either, Theo*, I thought. Two could play this game.

He laughed quietly and rubbed his jaw with his hand. *Well played* was what I was reading on his face, and his expression made me grin more.

I leaned closer to him. "Don't make a big deal out of this, alright?" I slapped him on the back.

Quickly, I pushed myself off the bench and slung my bag over my shoulder. Without another word, I took off behind the other guys to the showers. I didn't know if I'd imagined it, but I felt Theo's eyes on me every step of the way. I guess the roles really were reversed today.

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I closed the door to the locker room, leaving Theo, who was still deep in conversation with Cardy and Lewis, behind. The whole atmosphere in there had been rather charged, but I couldn't really complain about it this time. After all, I had intentionally made a joke that I knew Lewis wouldn't find particularly funny.

Still, I left the locker room slightly angry. Not because of Cardy and Lewis, but because of Theo. When he had finally caught up, he quickly and seamlessly joined Cardy and Lewis's conversation. His mask was back—upbeat and carefree Theo, not even glancing at me. It was as if a switch had flipped inside of him, and out of nowhere he was back to pretending I didn't exist. Half an hour ago, we were sitting side by side, joking around. I could have sworn a kind of familiarity was forming between us. And now he was suddenly talking to every single player *except* for me? It felt deliberate somehow. Like a game. And if it was, I did not understand the rules.

I shook my head, trying to snap myself out of it. Then I rounded the corner and ran straight into another body. Instinctively, I gripped the other person's arms to prevent them from falling. Still startled, my gaze settled on a chest that was all too familiar. And even before I saw his face, I knew it was Kjell I had run into.

I heard his "So sorry" at the same moment I muttered my apologies. Abruptly, I let go of him and took a step back.

"I was actually hoping to run into you, Will. Though I didn't mean it quite so literally," he said with a teasing smile before adding, "Having fun so far?"

I arched a brow, and a slight grin spread over my face. Kjell knew that I had never been a fan of exhibition tournaments. I hadn't been then, and I wasn't now.

"Oh, I'm having a blast," I said, the irony in my voice clear.

"I'm sure you are."

We locked eyes for a moment, a tense silence settling between us.

"How are you?" I finally asked.

"Not bad."

I just couldn't grasp the vibe between us. There was still a familiarity, but that made the situation almost more uncomfortable. We knew each other, but we also didn't. Not anymore. And everything left unsaid between us, this unspoken tension, triggered my instincts to flee.

"Good." I adjusted the bag on my shoulder. "I should go."

When I attempted to walk past him, Kjell suddenly put his hand on my arm, holding me back.

"When can I see you?" he asked.

I looked around, checking if anyone else was overhearing our conversation. "I don't think that's such a good idea," I answered quietly.

"No need to panic here, Will," he said. "It was solely an offer to catch up as, you know, old friends and all."

Oh. I guess reading people wasn't a strength of mine off the tennis court. "Sorry, I didn't want to assume anything."

He leaned against the wall with his shoulder. "I just wanted to hear how you are doing—how the whole team is doing. It feels strange to pass you

daily on the courts but not catch up. Not know how all of you are."

I could feel him trying to find my gaze, but I held my head down. It did feel strange, yes, but this was what we did at any other tournament. Ignoring each other had worked well for us so far, and I wouldn't have minded continuing to do just that. Especially at this particular tournament, where I already felt constantly on edge. I circled my shoulders, and a tense ache spread down to my back. The events of the day had already taken a physical toll on my body.

"But it can be about other things too," he went on before I was able to reply. "That depends entirely on you, Will."

My head shot up, and I met his gaze. Right. I had almost forgotten how direct Kjell was—never afraid to ask for what he wanted. I used to like that about him, but now his words just panicked me. It was a tempting offer. It really was. But the timing could not have been worse.

I exhaled. "I don't really know what to say."

"Think about it," he said simply. "But just to let you know, the physio staff are staying in the same hotel as the players. So . . . I'll be close by."

My eyebrows shot up. Somehow, this didn't sound like a spur-of-the-moment idea. Which surprised me. After I ended things between us, I had thought he wanted to stay as far away from me as possible, despite him seemingly taking my decision well.

I could feel him studying me, trying to read what I was thinking, and slowly, a small smile formed on his lips. He thought he had convinced me, misinterpreting the silence between us as an agreement on my part. But he hadn't convinced me. At least not yet.

"Seems a bit risky," I stated.

A dark shadow darted across his face, but a second later his smile was back in its place, making me think I had imagined it. "I thought sneaking around was part of the appeal for you."

For a moment, memories of us in a hotel room in Shanghai flashed before my eyes. Despite everything, I was tempted to say yes. We used to have fun. And maybe there was a way we could get together secretly, just like old times. It seemed like a nice way to get my mind off things for a few hours. But then again, this tournament meant something. It was a way to improve my career. To make my life easier.

“Room 223,” Kjell said, cutting through the heavy silence between us. His voice sounded charged, reminding me of the times he had given me his previous room numbers.

“I’ll think . . .” I began, but stopped in the middle of my sentence when Kjell suddenly took a step back, fixing his eyes on something behind me.

Quickly, I spun around, following his gaze. I felt my whole body freeze on the spot. I was met by a grinning Theo, leaning confidently with one shoulder against the wall, his bag hanging loosely over his other.

“See you later, Will,” Kjell said with a soft smile while walking past me.

I exhaled and pushed a strand of my hair out of my face. A part of me hoped that he had somehow missed most of my conversation with Kjell, but judging by the way he was smiling at me, I wasn’t too optimistic. At least it was just Theo, and Cardy and Lewis were nowhere to be seen. A very small consolation.

I looked at him expectantly. “What?”

He pushed himself off the wall, slowly making his way over to me.

“Oh, nothing, *Will*.” His smug expression made me uneasy. “Just never pictured you as somebody who mixes business with pleasure.”

Lucky me. He was talking to me again.

“Back off, Eastwood.” I tried to sound unbothered, even though my mind was racing, desperately looking for the right words to handle this situation. He’d heard us talking. He now knew about Kjell and me—or at least was able to put two and two together. This day was going *so* well. I hadn’t even started to process Kjell’s offer, and now I had to worry about Theo not keeping his mouth shut. Would he share my private life with people who had no business knowing about it?

I swallowed, fighting the tight feeling in my throat. I really needed some air. The narrow hallway was starting to make me dizzy.

I turned to walk away, very well aware that Theo was going the same way as me. He wouldn’t let me off the hook so easily. I could almost hear his brain turning, trying to process the new information he just learned about me. But before he could say anything more, we both heard Cardy and Lewis approaching. Grateful for this interruption, I exhaled audibly, which earned me an amused chuckle from Theo.

“Saved by the bell,” he whispered.

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Chapter 11

One more lap around the pool and I should let my body rest for tonight, I thought as I glided through the water. I could almost hear Dawson's voice in my head, telling me not to exert myself too much. Advice I would gladly take if somebody could tell me how to calm my anxious brain. Until then, I would swim and let the cool water do its job.

When I reached the end of my lap, I was breathing hard and my shoulders were aching. I pushed myself out of the pool and walked over to the lounge chairs, water running down my body. Before I pulled my sweatshirt over my head, I rubbed my hair dry with my now-damp towel.

It was quiet out here; only the faint sound of traffic reached me from time to time. I soaked in this peaceful late-summer night as I relaxed into the lounge chair. I closed my eyes, making myself more comfortable, but my thoughts were immediately drawn back to Kjell and our earlier conversation. Apparently, there weren't enough laps I could swim to make myself forget it.

Even after everything, he still wanted to meet up with me again? Had he actually forgiven me? Because I knew that I had let him down. Not that I regretted it; I would never regret putting my career first. It was just unexpected that Kjell would want to go down this path again. But maybe he saw it differently this time. More . . . casual. We already tried something more serious, and it didn't work out. He couldn't be interested in reliving that again any more than I was.

In that moment, having him so close to me, looking at me in that way again, had almost gotten me to agree to his offer. Even now, there was a strong, familiar sensation pulling in my chest. But then Theo had appeared, and instantly, his presence had brought me back to my senses. It was like a wake-up call. Kjell and I were something from the past, and it didn't matter how he made me feel—it just had to stay that way. All I could do now was hope that local gossip Theodore Eastwood would keep his mouth shut and not spread the news that I was hooking up with my former physio. That he would not ruin everything we were trying to achieve here.

Just then, I heard the door of the pool area shut. Once again, I didn't need to open my eyes to know it was Theo, who now settled in the chair beside me. I felt his presence before he even said anything. Slowly, I turned my head and met his mischievous grin.

"You again," Theo said.

"I didn't know you were so into swimming," I stated.

His grin broadened. "I'm not. But I thought I might find you here."

"You came looking for me? I suppose I should feel honored." The sarcasm in my voice was impossible to miss.

Theo raised his brows, and even in the darkness, I could see the amusement glinting in his eyes. "As you can imagine, I do have a few questions about that little situation I witnessed earlier."

I immediately tensed at his words. *Of course* he couldn't just let it go.

"What gives you the impression that I want to talk about this with you?" I replied, trying to mask the panic rising inside of me.

His mouth twitched. "Oh, you can't blame me for wondering . . ." He let the rest of the sentence hang in the air, purposely trying to bait me.

Which, unfortunately, worked. "Wondering *what*?" I shot back.

"Oh, you know, now that I found out that you like to mix business and pleasure, I was just *wondering* . . . if you ever hooked up with one of the players?"

I looked at Theo, utterly speechless for a moment. This man really had no filter. And the stupid grin on his face. Clearly, he was enjoying this. Digging deeper while being fully aware of how uneasy it was making me.

"I can't believe you're seriously asking me this," I said after I'd recovered.

"What?" he asked with false innocence. "I'm just curious. I thought we were getting to know each other better this week."

I rubbed my face with my hands in exasperation. "If I answer this one question, can we agree to never talk about it again?"

Theo's grin spread wider. "If you insist."

I shook my head no to answer his initial question. It seemed like the easiest way to get him to shut up. Or rather—the *only* way.

“Just the physio then. Noted,” Theo replied. “Interesting.”

“And why is that interesting?”

“Didn’t think he was your type,” he said matter-of-factly with a half shrug.

I tilted my head and regarded Theo with a furrowed brow for a moment. How would *he* know what my type was?

“Let me rephrase that then,” he went on. “Ever fancied one of the players?”

“I said one question, Theo.”

Despite the cool breeze, I felt a strong sense of heat washing over me. I didn’t need to look at my cheeks to know that they were probably flushed by now. If I could be thankful for one thing tonight, it was the dim lighting hiding the visible effect this conversation had on me.

“It’s still the same question. Just a little bit rephrased, *Will*,” he shot back, a teasing spark in his eyes.

I held my ground firmly, allowing my gaze to wander over his face. Silently taking in how his lips softened into a challenging smile, how a strand of his hair had fallen across his forehead. I noticed how dark green his eyes were and how they were shimmering in this light. God, he really was enjoying making me this uncomfortable. Maybe I would follow his example.

I sat up, leaning closer to him. “You know, Eastwood, that’s actually a great question. I didn’t know how to bring it up before, so thank you. I have, in fact, been desperately in love with *you* for the past five years. Every time you throw another temper tantrum on-court, trashing yet another expensive racket, I can barely hold myself back.”

Theo shook his head and laughed. “Alright, alright. I guess I had that one coming.”

I leaned back on my hands, restoring the distance between us. “Are we done with the questions then? Can we *never* talk about this again?”

“For now.”

A heavy, loaded silence fell between us. Our previous conversation was still echoing loudly in my mind. Desperately, I searched for any way to change the subject and ease the uncomfortable tension between us.

“Do you . . . feel better?” I questioned hesitantly. Bringing the topic back to the interview seemed to be the best strategy at the moment.

Theo shrugged his shoulders. “More or less.” He let out a deep breath. “There’s just this one . . . comment that I can’t get out of my head.”

“Comment?”

“Under the article, yes.”

“Care to tell me what it said?” I asked when he made no effort to elaborate. Apparently, *someone* was only talkative when it concerned my dating life.

“It’s stupid, really,” Theo said, rubbing his face with his hands. “Someone wrote ‘It’s incredible that a guy with such a weak mentality is a Top 10 player.’ An assessment coming from a stranger who probably never even held a tennis racket and definitely never played a match with a whole fucking stadium watching them. Judging them. But it still just . . . hit a nerve, you know?”

So far, every single conversation with Theo took a turn that I didn’t see coming. Each interaction was like a new piece of the puzzle, slowly assembling a clearer picture of who he really was. It was strange how, a few days ago, I had been so sure that his outbursts were because he was undisciplined. Unwilling to manage his emotions in high-pressure situations. Honestly, I had regarded him as weak too. But I was beginning to realize more and more that charming Theo Eastwood, who never missed a moment in the spotlight, was deeply insecure. He had created a facade for the public, and I was one of the many people who fell for it. His former coach and this single comment pierced straight through the carefree persona he took on whenever he was off the court.

“You’re focusing on one comment here, Theo,” I told him. “There were literally fifty others that were raving on and on about how great you are and how outrageous it is that he is commenting on you in this way.”

Slowly, he turned his head. “You’ve read them?”

“Some of them, yes,” I replied, attempting to ignore the odd sensation that Theo had just caught me doing something I shouldn’t have. “And I don’t get why you’re wasting your time thinking about this. They can say whatever they want, but in the end, it comes down to the numbers. We play: Sometimes we win; more often than not, we lose; but along the way, we

earn points. That defines whether or not we're at the top. And you have the points because you've earned them. There's actually no room to debate that, if you think about it."

Theo watched me with a strange expression on his face. Then a slight smile curled up the corners of his mouth. "Could you leave that in the comments, by any chance?"

I laughed, surprised. "I'll think about it."

Out of nowhere, I suddenly felt a strong urge to be the first to leave tonight. Because somehow the thought of us making our way back to our rooms together just didn't feel right.

Quickly, I pushed myself off the chair, heading toward the exit. But before I could stop myself, I spun around.

"Can I ask you a favor?"

Theo's eyebrows shot up, but he nodded. "Always," he said with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Can you not tell anyone about me and Kjell?"

A beat of silence passed between us, our eyes firmly locked. Theo's expression shifted at my plea, a flicker of compassion softening his features.

"Why is it a secret?"

"It's not a secret," I replied without hesitation. "It's just nobody's business."

He made me wait, the conversation hanging in the air between us, and the silence was driving me mad.

"I wouldn't have told anybody, Will." His voice was nothing more than a whisper.

A relieved smile tugged at my lips. I realized I felt no flicker of doubt at his response. I didn't know when this had happened, but I trusted him. I *trusted* Theodore Eastwood.

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Chapter 12

// Thursday

I leaned forward and pointed my index finger behind my back so that only Theo, standing behind me, could see the hand signal. Every time he served wide, we had managed to play a perfect combination. He got our hitting partners to return the ball high and slow so that I could take it out of the air and smash it into the T-field. I was signaling him to do that now. *Let's do it again. Serve wide.*

I bent my knees deeper, bringing myself down to almost net height to give Theo more room for his serve. I could feel the wind coming off the ball as it flew over my head at full speed and landed on the outer edge of the line. The ball returned, I caught it in the air and accelerated it straight through the center.

A smile tugged at my lips. Following the strategy "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" was paying off.

"Great job, guys. I've been waiting to be able to say it—perfect communication," Cristina said, confirming my own thoughts as she walked over to us. She patted me lightly on the shoulder.

"Yeah, it feels fucking great today," Theo replied, breathing heavily as he pulled off his headband, tousling his sweaty hair with his hand. "Somehow embarrassingly easy compared to the last training session."

I snapped my head toward Theo, the first part of his sentence echoing in my mind again and again. *Embarrassingly easy.* My already-labored breathing became shallower, air hardly entering my lungs. My thoughts were drawing me inescapably inward, drowning out the voices of Theo and Cristina, reducing them to background noise. As much as I tried to ignore it, I just couldn't help but remember when I had heard those *exact* same words.

A few years ago, Theo and I had faced each other in the final of the ATP 500 tournament in London. It was an incredibly important match for both of us, but for him, it was on home soil. To face an opponent in front of his

home crowd was something players had to mentally prepare for. Especially a player as popular as Theo, who was not only the pride of his country but also the player with the biggest fan base. Even so, I hadn't been too worried. I was so sure I knew what I was signing up for. Our head-to-head was 4–1 at the time, and even then I'd already been pretty good at tuning out the sound of a biased crowd during my matches.

But when I'd left the players' tunnel, I realized that something was different that day. Every single seat in the stadium was taken, and the charged energy crashed over me the moment I stepped onto the court. A patriotic crowd that wanted nothing more than to witness Theo win and revel in my defeat. The air was humming with hostility. I tried to ignore it and kept telling myself not to let it get to my head. *To focus.*

For most of the first set, I was able to put up a good fight, with the majority of the longer rallies going my way. But every time I was on the verge of breaking Theo's game, the crowd would always build him up again. Then they started to cheer and whistle when I hit first serves into the net or double-faulted. It was a cruel taste of the mental torment that was awaiting me at the US Open final.

But it had been different then. This loaded tension . . . it did something to Theo. He was drawing from it like I had never seen him do before. As emotional as Theo often was on the court, it was usually because things were not going his way. Whenever he sent a scorching, winning shot down the line, he typically wouldn't react. But not on that day. And apparently not when *I* was his opponent. He channeled the crowd's energy, encouraging them to celebrate him and cheer for every mistake I made. He made it obvious that he was enjoying what was happening to me, riling them up, pushing me closer and closer to my mental breaking point. I was losing to him in the most grueling way possible.

And right when I'd thought the match could not get any more humiliating, I heard him say to his coach the exact same words he had just said to Cristina: *Embarrassingly easy*. But back then, he was talking about *me*, about *my* embarrassing performance. In that moment, I had hated him. I channeled all the frustration I felt during that terrible match into anger—so much that I could feel it burning under my skin.

"The Most Brutal Defeat of the Season—Eastwood Crushes Hagen Without Mercy in London." I read the headline in an article the next day.

Never again, I had promised myself after that. I would never let people toy with me and affect my game that easily. If other players wanted to beat me, they had to play better than me, not win with mind games. The next time I played Theo, I beat him in under an hour. It was after that crucial match that I started putting up a wall whenever I was on the court, not giving my opponents anything they could use against me. And it had worked, until . . .

"What is that look for?" Theo asked, pulling me back to their conversation as my thoughts drifted from one fateful finale to the next.

I met his amused gaze, trying to shake off the negativity that started to creep up my spine. Every tennis player had at least one match they couldn't let go of for the rest of their life. It seems now I had two.

"Nothing," I replied a couple seconds too late.

Theo drew up an eyebrow, looking unconvinced.

I pulled a ball out of my pocket and threw it at Theo with more force than necessary, watching him catch it at the last second. "Let's play."

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I let my aching head rest against the cool glass of the window and squeezed my eyes shut. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't quiet my mind. It was screaming at me, forcing me to relive that match against Theo again and again—but also bringing up every single feeling I'd had in New York. The overwhelming wave of emotion took hold of my entire body, and I couldn't shake it off.

Every fiber of my being was telling me to leave my hotel room. The confined space made everything so much worse. But going outside meant that I might see *him*. And I just couldn't. Not right now. Not when picturing his smug, teasing smile made my blood boil.

And yet, there was a strong, almost masochistic pull inside me to go to the one place I knew I wouldn't be able to escape him. Despite all the anger and hurt I was currently feeling, I found myself wanting to find out if he'd be at the pool again tonight.

I didn't understand it. But maybe I didn't need to understand it right now. He might not even be there. For all I knew, he could be sound asleep on the other side of our shared wall. *Only one way to find out*, I thought, finally setting off for the pool with determination.

When I stepped outside and found the pool deserted, I felt a wave of something—relief, maybe. Or that's what I told myself. At least I could swim undisturbed now, without the distracting sensation of his eyes following me.

When the coldness of the water drew me in, I forced myself to focus solely on my movements. I was *finally* able to bring myself back to the present, leaving those painful memories and the hateful crowd where they belonged: in the past.

I didn't know how long I had been swimming, but I went until there was a feeling of pure exhaustion in my chest. Then I pushed myself out of the water.

"That was some *very* intense swimming," a voice suddenly said from the side, making me flinch. *Theo's* voice, to be precise.

Instantly, my heartbeat quickened in my chest. I didn't know what I was feeling at the sight of him. But at least his appearance answered one question. Meeting at the pool nightly had become more than just a routine for me. It was the same for him too.

"Fuck," I cursed, still breathing heavily. "You scared me." I met his amused gaze yet stayed by the edge of the pool, water running down my body and dripping to the ground.

Seconds stretched between us before I got myself to move again. I hesitantly sat down beside him on one of the lounge chairs. I didn't bother to dry off and instead embraced the cool air against my wet skin.

"Explain something to me," Theo said after a moment, when I had finally gotten comfortable.

"Yes?" I turned my head to meet his gaze when he didn't continue.

"How can you be in a mood today after we played one of the cleanest doubles I have played in a while?"

I frowned. This conversation wasn't off to a good start. "I'm *not* in a mood."

Theo looked at me for a moment with raised eyebrows. He had the same expression on his face that he'd had earlier on the court. But there was something else too. He seemed almost . . . disappointed.

"Right," he said, clearly not believing a single word of what I said.

God, I needed to get a grip and snap out of it. When I let my eyes wander over the strained expression on his face, none of my anger made sense anymore. I had to let go of my past grudges against him—as difficult as it was. At least while we were at this tournament, where we had *finally* managed to find some common ground. It was pointless to tell him how that match still haunted me or to confront him about how he had mentally toyed with me—to ask him why he'd only done it that one time. Never again; never to another opponent. I doubted he could even give me any kind of closure, anyway. We were rivals. We would do almost anything to win.

I let out a tense breath and lifted my gaze from my lap. "So, after today, there's hope we'll bring home the trophy, huh?" I said into the silence, trying to ease the tension in our conversation.

Theo looked at me in surprise for a moment. Then a relieved grin spread across his lips. "You could say that, yes," he replied while lying back on the lounge chair, putting one arm behind his head. "It was about time. I was getting a bit worried about my winning streak there."

"Your legacy, you mean."

"Precisely, William." Theo's mouth twitched. "But we really did play well today, don't you think?" After a moment he added, "I'm still waiting for an excited reaction from you. You're not matching my energy here."

A laugh escaped me. Slowly, I could feel the tension dissolve between us, shifting into something else. Something lighter.

"Yes, Theo. It was great today. Much better than the last time. Satisfied now?"

The light from the terrace only slightly illuminated his face, accentuating his annoyingly perfect nose and casting a shadow over his soft lips, leaving half of his face barely visible in the darkness.

He met my eyes. "Maybe."

Absentmindedly, I began massaging my leg. It had started to act up during training today. And to nobody's surprise, vigorously exercising in the pool had not relieved any of the tightness. On the contrary, actually. I really should have gone to the physio staff earlier to loosen up my muscles, but only Kjell had a free slot, and I really wasn't up to facing him again. I wasn't sure how strong-willed I could be—especially while his hands were on my body.

“Need any help with that?” Theo suddenly interrupted my thoughts and made my head snap up in his direction.

“Sorry?”

“Need me to loosen up your muscles?” Theo clarified. “I used to struggle with my thigh from time to time, and I learned some tricks from my physio.”

“I guess it’s an indispensable survival strategy when you smash your leg with your racket on a regular basis, huh?” I said teasingly, mostly as a weak attempt to avoid answering him directly.

“Fuck you, Will,” he replied and laughed.

I grinned at him and dropped my hand from my leg, hoping Theo didn’t expect me to actually accept his offer. As tempting as it was, since my muscles were pretty stiff, I felt like it wouldn’t be a good idea to have him massage my thigh in the secluded darkness.

Suddenly, Theo sat up in one quick movement, sliding to the edge of his chair until he was positioned right in front of me. Unlike me, Theo was wearing a shirt, and for a moment, I regretted not putting mine back on. It was cooler tonight, so his sudden closeness certainly had *nothing* to do with the shiver that ran through me.

“May I?” Theo asked quietly.

I supposed he did expect it.

I sighed defeatedly. “That’d be great. Thanks.”

He leaned closer and carefully placed both of his hands above my knee. His fingertips felt warm against my skin, and I had to force myself to stay still. To not withdraw my leg the second his hands made contact with my thigh.

“Here, right?”

“Yes,” I muttered and leaned back on my hands to bring back some of the distance between us.

Slowly, Theo began massaging my thigh—tentatively at first, then with more and more pressure. He really did seem to have picked up a few tricks, because after a moment, I felt my muscles loosen up a bit. But I barely noticed. The only thing I *did* notice was how close he was to me. His right leg was only inches away, almost touching mine. I realized that this was the

first time I'd had the opportunity to unguardedly take in every single one of his features. God, it almost annoyed me how good-looking he was. Of course, I'd always been aware that he was attractive. But I used to take note with a detached sense of appreciation, nothing that affected me personally. But then again, he had never been this close to me, and he had never touched me like this before.

I suddenly had the overwhelming urge to run my fingers through his hair, to push the loose strands out of his face, and the thought actually horrified me. What was going on with me? I needed to think of something else, *anything else*, but all I could focus on was the feeling of his hands touching my thigh, his breath on my skin. It was like I was in a trance that I couldn't escape. I knew it was a bad idea to begin with, but I never thought his fingers on my skin would affect me this much. He was only touching my thigh, yet I felt him *everywhere*.

I realized this must be what torture felt like. Sitting here, thinking about Theo's hands on my body, while he was completely oblivious of what he was doing to me. Thinking he was helping me while I died a thousand deaths every time he moved his fingers and adjusted his grip. God, I needed to move away from him before my body responded in a way that would make Theo all too aware of what he was doing to me.

I gripped his wrist, stopping him mid-movement.

His gaze fell on my hand. "Did I hurt you?"

Quite the contrary, I thought. My jaw clenched. "No, it really . . . helped. I'm just tired, so I think I'll just get up a bit earlier and book a session with one of the physio staff in the morning."

I realized that I was still holding his wrist. Immediately I let go, as if I had burned myself.

I stood up abruptly, desperate to put distance between us. I sensed Theo's confusion—uncertainty, even—at my quick escape, but there was simply no way I could explain why I suddenly couldn't bear to have his hands on me for a single moment longer.

I glanced at him briefly before I added, "See you tomorrow."

"Night," he replied quietly.

I turned and walked toward the entrance of the lobby.

"Will?" I suddenly heard Theo's voice call after me.

I stopped and slowly turned back around. My cheeks were burning hot, and once again, I silently thanked the darkness for its cover. *Just let me leave, Theo. Please.*

"Yes?" I forced out.

He held my gaze for a moment before looking away again, pushing his hair out of his face. "Which physio? Who is going to . . . treat you tomorrow?" The corners of his mouth tightened as if the question had left a bad aftertaste.

I frowned. His voice had taken on an unfamiliar tone I couldn't quite place. I couldn't come up with many explanations as to why this was in any way relevant to him. Why the question seemed urgent. There was only one reason that came to my mind, but it seemed almost too implausible to entertain the thought.

"Why are you asking?" I replied with a counterquestion.

I could see his hands tighten on the edge of the chair. "Just tell me."

Silence.

"*Please.*"

Maybe the reason wasn't too implausible after all.

I took a step closer toward him. "Not Kjell," I said before I could stop myself.

I observed him closely without breathing, trying to decipher the reaction my words had triggered in him. But . . . nothing. He didn't reply. He didn't even move. He just continued to look at me with the same serious expression that he'd had this entire time. *I misunderstood him.* I misunderstood his words, and I was still standing there waiting for . . . I didn't even know what I was waiting for. I forced myself to turn and leave the pool and Theo behind me as fast as I could. This time, he didn't stop me.

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Chapter 13

// Friday

“Ready?” Theo asked. He placed his water bottle and his towel in his bag.

I checked the time on my phone and looked at him, raising my eyebrows. “In a rush?”

“I just don’t want to keep Isabel waiting.”

We still had over ten minutes, but I decided not to mention it. There was a lot I had to leave unsaid today, as Theo had been awfully quiet all morning, only briefly answering when I spoke to him. After tossing and turning all night, I woke up knowing that today was going to be rough. But the way he was acting right now, with that icy tone of his, was even worse than anything I could have imagined.

I was hoping he was just in a bad mood and that his curt behavior wasn’t because of what had happened last night. But I could count on one hand the number of times he’d looked me in the eye today, so that was becoming less and less likely. Had he somehow guessed what I had been thinking? What I had wanted in that moment, no matter how quickly I had left? The thought made my stomach turn.

“I think they can wait a couple more seconds,” I replied flatly while changing into a fresh T-shirt. “I’m not too keen on the whole media thing today anyway.”

And that was putting it mildly. Right now, maintaining the charade with Theo in front of the cameras felt almost impossible. How was I expected to concentrate on any of their questions when I could still feel his hand on my leg, his fingers tightening right above my knee? My heart rate was increasing just from the thought of it. And I hated it. I hated how my body had reacted to him. It was like his touch on my skin suddenly set something loose inside me. I wanted to undo last night, but I didn’t know how.

“Why? So far it hasn’t been too bad, has it?”

He walked one step ahead of me, as if he was trying to shake me off.

“No, not *bad*. But no fun either. You can’t really tell me you’re having a great time with those questions?”

He was right, of course—it wasn’t that bad. But I thought every player could agree that the interviews were more like a necessary evil. Especially when they were scheduled on days as full and exhausting as ours.

“I’m having a good time with them, yeah,” he replied over his shoulder. “They’re doing a good job. The team is nice. I think Isabel is fun.”

A muscle twitched in my jaw. Why did it seem like he was disagreeing just so he could disagree with me? All of this because of one stupid assumption in the heat of the moment? I knew I had made a mistake by reading into a situation that wasn’t there. I had given a loaded answer to a seemingly loaded question, and in return, he’d given me nothing. But *he* had been the one who had blurred the lines for me. I had never asked him to touch me. And it was more than that. There had been something in the way he’d spoken yesterday. In the tone of his voice when he’d called me back and stopped me from leaving. It didn’t sound like a casual question. It had been almost . . . pleading.

“Never mind,” I said. If he wanted to misunderstand me, then so be it. There was nothing to say now, anyway. Because whatever I was feeling, I had to snap out of it. Every word he said to me and every time he avoided my gaze told me to *wake up*. Snap the fuck out of this. If I were good at one thing, it was controlling my emotions. My upbringing had taught me how to downplay my feelings and zero in on the things that mattered. It was the best strategy here too. Focus even more on tennis and distance myself from him. Extinguishing my attraction couldn’t be that difficult. It was Theo after all. He used to be an expert at turning me against him.

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“Thanks, you two. It’s been a pleasure as always.”

“Thank you, Isabel,” Theo said, getting up from his chair.

“See you tomorrow,” I added. I headed over to my bag, hoping we could finally move on to the actual training. I had an unbelievable urge to run until my lungs were burning and to exhaust every single muscle in my body. I still couldn’t fathom how Theo managed to not look at me a single time during the interview. He barely seemed to tolerate my presence, and I

couldn’t remember ever feeling more out of place. And while he gave me the cold shoulder, he was, of course, still charming to Isabel.

“By the way, I’m curious about your accent,” I suddenly heard Theo say to Isabel from behind me. “Are you from Essex?”

I turned back around and watched him step up to her chair.

She leaned her head back, looking up at him with a smile. “I am, yes. Why do you ask?”

“A friend of mine speaks *exactly* like you do, and I just couldn’t figure out what it was.”

“And here I thought I had gotten rid of my accent.”

“If it makes it any better—I like it,” he said with a cheeky grin.

Isabel let out a soft laugh. “It helps a little. You’re from London, right?”

I shouldn’t still be standing there, waiting for Theo to join me. This wasn’t quick, polite small talk. Theo was chatting up the pretty interviewer, and my presence was definitely unwanted.

I put my bag on my shoulder and forced myself to walk down the steps in the direction of the courts. *It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter. None of this fucking matters.* I repeated this over and over in my head as I rushed down the stairs. But right before they were out of sight, I took one last glance over my shoulder. I just couldn’t help myself. Isabel was laughing again at something Theo had said, placing her hand on his arm for a moment, letting it linger.

I froze on the spot, suddenly unable to move. All I could do was watch the two of them together, torture myself with the sight of them standing only inches away from each other. God, how I hated feeling the sting when I looked at them. How angry I was at Theo for talking to her, charming her, while he couldn’t even look at me. I wished I could remain unaffected. Things were returning to the way they had been. Avoiding each other, choosing silence over conversation—all of that was typical for us. The only thing I should’ve been feeling was relief.

I let out a deep breath.

But that’s not what I felt.

I felt *jealousy*.

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Chapter 14

// Saturday

That morning I felt just like I did on the first day of the tournament. I dreaded seeing Theo. Yesterday was filled with not-so-subtle signals from him that he wasn't interested in me in that way. And after another night of losing sleep over it, I was officially furious. I wanted to knock on his door and tell him that "Not Kjell" could have been a harmless, matter-of-fact response. That implying an ulterior motive, suggesting that he was asking out of jealousy, was a stretch. It was true, but I would never tell him that. But to interpret my response as charged meant that he knew the situation *was* charged. He made it that way in the first place. Reacting the way he did yesterday demanded sheer arrogance. But then again, arrogance wasn't something Theo lacked.

I took a long drink of water, trying to calm myself. God, how I hated that those two words gave him the power to act like I had crossed some invisible line, when in reality, I never tried to deepen our relationship. He had. I had merely matched his energy. But it didn't matter anyway. All we had to do at this point was get this tournament over with.

I grabbed the door handle. Today, I would be more prepared. If he wanted distance, that's what he'd get.

I let out a deep breath and finally stepped out into the hallway. Of course he was already waiting for me, leaning casually against the wall in his running clothes, concentrating on the watch on his wrist.

"Finally," he said without looking up.

"Good morning to you too, Theo," I replied dryly while stepping around him.

"Morning," he said, now making the effort to meet my gaze with a strained smile.

Evidently, the tension between us had not simply evaporated overnight. A loaded silence followed us everywhere. Even the short elevator ride down

to the lobby was almost unbearable.

“Slept alright?”

I nodded. Impressive. He was more talkative than he was yesterday by just asking that one question.

“Good,” was all he said, and we fell silent again.

Those twenty seconds in the elevator had never felt so long. I forced myself to look at anything but him and his annoying, messy strands of hair falling across his face.

“So you weren’t in the mood for a swim?” He broke the heavy silence once more.

“Sorry?”

He hesitated for a moment, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet, almost uncertain. “I waited for you at the pool last night. You didn’t come.”

I turned toward him, the confusion written all over my face. Wait—was he serious? Why would he think that he could ignore me all day and I would join him for a friendly chat later that night? When things took a turn for the worse yesterday, I’d come to the conclusion that it would be best to skip the pool. He clearly didn’t want me around. What else was he trying to achieve with his hostile attitude?

“Did I miss something?” I asked. “Did we agree to meet?”

We had never talked about meeting at night, but we both had gone to the pool every single day for the past week. Almost as if it were our secret meeting place, one that we weren’t allowed to acknowledge in the light of day. A silent agreement that neither of us would speak out loud.

“Well . . . yeah, technically we hadn’t. I just thought . . . never mind.”

I had to stifle a laugh when I watched Theo struggle to find the right words. Silent agreements were certainly difficult to talk about. He was beginning to realize that now.

By the time we’d stepped out of the hotel and into the fresh morning air, we were back to our previous silence. Neither of us attempted to make conversation for a while, aware that there was nothing we could say to lighten the mood. Not speaking seemed to be the easiest solution. But despite how angry I was at him for shutting me out yesterday, there was still

a part of me that hated the way things felt between us now. How we were back to ignoring each other, every sentence a deliberate dig at the other.

Theo cleared his throat. “In case you don’t have other obligations tonight, you could join us for dinner.” I could hear the same insecurity from before in his words.

Before I could stop myself, I laughed.

“What?” he asked, frowning in confusion.

“Nothing,” I said. “That was just very . . . formal.”

“My question?” Theo’s forehead was still wrinkled, but his mouth began to twitch slightly when he saw me nod in response. “No, not formal, William—*polite*.”

“Right. And when you say I could join *you* for dinner, you mean . . . ?” If he was talking about him and Isabel, I was actually going to kill him.

“Cardy, Lewis, and myself,” he said, as if that should have been obvious from the beginning.

This time I managed to suppress my laugh. To be fair, it would have been absolutely insane if he had invited me to his date with our interviewer tonight. But with Theo, nothing seemed impossible anymore. Not that it made any more sense that he was inviting me on a night out with his two best mates. I thought we weren’t speaking. That he wanted to put as much distance between us as possible. But now, he wanted to spend the evening with me, doing something outside of our tennis commitments in Cádiz? It didn’t make sense. *He* didn’t make sense.

I exhaled, unsure of how to reply.

Perhaps this was a kind of peace offering. No matter how angry I was with him, how much I wanted to say no, how much I wanted to show him what rejection felt like, I couldn’t. In that moment, the painful realization hit me: I would take *anything* he offered.

“Why not?” I said, grateful for how my neutral tone revealed nothing. “Even though it does sound like an exclusively British evening. You sure I wouldn’t spoil your night of shared patriotism?”

His eyes glistened with amusement. “Our ‘night of shared patriotism’? I like that, actually. But no, you’re not spoiling anything. Obviously. I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

Inviting me and then making me feel unwelcome didn’t seem too far of a stretch for Theo, but I refrained from commenting. That would certainly fall into the category of things we shouldn’t talk about. Crossing the invisible line that ran between us.

“Alright, I’ll be there,” I said, even though I knew I shouldn’t have.

His smile was the first real one I’d seen in two days.

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They had chosen a small restaurant that they had discovered during a previous stay and had been returning to ever since. I could see why. It was lively, but not too crowded, with a couple of other restaurants and bars surrounding the square. The place was a most picturesque image of exuberant Spanish nightlife. A splashing fountain sat in the middle of the square, surrounded by children and their families eating ice cream, and a small crowd had gathered around a group of street musicians.

The atmosphere was starting to make me feel at ease. I still might not have trusted Theo’s sudden change of mood, and I didn’t believe that Cardy or Lewis were particularly thrilled about me joining them tonight. But so far, we had all managed to remain civil. The three of them had even toned down their strange, intimidating, brotherly dynamic. Ironically, I had known Cardy and Lewis for years now, just as Theo had. We had played as juniors together first, trained for months at the same academies, turned pro around the same time. Strangely, they were incredibly familiar people. But it was ultimately a superficial relationship that had only ever scratched the surface. Even after knowing them for all those years, I still didn’t know how to act around them.

Perhaps that was my fault. But it had always been this way and probably always would. They were players I met in the fitness room and later faced on-court in a match each of us wanted to win at all costs. I had never understood how so many players were able to become close friends and not resent the other person for beating them in a match. Knowing that as soon as they saw a weakness in you, they would use it against you without hesitation. *Friends and rivals.* Two pieces that just did not fit together. But this seemed to be exclusively my opinion, since the relationship between Theo, Cardy, and Lewis showed no signs of being strained by any rivalry.

“What are we talking about?” Theo asked, putting four glasses in front of us and sitting back down next to me.

“Still about the upcoming matches,” Cardy replied dryly. “God, we’re such a cliché. We really only ever talk about tennis, don’t we?”

Theo raised his brows. “Don’t hold back for our sake if you have another topic in mind, mate.”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Cardy said, a concentrated expression appearing on his face. Clearly, he hadn’t the slightest clue about what to suggest. “We should play . . . truth or dare,” he said after an excruciatingly long pause. Leaning back with the confidence of someone who had just come up with the best idea of their life.

Lewis put his untouched drink back down and regarded Cardy in bewilderment. “Where is that coming from?”

I let out a laugh. “So, that’s what you guys do when you hang out then?”

Theo met my gaze, a grin spreading across his lips. “Not quite, no. You’re joining us for the premiere tonight.” He turned his gaze back to Cardy. “Go on then. Ask the first question.”

“Seriously?” Lewis asked. “We’re doing this?”

Both of them purposely ignored him.

“*Hagen*,” Cardy addressed me with a mischievous smile on his face. “Truth or dare?”

I took a big gulp of my drink. “I’m first, what an honor,” I replied sarcastically. “Truth.”

“When was the last time you hooked up with someone?” Cardy asked after pondering his question.

The image of Kjell kissing down my neck, biting my lip, flashed before my eyes. I took another large swig of my beer to push away the memory. “Too long ago,” I said.

“That’s not really answering the question, is it?” Theo prompted. He interlaced his fingers and rested his chin on his hands, his gaze fixed on me.

“You want an exact date?”

Theo shrugged his shoulders. “Those are the rules of the game.”

I kept my eyes locked on him for a moment. This was the same guy who had barely spoken to me yesterday. Who had barely tolerated my presence.

And now we were doing . . . *this*. Whatever this was. God, he was frustrating.

“A year ago,” was all I said. “My turn to ask a question.” I forced my attention away from him. “Lewis. Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” he replied, apparently resigned to his fate.

“Ever hooked up with a fan before?”

He shook his head firmly, a grin spreading across his face. “Sleeping with people who have posters of my face doesn’t really do it for me.”

“You’ve been with your girlfriend for way too long for any of that,” Cardy added. “Before she came along, you weren’t famous enough to have any fans to hook up with.”

Lewis jokingly shoved Cardy. “True, but still—fuck you.”

I let out a quiet laugh, relaxing. They really were like an old married couple, knowing exactly how to push each other’s buttons.

“Theodore, your turn. Truth or dare?” Lewis said.

“Same as everyone, I suppose,” he said. “*Truth.*”

“When was the last time you felt jealous of someone?”

“I’ll pass,” Theo replied without hesitation.

“Seriously? I was being nice with this one. Stop being so secretive and answer the question, mate,” Lewis said with a slight frown.

I had to suppress a smile. For someone who was against this game only minutes ago, Lewis was suddenly very invested in it.

“Yes, *seriously*.”

“Alright,” Cardy chimed in. “Dare it is then.”

Theo shrugged. He *really* did not want to answer that question.

“Any ideas?” Cardy asked.

I looked for something in our surroundings, landing on the brightly illuminated fountain. I nudged Cardy’s arm and nodded across the square. “What about a little swim?”

Theo’s head spun around, his eyes flickering over the fountain. “You’re kidding, right?” he asked when he turned back around.

“Do you want to answer the question?” I asked, a patronizing smile spreading over my face.

He shook his head.

“Then I *dare* you to take a nice dip in the water,” I went on. This was giving me more satisfaction than I’d expected. “You do love to swim, Theo, don’t you?”

He looked me dead in the eyes, as if he was the one daring me, before reaching for his drink and downing the rest of his beer. Then he slowly pulled out his phone and wallet from his pockets and placed them on the table.

“Trying to stall time or something?”

He met my gaze, a smile tinged with irony playing around his lips. “Patience is a virtue, you know?” Then he took off his watch, handing it to me. “Hang on to it for me, will you?” he asked as he stood up.

My hand tightened around the watch as my eyes followed him. Theo quickly strode over to the fountain. Without hesitation, he pushed himself over the stone wall and stepped into the water, ignoring the questioning gazes of the people around him. Then he turned back to us—no, not at us, at *me*. Holding my gaze, he slowly lowered himself into the water until he was fully immersed.

“Doesn’t even look bothered,” I said to Cardy without taking my eyes off Theo.

“Oh, he is, but he won’t show it. You know Theo.”

I finished the rest of my beer, my throat suddenly dry. I watched the now-dripping-wet Theo step out of the water, his white shirt clinging to his chest, the strands of his wet hair falling into his eyes. As he returned to the table, I could see droplets of water running down his lips, and I had to fight the urge to shut my eyes. It was almost painful to look at him in that moment. God, I was so screwed. I had thought, *hoped*, that my feelings from the past few days would be short-lived. That the absurdity of even thinking about Theo in that way would finally force me back to reality. That everything he did to me in the past and his mood swing yesterday would help me get over it. It had been easy to be angry at him again, to convince myself that things were back to the way they’d always been.

But I was fooling myself. I wanted him. *Desperately.*

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Chapter 15

“Oh,” Kjell said, surprise written all over his face as he opened the door. “Have you come to your senses then?”

I laughed, running a hand through my hair. “Something like that,” I lied. I wasn’t coming to my senses. Not at all. Right in this moment, it felt like I was going *mad*.

“Or are you here for a physio session? Because unfortunately, you came outside my business hours.”

His smirk and raised eyebrows told me that he knew *exactly* why I was here. The familiarity in his teasing expression caused a wave of heat to wash over my body. I could feel my cheeks getting flushed. Kjell’s gaze darkened briefly, losing focus as if he was also thinking back to all the times he had kissed my reddened cheeks, his tongue on my jaw, telling me how he loved being the reason for them.

The urge to touch him was overwhelming. This was exactly what I had wanted. *He* was who I needed to stop my brain from spinning.

“I am not,” I replied firmly. By now, I could feel my heartbeat pulsing in my throat.

“So what are you here for then, Will?” he challenged. I knew he was trying to get me to say it out loud.

I held his gaze for a moment. Then I closed the distance between us, pressing my lips on his. I could hear Kjell gasp for air, briefly taken aback, but then he kissed me back with the same intensity, grabbing my hair with his hands. It had been one whole year since I had been this close to him, yet it was still instinctively familiar when his soft lips touched mine. Quickly, I pushed him back into his room without breaking the kiss, my hands on his jaw.

He didn’t even hesitate, I thought while I closed the door behind me and pushed Kjell against the wall, pressing my body into his.

“You took your sweet time to visit,” he said breathlessly. He leaned his forehead against mine. “By now, I didn’t think you’d actually show.”

I brushed a strand of blond hair from his face. “Patience is a virtue, you know?” I replied teasingly. The words instantly left a bitter taste in my mouth. I struggled to pinpoint why, but then it hit me: Theo had said that to me. I was repeating his *exact* words to Kjell. I felt a slight stab in my chest at this realization. Couldn’t my fucked-up brain stop thinking about Theo for at least one minute? He was already the reason I was here. The reason I was risking hooking up with Kjell in a hotel filled with not only fifteen other players but also an entire press team.

Kjell laughed quietly at my response. “You’ve always liked keeping people in the dark, haven’t you? Slowly driving them crazy trying to figure you out,” he said. He began kissing me again, more roughly this time, his teeth scraping my lower lip. Kjell walked me across the room and pushed me against the wall, my back meeting the cold surface. Even though I was only planning on making this a one-time thing, just to let off some steam tonight, I had to admit how good it felt having Kjell want me so desperately. The urgency with which he kissed me, pushing himself into me, feeling how hard he was for me, was exactly what I needed after these last few days. Theo had unconsciously taken over every fiber of my being with an intensity that I had never experienced before. *Never.* The only thing I knew for certain was that I needed some relief from that intensity, to get him off my mind for at least a couple of hours, or I might actually go crazy.

I knew using Kjell to distract me wasn’t the most honorable thing to do, but as far as I knew, the only thing he wanted from me was pleasure as well. And I was more than happy to oblige.

Kjell grabbed my hair and pulled my head back slightly, starting to kiss down my throat. He was careful not to leave any marks. *Would Theo be this gentle?* I thought to myself. Or would he be rougher, not caring whether he marked my skin with his teeth? For a moment, while Kjell’s lips were on my throat, his body urgently pressing into mine, I could almost pretend it was Theo who was doing all these things to me. A low sound escaped me. Abruptly, I tore my eyes open. Why was it so impossible for me to banish him from my thoughts?

Kjell began to deliberately, almost teasingly, unbutton my shirt, his fingers brushing against my stomach, causing me to shudder. He paused, opening my shirt up further and regarding my naked torso with a starved expression.

“I see you’re still in shape,” Kjell said jokingly, yet his voice was hoarse.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I replied.

His lips twitched, then he stepped closer and looked me straight in the eyes while slowly undoing my belt. I leaned forward to close the last bit of space between us, but just as my lips were about to touch his again, Kjell pulled back his head, stopping me. Before I could protest, he lowered himself to his knees.

Oh.

I looked down at him, watching his every move until I could no longer keep my eyes open. It was unfeasible to imagine why it had taken me so long to take him up on his offer. My head dropped back against the wall and my hands dug into his hair, memories flooding behind my eyes. Us hooking up late at night in different hotel rooms, his reward after I won a match. He remembered exactly how I liked it. If Kjell only knew how much I needed this right now. He was easing my worries and Theo’s hold on me, if only for a moment, and *finally*, I could shut off my brain.

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I moved Kjell’s arm off my chest and got up to grab myself a water bottle from the minibar.

“You owe me six euros then,” he said and grinned at me. His hair was still a mess from where my hands had been only minutes ago, and I could see a thin layer of sweat on his torso.

Raising my eyebrows, I took a big gulp of water. “I’ve always admired your generosity, you know?” I replied sarcastically and fell back down beside him.

With a laugh, Kjell took the bottle from my hands and quickly finished it.

I watched him swallow the remaining water, a strong sense of déjà vu hitting me. Here we were again, lying beside each other in the secluded darkness of a hotel room. Slowly, I felt like I was waking up from whatever frenzy I had been in before. I could feel my brain starting to spin again. Was meeting him tonight the smartest or the most foolish thing I could have done?

“Can I ask you something?” Kjell suddenly said from beside me.

I turned my head in his direction and gave a slight nod, grateful that he rescued me from my thoughts.

“Why did you decide to come tonight?” There was a slight uncertainty resonating in his voice.

I hesitated for a moment. “I don’t know. I guess . . . I wanted to see you. Why do you ask?” It was the truth. I had wanted to see him, as if he had been pulling me with some invisible force. But it was only half the truth, and there was no way that I could tell him the other half. Explain to him how much I had needed to forget. There was no need to hurt him by telling him that in a way, he had been a means to an end. That I was already fearing the moment I would leave this room and every single thought would immediately circle back to one person. And as much as I wanted it to be otherwise, that person was not Kjell.

“I was just surprised, I suppose. You seemed a bit distant the other day. Or maybe distant isn’t the right word. Distracted, maybe. Like you were far away with your thoughts. I just figured you already forgot my offer.”

I regarded him speechlessly for a moment. If he only knew. But I had not forgotten about his offer. It was crazy to think that I had. I may think about Theo most of the day, but Kjell’s presence still affected me.

“So you have been watching me?” I asked in a feeble attempt to ease some of the tension between us.

“I’m always watching you,” Kjell said, then laughed. “Somehow, in my head, that sounded a lot less like something a stalker would say. I just mean, it’s always great to see you, you know? Even if it’s just from a distance and we’re not . . . together anymore, it still feels . . . comforting to see your face on tour from time to time. Makes it all a bit less lonely. If that makes any sense.”

I let my eyes wander over his face, his serious expression, the corners of his mouth that were lifted in a nervous half smile.

“I think . . . I might have missed you this past year,” he said.

His words hung heavily between us. I hadn’t expected him to say something like that. I had never even thought of the possibility. That he might . . . miss me. Those words triggered something inside me, and a rush of warmth filled my whole chest.

“Maybe we shouldn’t just see each other from a distance.” The words left my mouth without thinking. I had no idea what I was doing, if I would regret saying this, but there was just something about hearing him say these things. The familiar, comfortable closeness settling between us once again.

Maybe Kjell really could be the answer to everything I was struggling with. This constant one-on-one battle with the rest of the world was beginning to wear me down. Yes, I had my team, and yes, I had myself, but maybe that wasn’t enough anymore. Despite what I had been feeling and thinking recently, it was ridiculous to believe that Theo could ever be that person for me. So why shouldn’t I at least try to let Kjell in?

He turned his head in my direction, studying me. As if he were trying to judge the validity of my statement just from my expression. If, after everything, he could trust me again.

“I think that sounds like a good idea,” he said, a smile spreading across his lips, lighting up his whole face. “We had a lot of fun on the Asian part of the tour, in case you forgot.”

“We always had fun,” I replied.

Until we didn’t, said a soft voice at the back of my mind, but I instantly pushed the thought away.

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Chapter 16

// Sunday

I stepped out for some fresh air, set my glass of champagne down on the empty bar table in front of me, and began to loosen my bow tie. By now, the sun had set completely, and the only light on the terrace came from the windows of the clubhouse. The black-tie event was currently in full swing. The rain had finally stopped after coming down all day, and it felt good to get out of the crowded clubhouse and enjoy the breeze for a moment. To finally gather my thoughts after the day had passed in a blur.

I had only slept for a few hours after saying goodbye to Kjell in the early morning and heading out to training. However, it was the first morning in a week that I hadn't woken up thinking about Theo. Which was why I gladly accepted the exhaustion. All I could think about *now* was Kjell's touch. Each time I recalled the events from the previous night, I felt achingly good. I wasn't going to admit it out loud, but feeling wanted by someone was exactly what I'd needed last night.

I took another sip of my drink and listened to laughter coming from inside. I had to collect myself before returning to the group. It was already ten o'clock, and I hoped I could return to the hotel soon and get the sleep that I was desperately craving.

"There you are." I suddenly heard Theo's voice from behind me.

I turned around, watching him approach with a full glass of champagne in his hand. His hair was as unruly as ever, and by the looks of it, he had tried to brush it back with his fingers more than once already. He was wearing a suit like the rest of us, and somehow it made him appear even taller than he already was. When our eyes met, his face softened with a smile.

"Why am I not surprised to find you by yourself?"

"You tell me."

“You’re missing all the fun inside. I think one of the sponsors was just getting ready to give another speech,” Theo said as he walked over to my table. He also loosened the bow tie around his neck.

I laughed. “Oh, good. That answers my question as to whether or not I should go back in.”

“You know, if you’re in need of a bit more excitement, I’m sure I can convince Cardy to step out real quick for another round of truth or dare.”

“Tempting, but I’ll pass,” I replied, but I couldn’t hold back my smile.

For a moment we just stood there, grinning at each other. *God, this is dangerous*, I thought. Being out here in the dark with Theo, joking around and drinking . . . It was definitely not a good combination.

“Am I intruding?” Theo asked.

“Intruding on what?”

“Your alone time.”

I shook my head. “I just wanted some fresh air.”

“Good. For a moment there, I was worried you might prefer being alone rather than hanging out with us,” he said teasingly.

“At the great risk of hurting your tender feelings, Eastwood, I actually do prefer being alone. I’d be in the wrong profession if I didn’t.”

“My *tender feelings*,” Theo repeated with a chuckle, shaking his head. “Sometimes I can’t tell if you’re being cryptic on purpose. Care to elaborate?” He took a sip of his drink and looked at me over the rim of his glass, raising his brows.

“We are singles players, are we not? It’s kind of a given that we prefer being alone,” I stated. I mirrored him and also took a sip of my champagne.

“God, you make our lives sound tragic, Will. I get your point, but I still think you’re, well, wrong.”

“Care to elaborate?” I asked, echoing his earlier question to me, amused at his blunt reply.

His mouth twitched. “Yes, we’re alone on-court, but for most of the season we’re training with our teams, working out strategies together. So we can become better players and win for a team. I wouldn’t say tennis has to be as lonely as everyone makes it out to be. Most of the time, at least.” He sounded like he was trying to convince not only me but also himself.

“Not always, no,” I replied with a shrug. “But it seems like you are forgetting all those hours we spend hitting a ball against a wall. The countless times we’ve been the last ones on the court, repeating those drills again and again as it gets dark. The first ones in the gym, and sometimes we’re the only ones there because it’s a fucking holiday. I mean, I think I spent about twenty-two hours alone on the court at the US Open. I had opponents, yes, but still, essentially, alone. And that’s just one of many tournaments. So yes, we work with a team and win as a team, but we still play a really lonely sport. I think if I didn’t enjoy that loneliness, I’d be absolutely screwed out there.”

Theo was quiet for a moment, and the silence felt charged. Somehow, it felt this way whenever it was just the two of us.

“I dread the loneliness,” he said finally and downed the rest of his drink.

I wasn’t sure how to respond to his confession. Of course, there had been times on the court when I had wished I had someone beside me to calm me down or help me regain perspective. It was too easy to lose yourself out there. But those were the exceptions for me. Most of the time, I was happy to solely rely on myself. Even if something didn’t go the way I intended it to, I would rather blame myself than anyone else. I guess that was in our nature as singles players; otherwise, the loneliness would eat us alive. But maybe that was the problem with Theo. Maybe the constant loneliness was eating him alive.

“Alright, enough of this serious talk,” Theo suddenly said before I was able to form a reply. “This is supposed to be a party, a chance for us to enjoy ourselves before our matches start. To be fair, it’s probably one of the dullest parties I’ve ever been to, but according to Leo, Pavel has a crush on one of the waitresses, and I think it’s time to show off my excellent wingman abilities. Care to join me?”

“Sure. If only to warn Pavel about you,” I replied, smiling at him. You had to hand it to him: He simply had a talent for instantly lightening the mood.

Theo chuckled, picked up his empty glass, and made his way to the entrance of the clubhouse.

“Oh, before I forget,” he said without turning back to me. “Where did you sneak off to last night?”

I halted my steps for a second, then forced myself to keep up with him. He couldn’t have known that I had been with Kjell. He just couldn’t. I’d checked the hotel floor before going back to my room. I was sure no one had seen me.

“What do you mean?” I replied, trying to sound confused. Although I really *did* feel confused. Mostly about why I was so scared that Theo could find out where I had been. Or rather, with whom.

“I thought I heard you come back to your room around four, and I wondered what you’d been up to.”

“Oh. I’ve been . . . out.” *Alright.* Maybe not quite the best excuse I’d ever come up with.

“Out?”

“Yes. *Out.*”

He opened the door and looked back over his shoulder, regarding me skeptically. For a moment we just stood there, holding each other’s gazes, until Theo shook his head and went back inside.

“At least that answers my previous question.”

“What question?” I asked.

“You’re *definitely* being cryptic on purpose.”

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As we got out of the shuttle and entered the hotel lobby, Pavel was still defending his choice to say two sentences to the woman he was interested in and then ignore her for the rest of the evening. I let out a quiet laugh when he went on to blame Theo for being a terrible wingman and stealing his thunder. I had to agree with him. Theo’s attempts to get the poor waitress to pay attention to Pavel only turned her attention to him. Not that you could really blame her. Theo just had that effect on people.

I checked the time on my phone—it was past midnight. With Pavel’s unsuccessful flirting attempts and Cardy downing one drink after another, the evening had been more fun than I’d expected. I hadn’t even realized it was already so late. But by now, I felt the exhaustion in every bone of my body, and all I could think about was *finally* getting some sleep.

Suddenly, I felt Theo's hand on my arm, pulling me back. I looked at him questioningly as the group walked past us, all too deep in conversation to notice that we had fallen back.

"What?"

"Pool?" He nodded toward the side exit, his piercing eyes questioning me.

I was instantly wide awake. I remembered telling myself earlier that I shouldn't be alone with Theo, but when he headed for the pool without waiting for my reply, I followed him.

Of course I did.

The pool area was just as quiet and deserted as it had always been. But tonight was the first time the silence felt almost . . . unbearable. *Why* wasn't Theo saying anything? Why was he standing silently beside me, his hands in his suit pockets, staring wordlessly at the water in front of us?

After what felt like an eternity, he cleared his throat and finally spoke. "Nervous about our first week of matches?"

I wrinkled my forehead. Was *that* really what he wanted to talk to me about? What he had dragged me away from the others for?

"Not particularly, no."

Theo turned his head to me and raised an eyebrow. "That confident, huh?"

"We definitely have a fair shot. And we don't really have anything to lose, do we? It doesn't affect our ranking," I replied neutrally while scanning Theo's face for any clues as to why we were here. It was starting to make me feel uneasy, and I could feel my heart beating faster.

"I was thinking more about the whole reworking your image thing and all that. It certainly wouldn't hurt to win this thing."

I regarded Theo warily. I really didn't feel like having this conversation, especially at this hour. Had I known he was going to discuss tennis, I would have declined and gone straight to bed.

"Of course I want to win. I *always* want to win. I'm just not that nervous, is all I'm saying. At least not yet. Are you?"

"A bit. But I'm always nervous. Before matches, I mean. So that's nothing unusual." He shrugged his shoulders.

What was I doing here? Or rather, what were we doing here?

I began to take off my suit jacket, desperate to feel the night breeze on my skin and calm down my racing heart. As I turned away from him to put my jacket down, Theo suddenly held out his hand and took it from me.

I regarded him with arched brows. “Cavalier.”

He let out a quiet laugh. “Is your phone in there?”

I nodded. “Why?”

Instead of replying, Theo took a quick step back and, without hesitating, pushed me. I couldn’t brace myself before my body met the cold water, a shock to my skin, sucking the air out of my lungs. For a moment, the water drowned out all the sound around me. When I touched the floor of the pool, I pushed myself back up and broke through the surface, panting.

“What the fuck, Theo?” I asked, brushing my wet curls out of my face. “Are you out of your fucking mind? Why would you do that?”

He just dropped our jackets to the side and dove in, coming up right beside me. “It just seemed like the easiest way to convince you to take a late-night swim with me,” he said and laughed, splashing water in my face.

Without hesitating, I lunged at him, putting my full weight on his shoulders and pulling him under. He was expecting this and pulled me down with him.

“You’re completely mad, you know that?” I said after we emerged from the water, now both breathing heavily. “I still have my fucking shoes on. You owe me a new pair.”

“Well, *you* owed me a swim. And besides, I think you can manage. You know, financially,” Theo replied teasingly, splashing more water in my direction.

I took another leap at him, only for him to pull us down again. This time, however, neither of us showed any signs of letting the other go. We were both acting on impulse, using our combined excitement to finally release some of the tension that had built up between us. Fighting for short breaths of air before going underwater again, it felt as though some of our unspoken feelings were sinking down with us. With every push, a little bit of resentment washed away. With each pull, another bit of the tension, until there was nothing standing in the way between us, each layer stripped away.

There was only us.

And even then, we didn’t stop. Our movements became slower—less frantic. Suddenly, our wrestling was no longer juvenile. Instead, neither of us could get enough of touching each other beneath the water. The whole atmosphere between us had shifted, and I just *knew* Theo was feeling it too.

When we both broke the surface again, gasping for air, I became aware of how close he was. So close that even in the dim light, I could make out every detail of his face. Just like yesterday, I couldn’t look away. But this time, he didn’t look away either. I felt myself growing weak under the intensity of his stare. Theo had never looked at me this way. Or maybe he had never allowed himself to look at me this way? Not that it really mattered right now. All that mattered was that Theo was standing right in front of me, motionless, with droplets of water dripping down his face, looking at me as if he yearned for me with every part of his body.

Despite the darkness, I could see Theo’s eyes following the slight movement of my fingers as I brushed back my wet hair. It seemed to snap him out of his trance. He put his hands on my soaked shirt, pushing me again, but this time, not underwater.

All at once, my back made contact with the pool wall behind me, and then I couldn’t feel anything but Theo’s hands firmly gripping my face. He hesitated for a second, looking at me with a starved, almost angry expression on his face. I stayed completely still, too scared to break the spell between us. Then his lips were on mine with such intensity that if I hadn’t been trapped between the wall and the full length of his body, I would have stumbled backward.

For a split second, I couldn’t react, still in utter disbelief that Theo’s lips were touching mine, softer than I could’ve ever imagined. But I recovered quickly, answering his kisses with the same urgency, grabbing his neck, pulling him closer. Now that I could finally touch him, grasp his hair, *nothing* felt close enough. I wanted more. I wanted all of him.

A tremor ran through my body when his hot breath caressed my skin. What had I been doing yesterday? It felt almost ridiculous to think back to me in Kjell’s room when all along, I could have had *this*. If I thought my body was on fire last night, it was nothing compared to how I burned now.

Theo’s cologne lingered in the air between us, its light, almost citrusy scent reminiscent of a late-summer night. I wanted to drink it in.

Theo’s hands were now running down my neck, shoulders, and arms, as if he couldn’t get enough of me either. Wherever his fingertips grazed my skin, they left it aching. I wished my shirt wasn’t there, that there was nothing between us. God, I needed to feel all of him. Deepening the kiss, I pressed myself closer into him, almost ripping his white shirt out of the waistline of his pants.

Suddenly, I could feel Theo pulling away. It was like a switch went off inside him, and he couldn’t let go of me fast enough. He tried to avoid my gaze, but I could clearly see the panic flickering in his eyes. No, not panic. *Regret.*

“Sorry,” he murmured, barely audible, as he pushed himself out of the pool and collected his things. I couldn’t respond. I was too stunned by the fact that Theo Eastwood had just kissed me in a way that caused my brain to shut down completely.

When I heard the door slam shut behind me, my fingers found my lips in utter disbelief. I traced them, needing to make sure that his had actually been there mere moments before. Slowly, the haze lifted, and I was left with the realization that my lifelong rival had just kissed me and I had kissed him back and then he had run away. He ran from *me*.

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Ortega Cup

Week 2

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Chapter 17

// Monday

The light from my phone's lock screen was so bright that I could hardly keep my eyes open as I tried to switch off my morning alarm. Despite feeling wrecked after another sleepless night, two texts from an unknown number instantly left me feeling wide awake.

+47 22 23090201
Can't sleep. Want to come over?

+47 22 23090201
In case you dared to delete my number—it's Kjell ;)

I let my head drop back down onto the pillow. What the fuck was I supposed to do now? I couldn't believe that I'd just forgotten about Kjell. After Theo had kissed me last night, he hadn't even crossed my mind once. Instantly, I felt guilty at this realization. I needed to talk to him at some point this week. But just the thought of it made everything inside me tighten up. What could I even say? How could I look him in the eye and tell him that I'd made a mistake two nights ago? That he had been there when I needed him but that there was actually someone else? It didn't matter what I said; I would hurt him either way. *Again.*

I turned onto my stomach, pressing my face into my pillow and closing my eyes for a moment. I couldn't worry about this right now. First, I needed to figure out what had happened between Theo and me. I needed to know what he meant when he said he was sorry. What was he sorry for? For

kissing me or for running away? The only thing I knew for sure was that I needed to see him. I needed to look him in the eye and try to understand where we stood after last night.

The prospect of gaining some clarity about what was going on between us finally got me out of bed.

When I got to the pick-up spot, I came to a halt, my heart beating violently in my throat. *There he was.* Standing next to Pavel and Leo in his sports gear, loading his bag into the trunk of the car.

I swallowed hard before I made my way over to them. I tried to catch Theo's eye, desperate to read his face for any sign. But he met me with a neutral expression, as though I were just another stranger passing him in the street. He didn't say a single word before lowering his gaze and getting into the car.

It took all the strength I had to push down the sharp ache of disappointment in me.

Mechanically, I passed Leo and Pavel, exchanging quick greetings with a voice that didn't sound like my own, before purposely choosing to sit next to Theo.

When I sat down on the cool leather, he didn't lift his gaze, keeping his focus on the phone in his hands. Yet when I accidentally grazed his arm as I reached for the seat belt, I felt him tense up. We still hadn't said a word to each other. The silence hung heavily between us, and slowly, a sense of anger boiled inside me. He must be out of his mind if he believed I was going to pretend last night had never happened.

"Good morning," I said, looking straight at him.

Finally, Theo lifted his gaze, and my eyes bore into his. But when the others joined us in the car, he immediately returned to his phone.

"Morning," he replied a couple seconds too late.

I almost laughed about the insanity of this situation. Actively ignoring me was beyond what I'd imagined. We couldn't avoid acknowledging that it had happened—he must know that. There was a part of me that had hoped he wanted to talk to me about it. It felt impossible *not* to talk about it. Apparently not to Theo. But I refused to feel like I had done something wrong. He'd kissed me. Still, the sting of his blunt dismissal sank into my chest.

I let my gaze wander out the window, trying to get Theo out of my field of vision. In a few minutes, we would arrive at the courts and play a practice set against the two other Brits. Naturally, all filmed by the media. It was our chance to prove to them how we'd become a tight-knit duo in the past week before the matches officially began the next day. But here we were. Theo avoiding me, neither of us able to speak to each other. If one thing was certain, it was that we could kiss victory goodbye. This distance wouldn't work on the court, especially against Cardy and Lewis, who played together like a well-oiled machine. But Theo knew that. Of course he did. He had just decided that withdrawing from me was more important.

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I placed my racket next to the bench and wiped the sweat from my face with my towel. I couldn't remember the last time I had been crushed this brutally in a match. Theo sat on the other end of the bench, taking a drink from his water bottle, the frustration on his face mirroring mine. *Good*, I thought to myself. Suffer the consequences of this terrible match, because it certainly wasn't just my fault that we were already two breaks down. Our opponents were demolishing us, and somehow it seemed to be exactly what Theo wanted. It was like he was punishing himself, or perhaps he just needed to punish me. I clenched my hand around the towel. I had been angry before, but this feeling was like pouring gasoline on a fire, transforming my anger into fury.

I tilted my neck in both directions and tried to stretch out some of the accumulated tension.

"Is your neck alright?" Cristina asked from behind me.

I leaned backward on the bench and tilted my head until I was able to see her. I had avoided looking at her so far because I couldn't bear to see her shock at the disaster unfolding before her eyes.

I nodded and forced a smile before turning back around. But I could still feel her eyes boring into my back. I already dreaded the moment we would have to explain ourselves to her. She'd certainly have a few questions about why on earth our match strategy was a complete failure. Why Theo was going for an aggressive winner with almost every shot regardless of

whether he had the right ball for it, while I was playing one of the most passive, uninspired games of my life.

But Cristina wasn't the only one disappointed by our performance today. The whole media team didn't look too happy either as they filmed this embarrassment of a match. They had wanted some entertaining footage, hoping for a fun dynamic between the three Brits. Instead, they were witnessing a tennis tragedy.

I let my gaze drift to Isabel and her team, hoping they'd be packing up their stuff by now, but it seemed that they hadn't given up yet. And worse, some of the tournament staff had joined them.

My breath quickened. One of them was Kjell. His messages I had left unanswered, and our last encounter popped back into my head. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, trying to push everything to the back of my mind. Not now. I couldn't deal with any of this now.

When I opened my eyes again, I looked directly into his. He wasn't talking to Isabel anymore. He was now quietly watching me. For a few seconds, neither of us moved. He didn't come any closer and didn't say a single word, but I could hear his questions loud and clear. Why hadn't I replied? Why was I pulling back after what I'd said about us?

When I didn't react, still frozen to the spot, Kjell raised his hand in a small greeting, but then his gaze shifted behind me. Immediately, he turned his back before I could even manage to give him something resembling a friendly smile.

I grabbed the water bottle from the bench behind me, where Theo was sitting, as far away from me as possible. But he was no longer staring at the ground. Instead, he was watching the person I had just locked eyes with seconds ago. Slowly, he turned his head to meet my gaze, his expression one of deep hostility.

"What?" I asked.

Theo didn't respond. He just held my gaze while he closed his water bottle and got up from the bench. When he passed me, he came to a halt.

"Better concentrate—seems like you got fans watching." His voice was cold, almost mocking, and sent an icy shiver down my spine. With that, he walked away to the baseline.

For a moment, I just sat there in utter disbelief. If this was just about the two of us, I would have loved to get my things and leave him on this court right now. But it was time for me to pull myself together and remember that this was about my career too. It was about finally winning over the fans, who weren't exactly impressed with our performance so far. And right now, I was almost as furious with myself as I was with him.

He was right about one thing: I *did* need to concentrate. Cardy and Lewis were up 5–1, and all we could hope for now was forcing them to serve out the match. The outcome would be the same—we would still lose—but at least we would retain a small shred of our pride.

I positioned myself at the net again while Theo prepared to serve.

Two more games, I kept telling myself. We would lose and be humiliated either way. I had no idea how we would play the official matches this week, but that was a future problem. For now, I just needed to get off the court and Theo out of my sight.

Sixty seconds later, our opponents had a set point. Not only were we getting crushed; we were also losing quickly. If you blinked, you could have missed it.

I heard Theo bounce the ball on the ground behind me, getting ready for what could be the last point of the match. It was another good serve but another even better return by Lewis, straight into Theo's feet.

Milliseconds before I saw the ball fly full speed into the net, I heard a loud smash behind me. I didn't have to turn around to know where that sound came from—Theo's racket had met the ground with full force.

A smattering of applause came from the few people who had been watching us. When I looked over, I saw Kjell had already left.

But I barely registered any of this as I turned to my teammate. When I saw Theo picking up his slightly bent racket, the reality of the last twenty-four hours violently slammed into me. And I just couldn't help but laugh. A dry, bitter laugh that, at least briefly, released all the frustration and disbelief I was currently feeling. I mean, what else could I do? This situation was absolutely ridiculous. This match had been ridiculous. Our team performance had been ridiculous. And smashing the racket after Cardy and Lewis finished their game with an outstanding final point was even more ridiculous. There was nothing left to do *but* laugh.

Theo didn’t seem to think so. His head snapped up, and he threw me a look that could only be described as absolute contempt. I could almost physically feel the intensity of his glare.

I shook my head at him and turned back around to Cardy and Lewis, waiting by the net. I was done with his bullshit.

“Well done, guys. Congrats,” I said and gave them a friendly clap on their backs.

When Theo walked up beside me, I took a slight step to the side to give him room to congratulate our opponents. His friends, I might add.

“Well played,” was all Theo was able to say with a handshake that lasted a second. Abruptly, he turned back around and walked over to the bench.

Speechless, we watched him throw his water bottle and his racket in his bag and leave without another word.

“Well, don’t we love a sore loser,” Cardy said dryly, interrupting the silence.

“What’s up with him today?” Lewis asked, watching Theo climb the steps. “I mean, we know he has a temper during matches, but this felt different somehow. He already seemed loaded when he stepped on the court.”

“No idea,” I lied. I had to actively suppress the image of Theo pushing me away, the look of regret on his face. “He behaved weirdly all morning.”

“Well, I fear someone has to talk to him,” Lewis said. Instantly, the duo looked at me, wordlessly telling me what I already knew. That since I was his teammate, it was on me to go after him.

I let out a sigh. “I’ll do it,” I replied, my lack of enthusiasm clearly audible in my voice.

It didn’t matter if I wanted to or not. It had to be me. I might be the last person Theo wanted to talk to right now, but I was also the only person who could.

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When I opened the door to the locker room, I saw Theo standing with his back to me, one arm propped up against the wall. Slowly, I approached, seeing his bag and his racket, which might have gotten another good

beating on the floor of the locker room. Even though I knew he must have heard me come in, he did nothing to acknowledge my presence.

“Great show out there. Truly. Almost worthy of applause,” I said into the silence, my mocking tone echoing through the empty room.

Theo’s head snapped around, and it seemed like he had to control himself to stay exactly where he was. *Be my guest, Theo. Come over here and hit me*, I thought. At least he would finally react.

“Could you do me a favor and just fuck off, Will?” he said instead before ripping his gaze away from me again.

“Oh, don’t think I want to be here. Believe me, I don’t. I’ll leave you alone in a moment anyway—someone should probably go convince Isabel not to post exactly the kind of performance we promised our coaches we wouldn’t deliver.”

Anger surged through my body as I took a step closer toward him, passing the empty wooden benches that lined my path on either side. “I mean, I can already see the headlines: ‘Not Such a Great Team After All.’ ‘Hagen and Eastwood Get Demolished on Court.’ ‘It Seems Not Even the Ice King Can Cool Down Theodore Eastwood.’ The press would have a lot of fun with it, don’t you think?”

I waited, giving him a few seconds to see if he would react to what I had just said. But he remained quiet, still not looking at me. My cheeks burned with frustration, my anger coiling in my chest, but I couldn’t stop now. Not until he finally gave me a reaction and told me what the hell was going on. I took another step closer.

“And just a small reminder,” I went on. “We are *professional* tennis players. This is our job. I would have expected you to show a little bit more composure on-court despite what happened between us yesterday.”

At the mention of last night, I could see Theo’s shoulders tense. I knew I had probably gone too far now, but I couldn’t help it. My anger toward him had spread into every part of my body. And it wasn’t just about the match anymore. It was about last night. About last week. About him *still* not looking at me.

“So if this is about that, and I assume it is, you can stop punishing me every second of the day. I got it, alright?” I hated how breathless I sounded, how I could barely mask the hurt in my voice, but still, I went on. “I got the

message loud and clear, believe me. I can't turn back time any more than you can. But I can promise you it won't *ever* happen again. And rest assured, I won't tell a single soul. As far as I'm concerned, it's already forgotten."

Slowly, he turned his head, finally looking at me again. I tried to read his expression, tried to understand his frown—the intense, burning look in his eyes. But his face didn't give anything away. For a moment, we just stared at each other. Another beat of silence passed. Then he was on me. Theo was kissing me. *Again.*

In the back of my mind, I knew this was absolute madness. The immediate change between disdain and desire. But I couldn't bring myself to care. Not when Theo was finally kissing me without holding back, pressing himself into me with an urgency that left me breathless.

Yet there was still anger between us. He crushed his lips against mine so forcefully that it hurt, but I gladly welcomed the pain. There was none of last night's restraint between us now. I felt Theo's frustration in every kiss, in every movement of his hips against mine. His hands in my sweaty hair, his tongue in my mouth. Although we shared the same desperation, it was only now that it truly felt like Theo was finally letting go. As if he knew that after this, last night could no longer be explained as an accident—a drunken mistake after too much champagne. This was our admission of how we were drawn to each other.

Biting into his lower lip, I pushed him back against the wall. The ache inside me was beginning to tighten into something heavier. Momentarily, I wondered if another player could walk into the shared locker room and spot us, but I pushed the thought away. Instead, I slid my hand under Theo's shirt and explored his bare chest with my fingers, tracing the lines of his torso before moving farther down. My body grew hot as I watched him shudder under my touch, inhaling air through gritted teeth. His desperate sounds made me feel braver, less scared of him pulling away like he did the night before. I could feel the tremble that went through his body as I slid my hand along him, and my own pulse spiked.

He leaned into my touch, pressing himself up against me, and I was close to losing the last shred of self-control that was preventing me from tearing off his clothes. Drawing away from his lips, I began kissing down his neck, moving greedily toward his collarbone. His skin tasted salty against my

lips, and I couldn’t get enough of it. The fabric of his shirt was in the way, and Theo took his hands off my hips to swiftly pull his shirt over his head. His chest heaved with each jagged breath as I took in the hard lines of his sculpted torso. I lifted my gaze to meet his. His eyes seemed much darker now.

“So eager,” I rasped, my voice sounding strange in my ears. “Did you always have these locker room fantasies?” I added teasingly, a grin playing around my lips.

Just then, I could see it in his eyes. My words had woken him up, shifting something inside him.

He’s going to run again.

While I already knew exactly what would happen next, I still had to hold on to the wall to stop myself from stumbling when Theo pushed me away. In a desperate attempt to create distance, he rushed to the other end of the room, but then he turned back toward me. He was gazing at me as though he were in actual shock, still breathing heavily.

“*Fuck.* What the hell is going on with me?” he asked, closing his eyes as if he were in pain.

Oh no. Not this time. He was not doing this to me again—kissing me and then making me feel like I forced myself onto him or something.

“I don’t get it,” he continued, shaking his head. “I’m not even into men,” he added more quietly, more to himself than to me.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, Theo, but I doubt that. And before you turn this whole thing around again and act like I was suddenly all over you—you kissed me. *Twice.*”

“Yeah, no shit, William,” he hissed, then glared at me.

For a moment, we just stood in front of each other, neither of us breaking eye contact. I could feel the tension rising again before Theo shook his head. Then he sat down on one of the wooden benches and rested his head in his hands. Unlike me, he seemed to have forgotten that he was still shirtless.

Unsure of where to go from here, I just stood motionless in front of him, my hands clenched into fists. Eventually, I walked over and sat down beside him, leaving a noticeable amount of space between us. I wasn’t sure if he could handle me being that close to him just yet.

“You’re going to ignore me again now?” I asked after a moment.

“I can’t,” Theo said quietly and turned his head in his hands to look at me. “I tried that. Didn’t work too well.”

“No. It didn’t. Felt great, though,” I replied sarcastically.

He let out a breath and leaned back on the bench, resting his head against the iron lockers behind him. “Sorry. I guess I panicked. I just thought I needed to keep my distance, because whenever . . .” He trailed off, hesitating for a moment.

“Whenever what?” I asked more softly.

“Whenever I get too close to you, it just gets really difficult to not . . . do what I just did.”

I swallowed, feeling my heart pound wildly. “It’s the same for me.”

We held our gazes for a moment. Sitting quietly with our confessions, letting it all sink in. How much it meant that we were finally saying it out loud.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“I have no idea. I can honestly say I have never been more confused in my life. I thought my biggest problem for these two weeks would be getting along with you.”

“Well, one problem solved. We do get along. More or less,” I added with a small grin tugging at my lips.

“Not quite what I had in mind, though,” Theo said, and we fully grinned at each other. “No, but really,” he continued earnestly, “I would like nothing more than to figure this out—it’s driving me crazy. I just don’t know what to do.”

I let my eyes wander over his naked shoulders, slowly traveling further down to the sun-kissed skin of his torso. I swallowed. “Me neither, but if you don’t put your shirt back on, I doubt I can be helpful any time soon.” I met his gaze again, a teasing glint in my eyes.

A cocky grin spread over his lips. “I’m still fucking hot, Will. But we can’t have you distracted right now, can we?” With that, Theo got up and strode away to pick up his dark-green shirt from the floor.

In one swift movement, he pulled it over his head. When he pushed back his messy hair from his face, he met my gaze again and winked, knowing

full well that I hadn’t taken my eyes off him once.

“There’s only one thing I know right now,” Theo said when he sat back down next to me. There was no more amusement in his voice.

“What?”

He hesitated for a moment. “I can’t stay away from you. I tried and it just doesn’t work and . . . I don’t want to, either.” He sounded shy as he said the last part, and I had to fight the urge to kiss his tensed lips.

“Me neither,” I quickly replied. My heartbeat was so loud that I was afraid Theo might hear it. “We just need to figure this out somehow. How exactly, I don’t know, but all I *do* know is that we can’t play like we did today. We just can’t.”

Theo let out another heavy breath. “God, no. That was a low point, even for me. But I’ll talk to Isabel, I have her number. I’ll straighten it out, I promise.”

Of course he had her number. I had to bite my tongue to refrain from commenting about that. But I knew it was silly. He could do whatever he wanted. He owed me nothing.

And right now, Isabel didn’t matter.

He’d said he couldn’t stay away from me.

That was all that mattered.

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Chapter 18

As we stepped out into the corridor and passed a couple of the club's employees, I suddenly felt Theo's hand on my shoulder.

"Sorry about the match, by the way."

He spoke softly, leaning in close enough that a strand of his hair brushed my face.

"I know I haven't said it yet, but I want you to know that you don't have to worry about it tomorrow. It won't happen again."

I was still caught up in the revelation of feeling him so close to me when Kjell suddenly stepped in front of us. I shifted slightly to the side; Theo's hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear suddenly felt all too intimate. Instantly, Theo dropped his hand, stopping beside me.

"Hey," Kjell said. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Of course," I replied mechanically.

When Theo showed no effort to leave, I could sense Kjell's confusion grow.

"*Alone?*" he added.

I nodded before turning to Theo, who still showed no sign of leaving. "I'll be out in five minutes. Are you OK to wait?"

"Yeah. I'll definitely wait," he said. His voice sounded strange in my ears.

When I returned to Kjell, I caught him looking at me with a confused expression on his face. No, not just at me. At *us*.

Silently, I followed him to one of the unoccupied staff rooms, already dreading the conversation between us. All this burning excitement I had felt after my talk with Theo was immediately replaced by my guilty conscience. I'd known I had to talk to Kjell at some point, but I didn't expect it to happen today. The whole night with him had been a knee-jerk reaction, and I would take it back if I could. Of course, I would never tell him *that*.

“I was actually going to ask you if something happened since Saturday night. I doubt it is a coincidence that you haven’t replied to my texts or come by again,” Kjell said into the uncomfortable silence between us. “But I think I already know what is going on.”

My head snapped up and I met his gaze. “And what do you think is going on, Kjell?” I asked, matching his tone, even though I didn’t actually want to hear his answer.

His features hardened. “Theo and you.”

Momentarily, the ground seemed to tilt beneath me, my hands helplessly clenching into fists.

“I already thought you two had grown rather close this week,” Kjell went on when I didn’t reply, “but the way he looked at me on-court earlier, and just now, not wanting to leave you alone with me . . . it told me more than I wanted to know.”

I tried to process his words, find a way to respond, but my brain was incapable of coming up with even one coherent thought. I had been prepared for him to reproach me for my erratic behavior, but *not* for Theo to be the topic of that conversation. How could I possibly explain what was going on between Theo and me when we ourselves were still struggling to understand it?

“You should be a bit more careful,” Kjell said bitterly. “People aren’t blind, you know? I assume keeping it a secret might be important to you. It always was, was it not?”

I clenched my jaw at his words. Each one served as a punishment. He was clearly trying to provoke me, and unfortunately, it was working.

“I don’t think it’s any of your business, to be honest,” I said.

Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t. I honestly wasn’t sure what I owed Kjell at this point. All I knew was that it had been a long day, and I was tired. Tired from the previous match and tired from the emotional roller coaster with Theo. I just couldn’t deal with this now.

He shook his head in disbelief, his light-blue eyes boring into mine from across the room. “Really, William? That’s your reply? It’s none of my business? I didn’t think you could become more egotistic than you already were, but I shouldn’t be surprised with you tennis players.”

“Why hook up with me then if I have such a terrible ego?” I replied, my voice cold.

“Because I liked you despite it. But even I can only excuse so much.”

One by one, his words slammed painfully into my chest, but I brushed them away.

“Did I miss the part where we decided that we are committed to each other? Wasn’t it just a night to blow off some steam for the both of us?”

He let out a bitter laugh. “Of course you would say something like this. I should have known. Very convenient for you to suddenly forget everything you said that night. Whenever someone gets too close, too serious, your first instinct is defense, isn’t it, William? Just like in your matches. You should try to differentiate those two things at some point. And, you know, try showing some decency and tell me that you are seeing someone. Don’t talk about getting together after this tournament. I’m not some stranger. We used to be close,” Kjell said, his tone cutting. I could see the disdain in his eyes. Disdain and disappointment.

I flinched, and my hand gripped the door frame as I desperately tried to stabilize myself. I didn’t think he had ever spoken to me in such a contemptuous manner. Not after I started distancing myself from him a year ago and not after I ultimately ended things between us. That’s why I had hoped that this whole situation might resolve easily. He had always been forgiving. But the expression he now wore on his face, how he regarded me with disgust, suddenly made me realize that *this was it*.

He was done with me—and this time, it was for good. Despite ending things with him and not speaking for most of last year, there had always been a small part of me that still relied on him. I never admitted it to myself before, but deep down, I had believed that he would still be there if I ever changed my mind.

But not anymore. Not that it should surprise me. I already knew that I was good at severing ties with people I was close to.

I couldn’t meet his eyes any longer and let my gaze wander to the floor. By now, my guilty conscience had sunk deep into my chest, heavy like a stone. But it was more than that. There was also a terrifying feeling of uncertainty, knowing that I now had a future ahead of me in which I would have to let go of Kjell completely.

“The thing with Theo is . . . complicated. And new. It has nothing to do with you,” I hesitantly tried to explain. “I get that it’s awful timing, but I didn’t assume that what happened between us automatically meant things were getting more serious. I’m sorry if I miscommunicated that. And I’m sorry I didn’t reply, but you know that I’m not here for fun. I’m here for work, so there have been a few other things on my mind.” I had to fight the urge to wince when I realized how hollow my words sounded.

“*Work?*” Kjell repeated with a fake laugh. “Bit pointless to call it that when work is actually your whole life, don’t you think?”

I tightened my jaw and bit down on the inside of my cheek, trying to hold back my anger.

“So it’s true then?” he went on, not bothering to wait for my reply. “You guys are seeing each other?”

I just stared back at him. There was no need to answer. He knew it was true.

“No offense, but that’s a disaster waiting to happen,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Excuse me?”

“I know you. You’re struggling with a lot. But I also know Theo. At least professionally. That guy is a mess. He has no clue who he is—on-court or off-court. You should know that as much as I do. He’s charming, I give you that. But the two of you together scream chaos. And you of all people should stay as far away from that as possible. And I’m not saying that because I want you for myself, just so we’re clear. We are done here. But take my advice: If you want to spare yourself some pain, let this whole thing go. Believe me, you don’t want to feel like I do right now,” Kjell finished. He was trying to sound distant, hide his feelings behind a mask of indifference, but the last sentence gave him away. An expression of deep hurt briefly darted across his face.

My mouth now tasted metallic, having bitten so deeply into my cheek that I drew blood. I couldn’t bear to see the pain on his face. But everything he had just said was what I had been secretly fearing. Things were just starting to look up between Theo and me. I couldn’t deal with any more problems, and I definitely didn’t want Kjell to be the one pointing them out to me.

“Are we done here?” I asked quietly. I felt like I was suffocating in that room, and all I wanted to do was to get out of it as fast as possible.

“Oh, we’re done, yes. I said everything I had to say.” He checked the watch on his wrist before looking back up at me. “I have an appointment now anyway. Have a nice tournament then. And don’t worry, William—from now on, it’s solely business. Just like you always wanted.”

His tone sounded detached, but his hand trembled slightly just before he slipped it into his pocket. I tore my eyes away and met his gaze again.

“OK,” I said, my voice nothing more than a whisper. I turned around, closed the door behind me, and leaned against the corridor wall for a moment, pressing my eyes shut. I tried to take a deep breath to calm myself, but it felt as though something in my chest was blocking the air from getting through. Somehow this day was just getting worse and worse. I couldn’t remember the last time I had to deal with so much drama unrelated to tennis. I certainly wasn’t good at it, that much was evident.

You should have apologized, not just thrown him that insincere “I’m sorry,” a voice whispered in the back of my mind. I immediately pushed that thought away. It was too late. All I wanted now was to banish the whole Kjell chapter from my memory.

I was almost done with the day. *Almost.* Theo was still out there, waiting for me, I suddenly remembered. A faint smile began to spread on my lips. Maybe this day wasn’t so bad after all.

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As I walked out of the building, I wasn’t sure if Theo had left without me. When I had asked him to wait, I had hoped Kjell and I would be done talking in a couple of minutes. I certainly hadn’t expected a serious, extensive conversation. Definitely didn’t expect something so brutal.

My thoughts were still circling around every single thing Kjell had just said. About me, about him, and especially about Theo. Yet I didn’t want to think about any of that right now. All I wanted was to go back to the hotel with Theo and try to make sense of the situation between us. I wanted him to tell me again that he couldn’t stay away from me.

I let my gaze wander over the site, spotting Theo sitting on the same stairs he had met me at on our first day. It felt like months ago. Briefly, I

halted my steps and allowed myself to take him in for a moment longer. How his brown hair was shimmering in the afternoon sun, glowing warm auburn in this light. I wanted him to turn around just to catch his face in the sun and see his freckles.

As if he read my mind, Theo turned his head and met my gaze. A smile spread across my face, and quickly, I made my way over to him.

“Some talk you two must have had,” he said the moment I was in hearing distance. His voice sounded strained.

My smile slipped from my face. “Not particularly, no. Why?” I asked hesitantly.

“I was just wondering what you guys had to talk about in private for almost thirty minutes.”

I took it all back. Today was getting worse by the minute. And I was really getting sick of it.

“We were casually hooking up, of course, Theo. What else?” I said sarcastically. I knew I was only making it worse, but I just couldn’t help responding to his reproachful tone.

“Funny.”

“Who said I was making a joke?”

His gaze hardened. With a slight shake of his head, he got up and headed back toward the parking lot.

Alright. Definitely not the right moment for sarcasm, but I just couldn’t understand him. Just hours ago, he couldn’t even bring himself to talk to me, and now he was annoyed that I had overextended my private time with Kjell?

“Oh, come on, Theo. Obviously I wasn’t being serious. We just had some unfinished business, that’s all. Trust me, I wasn’t enjoying myself in there. And in all honesty, you’re being awfully sensitive for someone who spent the whole morning ignoring me,” I said while I followed him down the stairs. When Theo suddenly stopped, I almost crashed into him.

He scanned our surroundings, checking to see if anyone was listening. “Can I ask you just one question?” he then asked.

I nodded.

“Did you come back from his room the other night?”

I just stared at him for a moment. “Does it matter?”

“I take that as a yes then. Wow.” He let out a bitter laugh. “You’ve really had quite the week, huh?”

I wanted to point out the irony in his statement. Indeed, I’d had quite the week, since I had spent almost every second of the tournament wondering what the hell was going on with him. Trying to make sense of the fleeting moments of intimacy between us before Theo iced me out again. But it felt like too much to say and too soon to say it without scaring him off. I didn’t think he could handle the truth—that I had been thinking about him nonstop for eight days straight—yet. So instead, I just stayed quiet.

“Obviously you don’t owe me anything. You can do whatever you want, Hagen,” he said.

Hearing him call me by my last name felt like a slap to the face. I had gotten used to him calling me Will and the familiarity that came with it. But I supposed that’s exactly what he intended. He was taking a step back, creating distance between us once again.

“Can we just talk about that later?” I asked in a weak attempt to defuse the situation.

“We don’t have to talk about it at all. Like I said, you can do as you please. It’s just good to know that while I’ve been working through one of the biggest personal crises of, well, yeah, probably my entire life, you’ve been having fun with our physio staff. But good for you, honestly. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself this week. One of us had to.” Although his tone was harsh, I could see a flicker of pain in his eyes.

Theo spun around, walking quickly toward the parking lot. I silently followed him, my mind racing, words stuck in my throat. Then he suddenly turned around again.

“Could you do me a favor?”

I lifted my gaze, meeting his eyes.

“Could you grab the next shuttle?”

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Chapter 19

I heard a sound from the hallway and looked at the door, hoping it was Theo. Maybe he miraculously decided to forgive me and finally came to my room. But of course, it wasn't him. It hadn't been him the last six times this had happened in the past hour. I wasn't really sure what I was waiting for. By now, I knew him well enough to know he wasn't going to come looking for me tonight. It was up to me to find him and make him understand that the whole thing with Kjell meant nothing. At least not in the way he was imagining it right now. And yet, I couldn't seem to bring myself to knock on his door. I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I was in way over my head. I was here to try to win over the press, but at the same time I wanted to hook up with Theo without them knowing. I was playing with fire and I knew it.

Everything inside me was screaming to let this go before it got any more complicated. If I thought about it rationally, there was just no way this was going to end well, so why pursue it? It wasn't like I'd had any stable relationship that hadn't ended in disaster. I learned that lesson early on, and I hadn't forgotten it since. Tennis was safe. It was all I'd ever known—the only thing I'd ever felt equipped to handle. I knew the gut-wrenching disappointment of a defeat, but I also knew what I could do out there, and that knowledge always held me together afterward. I knew how to navigate tennis and tennis only. Anything that took my focus away from that just never seemed worth it to me. It was as simple as that. Yet here I was, sitting in my room, contemplating whether or not I should possibly get involved with my teammate just before I was about to play my first match with him tomorrow. It didn't make any sense. It wasn't *me*.

But . . . maybe this time, it wasn't that simple. Because as much as it scared me to try to open up to Theo, it seemed even scarier not to talk to him at all. To just go back to being teammates, and not long after, to rivals who only cared about exploiting each other's weaknesses on the court. We would be back to that soon enough. But not yet. I needed more of him. So . . . I needed to be brave.

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My knock echoed through the silent corridor of the hotel. The seconds before I could make out movement behind the door stretched on for an eternity.

“Can I come in?” I asked when Theo finally stood in front of me in the doorway. He lowered the hood of his sweater and ran his fingers through his hair, still slightly damp from the shower. He just gave me a faint nod and walked back into his room, leaving the door open for me to follow. Theo dropped down onto the bed, glancing at me with a blank expression.

Slowly, I walked over to the desk on the other side of the room and leaned against it.

“So,” I began, not really knowing where to start, “I just wanted to explain because I think you misunderstood a few things earlier.”

“You know you don’t have to,” Theo interrupted me. “I know I reacted a bit . . . harshly, but I meant what I said. You can do whatever you want. With whoever you want. I have no right to be pissed off about it, but I guess it still *does* piss me off.”

“I like that it pisses you off,” I replied without thinking.

Theo laughed. “That makes one of us.”

“I want you to understand, though,” I went on. I knew he was giving me a way out, but I wasn’t sure if he was withdrawing again. “Kjell was my physio for a year, as you probably remember. We got along quite well, and at some point, we started to have a . . . physical relationship.”

“*Physical relationship?*” Theo repeated, rubbing his face with his hands and letting out a small laugh. “You know you sound like my dad trying to explain sex to me, right?”

“I thought I would say it in the least descriptive way possible. But I can go into detail if you want,” I replied, raising my brows.

“I appreciate the offer.” He grimaced. “But no.”

“That’s what I thought. The reason I’m even putting myself through this is just so you understand that Kjell and I have some history. But this tournament is actually the first time we have seen each other since I ended things—”

“Why did you?”

I looked at him in surprise.

“End things, I mean,” he added.

“It just didn’t make sense anymore, I guess. At least for me. I felt like I needed to focus more on my career. He was distracting me.”

Theo just nodded, and it was driving me crazy. The way he managed to never give anything away. That impenetrable expression of his.

“The other day, when you saw us talking in the hallway,” I continued slowly, “he kind of put it out there, that . . . I could meet him in his room at night.”

“I heard him tell you his room number,” Theo said flatly. “I kind of figured.”

“I wasn’t actually going to do it. I was tempted, I’ll admit. I’m not a saint. But I wasn’t going to go, I was sure of that.”

“What made you change your mind?”

I let out a breath. “You.”

Theo’s eyebrows shot up, a look of confusion forming on his face. “How?”

“*How?*” I repeated, stunned. “With every single thing you’ve done in the past week. The time we spent together. Training together every day, being at the pool night after night. I just couldn’t help but . . . want you.” Saying the words out loud left me with another twinge of guilt.

“Wait,” he said and closed his eyes for a moment. “I wasn’t your distraction from him?”

“Sorry?”

“I wasn’t your distraction from—” Theo began to repeat.

“Oh no, I heard you the first time. It’s just . . . *that’s* what you thought?” That’s what he had believed this whole time? That he had been the consolation prize, nothing more than a desperate attempt to get over Kjell?

I shook my head. “Well, let me be clear. The only reason I hooked up with Kjell again was because I could not have you. I needed to stop thinking about you for at least one night.”

My heart was wildly beating in my chest. When was the last time I had expressed my feelings so frankly to anyone? I just wanted him to know

everything. I wanted him to see how things had changed, how he'd affected me this past week.

"And don't get me wrong," I went on. "You drove me crazy most of the time. With your temper, charming to every single person here but me. Then you tortured me every time you touched me—no matter how briefly. God, when you massaged my fucking leg, you really were trying to kill me, weren't you?"

Theo let out a pained laugh and put his head in his hands. "I really wasn't. I genuinely thought I was helping you. I don't think I even knew what the hell I was doing when I sat there in the dark. Not until I actually had my hands on your leg. Then I realized that it was all about wanting to touch you."

His confession made my chest grow warm. I cast my eyes down to his lips. Recalling just how soft they were made the heat travel farther down in my body.

"I thought I was making it all up in my head," I replied truthfully, forcing myself to meet his gaze again. "I wondered if it meant something, but I was so certain it didn't."

Theo raised his eyebrows, a look of astonishment on his face. "Seriously? And here I was, thinking I could not have been more obvious. I genuinely couldn't sleep for hours because I'd asked such a stupid question that night."

"Oh, right. That question of yours was the reason I had spent most of *my* night wondering if I was going insane."

His mouth twitched. "And that wasn't enough to see right through me?"

"Not with the attitude you gave me the next day, no. It didn't really let me consider that you might be bothered by the idea of me being alone with Kjell."

Theo held my gaze for a moment. The hint of humor that had flickered across his face had disappeared again. I watched his eyes follow the movement of my hand as I lifted it to the side of my neck and massaged my shoulder. Under his piercing gaze, I could feel my pulse pound against my palm.

He forced himself to look back at my face. "You weren't going insane. I didn't like it. I still don't like it."

“So you chose to make me feel horrible instead?” I hadn’t forgotten the way he shot me down, the sting of his disregard still there.

“No, that’s not . . .” He paused, closing his eyes for a moment. “Maybe I did, I don’t know. If it makes it any less horrible, doing that didn’t make me feel any better. On the contrary, actually.” He let out a breath. “But I am sorry for punishing you like that.”

The only answer I could give was a single nod. At least now, I knew that I hadn’t imagined all of it. That I hadn’t been going crazy the last couple of days.

A beat of silence passed between us. Then another one. By now, the whole room was full of tension.

“So what now?” I forced out.

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

“You’re the one who is constantly . . . seeing someone. I expected at least some expertise here.”

“Yes, with *women*. Not with men. Never with men,” Theo said, leaning back on the bed, keeping his eyes on me.

I held his gaze, a slow smirk spreading over my lips. “What would you normally do when you’re with a woman in your hotel room?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment. “There would be less talking. *Significantly* less talking.”

“I assume because you are showing them one of your matches?” I teased.

Theo let out a laugh. “Close. But not quite, Will, no.”

“Show me then,” I challenged him, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

He raised an eyebrow, regarding me for a moment. Then, slowly pushing himself up from the bed, he moved toward me until he was standing right in front of me and the desk. He hadn’t even touched me yet, but he was so close I could breathe in the scent of his shampoo. I could feel him everywhere. He held my gaze for a moment before slowly lowering his eyes, wandering over my face, the rest of my body, before finally meeting my gaze again. Leaning forward, he placed both his hands on the table, on either side of me, pinning me against the desk. He took his time, leaning in closer and closer until his lips were just inches from mine—but still not

touching. As if deliberately trying to torture me. The heat of his breath made me shudder, and I involuntarily shut my eyes. Only to snap them open again when I heard Theo clear his throat. His knowing gaze met mine, and a cocky grin spread across his face.

“I think you get the idea,” he said, winking before moving away from the table and me.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Eastwood.” Before he could turn around, I grabbed the front of his hoodie, pulled him back toward me, and pressed my mouth against his. In an instant, Theo gripped the sides of my face and drew me in closer. However, there was nothing hurried about the way he parted his soft lips against mine, letting his tongue caress my bottom lip ever so gently. None of his movements showed any sign of his past frustrations with me. His fingers gently brushed back into my curls, his thumbs caressing my flushed cheeks. The way he held my face so firmly yet tenderly made me burn with an unknown desire.

I gripped the fabric of his hoodie more tightly, refusing to let him move an inch as I fully drank in this moment.

I had no idea how long we stayed there, with Theo’s hands in my hair, kissing for the first time without worrying that either of us would pull away. He made me lose all sense of time.

Slowly, Theo began kissing up my throat before letting his head rest against mine. “I honestly don’t know what is going on or how we are going to survive the rest of the tournament. All I know is . . . I don’t want to go back to pretending again tomorrow. I don’t want this to end yet,” he said softly.

He doesn’t want this to end. A small smile formed on my face and I kissed him again, slower this time. Maybe today wasn’t so bad after all.

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Chapter 20

// Tuesday

Theo sank back onto my bed and pulled my pillow under his head. It still felt surreal to have him alone in my hotel room. To see him lying on my bed an arm's length away and knowing that I could touch him. Knowing that he would let me.

"Not such a bad duo after all, huh?" he asked.

"To everybody's surprise, including my own, no." A smile tugged at my lips.

Yesterday might have been a doubles match from hell, but earlier today we'd managed to win our first official match against Cafaro and Tirelli. A win that no one seemed to have expected, least of all Theo and me. Apparently, we could work like a team.

He let out a small laugh. "Now, we have to do exactly what we did today three more times, and the trophy will be ours. That'd be great, actually. I could use a bit of momentum before the next tournament."

I nodded. "Yeah, a win would be a great send-off."

"Can you believe that we're over the halfway point of the tour? God, I need a couple of good tournaments or I can kiss the ATP Finals this year goodbye."

I wrinkled my forehead. "There's no way you're not going to qualify. In the last, what? Three years? There hasn't been a single time you didn't secure a spot."

Theo let out a weak laugh. "You haven't followed my season quite so diligently, have you? It's been the worst season I've had in ages. I'm lucky I'm still in the Top 10."

"Didn't you win Rotterdam in February?"

"Yes, which is the only reason I have a chance at qualifying this year. I lost like five tournaments continuously in the first round. My US Open

breakdown was the icing on the cake of this embarrassing season. At least *that* wasn't a first-round exit."

"Right." He had played badly this season—there was no way to sugarcoat it. As much as I would have liked to.

"Which is exactly why for the last few months I have been playing tournament after tournament, no matter how small and unpopular they are, like some kind of madman," Theo went on. "To gain at least a few points. Not that I made a great show of myself. It doesn't take a lot these days to beat me."

"Why?"

Theo propped himself up. "Why what?"

He frowned at my question, and I noticed a small pale scar on his furrowed brow. I found myself noticing minor things about Theo a lot over the past couple of days. Things I had never seen before. A birthmark on his left hand, that auburn glint in his hair, and now the scar on his brow. It was almost funny how a week ago, I had done everything in my power to steer clear of him. But now, I couldn't stop myself from tracing his face, searching for anything I might have missed.

"Why do you think it has been such a bad season for you?" I asked, drawing my eyes away from his scar.

Theo shrugged his shoulders. "That's the million-dollar question. I blew this one match out of nowhere in March, got completely destroyed by some kid who was ranked 247 in the world. It shook my confidence, and it seems like I'm having a hard time building it up again. Or . . . I don't know. Maybe tennis just hates me." He tried to sound nonchalant, but I could still hear the defeat underneath his voice.

I placed my hand on his leg, just above his ankle. "Of course tennis doesn't hate you."

Theo stayed quiet, regarding my hand on his leg for a moment.

"But I've been wondering about this," I continued. "What was happening in your mind when you played all these first-round matches, especially when you were the clear favorite against a qualifier no one had even heard of before. Everyone seemed to know you were the favorite. Everyone but you. I never really understood why you would willingly hand your opponent the opportunity to show you up like that. I mean, you're one of

the best players on tour, but you somehow forget that as soon as one minor thing doesn't go your way."

Theo exhaled. "Like I said. It doesn't take a lot to beat me these days."

"No, but it does," I said, firmly shaking my head. "That's the thing. You're the better player. You have more match experience, you have better movement, you have a better fitness level. So yes, it does take a lot to beat you. You're just doing all the hard work of beating yourself for them."

Theo kept his eyes on my hand that was still placed motionless on his leg. I didn't think twice about helping Theo—even though I knew I should have. I should take in any new insights and save them for later. Any additional weapon for the next match could be a key to victory. After all, he was someone I wanted to beat, not help. Someone I should have enjoyed to see struggle like that. But my heart seemed to beat faster whenever he was nearby, and I couldn't help how it urged me to protect him.

"What does Baldridge say to all of this?" I asked when he still hadn't replied.

"Oh, a lot. He basically tells me that I have let the negativity in. That until I start to believe in what I'm capable of, I won't stop struggling. So far, it seems like I can't stop focusing on my mistakes." He shrugged. "And how could I not? Tennis is cruel like that. You know that as much as I do. I mean, we play the only sport where *every* mistake we make goes on the scoreboard."

I tried to decipher the tone of his voice. Was he exhausted? Pained? Was tennis doing that to him now? Hurting him?

"But do you still love it?" Ultimately, that was all that really mattered. If you stopped loving tennis, if it stopped being everything to you, you would crack under the pressure in no time.

Again, he was quiet for a moment. "Yeah, I guess I do. It would probably be a lot easier if I didn't, though. It's becoming pretty painful to pursue a profession which basically tortures me every day. Makes me hate myself." He let out another weak laugh. "I'm in a bit of a crisis at the moment, if you can't tell. It just feels like I . . . I don't know. Like I don't really know anything right now."

I knew he was hard on himself. I knew this version of him existed. I had seen his outbursts on the court, even used them against him. Played with his

mental instability. I knew I would eventually do it again. I knew all of that, and still, it was difficult to reconcile it with the charming, lighthearted side of him. Right now, he seemed like he had hit rock bottom, like he was lost without a clue about how to get back on track. Yet he never showed any sign of it to the world, keeping up the facade of the carefree Theo that everybody loved.

"Do you ever think about the time when you were in the Top 200, and every time you moved up in rank, you were excited about it? How easy everything was back then?" he asked.

I nodded. It felt like ages ago, but I could still recall the excitement I felt every Monday when I would check the rankings and found myself climbing closer and closer to the top.

"I mean, I dreamed of being in the Top 50 of the world. And now I am part of the Top 10, but I might not be able to hold my spot any longer. I might fall back and be part of the Top 20 again. Which is still fucking good. Objectively, I know that. But just the thought of that . . ." Theo grimaced. "Let's just say I wouldn't take it very well."

I scrutinized him for a few seconds, letting his words sink in. "So it's all about the pressure then. About you not being able to endure it anymore?"

Theo met my gaze and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I just feel disappointed. Now I'm wondering if, maybe, I deserve it. Feeling this hatred toward myself because all these people used to talk about how talented I was, how much potential I had, but I just feel like I haven't lived up to it, and I fear I never will. I mean, even my dad has stopped watching my matches."

"What? *Why*?"

Theo exhaled sharply and ruffled his hair. "He doesn't understand why I play a sport where I lose so much more than I win. Where I show so much pain when I lose. He said I must love to get hurt in some way; otherwise, he doesn't understand why I would put myself through that. He said he can't watch me do that to myself any longer. So he's certainly not all that impressed with my performance at the moment."

I gave Theo's ankle a squeeze before running my thumb soothingly over his leg. "No, he's just worried about you. He obviously sees that you are not in a good place at the moment and that you are punishing yourself for it.

But it’s difficult to understand when you’re not part of this world. They just won’t get certain things.” My voice was soft yet urgent. I needed him to know that I saw him—that he wasn’t alone in this.

Theo nodded and gave me a smile that did not seem to reach his eyes.

He really was . . . falling apart over this. And he was telling *me* about it. He was opening up to me in a way that he never had before. Without being able to fully explain it, I felt a strange sense of pride, as if I had accomplished something I hadn’t set out to do.

“But I get it. I know that playing at our level comes with a lot of expectations that you can’t avoid. To constantly get better, to keep on winning. I obviously deal with it too.” The words just poured out of my mouth. “But maybe try to see it that way—without all this pressure, there are no expectations anymore. And why would we even do any of this if there were none?” I let out a small, self-conscious laugh. “I don’t know if I’m making any sense here. I guess I’m just trying to say that without the pressure, we couldn’t find out how much greater we could be. No chances to win, to challenge, and inspire. We probably wouldn’t be doing any of it. So maybe instead of letting it crush you, try to revel in it sometimes.”

Theo pushed himself up on his arms again. “I want to, believe me. I mean, I watch you on-court, and I’m almost jealous, you know? You always manage to stay so calm,” he said bitterly.

“Not always. When I was younger, I did a very bad job at staying calm. *Especially* at handling my anger,” I said honestly.

“You? Seriously?” Theo said with a raise of his brows. He looked like he didn’t believe me.

“It was years ago, but yeah. It was a . . . difficult time then.” I didn’t like the recapitulation of that part of my life, but I knew I had to go into it if I wanted Theo to stop with his black-and-white thinking. “I mostly felt like there wasn’t a fucking thing that was in my control. Maybe a bit like you do right now. But it was more that I didn’t trust anyone, and I had no stability. Until I turned to tennis. It became the one thing I could depend on. My routines. Putting endless hours into my training. It almost became this . . . haven for me. I never had that before. So I couldn’t—still can’t—mess this up for myself.”

He looked at me for a moment before a smile started to form on his lips.

“Haven, huh?” he teased. “*Very* poetic.”

I let out a laugh. “Fuck off.”

I shoved him onto his back again, placing my hands on either side of his head. “I was trying to help you.”

He lifted his fingers and let them trail over my jaw. “Very much appreciated.”

I slowly moved my eyes down Theo’s face. Over his throat and his white T-shirt, which had ridden up slightly. All I had to do was lean forward and I could kiss him. Kiss him like he had kissed me last night. I swallowed, images of me and Theo in his room, pushing himself against me, flashing behind my eyes.

“What’s that look?” Theo asked, drawing my focus back to his eyes.

“Oh, just reliving some of last night’s events.”

“Ah,” was all he said, and his gaze darkened.

For a few seconds, we looked at each other, a charged silence hanging heavily between us.

When I couldn’t take it any longer, I leaned into him, closing the last bit of distance and pressing my lips against his. Theo’s response was so forceful that it almost threw me off. Gripping my head, he pulled me down against him, deepening the kiss without hesitation.

I softly bit into his lower lip, earning myself a whimpering breath from him. I wanted him closer, to finally feel his skin against mine. God, every single time I kissed him, felt his breath against my skin, my whole body felt like it was on fire. How could it feel *this* good?

Suddenly, Theo pushed me away. I looked at him in confusion, still breathing heavily. Then I realized what he was doing. In one swift motion, he pulled his shirt over his head and flung it to the side. I was frozen as my eyes took in the hard lines of his sculpted body.

“Take it off,” he said, nodding at my hoodie. His voice was serious, his pupils dilated.

I got rid of it quickly. Without missing a beat, Theo was on me. Now it was his turn to push me back onto the mattress, kissing me impatiently. When his hot skin finally touched mine, I held my breath as anticipation curled tightly inside me.

For a second, I wondered if this felt strange to him in any way—going this far with me, when only two weeks ago he had believed he wasn't into men. But when his hands gripped my hair tightly, I quickly pushed the thought away. If he wasn't thinking about any of this now, why should I worry?

He lowered his mouth over my jaw and down the side of my neck, his teeth scratching my skin as he went. Instantly, the last of my concern was gone.

I lifted my hand, which had been tracing the hard contours of his torso, and trailed it down his stomach. I reveled in the way his body reacted to my touch, goose bumps prickling his skin. Remembering how he had pulled away from me the last time I went this far, I made sure to give him enough time to stop me if he didn't want me to continue.

Theo stilled under my touch, yet he held me firmly in place as I worked my way down and loosened the fabric around his waist. Another shiver ran through his body as the cold air brushed against his skin. This time there was not a single sign that he wanted to put an end to it. Our eyes locked, and it felt as if I saw my own desire reflected in his.

"I want you so badly," I panted.

He swallowed, still breathing heavily. For a moment, nervousness flashed across his face.

"We don't have to." I quickly retreated.

He closed his eyes for a second and drew in a deep breath. When he opened them again, any sign of uncertainty was gone. "No, I want to," he said firmly, shaking his head. "More than anything, Will." The assurance in his voice sent a tremor through my entire body.

Then, slowly, Theo shifted away from me. It was only for a moment, but the space he left behind seemed to deepen the silence between us, stretching it thin and wide. I stilled, watching him move just out of sight as he reached for his pants. The room echoed with the meaningful sound of plastic tearing as the tension stretched toward a breaking point.

When he returned, he was above me again, closer this time, the distance between us erased in an instant.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Carefully, I let my gaze travel over Theo's freckled face, listening to him suck in a shallow breath. I watched him bite his lip so he wouldn't make a sound, but he couldn't hide it from me.

Theo was coming apart in front of me, and I realized that I would never get enough of this sight.

Let's never stop doing this, I thought. I didn't want to think about the world outside of this room. All I wanted was for this tournament to go on forever and for reality to never catch up with us.

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Chapter 21

// Wednesday

“Best friends edition today, guys.”

“Let’s see how well you *really* know me, Will,” Theo said, and I could see the corners of his mouth twitch as he took off the cap of his marker.

“I’d say by now, pretty well. But if you want me to prove myself, I can,” I replied, barely able to contain my grin.

He leaned back, resting his arm along the back of the seat and propping his chin on his hand. All the while, he was looking at me and mirroring my grin. I knew *exactly* what he was thinking—how well I had come to know him since last night.

“I’m afraid I have to ask for proof.” His voice was teasing.

“OK then,” Isabel interrupted us, getting our attention. “You know how this works. I will ask you a question, and you will write down your answers at the same time. Ready?”

I had to squint against the harsh studio light shining on us when I turned to look at Isabel.

“Just a second,” Theo said. He took off his cap and put it on my head.

I turned toward him, eyebrows raised, and watched as he quickly removed his hoodie and ruffled his hair. Watching Theo take off his clothes has become one of my new favorite activities.

“Sorry, it’s hotter than I expected,” was all he said, shrugging, before retrieving his cap. “Go ahead, please.”

We’d both been in a silly mood all morning, unable to stay serious for more than two minutes. Joking around in the fitness room, acting like teenagers around each other. If anyone was surprised by our newly improved mood, they didn’t mention it—not that I would have cared anyway. It was difficult to care about anything when I knew that Theo and I would be back in one of our rooms in less than six hours.

Isabel looked at us for a moment, a strange expression on her face that I couldn’t quite place. When she caught my gaze, she cleared her throat and returned her focus to the notebook in her lap. “Alright, let’s start with an easy one. Theo, how many ATP titles has William won in his career so far? William, how about Theo?”

“Oh come on, Isabel,” Theo said while quickly writing his answer on the board, “that’s almost too easy.”

“If you’re wrong, that’s going to be pretty embarrassing,” I said, fighting a smile.

Theo turned his head and met my gaze, a teasing spark in his eyes. “Don’t worry. I won’t be.” With that, he revealed his board, presenting a clearly written “13” to the camera.

“Beginner’s luck,” I said while I wrote down his seven titles.

“Alright, let’s make it a bit more difficult then, shall we?” Isabel said, drawing the focus back to her. “Can you tell us how old the other one was when he turned pro?”

I leaned back in my chair, trying to search my memories for the year Theo had joined me on the circuit for the first time. I knew it was shortly after I turned pro myself. Theo, being a couple of months older than me, must have been seventeen at the time. It had been seven years since then. Seven years of touring almost nonstop. I hadn’t thought about that in a while. How long we had already been doing this for. How long it had taken us to get to the top and how close to number one I finally was. It was almost scary how quickly time had passed, with the seasons blurring into one another. Staying in the same hotels, the same drivers picking me up at the same tournaments. Short trips back home, getting restless and impatient, getting back on the road again. The same cycle over and over again. For some people, it probably sounded like hell, but I didn’t know anything different, nor did I ever want to.

We turned our boards at the same time, both presenting the correct answer once more.

“Still too easy. I mean, we’ve been on tour together since forever. We’ve been rivals since forever.” Theo shrugged his shoulders. “You just know these things.”

I turned my head and let my gaze wander over Theo’s face for a moment. The face I had studied meticulously last night, memorizing even the smallest detail. It sounded almost wrong to hear him refer to us as rivals just now. Not that he was wrong—we were still technically rivals. But I was realizing that, maybe, it wouldn’t be that easy to consider him that way anymore. I used to loathe this man. Tried not to waste a second thought on him most of the time. But now, after last night—or rather, after this entire week—I wondered if I would be able to feel that way the next time we faced each other on the court.

“But you are not always rivals, are you?” Isabel said, raising her brow. “There is so much time off the court where you can focus on other things. Put the rivalry on pause.”

“I suppose so, yes,” I replied, hesitating.

Isabel met my eyes, her expression suggesting something akin to . . . smugness, but it was fleeting.

“Who would rather date another professional tennis player?” she went on, swiftly changing the topic.

I rubbed at a nonexistent smudge of marker on the board with my finger, slowly writing down his name on the board. Apart from the one minor detail that Theo had been in my bed last night, it felt rather obvious that the answer here wasn’t me. I had never publicly dated anyone, let alone another tennis player.

When I turned my board around, Theo straightened up, trying to get a glimpse at my answer.

“Definitely not, no,” he said with a firm shake of his head. His voice carried a hint of defensiveness. “The answer might be neither, but it certainly isn’t me.”

“And why is that?” Isabel inquired, increasingly curious. Though, for once, she was voicing out loud the same question that had been circling my mind.

Theo shrugged. “I hear enough of tennis as it is. I wouldn’t want it to play such a huge part in my romantic life too. A little distance does me good in this regard.”

As much as I hated to admit it, Theo’s words left a sharp pain in my chest. I thought that he’d feel relieved to open up to someone who could

truly grasp what he was going through. Who understood the pressure, the pain, the addiction to winning just as much as he did. This person outside the tennis realm that Theo seemed to be looking for wouldn't be able to understand his struggles the way I had been able to.

"Different perspectives then," I said after a moment, trying to maintain my composure. "Personally, I wouldn't mind talking about tennis with my partner. I think it could even help me . . . regain some perspective. I won't write it down again, but consider that a last-minute change to my answer."

For a couple of seconds, we were both quiet, neither of us looking at the other, waiting for Isabel to break the tense silence.

"Any more questions? Or are we done for today?" I asked impatiently when she still hadn't come to our rescue.

"One more to wrap this all up," Isabel said. "What do the two of you like to do together in your free time? You seem to spend *a lot* of time together."

Beside me, Theo gripped the armrest of his chair so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He suddenly had a tense expression on his face, and I frowned. Why was this question throwing him off like that?

"We don't really," he quickly replied. "Spend time together off-court, I mean." His laugh sounded off. "Like I've said before, I like this guy, so it's great that we've been paired together for this tournament. Although I was looking forward to playing here with Matt again. But then he got injured and everything." He glanced nervously in my direction. "Also, we all train so much. It's hard to really do anything else."

I regarded Theo with utter confusion. What was happening right now? He was reacting as if he'd been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to even though Isabel's question had been perfectly innocent. Many players hung out together in their free time. Often, you had no choice but to have no friends or spend time with your opponents. Not many people chose to be alone like I did.

Obviously, I knew we couldn't tell them about our nights at the pool—and certainly not about our nights in each other's rooms. But there seemed to be a clear middle ground here. One that did not include the risk of jeopardizing our business arrangement.

I cleared my throat, slowly writing down "Going out to eat" on my board and turning it around with another frown in Theo's direction.

“When we find the time, it’s mostly just normal, boring stuff. Like the other night, we went to a restaurant in town with Lewis and Cardy,” I said, attempting to divert attention from Theo’s hasty reply.

I watched Isabel slowly pull her gaze away from Theo and look at me instead.

“Sure.” A thin smile appeared on her lips. “I will let you get back to your schedule now. Thank you for your time.”

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He had taken a seat on one of the benches, regripping his racket with quick, skilled movement. I watched his fingers for a moment. The same ones that had felt so soft against my skin the night before were now wrapping tape around the grip with perfect precision. He looked up and caught my eye. For a moment, he paused, holding my gaze, before returning his attention to the task at hand.

“What?” he asked without looking at me.

“I’m sorry, but what just happened?”

He let out an audible breath, put the racket down beside him, and leaned back on the bench. “What did you want me to tell them exactly? That we have been . . . seeing each other for the last couple of days?” He lowered his voice while uttering the last sentence, even though we were completely alone on the court and he didn’t say anything remotely suspicious.

I let out a dry laugh. “Yeah, exactly that, Theo. Because we only had two options. Confess that we fucked last night or say we never see each other off the court.” I saw Theo flinch at my words, turning his head to see if anyone could overhear us. “You are so right, our hands were *truly* tied here.” The sarcasm in my voice was unmistakable. “Or *maybe* there was a third option that did not include making our relationship sound hollow and completely made up.”

“Fuck, Will, I choked,” Theo said forcefully. “I don’t know, the whole interview suddenly felt off, and it just seemed like that question was hinting at something. Which seems ridiculous now that I think about it, because how should they know anything? But I just thought I needed to make sure there was no room for interpretation.”

Silently, I crossed the space between us and sat down next to him on the bench. After a few seconds, he turned his head to meet my gaze. Our faces were now only inches apart, and I could see the despair etched into his features.

“Did it bother you that we spent so much time talking about tennis last night?” I asked quietly.

A frown formed on Theo’s face. “Of course not. Where is that even coming from?”

“Have you even been listening to yourself?”

“Barely,” he replied, and his mouth twitched. “And you shouldn’t either, by the way. Not everything I say in an interview is the truth. Like I said, I was just trying to make sure nobody could misinterpret what we are to each other, alright?”

And what are we to each other? I thought to myself but didn’t dare utter it out loud. Instead, I nodded hesitantly. It hadn’t sounded like something he just made up in the moment to throw the press off, but now didn’t seem like the right moment to argue with him about that.

“And to be fair, I don’t think I ruined our whole cover story. They probably thought I just tried to sympathize with Matt. It would’ve been kinda shitty if I hadn’t said anything about him at all. I just twisted the truth a little bit.”

Theo looked over his shoulder, checking once more to see if anyone was watching us, before he placed his hand on the bench beside mine. Carefully, he reached out with his thumb and slowly stroked the back of my hand before intertwining our fingers. I watched his hand without taking a breath, too scared to break the spell between us.

“Can’t wait to be back in the hotel tonight. I’m counting the minutes here,” Theo whispered, and I could feel his breath on the side of my neck.

I grinned. “I don’t think a day has ever felt this long.”

When we heard gravel crunch on the trail behind us, Theo quickly let go of my hand and leaned forward, resting his arms on his thighs.

I turned my head, fully expecting Cristina, but instead it was Kjell, of all people, passing us with one of the other physiotherapists. My first instinct was to back off even further from Theo, but I reminded myself that there was nothing to hide here. Two doubles partners sitting on a bench, waiting

for their coach to start their training. I wasn't shoving anything in Kjell's face; I was just following my usual tournament routine.

I saw Kjell watching Theo before his gaze met mine, and he offered me a curt nod.

"Morning."

"Morning," I returned his icy greeting, while Theo said nothing.

I followed Kjell with my eyes for a moment until he rounded the corner.

"That was awkward," I said after he was gone, letting out the breath I was holding.

Theo leaned back on the bench, looking at me with raised brows. "Well, Will, I'd say that's what you get for trying to play both sides. My sympathy for you is pretty limited."

I leaned closer to him. "I like it when you're jealous."

Theo let out a small laugh and shoved me. "Fuck off." With that, he grabbed a ball from his bag and got up from the bench beside me.

I shielded my eyes from the sun and watched Theo bounce the ball on his racket repeatedly. And in that moment, it hit me. This was really happening. I wasn't making any of this up. We were really here together. He really just told me that he couldn't wait to be back in my room with me.

But I could still hear a familiar, sinister voice in the back of my mind reminding me that good things don't last long for me. For the first time in my life, I tried not to pay attention to it. For now, I wanted to just accept this for what it was. Maybe I could ignore everything else for a while longer and just let myself . . . enjoy it.

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Chapter 22

I tugged down the hem of my T-shirt, which was clinging to my damp skin. Fresh from the shower, I sat down on my bed and picked up my phone to fill the remaining time I had on my own. The thought irritated me. I was never bothered by spending time alone, but now, not even two hours had passed, and I was already missing Theo's company. My mind had been circling back to him for most of the past hour anyway. It was ridiculous how easily he slipped into my thoughts now.

I tapped on a notification from an unknown number that'd popped up.

+44 02042912261
All done with my call. Can I come over now?

Instantly, a wave of warmth spread through my chest, and I smiled. Theo had my number since before the tournament, but he'd never contacted me. Not once. A lot would have had to happen for either of us to reach out to the other voluntarily. But I supposed a lot had happened over the past week.

Just as I began typing, I heard his door open and close—and shortly after, a knock on mine. With a full-blown grin on my face now, I unlocked the door. Leaning my shoulder against the wooden frame, I regarded Theo.

"Weren't you the one who lectured me that patience is a virtue and all that?"

He let out a small laugh and brushed past me, leaving behind the hallway with its glaringly bright lighting. I felt his touch even through my shirt.

"I could literally hear your notification when you got my text," he said. "Seems a bit silly to just sit there and wait when you're six feet away from me, don't you think?" Theo dropped himself onto my bed.

"I'm not complaining." Overcome with the strong urge to feel his lips against mine, I leaned forward and stole a brief kiss from him. As I pulled

away, I saw the stunned look on his face, and I felt a wave of uncertainty wash over me.

“Sorry.” I could hear the self-conscious note in my voice and felt a blush spreading over my face.

He lifted his hand and brushed a strand of my hair out of my face. “What for?”

I stared into his eyes for a moment, a relieved smile forming on my lips before I let myself fall onto the bed next to him.

“Ready for our next big match tomorrow?”

Theo settled down as well, placing one arm under his head. “You know, I don’t really care about it that much at the moment.”

“You know what? Me neither.”

I reached out and let my fingers slowly graze over Theo’s arm. It was becoming increasingly difficult to resist touching him whenever he was around me. As if I had no control over my own body. He drew me in, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“I mean, I know we have to win tomorrow. For many reasons,” he went on after a moment of silence. “But right now I can’t really decide if I want this tournament to last forever or for it to be over as quickly as possible.”

My fingers stilled on Theo’s arm. “You want to leave?”

“*No.*” He let out a breath. “I don’t know. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to be anywhere else right now. I guess it’s just been a strange week.” Theo smiled at me, but he couldn’t quite hide the shadow of exhaustion behind it.

I nodded. “Definitely a very unexpected one. Complete chaos most of the time. But there were some good surprises.” I nudged his leg with my knee. “The nights have been fun.”

Theo smiled weakly. “Most of them, yes. Though I can think of a specific one I don’t really like thinking about,” he replied flatly. “I still can’t believe you actually hooked up with him.” He shook his head.

I liked this jealous side of him. I wasn’t proud of it, but the fact that he still couldn’t let go of what happened between Kjell and me gave me an illicit thrill.

I straightened up, leaned back onto my hands, and raised my brows. “I mean, if we are being honest here, that specific night you are talking about is technically your fault.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you hadn’t been so irritating all week, I might have been able to think clearly and stop myself from going to such . . . extreme measures,” I teased.

Theo let out a dry laugh. “Oh, yeah, tell me something about these *extreme measures*, Will. Must have been pretty rough for you to get sucked off and whatnot until four in the morning.”

God. He really was pissed about that night. “I mean, when you put it like that . . .”

Theo huffed.

“I’m only kidding,” I added quickly, gently nudging his arm. “In retrospect, it really was a rough night, believe me. It was a stupid, heat-of-the-moment idea that I regret immensely right now, alright? And honestly, I never thought it would bother you in any way.”

“Oh, no, no, it didn’t. Not at all.” The sarcasm was unmistakable in his voice. “I definitely did *not* stay awake for most of the night when I heard you leave your hotel room, checking the clock every ten minutes, going through all the options in my head of what you could be doing and with whom, while loathing myself for even caring.”

Seconds of silence passed between us, and I felt a wave of warmth mingling with my guilty conscience.

“I’m sure this is not the right thing to say in response, but everything you just said to me was really fucking great to hear.”

Theo’s mouth twitched. “Glad to be of service.”

I let my fingers run up and down his arm in a steady motion.

“He was the one I was thinking of, you know?” Theo continued. “The other night. When Lewis asked me who I was jealous of. He was the one I immediately thought of.”

“What?”

He rubbed his face with his hands. “I don’t know. He just popped into my head. I couldn’t even come up with a good lie. I just kept on seeing you two together, and I . . . I hated it.”

I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading on my lips. Everything he said, everything he just confessed to me, made me feel light in a way I hadn’t known was possible.

“Any way I could make it up to you? Make you stop thinking about him?” I asked.

He propped himself up, his gaze hooked on mine. “Can’t think of anything.”

“No?” I leaned forward and let my hand wander over his thigh, feeling him tense up under my touch. “I can,” I said while I continued to let my fingertips trail under the hem of his shorts. Silently, Theo watched my hand slowly move upward, his gaze burning into it. Right before I was exactly where I knew he wanted me, I stopped.

“But if you can’t think of anything . . .” I trailed off. “No need to impose myself here.”

With that, I started to withdraw my hand from his leg, letting my fingertips graze his thigh in the process. Suddenly, Theo’s hand snapped forward and gripped my wrist tightly.

“I might kill you if you stop.”

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I turned my head to the window and looked at the almost full moon for a while. Then I let my eyes wander back to Theo. It felt almost painfully good to see him lying beside me with his eyes closed, the light of the moon illuminating his features. He looked younger in this unguarded moment, free of any tension and his rigid mask. His scattered freckles resembled constellations in the darkness. It was still pretty hard to believe that he was actually here. In my hotel room. In my bed. And that I was allowed to touch him whenever I wanted, that he even encouraged it.

It still seemed so absurd that the Theo I thought I knew—who never used to speak more than five sentences to me—had been begging me not to stop only minutes ago. But that was the thing. I thought I knew him, that I had figured him all out. Yet I couldn’t have been more wrong. I had fallen in the same trap the public stepped into over and over again: Judge the person by the player they embodied on the court. I had done precisely what the press had been doing to me every step of my career. I constructed a version of

him in my mind that consisted solely of the bits and pieces I witnessed on tour. From moments in the locker rooms, group interviews, matches we played against each other, and headlines I stumbled across. Nothing that was a true representation of the person lying beside me now.

“Are you staring at me?” Theo said into the silence.

I lifted my gaze from his stomach and met his eyes. “Yes.”

A smile formed on his lips. “Bit obsessive, huh?”

“Ever met a tennis player who isn’t?”

Theo’s grin widened. “Do you ever *not* have a smart reply?” he asked.

“Can I ask you something personal?” I said instead of giving him an answer. There was one question that had been circling in my mind for the past couple of days, and I felt tonight might be the right moment to talk to Theo about it. The atmosphere between us had never felt so intimate and comfortable. I felt like I could say *anything*.

“I think that’s fair, considering that everything we’ve done in the last hour has already been very personal,” Theo replied playfully and propped his arm under his head.

“Is this the first time you have been with a man?”

For a moment, he looked taken aback, but he recovered quickly. “Well, *technically*, the first time was on Sunday when I kissed you.” He no longer sounded playful.

I just continued to look at him, not commenting on his diversion attempt. I’d already figured that this was something he might not want to talk to me about just yet. But this was a question I just could not let go unanswered.

He let out a deep sigh of resignation. “Yes, Will, this is the first time anything like this has ever happened, alright?”

“You’ve never felt attracted to a man before?” I asked, surprised. I didn’t want to press him on the subject, but the words left my mouth before I could give it any thought.

“Not really, no. There was never any moment in my life where I had to think about that question, since the people I *usually* felt attracted to always happened to be women. It’s nothing I had been actively fighting against or anything. It just seemed pretty straightforward to me. Until now, that is,” Theo said, staring blankly at the ceiling.

I couldn’t imagine what it must be like for him right now—how this would affect him. If everything you thought you knew about yourself changed in one single week. I wanted to dig deeper, to ask what it was about us that had changed any of this, but I could tell that he didn’t want to be pushed further on the matter.

Theo turned his head, now looking at me again. “What about you?”

“If *I’m* into men?” I asked, incredulous.

“No, I think we’ve got that answer covered. But . . . have you ever thought about me in that way?”

“Honestly?” I said hesitantly. “Up until a week ago, I didn’t even like you.”

Theo grimaced. “Well, isn’t that always great to hear.”

“Because you were always so crazy about me, right?”

“We are not talking about me right now,” he said with a grin. “So tell me then. Why didn’t you like me?”

Why didn’t I like Theo? Mostly, he just riled me up during tournaments without my really knowing why or how he’d once again gotten under my skin. That he bothered me had always been an undeniable truth I had never questioned. Of course, there was also the fact that he had contributed to the downfall of my reputation in the media. But we had already covered that, so there was no need to bring it up again.

I turned onto my side, my eyes drifting over his expectant features. “I guess it just always seemed like we never had anything in common.”

“You’re open-minded,” Theo said with a dry laugh. “You only like people you have everything in common with?”

“I’m not done yet,” I replied, throwing him a pointed look.

“Oh, great. Long list. Go ahead then.”

“I was mainly exhausted with the whole fire-and-ice comparison and the other bullshit the press came up with over the years. We were always pitted against each other as these two extremes, and I somehow managed to come out as the worse one every single time. I know it wasn’t your fault either, but it just got harder and harder to separate you from the media’s version of you.”

Theo was quiet for a couple of seconds. “I hate those articles too. All these journalists that call themselves tennis experts, but still, they get nothing,” he replied.

Instinctively, I reached out and interlaced our fingers, my thumb slowly caressing the palm of his hand. “And I suppose it didn’t help that you were basically best friends with every player on tour, but somehow when it came to me, you always seemed very . . . reserved,” I continued. “It bothered me to some extent. Definitely didn’t make me all too eager to get to know you better off-court.”

“I’m not friends with *every* player on tour,” Theo protested, gripping my hand tighter.

I rolled my eyes.

“And it was actually never about not liking you in my case,” he added. “That’s not why I was reserved, as you just called it.”

I gave him a surprised look. When I thought back to all the time we had spent together on tour, barely speaking to each other, that seemed highly unlikely to me.

“Then why?”

He hesitated for a moment, letting his eyes drift to his hand in mine. “Actually, I used to look up to you when we were still juniors on tour. You were always keeping to yourself even then, but you were never bothered by being alone. At least it seemed that way. You only needed to play tennis to feel content, and you never lost your focus, regardless of what happened on-court. I admired that, in a way.”

My thumb stopped stroking his hand. He used to look up to me? Admired me, even? That was the last thing I had expected him to say, and I wondered if I had ever truly understood him at all. So far, it didn’t seem like it.

“I guess I had started to compare myself to you. I’d tried to figure out how you managed to not let the mental side of the game consume you. I tried to learn from you to fix this big weakness in my play. I don’t know how to explain it—you just always seemed to be a few steps ahead of me. At some point, you became this constant reminder of my flaws. There were moments on-court where I couldn’t keep my anger in, smashing my racket or something, and the first thought I would have is, ‘What the fuck are you doing? That would have never happened to Hagen.’” He laughed. “God, I

can’t believe I’m telling you this. Makes me sound kind of pathetic, honestly.”

I moved closer and tilted my head to kiss him. “It really doesn’t.”

Theo let go of my hand and reached up to trace the side of my face with his fingers, his thumb lightly brushing over my bottom lip.

“You haven’t heard the next part.”

I leaned back and observed him. Experiencing this honest version of him, opening up more and more to me, was completely surreal. Surreal and *exhilarating*.

He let out a shaky breath. “The year before we turned pro, during the Frederiksberg Open in Denmark, sometime in February, your game had been cut short. For some reason, you and Dawson came to watch us play. And of course, I just could not get my foot in the match and I snapped, breaking my racket at some point.”

“I don’t remember that,” I told him, trying to rack my brain for the match Theo was talking about. I remembered the tournament, and I remembered that Laszlo Bokov, a Slavic player, had the stomach flu and had to retire after only two games. Because of that, I sailed into the semifinals with barely any effort at all. Theo’s match, on the other hand, had been completely erased from my memory.

“Well, I do. Right when I’d picked up my racket, I looked over at you, and I saw you shaking your head, looking repulsed. Then you got up and left. You didn’t even stay to finish watching the match. Not that you missed a lot, to be fair. I think I lost 3–6, 2–6, or something like that. And I’m not trying to say that I was holding a grudge against you for that. It was a shit match anyway. No need for you to have wasted your time. But I realized that even though we weren’t close or anything, your opinion of me mattered. And you obviously judging me, which was kind of fair, I guess . . . well, let’s just say it stung. I already had so many critical voices in my head every single day, I just couldn’t add yours. So I decided it was best to just keep my distance.”

Theo dragged a hand over his face, and we both stayed quiet for a moment. I was still too surprised to speak after what he had just told me. I didn’t even know where to start.

“You know what? That’s not actually the whole truth,” he continued. “I’m not as saintly as I try to make myself out to be. Maybe I did hold a grudge against you because of that match. Maybe part of me . . .” He let out a weak laugh and dropped his arm over his head, the sentence hanging unfinished in the air. “No, I can’t say it. That would *really* make me sound pathetic. Just believe me on this one.”

“You know you have to say it now.”

Theo remained silent until I gave him a little nudge with my knee, trying to coax him into talking. He still didn’t react, and my anticipation was killing me, so I carefully pulled his arm away from his face and interlaced our fingers once again.

Hesitantly, he met my gaze again. “Maybe on some level, I enjoyed that you were never so . . . popular with the other guys on tour. In a fucked-up way, I thought I was better than you in that regard. It gave me this weird sense of satisfaction. As if I had found your weak spot like you had found mine, even though yours didn’t have anything to do with your tennis abilities. Which is ridiculous, I know that. I mean, it wasn’t even something I could use against you in our matches.”

Oh, but you did, I thought. Probably without knowing it, but in that one match in London, he had managed to beat me by using my lack of popularity against me, weaponizing everyone’s dislike of me to get to my head. He had played on my weakness the same way I had played on his.

I let go of his hand and rolled onto my back again, unable to meet his eyes any longer.

“Can you say something, please?” Theo sounded tortured.

“I’m still processing,” I replied truthfully while trying to ignore the sting I felt at his confession. His words echoed in my head over and over again. I knew I had pushed Theo to open up to me, but somehow, I hadn’t expected him to say anything like that. Something so . . . demeaning.

“Well, at least I hadn’t imagined it,” I finally managed to say. Which was a consolation, I supposed, however small. That I hadn’t been crazy all those years, feeling like he was deliberately overlooking me. It was just strange to realize that I had been a part of some twisted revenge game without even knowing it.

“I know it was wrong, but it felt like the only way I could . . . I guess, get to you. Especially after the Battle of the Ages, it felt more justified. I finally had something to hold over you.”

I furrowed my brow. “More *justified*?”

“It’s just,” Theo began to explain when he saw my irritated expression, “before the Battle of the Ages, you hadn’t really done anything to justify what I was doing to you. You just kept to yourself, but besides that, you were this flawless person—”

“‘Flawless person’?” I interrupted him again, this time with a hint of a smile.

Theo let out a self-conscious laugh, a slight blush creeping up his cheeks. “Shut up, I’m trying to save myself here. So, as I was saying, in my eyes you were this flawless person, and it made me feel *that* insecure that I had to be so petty to make myself feel better. It was only after what you said to Lewis and everything that followed that I finally had somewhat of a valid reason. At least that was my perspective back then. And now that I am actually hearing myself say this out loud, I realize that I should’ve taken that to my grave. Some things should *really* be left unsaid.”

I laughed and shook my head, feeling some of the tension ease again. “No, I’m glad you told me, honestly. I mean, it doesn’t feel great to hear, but you probably wouldn’t have felt this way if I hadn’t acted so arrogantly while watching your match.”

Theo leaned back, resting his head on his arm, and looked at me through the strands of hair that had fallen onto his face. Moonlight still flooded through the window, tracing the contours of Theo’s chiseled torso.

“I guess we’re both pretty fucked up, huh?” I asked, a faint, bittersweet smile curling the corners of my lips.

“I guess we are,” Theo said, returning my smile. “But it really wasn’t about not liking you, you know? For the most part, it was just some weird jealousy thing on my end. I’ve never really understood it, to be honest. I still don’t.”

I leaned forward and brushed the hair out of his face. “Maybe it was never about not liking you for me, either.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe it was always about a bruised ego. I saw you as someone I would never have anything in common with just because you purposefully kept your distance from me all these years, and it bothered me more than I care to admit.”

I felt strange saying it out loud. It felt strange to even think any of this. For years, I had taken my feelings of contempt for Theo at face value, never considering that there might be something beneath the anger. But now, it was more about hurt feelings and our own insecurities that had deceived us over the years. In some ways, we were more alike than we ever thought.

“Sorry I left your match early,” I whispered.

An affectionate smile softened Theo’s features. “That’s OK. Wasn’t the best entertainment, to be fair.” Then the expression shifted on his face, a teasing spark glinting in his eyes. “Just another example of my *explosive personality*.”

I let out a defeated laugh. “Can you please let that go? For once in my life, I was not trying to be a jerk to you. I was actually trying, and apparently failing, to be diplomatic. You should know by now that interviews aren’t my strong suit.”

“*Now* I know that.”

“Well, then, you are not a very attentive observer. It should have been obvious before.”

Theo laughed. “You’ve gotten better.”

I turned back onto my side, moving closer to him. “Have I?”

“Don’t fish for compliments, Hagen.”

“It must be because of your influence this week,” I said and gave him a wink. Suddenly, Dawson’s words popped back into my head. He probably never imagined that Theo and I would be anything other than teammates, but he was still right: We fit together well. If we had more time together, we could really help each other . . . be happier. And maybe even stay that way.

“What are you thinking?” He traced his finger over my furrowed brow.

“I just remembered some things Dawson told me weeks ago. Something about how we’d be a perfect fit, how I couldn’t see it yet, but that everything one of us lacks, the other offers. That we could be each other’s

solution.” I exhaled nervously. “I think he might have been onto something.”

“Maybe, yeah,” Theo replied quietly. He closed his eyes, and we both stayed silent for a few seconds. Then he turned back to me, locking his gaze on mine.

“You certainly are my solution. Maybe I could be yours too. Somehow. The only thing I know for sure is that, as brutal and confusing this whole week has been, I am really glad you’re the one doing it with me. You don’t know how unbelievably happy I am to have finally gotten to know you.”

“So am I,” I said, and I could feel a buzz in every bone of my body. A captivating sensation I normally only experienced from returning a ball with perfect precision right down the line.

At some point, we had to talk about what this thing between us was. This wasn’t some meaningless hookup—that had become clearer than ever. But we didn’t need to bring it up right now. We had done enough talking for one night. We still had time.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Theo said. “Is it OK if I stay tonight?”

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Chapter 23

// Thursday

My phone buzzed again. I had already ignored several messages coming in this morning, too tired to care about anything except resting and feeling the heaviness of Theo's arm on my back. But someone was calling me and, apparently, wasn't giving up.

"Is that your alarm?" Theo asked from beside me, sounding as tired as I felt.

"No, not yet," I replied and carefully pushed his arm off me before I reached for my phone on the nightstand. Right when I grabbed it, the vibrating stopped.

I blinked at the bright morning light seeping through the curtains, my eyes adjusting to its silver cast in the room.

"It's Dawson. He wouldn't call me if it wasn't important. I should call him back."

"I won't make a sound," Theo said and winked at me.

The phone only rang once before Dawson picked up.

"Everything alright?" I asked right away.

"Have you read my texts?"

When I heard the sound of his voice, an ice-cold feeling crept down my back. I knew him better than anyone in my life, and those five words instantly told me that this wasn't just an early morning check-in.

I swallowed. "No, I just woke up."

"Can you check them now? I think it's best if you just read it and then we discuss it. I'll stay on the line."

"Alright, give me a second." A sinking feeling was slowly spreading through me.

Dawson had sent me a link, and beneath it were a couple of messages urging me to call him as soon as possible.

I clicked on the link and read the headline. I froze, and a soft ringing sound grew in my ears.

BREAKING NEWS: MORE THAN JUST THE NEW FAVORITE DUO ON THE TENNIS COURT? EASTWOOD AND HAGEN ARE REPORTEDLY DATING, A SECRET SOURCE REVEALS.

"Fuck," I whispered and lowered my phone. This had to be a sick joke. It had to be. I couldn't believe that this article was actually out there—that while I was reading this, thousands of other people were looking at the same headline.

I felt Theo's gaze on me, trying to catch my eye, but I evaded it. I knew that, unlike me, Theo never cared as much to keep his private life hidden, but I was sure that our relationship was something entirely different.

Theo hadn't come out to anyone yet. He hadn't even had the chance to wrap his head around the whole thing. After all, it had barely been a week since the tournament started. And I was worried about how he would cope with being outed like this. Worried what that would mean for him *and* for us.

I let out a deep breath, bringing my phone back to my ear. "I need to call you back. But can you do something about this? Anything?" I finally asked, my voice trembling slightly.

"I'll take care of it," he said without even asking whether it was true or not.

I ended the call silently and stared, motionless, at the phone in my hands. I shouldn't be surprised, I suppose. After all, last night had felt far too good to be true.

After a moment, I registered Theo's hand on my shoulder. "Will? You're scaring me. Can you tell me what happened? Is your family alright?"

The worried, compassionate sound of his voice almost made me flinch.

"Have you checked your phone yet?" I asked, still unable to look at him.

"No, it's still in airplane mode."

"Check it. *Now*," I said, even though everything inside me screamed to hide both our phones and stay locked in this room until it all passed.

He stilled for a moment as if something was dawning on him. Then he reached for his phone on the nightstand.

"*No.*" He sounded utterly horrified. "That's impossible."

Theo's hand dropped from my shoulder, and my skin was cold from the loss of his touch.

"Is this some kind of joke? I mean, what the hell is this?" Quickly, he pushed himself off the bed and began putting on last night's clothes. He paused, scrolling through the article on his phone. "God, this will spread like a fucking wildfire. I don't even want to think about how the press will jump on all these lies. They will go absolutely crazy over this."

"Lies?" I asked, finally looking him in the eyes again. I was just as shaken as he was, but we couldn't pretend they were making this up. Not between us, at least. I'd only read the first few sentences, but it was shocking how accurate it was.

"You know what I mean. This will ruin both of our careers. I don't know how the hell I'll be able to look any of the guys in the eye today," he said while pulling his hoodie over his head. Then he rubbed his face with his hands, his eyes closed. "Can you *please* just tell me that all of this is a joke? That I'm making this up somehow?"

I let out a deep, shaky breath, feeling a sharp pain in my chest at the sound of despair in his voice. "I wish I could, OK? But look, all we can do now is handle this whole thing rationally. Do as much damage control as we can. And how would it ruin our careers? It's not like they said we are fucking terrorists, alright? You're creating horror scenarios in your head. None of this will change how we're playing. It's bad, yes—an absolute nightmare, actually—but let's not make it into something it's not." I tried to take his hand, but he pulled away.

Pain shot through my body at this small movement.

I wasn't even sure if I believed the words coming out of my mouth, but I just couldn't bear to see him like that. I hadn't even begun to process what this was going to mean for us. All I wanted was for Theo to stop looking at me as if I were the reason for this disaster.

He furrowed his brow. "I'm sorry, but why the fuck are you so calm about this?"

“I’m not. I’m as shocked as you are. There is nothing I hate more than my private life being served up for the public. You should know that by now. Having this out there for everyone to read makes me feel sick. But it won’t help to panic now. Dawson said he will take care of it, and I’m sure your team is doing everything in their power as well,” I replied, desperately trying to assure him that he wasn’t alone in this. That it would be alright.

“They need to publish a counterstatement or something. If we don’t do that, it will seem like a confirmation. And we have to sue them,” he went on. It didn’t seem like he was listening to anything I’d been saying.

“And who told them?” Theo added. “Who is this secret source supposed to be? I didn’t tell a single soul.”

I shrugged my shoulders. That part I couldn’t explain either.

“Have you?”

I frowned and met his gaze. “Have I *what*?”

“Have you told anyone about us?”

“Of course not.” I threw him an irritated look.

Theo nodded and sat down on the edge of the desk opposite me. Then his head snapped up. “Did you tell Kjell?”

I stared at him, speechless for a couple of seconds. “I didn’t tell him.”

A beat of silence passed between us.

“He guessed.”

Theo laughed bitterly, his expression shifting into cruel disbelief. “You’re kidding, right? He fucking knows about us, and you did not think for one second that it would be important for me to know?”

“I didn’t tell you because it didn’t concern you. I am certain that Kjell would never tell anyone about us. I know him. He wouldn’t do that,” I shot back.

“Didn’t concern me. Wow.” Theo shook his head. “Well, I guess you had to learn the hard way, Will, that fucking someone doesn’t necessarily guarantee you their loyalty,” he said, the coldness in his voice sending an icy shiver down my spine.

I stared at him, taken aback, while the ringing in my ears began to grow louder. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I just think it’s a bit naive to believe hooking up once means you earned his loyalty or something.”

“It wasn’t *once*. We were in a relationship before. He used to be an important person in my life, alright?” I knew I was repeating myself, but he didn’t seem to hear me. I was trying to keep it together, but I was getting angry. “And are you talking about him or yourself, Theo?”

“I can’t believe you won’t see it as a possibility,” he replied, ignoring my question and raising his voice. “That man is jealous. He thinks I stole you from him or something. Of course he told them. You’re being unbelievably naive at this point,” he added sharply, grabbing his shoes from the floor.

“He didn’t fucking tell them.” I had to actively stop myself from shouting the words at him.

“Alright. We won’t get anywhere like this.”

I don’t think he had ever looked at me that way. Not even before this tournament. There was almost an expression of loathing in his eyes.

We stayed quiet for a moment, Theo standing in the middle of the room, uncertain of what to do next.

“I think we just have to admit that we were a bit careless,” I said into the silence.

“Careless?”

“Yes, Theo, *careless*. I mean, come on, let’s be honest here. Anybody could have overheard us at the pool at night or seen something in the locker room. We didn’t really choose particularly private spots. But if you want to blame everything on me, then feel free to just disregard that part entirely,” I said bitterly. My hands clenched into fists, my fingers digging painfully into my palms.

We were losing control of the situation, and I didn’t know if there was any way to turn it around. Maybe there wasn’t. Maybe we had already said too many regretful things by now.

Theo’s jaw clenched. “Many mistakes were made, yes.”

“Mistakes?”

We just stared at each other for a moment.

“Maybe you’re right,” I agreed coldly, even though hearing Theo call us a mistake made something inside me tighten in a way I couldn’t ignore. But

maybe he was right. We knew this thing between us made everything more complicated, and now the consequences were catching up with us sooner than we had expected. We couldn't turn back time, but maybe the smartest move was to back out while we still could and claim this as a false rumor.

Theo nodded slowly. "I need to talk to my team, see what we can do," he said.

He looked at me for a moment without moving from the spot. When I didn't reply, he walked over and grabbed his phone from the bed.

"Right," he said.

I stayed silent.

"I should go now."

Again, I merely looked at him, not saying a single word.

Before he reached the door, Theo turned around. "Can you just do me one favor and go talk to Kjell? You'll see I was right about him."

With that, he left the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

I let myself sink onto the bed and dropped my head into my hands. Everything in me was screaming at me to go after him. To not leave it like this between us. To tell him that all of this was ridiculous. That we shouldn't allow this to destroy what we had between us.

But I just couldn't. My whole body was glued to the bed, like I could not get a single muscle to move.

There it was. That familiar, overwhelming feeling of helplessness and frustration. I'd *promised* myself that I would never feel like this again. So why wasn't I learning my lesson? The only thing that worked for me was tennis. This was precisely why I was excelling in one of the loneliest sports in the world. This proven fact should be ingrained in my brain by now.

But here I was again, experiencing another familiar pain—the kind that appeared whenever life taught me that I was better off alone. It echoed memories of the last time I saw my birth mother, or when I thought I had found a new family, only to realize that, ultimately, I was better off on my own. So why had I believed that trusting Theo would be any different? Maybe I should have trusted my instinct instead. Maybe this history of ours—this intense, brutal rivalry—just couldn't be erased no matter what I had wished for.

We could be each other's solution. My words from last night echoed like a cruel reminder through my mind. I guessed a lot could change in a day. And maybe it was inevitable. It probably would have never worked between us. And if it was doomed to end sooner or later anyway, then it was better not to draw it out. To just rip the Band-Aid off as soon as possible. I knew all that, but still, my whole body was going numb.

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Chapter 24

Slowly, I stepped out of the elevator. I was still uncertain if talking to Kjell was the best move right now. It probably wouldn't help me and Theo find the person who reported us to the press. Obviously, someone did, but all that mattered now was stopping the journalists' momentum as quickly as possible. But the look on Theo's face when he left my room stayed with me. Crushing disappointment had been written all over it, and I just couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear to sit alone with my thoughts for another second, with that image of Theo burned into my brain. He was wrong, and I was going to prove it to him.

It was the only thing in my control right now. I was incapable of dealing with the rest. The possibility of things ending between us before they had even really begun, this aching sense of powerlessness within me—just thinking about it made me feel like I couldn't breathe. Nor did I want to think about sharing a court with Theo in front of a crowd later. After this morning, I highly doubted we could pretend to be a team for an entire match. Today would be hell, and there was no way to avoid it.

So first, I would address Theo's false accusations. I would focus on my anger toward him. Because, God, I was furious with him for calling us a mistake and blaming me for it. He had to see how wrong he was about everything. *That* I could handle.

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. Kjell took a moment to answer. He was still in his running clothes, a surprised expression on his face when he saw me standing in the hallway.

"Do you have a moment?" I asked.

Kjell pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the time. "Two minutes," he said before leaning against the door frame, crossing his arms.

"You know why I'm here." I was hoping I would sound indifferent, but my words held a slight tremor to them.

"Not really, no."

I looked at him, my brows furrowed. "The article about Theo and me?"

“Oh, *that*. I saw that, yes. You two are causing quite the stir.”

“Right,” I said. Less than a minute in, and he had already managed to get under my skin. “The thing is, Theo didn’t tell anyone, and I only told you. Or rather, you guessed,” I went on, trying to find the right words. “So we are just trying to understand how the hell this happened.”

Kjell laughed dryly. “If you wanted it to stay a secret, maybe you should have done a better job of hiding it, don’t you think? Come on, William. You’re a professional. You’re surrounded by the media here. And I warned you. It’s chaos of your own making. I mean, do you want me to comfort you now or something?”

“Of course not.” The last thing I wanted was a lecture from him. Not now. Not when I was barely holding everything together.

“I’m surprised by your carelessness, honestly,” Kjell went on. “You did do a great job of hiding me in the past. Seems you’re slacking now.”

“I understand that you’re mad at me, but this is getting a bit ridiculous.” It took all my strength to remain unfazed. I thought I knew Kjell, but the man in front of me, this cruel version of him, was alien to me.

“You just don’t get it, right?”

“Get *what*?”

He hesitated for a moment, a hint of uncertainty flickering across his face. “You hurt me. I was . . .” He closed his eyes for a second and stopped speaking. “You know what, it doesn’t matter.”

I rubbed my face with my palm. “Just say it, Kjell. I don’t have time for any of these games right now. You were what?”

“I was in love with you, William.”

My eyes snapped up to his, and for a moment, I felt as though the floor would open up under my feet. I could feel my blood rushing in my ears, the color draining from my face. He gazed at my shocked expression intently, savoring the effects of his confession.

“Wish you hadn’t asked me now, huh?” he said with a bitter laugh. “But maybe it’s time you actually hear me say it. That I did everything I could to be the person you needed me to be, and it still wasn’t enough. And you know what? That’s OK. It wasn’t meant to be then; I get it. But you know what else I finally realized last week? It’s more than that. You just don’t

care about other people's feelings. You only ever think about yourself. And I get that you had a rough start to life and that your family let you down, but that's no excuse for you to shut out everyone the moment they get too close. You're so goddamn lonely, Will, and you don't even see it. Instead, you tell yourself you can't rely on anyone and burn down all your bridges before anyone has the chance to prove you wrong. It's self-destructive, and it hurts people. It hurt me. So I think it's about time you understand that sometimes there are consequences to your actions."

Every word he said hit me harder than it should have, leaving me frozen in place, unable to process what he was telling me.

For the first time, I could see a surge of pain shimmering through the unforgiving expression on his face. I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to reach out and touch Kjell, but I resisted the temptation, clenching my hand into a fist.

"I didn't know you were in love with me. You never said anything—" My reply barely made it past my lips.

"Because I knew if I actually said it out loud, you'd hand me my notice the next day." His expression was impenetrable once again.

I grimaced. The roar of blood rushing in my ears grew louder. "That's not true. I would never have done that. That's not who I am." I didn't know if I was trying to convince him or myself at this point.

"Really, William?" He raised his brows and crossed his arms over his dark-green track jacket. "Even though I didn't confess my feelings to you, it was still clear to everyone that I loved you. Even to you. Don't lie to me. Not now. I mean, just think. That was precisely why I could no longer be part of your team. Whether you like it or not, it is true. That is *exactly* who you are."

We stared at each other for a moment, the silence between us strained to a breaking point. A wave of burning shame crashed over me, making me stagger where I stood.

"Did you tell them?" I forced myself to ask, my own voice sounding far away in my ears.

Even after everything he had just thrown at me, I still clung to the slight glimmer of hope that he hadn't gone that far. That even if he and I had fallen apart, he would never betray me like this.

It took him a couple of seconds to answer. Again, ever so briefly, his face shifted, and uncertainty flickered in his eyes. Then it was gone.

“What difference does it make?” Kjell asked, his expression one of cold apathy once more.

He told them. I felt my insides clench as the realization hit me, and I had to reach out to hold the door frame to keep myself upright. After everything I had shared with him, the small glimpses into my past, that tennis was my escape from that mess, how I never wanted it to get mixed up with any personal drama . . . Keeping my private life out of tennis was sacred to me. He knew all of that. And still, he told them.

“I trusted you,” I said, my voice faltering, shaking.

Kjell held my gaze for a moment. There was no hint of regret on his face.

“Well, you shouldn’t have.”

And with that, he shut the door.

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I kept on staring at the closed wooden door in front of me, unable to move. Because the worst part about what Kjell had just thrown at me was that . . . he was right. I wanted to hate him. For handing my privacy over to the press without a shred of remorse. And maybe I did hate him for doing that to Theo and me. But I couldn’t pretend everything else he had just said wasn’t true.

My brain was desperately trying to blame him, to blame everyone else, and prove the world had let me down once again. But I couldn’t. He was right. It was *exactly* as he said. A heavy pounding settled in the back of my head as the realization sank in.

I forced my legs to move, but I barely made it a couple of feet before a wave of nausea hit me. I braced myself against the wall with both hands, panting as if I was drowning.

I was in love with you, William. The sudden replay of his words in my mind made another wave of nausea roll over me. I pressed my hands into the wall, a desperate attempt to calm myself down.

He had been wrong about one thing, though. I hadn’t known that he was in love with me. Or maybe I just didn’t want to see it. Either way, I hadn’t

hurt him on purpose. But I'd certainly run away when things got too intense between us, because deep down I had known it might not last, and I feared one of us would get hurt. Maybe I threw it away too soon, maybe I didn't. I certainly hadn't stuck around to find out.

I inhaled sharply again and pushed myself off the wall. I had to get out of this hallway before somebody saw me like this.

Moving as if in a haze, I put one foot before the other. The words *You just burn down all your bridges before anyone has the chance to prove you wrong* echoed over and over in my mind. Was this what I was doing with Theo as well? After all, he had called us a mistake and couldn't get out of my room fast enough. But he was right about Kjell. I had been careless by telling him about us. And instead of trying to see where Theo was coming from, I had immediately put up my walls. I'd matched his anger rather than fighting to make him stay. I knew there was something between us, and the thought of letting it go hurt every single part of my body. And yet, I still gave it all up in a split second. *That* was the kind of person I was. I had become weak over the years, running away from anything complicated unless it concerned my career. Or had I always been that way? I didn't know.

A wave of tears threatened to well up behind my eyes, and I had to fight back the overwhelming feeling of despair.

I stepped into the elevator and let myself fall back against the wall, closing my eyes. I needed to speak to Dawson. He was the only one I could talk to right now.

I almost laughed bitterly.

Of course he was. After all, he was the only one I had ever let in.

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As soon as the doors of the elevator opened again, I took my first step toward my room and dialed Dawson's number. I didn't have to wait long before he picked up. In fact, I had just shut my hotel door behind me when Dawson answered.

"Finally," he said. "I was getting worried."

I leaned against the door, slowly sliding down onto the floor, and let my head fall back. A feeling of relief washed over me the moment I heard his

voice. Only seconds ago, I had felt completely alone in all of this, like I was the only one able to get myself out of this mess, but without the slightest idea of how. Not with my whole body feeling paralyzed and my mind racing.

I clenched my hand into a fist. This wasn't what he'd signed up for when he became my coach. Being burdened with such emotional nonsense. But the fear I had felt before hearing his voice made me realize how desperately I needed him. I couldn't handle this on my own. I just couldn't. And I hated myself for it.

"Will?" he asked when I didn't reply.

"Yeah, I'm here. Just don't really know what to say. I'm a bit lost for . . ." I let out a weak laugh. "Well, yeah, just a bit lost at the moment, I guess."

"Not quite the match day we had expected." His voice was gentle, warmth in every word.

"Not quite, no," I agreed dryly.

"Look, Will," he began, more seriously.

I heard him sit down somewhere. He was probably in his hotel room with his wife, trying to get in a little vacation time before he went back on tour with me. I guess I ruined that too.

"I know how much you hate your private life being mixed up with your career and that you are probably panicking right now. But just so you know, we are doing everything possible to discredit that article. It will die down sooner rather than later, trust me. And let me just say it once: None of this is actually a big deal in the end. None of this is as bad as it probably seems to you right now. It just feels terrible because they have illicitly published your most private thoughts for entertainment." He paused before continuing. "Whether or not any of this is true. It sucks, and it's unfair that this didn't happen on your own terms, and yes, it's nobody's business. But it's just gossip, nothing more and nothing less, alright?"

I pulled my legs up to my chest and rested my forehead on my knees. "It's true," I said quietly, my voice almost swallowed up by the fabric of my pants. "Theo and I have been . . . I don't even know what we have been, but . . . it's true." I grimaced at how I was stumbling over my own words.

Dawson was quiet for a moment. "OK." From the sound of his voice, I couldn't tell whether he was surprised by any of this. "Thanks for telling

me.”

I lifted my head again and snorted in defeat. “You know, I figured that was the least I could do after ruining our whole ‘create better press’ plan.”

“Well, *ruining* is a strong word. I haven’t read anything about you being arrogant yet. It’s not quite the strategy we had in mind, but it definitely doesn’t make things worse,” he said, and for the first time today, I heard a hint of humor in his voice.

We were quiet for a moment.

“Have you talked to Eastwood about any of this yet?”

“Yeah, it didn’t go so well. Which really sucks, to be honest. Because . . .” The words died on my lips, and I had to press them together to stop them from trembling. I swallowed hard, trying to pull myself together long enough to finish talking. “You know, surprisingly, we’ve gotten along really well, and it’s been actually a fucking amazing week, and now with everything that has happened, I fear he might hate me for it.” I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds, attempting to fight back my tears. “I honestly don’t know how we’re supposed to play together today.”

“The match doesn’t matter,” Dawson quickly chimed in. “You just go out there, do your best, and if you lose, you get on the first plane home.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” I cleared my throat. “But there’s more.”

“I’m all ears.”

“You remember Kjell, right?”

Dawson let out a laugh. “Yes, Will, I remember Kjell—the one I introduced to you and who toured with us for over a year.”

“We used to . . .” I began, taking a deep breath as I gathered my nerves, “date.”

“Shocker.”

“You knew?”

“Of course I *knew*. I feel slightly offended you think I didn’t. Even if you kept your distance from him, it was so obvious that boy was madly in love with you.” I felt my throat growing tighter as he went on, “I knew you wouldn’t want to talk about it, and at the time I didn’t think it was needed. I never questioned Kjell on a professional level; even at that age, he was well respected in his profession. Nor would I ever doubt you choosing to keep

him on our team. You were performing at such a high level despite your secret relationship. You deserved it. Even though I still don't necessarily understand why exactly it had to be a secret, but I guess that isn't something I need to understand."

I swallowed hard and rubbed my face with my hand. Kjell had been right. I was ignorant to what had been obvious to everyone except me. He had loved me, and other people had known. He'd been right about that part too.

Of course, I had realized at some point that he seemed to be more involved than I was, but in love . . . I couldn't wrap my head around it. I never thought it was that important to him. That *I* was that important to him.

"Well, in that case, you might see why it's a problem that he's currently working at this tournament," I said quietly.

"Right," Dawson replied, his voice tense. "I can guess."

"Let's just say he might have still been"—I couldn't get myself to even say the words out loud—"interested," I forced out instead. "It was him. He told the press about Theo and me."

He hissed in air. "Oh, that's a big mistake he made there. A *very* big mistake. And I don't just mean morally, but also professionally. Kjell isn't stupid; he knows that confidentiality is indispensable in his job. If he's leaking stuff to the press, he can say goodbye to the tour. It seems he chose revenge over reason. I would have judged him differently."

Dawson sounded astonished that Kjell would decide to jeopardize his career like this. It felt so good to at least have him on my side. I thought about telling him about how it was essentially my fault that Kjell had gone on a revenge trip in the first place, but then decided against it. Not today. Not when everything around me was already falling apart. Not when I couldn't even look myself in the eye anymore. Today, I needed at least one person to keep their faith in me.

"Alright, you have a match to play," Dawson said.

"To lose, you mean," I replied flatly. I let my gaze wander to my tennis bag and rackets lying in the corner of my room.

He let out a small laugh. "We'll see. Just get ready. And, Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe talk to Eastwood again. If he's important to you—"

“He is,” I interrupted without thinking, the words suddenly coming out with full clarity.

“Good. Then maybe let him know that as well.”

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Chapter 25

Let. Second serve.

Keeping my eyes fixed on our opponents, I crouched down. I avoided turning around because right now, I was unable to even look at him. I knew that, behind me, he was once again frantically asking for another ball, trying to serve without pausing to catch his breath. We were down by one set and a break into the second. Theo served wide—too wide.

Out.

Make that two breaks down. I let out a long breath and wiped the sweat from my brow. There was no way we would be able to turn this match around in our favor. Not with Theo playing like he needed to get off this court as soon as possible. Not that I was much better—not where it mattered, anyway. I wasn't playing Theo's frantic game, but I was unable to focus when it mattered. Which was exactly why I had put about five volleys straight into the net. On any other day, that wouldn't have happened. Unfortunately, it wasn't any other day.

The hour we'd spent on the site before the match had been dreadful. Theo had barely been looking at me, his headphones in, fully immersed in his routine. I kept telling myself it was better that way. It wasn't the right moment to talk about it, anyway. We couldn't speak openly here. Not in front of all these people. So I followed his example and tried my hardest to tune out any distractions. Not very successfully, as it became evident now.

I turned to Theo, who was already walking toward me. I tried to catch his eye, but he only offered me a quick handshake. His hand only touched mine for a split second before he pulled away, as if he had burned himself.

Mechanically, I followed him to our bench, where we sat down as far apart from each other as possible. Everything inside me was screaming to reach out and touch him, to remind him of what we had. As if to torment us even more, loud, upbeat music blasted through the speakers, creating an atmosphere that couldn't be more misaligned with what I was currently feeling. I reached for the water bottle in front of me, and when I

straightened up again, Theo had let his head fall into his hands, his fingers tugging at his hair. He didn't even try to hide his frustration. But then again, on the court, he never did.

Time.

I grabbed my racket and pushed myself off the bench. Pavel and Leo were about to serve for the match, and I doubted that there was a single person in the audience who didn't think they'd win at this point. I certainly didn't.

"Ready?" I asked Theo.

"Ready for what?" he replied. "To get humiliated one last time?"

He walked past me and positioned himself in front of the net.

I looked after him briefly before forcing myself to ignore his icy tone and get into position at the baseline.

We needed to take the next game or we would be out of this tournament. *The perfect ending to the perfect day*, I thought sarcastically while a bead of sweat rolled down my temple.

The first serve was fast and right into my body. I used my racket more as a shield than anything else to avoid being hit directly in the chest. The ball bounced off my racket and landed in the audience to my right. A young woman proudly presented her catch to the camera.

15–love.

Although Theo and I were good return players, I knew it wouldn't be enough to make a real difference right now. Leo played with such confidence, but then again, his two opponents today weren't particularly intimidating.

We changed positions while Leo bounced the ball in front of him. He aimed for an ace through the middle, but the ball slightly missed the line.

Second serve.

Another chance for us. Theo needed to get ready to attack immediately, to try to let this ball exchange unfold on his terms. We didn't have any time left to play carefully anymore. It was an all-or-nothing situation.

I could feel my heartbeat pulsing in my temples when Leo got ready to serve again. This time with a kick serve, and Theo went all in, attempting a

return winner down the line. But he miscalculated. The spin on the ball was too heavy, and it flew straight into the net.

30–love.

The audience clapped politely, the sound echoing down the court, but their disappointment was palpable nonetheless. What we gave them today was not entertainment. It was not a tension-filled showdown. It was a failure from the first ball that was played, and we all knew it.

It was my turn again. I twisted my racket a couple of times in my hands, but I could feel my last shred of fighting spirit slowly draining away. Did it even matter? If we could somehow manage to break back now and take this game, would we even have it in us to break a second time—let alone win a tiebreak against them?

Bergmann went for the same risky serve through the middle. This time the ball touched the outer edge of the line. I scrambled for it, but my reaction wasn't quick enough.

40–love.

I felt almost something like relief when I heard the chair umpire announce the score. There was no need to lie to myself any longer. I wanted it to be done. Only one more point and I would be off this court and could escape the judgmental stares from the crowd.

I positioned myself back at the net and tried to blink away the blinding sun as the crowd slowly went quiet again.

Match point.

This time, Leo served wide, pushing Theo to the far left side of the court and leaving the other side open. Theo managed to return the ball, and, expecting Leo to use the open court, he moved to the side—but Leo played a powerful inside-out forehand right back into the left side of the court. Theo jerked his body against the direction of movement and stretched out his arm, just managing to reach the ball, returning it high and slow to the middle of the court. Their strategy had worked. Now they had us exactly where they wanted us. Pavel smashed the ball right through the middle with full force. Theo and I didn't even try to reach it.

Game, set, and match Bergmann and Štěpánek.

It seemed like time was slowing around me. I turned to look at Theo. For the first time that day, he held my gaze, and I could see that for both of us,

the realization was setting in at the same exact moment. That this was it. We were out of the tournament.

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With a final wave to the crowd, we walked off the court and made our way toward the locker rooms. I couldn't wait a moment longer. The desire to talk to him was almost unbearable by now, making my heart race so fast that I could hear it pounding in my ears.

As soon as we were out of sight, I grabbed his arm and brought him to a halt.

"What are you doing?" Theo said, glancing at where I was touching him before he looked around to see if anyone was watching us. His voice sounded genuinely shocked.

Instantly, I dropped my hand and let go of him. *He can no longer stand being near me.* I felt my whole body going numb.

"I just need to talk to you," I forced out.

"Now?" Theo asked and took another look around.

"God, Theo, we are still allowed to speak to each other. Or what is your master plan here? Prove the press wrong by never talking to me again?"

"Of course not," he put forth, but I didn't believe him. "Can we at least go in there?" he asked with a nod toward the empty locker room to our left.

I closed the door behind us. Finally, Theo put down his bag and leaned against the opposite wall while I tried my best to ignore how he had deliberately left such a large space between us.

"Have you talked to Kjell yet?"

I should have known this would be the first thing he would ask me.

"Yes." I let out a breath. "And you were right. He told them. I'm sorry."

Theo dragged his hand across his face, shaking his head. "God, he's ruthless. And stupid, honestly. Surely, he must know that there's no way we will let him get away with this. That we will warn the others that he doesn't respect the privacy of the players. I hope he got a lot of money out of it, because work might be a bit tough to get for the next couple of years."

I nodded hesitantly, not sure what to say. Of course, I understood Theo's anger, but he seemed to forget that denouncing Kjell would mean admitting

that what he had told the press about us was true. He had to decide what was more important to him: Ruin Kjell's career and take revenge or hide the truth. That was his choice, not mine. Our situations were very different. While Theo had been collateral damage, I certainly couldn't pretend that I had a clean slate in this whole situation. Kjell had betrayed me, yes. But I had hurt him too. Maybe in some twisted way, we were even. We had both hurt each other badly now. And while I could forgive Kjell for wanting to get back at me, Theo didn't deserve to suffer because of my mistakes. Nor did he deserve to be hurt like this. That's something I could *never* forgive Kjell for.

Theo regarded me skeptically for a moment. "You're not going to let him get away with this, are you?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to ease the tension I was feeling. "I don't know. It's a bit more difficult for me than it is for you, alright?"

"Unbelievable." He let out a strangled laugh. "Fucking unbelievable," he said again, looking at me like I was the most ridiculous human being he had ever seen. His smile was almost mocking. "What is it with you and him? All of this, and you are still defending him?"

"I'm not *defending* him, I . . . You know what? It doesn't matter. Can we just please stop talking about Kjell for a minute here? He's not the reason why I wanted to speak to you. Or maybe he is. But not in the way you think," I put forth, forcing myself to stay calm. I couldn't make the same mistake I made this morning. I needed to focus on what was really important.

He let out a breath and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Alright," he said after a moment. "What do you want to speak to me about?"

I wished he would stop looking at me like that. Like he was barely tolerating my presence. He must have felt the same overwhelming desire to be together as I had over the last few days—this invisible pull. I couldn't have just imagined all of it. Not after last night. Though he didn't currently look like the Theo who'd asked if he could stay the night.

"When I talked to Kjell this morning, he'd mentioned a couple of things to me," I slowly went on. "Things that I cannot ignore. Or don't want to ignore. Not anymore, at least."

"What things?" Theo asked hesitantly.

“That I push people away, never letting anyone get too close. That I burn down all the bridges around me before anyone is able to prove to me that they’re worth fighting for.” I was speaking quickly, almost stumbling over my words. “That I should realize sometimes I can depend on other people and they can surprise me even though people in my past have turned out to be . . . a bit of a disappointment.”

Theo raised his brow, the mocking smile back in place. “Bit ironic for him to say something like that to you after what he did, don’t you think? I mean, he single-handedly became the biggest disappointment of them all.”

“No, but he’s right, you know?” I said and took a step closer to him. “I don’t. I never let anyone in. Not fully, at least. I depend on tennis, and that’s it. Tennis is my sole focus. That rush from winning, constantly being on the move from one tournament to another, never taking a break, never settling down. It’s my only constant in life. And I never really questioned that, because why should I? Everything seemed fine the way it was. It was paying off. But this past week . . . I don’t know. It changed things for me.”

I could feel my pulse fluttering in my throat as I waited for Theo to reply. He regarded me quietly for a moment, and this tense silence between us made me feel dizzy. I let my gaze wander over his face, desperately drinking in every little shift in his expression. His demeanor was still cold, but his eyes seemed slightly softer. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

“Changed what?” he asked.

I hadn’t decided beforehand how far I would go. To what extent I would disclose my feelings to Theo, how much I would risk. But everything was a mess already anyway. It seemed like now would be a good time to lay all my cards on the table, although there was a quiet voice in the back of my head warning me that the stakes might be too high after all. That maybe I had everything to lose.

I twisted my fingers together, unable to hide my nervousness any longer. “I don’t want to destroy things that I know, deep down, are good for me just because I fear people might disappoint me,” I finally said, meeting his eyes again. “I don’t just want to take the easiest way out because things seem too messy. And I definitely do not want to be a person who fights for nothing and no one except when I’m on the court. Yes, I want to be an exceptional tennis player. The greatest, even. But it cannot be just about that.”

I didn’t wait for him to reply. I wanted him to see how I felt first. To say it out loud, at least once, for the both of us.

I took another step toward him. “I hate that you called us a mistake this morning. But I hate even more that I agreed with it. Because we aren’t. It didn’t feel like a mistake when you kissed me for the first time in the pool. Or when we stayed up late into the night because we just could not stop talking. Or whenever I touched you.” I dared to take another small step closer to him. “Or whenever you touched *me*. And it certainly did not feel like a mistake last night.”

Theo shut his eyes for a moment, and his jaw clenched. “Will . . .” was all he said, his voice pained. For a moment, I could almost see the memories of us together—his lips on my throat, my fingers tracing along his jaw—flickering behind his eyes.

“What, Theo? You know I’m right.” I felt my fingers tremble and quickly curled them into a fist. “I mean, don’t you see? It’s out there already anyway. And I hate all of this as much as you do, and believe me, I never thought I would say this. But there’s no need to hide now. What do we have to lose? The worst is already over.”

I paused for a moment, trying to even my breathing. I didn’t know if I had ever gone this far out of my comfort zone in my entire life. I hated being this vulnerable. I hated that I didn’t know what he was thinking, if anything I was saying was making a difference. But I had to try. Because nothing was worse than not trying and missing my only chance to fix things between us. Just the thought of it felt like hands were tightening around my neck, making it impossible for me to breathe.

“It feels wrong to give the press—Kjell, even—the power to just end this thing between us,” I continued. I was speaking fast, still unable to hide how nervous I was. “We both don’t want to risk anything; we both don’t want things to get too complicated. But even to find out where this might lead us, I think that would be worth all the complications. I just have to know. Don’t you? Because I just keep thinking—how afraid are we to throw away something so good for fear that it might come back to haunt us? I mean, what if it doesn’t? What if it’s just . . . great?” A shy smile spread across my face, and briefly, I saw Theo’s gaze flicker to my lips.

I’d never risked sharing my feelings so openly with anyone, and my whole body felt like it was on the brink of overdrive. But it didn’t matter. I

had done it. For the first time, I was actually brave enough to fight for someone.

Theo was still staring at me, speechless, holding my searching gaze. Then, ever so slowly, he began to lower his eyes, and something about that small act made my stomach drop. I waited for him to say something, *anything*, but he said nothing. And somehow, silence was worse than anything he could have said. It told me everything I needed to know, and he didn't even have the decency to explain himself. To give me a single reason. He just stood there, his gaze locked on the ground. *He is as much of a coward as I am*, I thought to myself. At least I was trying to change that.

"You're taking the easy way out then," I stated after a moment, when I could no longer take the silence between us. I didn't even try to mask the bitterness in my voice.

Theo met my gaze, looking at me questioningly.

"You won't say anything?" I clarified.

"No, Will, it's just . . ." he said, taking a step in my direction. He reached out with his hand as if he wanted to touch me but then changed his mind and lowered it again. "None of this is easy. I just . . . can't."

Frustrated, I brushed my hair away from my forehead. "You just can't *what*?"

Two voices carried in from the corridor. We both looked at the closed door for a moment, waiting for them to pass.

"I don't think right now is the best moment to talk about this," Theo said after it was quiet again.

I let out a hollow laugh. "When would be a better moment? When we are both on the plane back home later today?"

He shook his head.

My skin was still warm from the sun, the sweat slowly drying, yet goose bumps spread across my arms, making me shiver. Once again, clinging to the last shred of hope inside me, I waited for him to give me some kind of clarity, but he stayed silent. And it was driving me insane. He was giving me *nothing*. Not a single word to help understand what the hell was going on in his head. Instead, he remained quiet, deliberately torturing me after I had risked being this . . . vulnerable with him.

“It’s your choice if you want this or not,” I said, a sharp edge in my voice. “I can’t expect you to return what I feel or make you see what I see. I had just hoped it would be important enough for you to be honest with me. But on the other hand, I’ve already realized today how wrong we can be about some people. At least I can finally say that I’ve learned my lesson.”

“This isn’t who I really am, OK?” Theo suddenly said, and I felt myself flinch. “Do you know that the other night when I left your room and laid down on my bed, I fucking cried? And yes, I know how pathetic that makes me sound, but you should know what all of this is doing to me before you assume any of this is *easy* for me.”

I looked at him, taken aback for a moment, feeling a sharp pain in my chest at his words. “What are you trying to tell me with that? Do you want me to apologize or something?”

“*No.* Of course not.” Theo dropped his head into his hands. When he looked up again, there was a pleading expression on his face. “I just need you to understand that this is tearing me apart. When I saw that article today, it felt like a wake-up call. I suddenly couldn’t help but feel like I was living in a parallel universe and behaving like this version of myself that I don’t even know. I just don’t want to feel like a stranger to myself anymore. And I can’t face the reporters. I can’t face any of their questions about us. I can’t face any of this. I meant everything I said, Will—truly, I did—but I just think it’s time for me to get back to reality now. I simply have to. Otherwise, it feels like I might go crazy.”

I stared at Theo for a few seconds, feeling a numbing coldness spreading throughout my body.

“Back to a reality where you are not into men?” I asked carefully, yet we both knew there was a different underlying question. The real question was whether he wanted to return to a reality in which I was nothing more than his competitor. If he wanted to go back to a reality where I was still a stranger to him.

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. Just back to the way things were before this tournament.” His voice wavered, his shoulders folding forward in resignation.

I had known that it would hurt to hear him confirm my biggest fear. That I had been nothing more to him than a brief lapse of sanity. But it didn’t compare to seeing him now shoulder his bag, showing me with this small,

brutal gesture that there was nothing left for him to say on this matter. The finality of this—him getting ready to leave this room—suddenly made me realize with full clarity that this was it. We were over before we had even really begun.

One last time, I allowed myself to take it all in—from his unruly, now sweaty hair, which I had grown to love; to his piercing green eyes, in which I could so easily lose myself; and of course, to the scattering of freckles on his soft skin, which I had traced with my lips not even a day ago. I glanced down at his clenched fists. The intense urge to reach over, ease his grip, and intertwine our fingers was unbearable. Knowing I couldn't sent another rush of pain through my chest, and I found myself gripping my own hands tightly when I felt them tremble again. Slowly, I raised my gaze to meet his.

"Do you regret it?" The words slipped out before I could stop myself.

Theo closed his eyes, and for a second, his expression was tormented. "Will . . . honestly, I—" he began, but a laugh from outside the locker room made him stop in the middle of his sentence.

He let out a deep breath. Whatever I had just seen on his face was gone.

"I don't think that matters now, does it?"

Without saying another word, he left me behind in the suffocating silence of the locker room.

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After

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Chapter 26

// Brussels, European Open

Losing in the quarterfinals was an improvement considering my second- and then first-round exits in China. I tried to convince myself of this as I hoisted my bags into the taxi that would take me to the hotel and, from there, straight back to the airport. At least the flight would be short, and I would have a couple of days to increase the intensity of my training before my next match. I just needed to play more, get back into my rhythm, and block out every single distracting thought that crossed my mind.

I looked out of the car window at the passing houses and rubbed my eyes, feeling them sting. I still hadn't adjusted to European time after the weeks I'd spent in Asia. And the hard courts at this year's European Open had been incredibly slow, throwing me off my game. Yes, I had missed another opportunity to improve my ranking, but I wasn't going to let that happen again. I would fall back into my routine of training all day and later fall back into my bed, my body aching from exhaustion. I would feel like myself again soon enough. That's how it had always been. No matter how bad things got, tennis always picked me up again.

"Want to talk about it?" Dawson asked, breaking the tense silence between us. Lately, that tense silence surrounded me wherever I went.

I turned my head and met his eyes, taking in the worried expression on his face.

"Nothing to talk about." I gave him the same closed-off reply I had given him the last few times he had asked a similar question. There was nothing else to say. I just . . . couldn't.

Slowly, my gaze drifted back to the car window, my thoughts fading away again into the blur of houses and lights passing by.

// Vienna Open

The lack of sleep certainly didn't make me feel any saner, I thought as I hit serve after serve. I couldn't remember the last time I hadn't woken up in the middle of the night, adrenaline pumping through my body, my heart beating wildly in my chest.

Thirty seconds.

I played one more serve for good measure before going through my equipment for a final check that everything was in its place and that I hadn't, for whatever absurd reason, left my other rackets at the hotel.

From the moment I stepped back onto the court, everything I had been trying to ignore came up at once. The sudden stillness seemed to invite in every self-loathing thought, reminding me over and over again that if I lost my game in tennis, I was left with nothing.

Pull yourself together, I silently told myself. *Don't fuck it up.* I lifted my cap, ran my fingers through my curls, then put it back on.

I fought my way into the tiebreak in the first set and quickly lost 3–7.

I had to take the next two sets. Win the match in three.

Pull yourself together, I told myself again, yet I couldn't keep my focus, panic flooding my body, causing me to slip up too many times.

Another tiebreak in the second set. This time it would determine if I would stay in the match and get a final chance to fight for the victory. I lost it in under ten minutes, 1–7. If you'd blinked, you would have missed it.

"Good game," Tirelli said when he shook my hand at the net.

I had to stop myself from laughing. It had been a weak performance on my end; he knew that as much as I did. I'd choked—*again*.

// Paris Masters

By now I felt like I was just functioning. I didn't feel happy, I didn't feel sad, I only felt numb. Moving on from tournament to tournament, getting eliminated quicker than when I first started playing on the ATP level. Yet this tournament felt like it was waking me up from this incomprehensible daze I had been in for a month now. Suddenly, I felt a surge of excitement at the thought of closing my fingers around my racket. My chest started to grow warm just from picturing myself hitting balls with Dawson at the tournament venue. And as much as I hated to admit it, there was only one reason for the change in my mindset: I would see *him* again. Theo would

also be competing for the final Masters 1000 title of the season, and it felt like both the best and the worst thing at the same time.

The next time I checked the schedule, he had withdrawn. *It doesn't matter*, I told myself, trying to shake off the sharp, ice-cold sting of my disappointment. But I could already feel it slowing everything down until my mind and body were wading through water once again.

Pull yourself together.

I lost spectacularly in the first round and immediately got back on the plane. I hadn't been in Paris for more than forty-eight hours, and I left feeling worse than when I arrived. Which, to be honest, I didn't think was possible.

Maybe tennis just hates me. Theo's words suddenly rang in my ears. I was beginning to understand what he meant. Maybe it was starting to hate me too.

// Turin, ATP Finals

The driver cutting the engine made me look up abruptly. I hadn't realized we'd already arrived. I was so lost in thought during the drive that I hadn't taken in the Italian city passing by the window. Similarly, the flight to Turin had passed in a blur. I had spent the entire time fixating on every single bad match I'd played, every mishit or double fault, and how I needed to make sure it wouldn't happen again.

Something needed to change. Which meant I finally had to admit to myself that this hollowed-out feeling inside me wasn't normal, and it *definitely* was not going away by just ignoring it. Because as much as I was trying to push it away, I wasn't completely oblivious to the reason behind this series of brutal defeats. Even for me, it was impossible to deny that all of this had started right after the Ortega Cup and the media storm that followed. That since then, *everything* had gone wrong. It was as if everything I had set my mind on was now destined to fail. At least Dawson had kept his word and had taken care of most of the press drama. I wasn't sure if it was Theo's team or ours—probably a joint effort—but the journal that had published the original article got sued, and shortly afterward they came out with a rewrite, apologizing and restating the facts. If anyone actually believed it was a false rumor, I couldn't say. I often still felt the gazes of the other players in the locker room, probably speculating about

whether there could be any truth to it. But no one had ever dared to ask. Sometimes I wondered how Theo was handling all of this. He was the one who had friends on tour; he couldn't just withdraw completely and avoid everyone the way I had done in the past few weeks.

Not that I had any idea what was going on with him. Since I hadn't seen him at any of the tournaments I had played in the last few months, I couldn't help but think he was making a conscious effort to avoid me. The realization that he might actually go so far as to deliberately withdraw from tournaments where he would have to face me had left a hollow ache inside me.

From then on, I had tried everything to shut him out completely. Whenever memories of us flashed behind my eyes, I went for a run, pushing myself until I was too drained to think coherently anymore. I used the sheer exhaustion to finally find some sleep. Going for a swim to quiet my racing mind like I used to was out of the question. I tried once, in Vienna. I went to the pool in the middle of the night, but as soon as I'd stepped up to the water, I felt my throat closing, panic rising inside my chest. All the calmness that swimming had previously brought me was gone. Instead, it made me realize that I had never felt as lonely as I did now.

So training felt like my only safe space. I was more focused and determined than I had been in a long time, and I used that to my advantage—hitting harder, running faster, and playing more aggressively. Not that any of that effort translated into my matches.

And every single loss I'd experienced over the last few months had fed this deep, consuming anger that was growing inside me. Anger at Kjell, at Theo—but mostly I was angry with myself. How could I have let it come to this? I loathed myself for putting years of work at risk, and for what? Someone who abandoned me at the first opportunity? As much as I didn't want to admit it, Kjell had been right when he said that Theo and I could never work. I didn't want to hear it at the time; I was far too infatuated with him then. I still was. And now *that* was the part that annoyed me the most. Prior to Theo, I'd never gotten caught up in such situations. If something was over, it really was over, and I was done with it. It had been that way with Kjell and with any other person I had been involved with. Now why couldn't I just be done with Theo too? Why, despite everything that went down, did I still want him?

There had even been a time I had almost caved and reached out to him. It was about two weeks after I had last seen him, right after I had played my first match. I had gone on the court determined to get things back to normal, to focus on what really mattered. Shake him and his rejection off. At least I had managed to win that night, but it was close, although it shouldn't have been. I hadn't played at my usual level, and I just couldn't understand why. It was a victory that had left a bad aftertaste. That night, I lay alone in my hotel room, staring at the dark ceiling, wondering if this was how Theo had felt so many times in his life.

It was like a cruel joke that after he had rejected me completely, I was experiencing something so similar, but it was impossible to share any of it with him. I had felt genuine pain at how badly I missed him. How much I missed talking to him. How his voice would grow softer whenever it was just the two of us. If I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine him lying beside me. *Almost.*

After another hour of wallowing in my misery, I had grabbed my phone from the bedside table, squinting at the sudden brightness of the screen. I had opened our messages and read the only text that had ever been exchanged between us.

All done with my call. Can I come over now?

Another sharp pain shot through my chest. And before I could stop myself, I had looked up Theo's Instagram, not really knowing what I was getting out of any of this. It was stupid. Actively confronting myself with things I knew would only hurt me more. I saw that nothing had changed since the last time I had looked him up during the Ortega Cup. It seemed he hadn't been very active on social media either, with his last post being in early September, for one of his sponsorships. I had clicked on his tagged posts and regretted it instantly. The image of Theo with his arm casually around a woman who looked at him with obvious affection was seared into my memory. I had looked at the date, hoping it could have been from earlier in the year.

Two days ago.

Suddenly, it had felt like the noise was sucked out of the room, and all I could hear was my heart pounding. Heat crept up my neck, my pulse quickening. Were they together right now? I had felt sick at the thought. I'd put my phone back on the bedside table and asked myself why I was doing

this to myself, why I just couldn’t let it go. And while a part of me wished I could erase what I’d just seen, another part had been almost relieved to finally have some sort of confirmation that it hadn’t been the same for Theo. Perhaps I really had been nothing more or less than a way for him to explore an unknown part of himself, to satisfy his curiosity.

It had not come as a surprise that I had lost my match the next day. Losing the next week too, though? That I had not taken lightly. From then on, I found myself in the same situation over and over again: I wanted to play my best tennis, but I just couldn’t, no matter how hard I tried. The fear that I had lost my touch was starting to consume me more and more with every single loss over time. But there was only one solution that I had been able to think of at the moment. To keep playing until I started winning again, until I felt like my old self again.

So far the plan hadn’t paid off, but I was trying to remain confident that things would turn around. They just had to. More than anything, I wanted to end this season on a good note. After all, it had been the best of my career so far. This was my final chance to pull myself together, to show everyone that I still had the momentum I had built up over the year *exactly* when it mattered the most. I would compete for the final ATP title of the season. I would not let myself lose focus again. Not with anything or anyone. Not even with the fact that in less than a day, I would see Theo again.

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Chapter 27

The mirrors immediately fogged up when I opened the shower door. I had stood longer than necessary under the stream of hot water, almost letting it burn my cold skin. After I had gotten up extra early for my run this morning, I gladly welcomed the water's warm embrace after freezing in the cold December air in Turin. I might have been used to cold temperatures when I lived in Norway, but my years spent in Monaco and on tour had erased every memory of that time from my body.

I turned on the tennis match I had started watching earlier that morning when I couldn't sleep again. It was a replay of the Paris Masters quarterfinals, where the American player, Young, lost against Bergmann in a late-night, three-set thriller. Since I knew Young would be my first opponent here in Turin, I had been meticulously studying his weaknesses to catch him off guard tomorrow. I couldn't leave anything to chance here. Not after what had happened in the last few months. Now was the time to focus and not let anything dampen my determination to win. Not even the fact that Theo might have already checked into the same hotel, was maybe even staying on the same floor. No, I would push that feeling of nervousness and excitement away with every ounce of strength I had left, and I would finally pull myself together.

I headed down the stairs into the lobby and repeated the notes in my head. Young's return position is very aggressive, very close to the line. I needed to use my body serve as a weapon, push him back and out of his comfort zone. Force him to play long rallies. Use his impatience against him.

Too deep in my own thoughts, I didn't see a person coming as I rounded the next corner and ran full speed into a solid wall.

"Bloody hell, Hagen."

For a moment, I felt my pulse quicken at the sound of a familiar British accent.

"It's good to see you, mate."

I took a step to the side and let out a breath. “Lewis. Sorry, I didn’t see you coming.” My heart was still pounding heavily in my chest. The sickening mixture of disappointment and initial shock was slowly dissipating.

“I’m quite surprised to only see you now,” he said. “Can’t believe I missed you at the Paris Masters.”

Well, I could. As I hadn’t progressed very far in any of the tournaments, least of all the Paris Masters, it hadn’t been too difficult to miss me. I was gone before all of the players had even arrived.

“Well, you can thank my world-class performance the last few weeks,” I said and shrugged, dismissing the matter.

The sympathetic look on Lewis’s face slowly turned into a grin. “You’re doing us a favor, actually. Finally leaving some titles for us.”

“Yeah, it was an act of generosity, really,” I said, a small smile tugging on my lips.

He let out a laugh, but then his expression seemed to shift.

“Have you heard about him already?”

“Whom?” I asked, feigning innocence, though I couldn’t hold his gaze. We both knew there was only one person he could be talking about.

“Theo,” he said, confirming what I already knew. “He pulled out of the tournament. They made it public about an hour ago.”

His words landed with devastating force, my hands instantly clenching into fists. He pulled out? Again? I wouldn’t be seeing him? *Again?*

I felt my face drop for a brief moment but immediately forced myself to put on a facade of indifference, displaying only a slight expression of surprise. That’s what I was best at—pushing my real feelings to the side, hiding them. Though this time, it did take more effort than usual.

I cleared my throat, trying to sound much more nonchalant than I felt. “You know why?”

“Well, officially, he’s having trouble with his wrist, but I texted him as soon as I heard. He told me he needed to focus on other things for now. He was a bit cryptic, to be honest.”

I immediately thought back to the photo of Theo and that woman. I hated my mind for being so cruel, for torturing me like that.

I swallowed quietly. “He didn’t tell you more?” I dared to ask, pushing the wave of disappointment to the back of my mind.

“Nope.” He shrugged his shoulders. “He’s been rather withdrawn lately. He probably just needs a short break. He’s had a rough season. But I mean, you know how it is. Being on the road at all times can be tough. And it’s probably for the best, even though it kind of sucks,” he went on. “I thought us three could have a little revival of our night out in Cádiz.”

I had to stop myself from letting out a laugh. Clearly he wasn’t aware that Theo and I had not spoken a single word since we’d been defeated at the Ortega Cup. Having a revival of that night would be borderline impossible.

“Right. Next time then,” I put forth, the lie smoothly leaving my lips.

“I’m a bit jealous, to be honest. He’s probably already on his way to the Maldives or something to unwind and take care of his wrist,” he said with a grin, putting air quotes around the last part of his sentence. “And in a couple of days, I’ll be right behind him. Win first and then get out of this cold.” In typical Lewis manner, he finished his sentence with a wink.

“Yes,” I replied, my voice hoarse. “Win first.”

Lewis frowned as if he suddenly recognized something on my face. I tried to retain my mask, hide what was consuming me behind my strained smile.

“You’re alright?” he asked.

Before I could manage to form a reply, I was interrupted by Lewis’s phone ringing.

“Fuck, I’m late. My team is waiting for me. But we should have dinner sometime this week, Hagen. Here, let me get your number.” He handed his phone to me, and I mechanically typed in my number.

“Cheers!” He held up his phone as he slowly backed away. “Good seeing you, mate.”

“Yeah, you too.” I raised my hand in farewell before I forced myself to continue walking. I supposed it really was good to see him. To be honest, I hadn’t spent much time thinking about any of them since September. I had been quite preoccupied with not thinking about anything related to the Ortega Cup and Theo. That had included Lewis, Cardy, and *especially* our night out in Cádiz. Theo dripping wet in the fountain, his watch in my hand.

My jaw clenched, and I shook my head in a weak attempt to clear my thoughts. As much as I was trying to tell my mind that the conversation I'd just had with Lewis was not a big deal, I couldn't fool my body. The news that Lewis had just given me made it difficult to breathe.

I hadn't realized how fixated I was on the promise that Theo would be here, and now that I knew he wouldn't be, something inside me crumbled. I still didn't know what I'd thought was going to happen when we met. Maybe there was a part of me that still needed one final confirmation that he didn't care about me in the same way I cared about him before I could fully move on. So that he, and everything that had happened, might finally stop haunting me. Whatever it was, the prospect of Theo being here had kept me sane these past few weeks. More or less, at least. I thought he could avoid me anywhere, but not here. Not at the ATP Finals. There was no way he would miss that. But I had been wrong about him—again. And now that I knew I wouldn't be seeing him, I felt my last shred of hope die.

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Chapter 28

Water splashed up the side of my leg after I accidentally stepped into a deep puddle. Thanks to my limited vision, I didn't see the water until it was too late. By now it was dark outside, and the streetlights were spaced far apart along the road I was currently running down. It had been pouring rain all day, and it had gotten stronger in the evening, but that didn't stop me from leaving the hotel.

My legs moved in rhythm, controlled, and so did my breathing, but my thoughts still spun around in my head without restraint. This was exactly why I had to step out, regardless of the weather or the fact that I was due to play in the semifinals tomorrow at midday. I needed to clear my head, and what better way to do that than to push my body to a point where these thoughts stopped mattering?

Not that the strategy had been working so far. I was running and running, completely soaked to the bone. My hair was dripping wet and plastered to my face, yet I still couldn't feel any sense of calm. God, how I wished I could trade this for a swim again. But what I'd felt in Vienna was still ingrained in my brain, and I just *knew* that as soon as I was underwater, my thoughts would immediately return to the person I had spent those summer evenings with. But even now in this godforsaken rain on this deserted Italian road, I found myself recalling the conversations Theo and I had shared during our morning runs together. Everything led back to him. I just couldn't escape it, escape *him*. And I was so tired of it. I didn't want to think about how, when Lewis had told me about Theo's withdrawal, I had felt betrayed all over again. How everything seemed to get under my skin even though I had convinced myself that I was becoming less vulnerable with each person I had left behind.

The rain became even heavier as thick drops hit the tarmac around me, drowning out every other sound in the night. By now, I could hardly feel my body, the numbing cold settling over my skin. When an icy dizziness suddenly spread through me, I had to force myself to pay attention to my

breathing. *Not yet.* I wanted to run a little while longer before I returned to the quietness of my hotel room.

You are in control of this. Just breathe.

The last time I'd felt this way was when I had decided to give up my utopian dream of having a normal, loving family—instead, devoting all my energy to tennis. And in a way, it had worked. Tennis had steadied me. But this time, it wasn't working like it used to. And I wondered if there was more to it than just my disappointment in Theo. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Sometimes, I felt like, off the court, I was the person I understood least in this world. The only thing that was clear to me was that my team was my only anchor. Without them, I truly had no one. So I desperately needed to win again, show them that the career we had always dreamed of was still within reach. Before they lost their faith in me, before they left me too.

I pushed the thought away. After all, that was exactly what I didn't want to think about. Instead, I turned my attention to the match day ahead of me. Having won the first three matches of the week, I had regained some confidence. I had managed to keep it together for three wins in a row. And now with only four players left, I was determined to win—more than ever.

I knew it was a ridiculous thing to dig into, because as great as it felt to lift the trophy at the end of the season, it wasn't a Grand Slam. Deep down, I knew that my growing obsession with winning this tournament at all costs was irrational, but I lacked the strength to question that too. All I wanted was to harvest the adrenaline in my body, that iron will to win. If I had the choice, I would play the match right now and then go straight on to the next one. I wanted to hit one ball after another and run until my lungs burned. That was what I needed right now. Playing and winning would put me back on track and help me feel like myself again. It just had to. I would not fall apart. Instead, I would win.

/

The bench creaked as Dawson sat down beside me, the sound echoing through the silence of the locker room. I couldn't even find the strength to look at him.

As I sat there in the aftermath of my toughest mental battle yet, I couldn’t hold it in any longer. It felt like the ground had been pulled away from under my feet, and I had lost not only the last match but also my final foothold on my career.

To say I was disappointed would be the understatement of the century. This was rock bottom and truly the most haunting defeat I had ever experienced. The panic that had been rising inside of me while I had played one unforced error after the other . . . it had been suffocating. I had barely been able to finish the match, my whole body overwhelmed with the desperate urge to retire and leave the court as fast as possible. I used my last bit of strength to shoulder my bag and turn to face the cheering crowd, which, by that point, I could hardly make out with my blurry vision. I had barely noticed Dawson joining me as I walked along the dark corridors and into a thankfully empty locker room, the words he’d been saying to me drowned out by the blood rushing in my ears.

I clenched my fists. This had been my fucking safe haven, and now it wasn’t anymore. Tennis had been my escape from every negative feeling I had ever experienced, my safety net. But now it wasn’t catching me anymore. Instead, I was in free fall.

Before I could stop myself, I pulled out a racket from my bag and threw it with full force across the room. It crashed into the bench in front of us, but it wasn’t enough. My frustration was still unbearable. I got up, leaving Dawson behind me, who had fallen silent. I picked up my racket from the other side of the room and smashed it on the floor again and again until finally it cracked. Still not good enough.

With all my strength, I slammed my hands into the locker door until I could feel my palms burning, gladly welcoming the pain. Breathlessly, I let my head drop, my wet hair falling into my face, and leaned my weight against the locker. With the last slam against the steel, the last bit of energy left my body. I wanted to hold on to this anger, but I could feel devastation taking over instead, spreading through my body like ice. I wanted to stop myself, to regain composure, but my shoulder was starting to tremble, my eyes stinging with tears.

Slowly, I let myself drop down onto the floor, letting my head rest in my palms, trying and failing to control my breathing. After a moment, I felt Dawson sit down beside me, his hand warm against my back. Still, he

didn’t say anything. He just stayed quietly by my side on the cold floor of the locker room, his hand on my back, until I could feel my pulse slowing and the shaking stopped. I silently lifted my arm to wipe the mixture of tears and sweat from my face.

“Better?” Dawson said after what felt like an eternity.

“Yeah,” I breathed out, my voice still hoarse.

“I have never seen you like this, Will. *Never.*”

I dropped my head back against the cool metal of the locker and exhaled deeply.

“I know. I don’t . . .” I let out another breath, trying to push down the emotions that were rising again. “I don’t really feel like myself anymore. It was torture to be out there today, you know?”

Dawson nodded. “Yeah, I saw that the moment you stepped out on-court. The whole time, I was waiting for you to tell us you wanted to retire from the match. But you didn’t. You forced yourself through it, like you were punishing yourself for something. It was more than painful to watch, Will. And we will never let this happen again. You hear me? Nothing is important enough for you to play a match when you cannot bear to be on-court.”

“I just don’t know why I keep fucking it up. It’s like I forgot how to be a good player or something.” It was hard to get the words past my lips. Any trace of strength had left my voice, leaving only exhaustion—and so much loneliness.

A slight frown appeared on Dawson’s face. “It’s not your game or your talent or anything like that. Come on, you know that as much as I do. I know this is not what you want to hear right now, but there’s nothing you could have done differently in terms of your game. You had all the keys, you were going for the right shots, everything was there, in theory. Everything was there except for you. I know it would be easier if we just needed to improve your game, work on some shots or your strategy, but that’s not it. You know that, don’t you?”

I let out a shaky breath and slowly nodded my head.

“It pains me and the whole team to see you like this because we have witnessed over the past few months how much you have beaten yourself up. How you put everything into our training, but it’s not going to change the outcome, Will, not in the long run. And I think it’s time we start being

honest here. *You* need to start being honest, not just with me, but with yourself."

I pulled up my shirt and rubbed my face dry, avoiding his gaze. Somehow, hearing him utter my fear out loud felt as comforting as it was terrifying. I knew he was right. It couldn't go on like this. I owed it to my team—and most of all, I owed it to myself—to finally face the fact that something was wrong. To find out *what* was wrong.

"I just feel like if I let anything out, it would all overwhelm me. I don't know if I can take it," I admitted, my voice barely more than a whisper.

His hand wandered up and squeezed my shoulder lightly. "I understand. You don't have to put too much pressure on yourself. Just take it slowly." After a moment he asked, "Should I have said something sooner?"

I shook my head. After all, it wasn't as if he hadn't tried before. I just hadn't been ready. I knew things had been bad before. I felt it every time I stepped on or off the court. But there had been a lifeline, a faint glimmer of hope, that everything could go back to normal if I just pushed through it. But now? I was drifting alone in the open ocean, surrounded by nothing but endless, terrifying depths. Whatever this feeling was wasn't going to simply fade away.

"I didn't want to talk about it. I mean, I still don't really know what is going on."

"Want some help figuring it out?"

I turned my head and regarded him quietly for a moment. "Please," I said, my voice thick with desperation. Everything felt so heavy, threatening to drag me down even further. I was glad to latch onto him, using him to pull myself out of this mess.

"I've been thinking about it for some time now. I just never really felt like it was my place to say anything. Maybe that was wrong, I don't know. But I've known you since you were a teenager, and it was always clear you were searching for something you thought you had found in tennis. And I think, in many ways, you have. And that's good. I'm glad it's working that way."

"*Worked*," I replied, the bitterness clearly audible. "Past tense. It worked that way. Not anymore."

“It will again. And maybe it’s good that it’s no longer working right now. Healthy, even.”

My head snapped to the side, and I met his eyes with a raise of my brows. “Excuse me?”

“Come on, Will. I love tennis just as much as you do. It’s our life, and it’s always going to be that way. But playing and winning cannot be the solution to everything. It doesn’t work like that.”

“It worked fine until a couple of months ago,” I replied defensively. “I never needed anything else.” I had clung to this knowledge for as long as I could remember. But the moment the words left my mouth, I knew they were no longer true.

“Yeah, most of the time it did. I guess it made sense for you to regard it that way. I think since you had already experienced enough disappointment in your life, you did your best to minimize the risk of experiencing more of it. Which is difficult with tennis. Disappointments come with the sport; it’s way too unpredictable. So instead, you did your best to minimize them in your private life. With your family. With your friends. It’s so easy to do because the tour runs almost all year-round. There is always another tournament to play or another skill to improve and train.”

I swallowed hard. It was almost scary how accurate he was with everything he’d just shared. I had never seen it that way—not until Kjell had mentioned the same thing to me. But when I had tried to change things with Theo, to act against my usual patterns, I’d paid a price for that. I’d thought it’d been a clear sign that I shouldn’t change, that I was better off moving on like nothing had happened. But that hadn’t worked either. Ever since the summer—no, ever since Theo—I just couldn’t help but feel like I wanted . . . more. Something, anything, beyond just tennis. And as much as I hated the feeling, I could no longer pretend it wasn’t there.

“You know, I think the only time it ever really caught up with you was when you injured your thigh and couldn’t play for those two months,” Dawson went on. “And now. Why now, I can’t say. Maybe it’s because of whatever happened between you and Theo, maybe it is more than that. That is for you to find out. But I think it is clear that with everything that happened at the Ortega Cup, things have changed for you, and your mind is begging you to find out what it is. What else do you need besides tennis?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, hating how I could feel the tears welling up again.

“I think you do, Will.”

His words hung heavy in the air between us.

“One more thing,” Dawson added, placing his hand on my shoulder once again. “You have to stop seeing this as a bad thing. I think we are at a turning point here. It is about time that you let other things . . . people into your life. Not all of them will disappoint you.”

I drew in a shaky breath and closed my eyes, leaning my head back against the metal door behind me.

His grip on my shoulder tightened in a soft, comforting gesture. “I’ll leave you alone for a moment, alright? Take your time.”

I nodded without opening my eyes, only realizing he was gone when I heard the door close behind him. I didn’t know how long I sat there without moving from my spot.

I pressed my fingers into my forehead, trying to slow down my racing thoughts. All the unforced errors I had made on the court earlier, the thousands of critical faces watching me, almost bringing me to my knees . . . The match was playing out in front of me like a horror movie. I could feel the panic rise again, my lips beginning to tremble, and I forced myself to draw in three deep, long breaths to push it back down. *This is a turning point*, I repeated again and again in my head. *I will get through this.* It couldn’t get any worse; I couldn’t fall any further. I just needed to listen to myself. Really listen to what I wanted this time.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and reached for my phone in my pocket, staring at it blankly for a while. Then I let out a long, unsteady breath and pressed the call button, my heart pounding in my chest. For a few seconds, the dial tone rang loudly in my ear. Then someone picked up.

/

“Mum?”

“William. What a surprise. How are you? Are you not at a tournament at the moment?”

It felt strange and familiar at the same time to hear her voice. I tried to remember when we had last spoken on the phone. It must have been months ago, that much was clear.

“I am. In Italy. The last tournament of the season, you know? But I just lost, so . . .” I said, leaving the rest of the sentence hanging in the air.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. But it’s been a long season. Your body was probably tired after the last few months.”

“Yeah, probably,” I replied, stopping myself from mentioning that the other players were also finishing a long season. We played under the same conditions; I just wasn’t good enough today. But none of that mattered right now. This call wasn’t about my defeat.

“I was thinking,” I said, hearing the unease in my own voice. “I have two weeks off, and I thought I could come by and visit you for a weekend in Oslo. If you have time,” I hastily added. For a moment, the line was silent, and I felt my throat tighten. Why was I so nervous about this?

“That would be lovely, but your dad and I won’t be in Norway, you know. He was transferred to Hamburg, remember? In fact, we are in the middle of unpacking.”

“*Hamburg?* As in Hamburg, Germany?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied and let out a quiet, amused huff. “We’ve told you, haven’t we?”

“No. No, you have not, actually.” Slowly, the pressure in my throat increased, almost like a rope had wrapped itself around my neck, tightening and tightening, while the familiar ringing in my ears began to grow louder.

“Oh, I’m sorry, William. I thought I’d told you. It was all on such short notice, and we had to find an apartment—and packing everything, you know? It was actually a pretty stressful time for us, so I think it must have slipped my mind. But you could come visit us here if you want? It might still be a bit messy, but it would be lovely to see you.”

“Yeah. I need to check,” I replied after a long, loaded pause. I cleared my throat. “I’ll let you know,” I then went on, using all my strength to keep my voice from breaking. I was feeling an almost overwhelming urge to end the conversation immediately and forget I’d ever called. This had been a terrible idea. A couple of minutes ago, it had seemed like the only right

thing to do. All I had wanted was to hear her voice, hear her say she was excited to see me, and maybe even believe it was true.

“Alright. I’ll go help your dad, OK? Let me know if you can make it.”

I already had my goodbye ready to go. I wanted to escape this call so badly, to stop putting myself in situations that made me feel even lonelier than I did before, to *finally* be able to breathe again. But then I stopped myself. Not this time. That was not why I’d called. Not for some small talk and the same old disappointment, the same questions I had carried around with me for probably the last decade of my life.

“Would you really want to see me?” I asked, my voice wavering slightly.

“Sorry?” I could hear the confusion in her voice. “Of course we do. Why do you ask?”

“Because you didn’t tell me you’d moved countries. I mean, how can you just forget to mention something this important to your *son*? Don’t you think I might have wanted to know that about my parents?” I shook my head in disbelief even though she couldn’t see it. “Because you have not come to any of my matches in the past two years. Because you didn’t even call me after the US Open, the worst defeat of my life. Because I think, deep down, you are happier without me in your life. But I just thought, in the unlikely event that I’m wrong here, that maybe you really mean it, and you’d like to see me. I just thought I’d . . . check, you know?”

I was met with complete silence for a few seconds. I’d never spoken to my mother that bluntly; I’d never blamed my parents that openly before. Up until this moment, I had always shared some of the guilt. I knew I could’ve visited. I could’ve called them myself in New York. I was capable of acting on my own; I wasn’t a child anymore. But I had been, once. And they hadn’t stopped me when I distanced myself from them. They had just let me walk away. It hadn’t been my fault then.

“God, William, *no*. Of course we want to see you.” She let out a shaky breath, and I thought I could hear her sitting down somewhere.

Now that I had said the worst of it, it felt as if a dam had burst inside me, and the words were suddenly, after all this time, flowing more freely. “I don’t want to just blame you for everything. I’m not even sure what I am asking here or what I’m hoping to get out of this conversation.” I paused. “I

guess I am just trying to understand . . . what we are. To each other, I mean."

"I didn't know you felt that way. We just know how focused you are on your career and how much time it takes up in your life. Your dad and I are very happy for you. I mean, I remember the first time you came home from practice and how incredibly excited you were. And from that moment on, it seemed like the only thing you wanted to do was play tennis, and it has been that way ever since."

"Yes. It was. It *is*. But I'm trying to understand why that had to exclude you. Why did it have to be an either-or situation?" I asked quietly.

The line fell silent again, and all I could hear was her breathing.

"I . . . I don't know. I suppose it was a bit difficult to find our place in your life from then on. And you've always been so incredibly independent, you didn't really seem to need us—"

"But I did need you," I interrupted her. "Of course I did. I still do."

"I'm sorry, William. It's just . . . you've never shown any sign that you did. It had seemed like you were running from us, and I had believed then it would be best to not hold you back," she replied, her voice ringing loudly in my ears.

"I wasn't running from you," I said, my voice low and strained. "I was running from the belief that you were relieved when I wasn't around. That you are more of a family without me. That I was nothing more than a . . . burden." My voice trembled as I uttered these words for the first time in my life. Until now, I had forbidden myself from even thinking it. This fear had been too brutal; I just had to suppress it.

"God, Will. I can't believe that's what you've been thinking . . ." she said. I could clearly hear it now. She was crying, and the sound made me feel as if an iron fist was gripping my heart.

"You know, I think I tried to convince myself I didn't need you. But I'm starting to understand that I'd just assumed that everyone would be better off without me. That I would be better off without anyone too, but I just ended up with . . . nobody," I continued, unable to fathom how I was actually saying these words out loud. That I was really facing these ghosts of my past. And above all, talking to my mother about it.

She cleared her throat. "We should have tried harder. Me and your dad."

I was quiet for a moment, letting her words sink in, one by one. Trying to grasp the enormity of the situation, her *admission*, but it simply didn't register yet.

"Maybe." I roughly dragged a hand over my face. "Maybe I would have been less alone then."

She drew in a sharp breath. "You're not alone, Will. We want to be part of your life. If you let us."

I nodded, then realized that she couldn't see it.

"It really, *really* would be lovely to see you," she added when I hadn't replied.

Hearing her say those words was both relieving and painful. There were still so many questions left, not only for her and my father, but also for myself. Would she ever have extended a hand if I hadn't been the one to open up to her today? Would my life be any different now if I had just talked to her sooner? But I supposed that wasn't the point. What was important was that, step by step, I might find a way out of the sudden dead end that was now my life. That this whole disaster with Theo and Kjell hadn't been in vain. That this pain—no, heartbreak, even—might actually let the other parts of me heal.

"OK," I said after a moment. "Maybe next week?"

"Whenever you like."

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Chapter 29

// Australian Open

I closed my eyes for a moment and raised my face to the sky. The sweat on my skin was already drying from the strong rays of the sun.

Despite the long flight and jet lag, the Australian Open had always been one of my favorite slams. As well as the most nerve-racking. It defined the start of the tour, and I always felt that my performance there would define the rest of the season. They say that all tennis players are superstitious, yet I had never thought of myself that way. I didn't skip any lines as I walked around the court; I didn't have to bounce the ball an exact number of times before serving. But when I played badly there, not reaching the second week, that was the only time I took it as a bad omen.

I opened my eyes and looked around me. I had to use my hand to shield against the bright-blue courts reflecting the midday sun. Although there were a few leafy trees, they did little to provide shade for the handful of fans already roaming the grounds. In the distance, Melbourne's buildings stood tall against the cloudless sky. A sight that had become so familiar over the years but somehow still remained cinematic.

And once again, I asked myself the annual question: Had the offseason disrupted my rhythm or had it reawakened my spirit? I supposed I was going to get my answer soon. The only thing I knew so far was that I was feeling completely different from how I had felt at the end of the tour in Turin. I had truly hit rock bottom there, slowly but steadily losing my mind.

I let out a deep breath before filling my lungs with the warm, salty air again. I wasn't anymore—that much I was sure of.

"Do you need more time to get the perfect tan, or can I start with my serve?" Cardy called out, his voice echoing over to me from his side of the court.

"We both know you're just talking out of jealousy, because you're not going to be anything other than fiery red," I replied with a laugh but quickly

brought myself into position.

“Enough talking from you,” he said with a grin and let the ball bounce in front of him. Exactly eight times, as always.

This scheduled practice match against Cardy was my first real test to see how much I had broken out of the rut I couldn’t get out of just four weeks ago. To find out what my chances would really be on Australian soil. The first round hadn’t started, and I’d only been getting back into my routine with my team, adapting to the conditions of the courts. We had all agreed that we would take it slow and test my resilience day by day. It was clear to everybody that the most important thing was to find out if I could play again for my own enjoyment or if I was playing driven by my despair.

When I flew home after the ATP Finals, I had no choice but to use my time away from the court to finally confront everything I had been trying to suppress. I could no longer use tennis as a diversion; I could no longer hold myself together using the well-rehearsed routines at tournaments. It was just me in my apartment. Just me and my thoughts. And although it hurt deeply to have all the pressure from the past few years come at me all at once, I also felt relieved to stop running away for a moment. I hadn’t realized how exhausting it was to use all my strength constantly to push everything away. To never question anything because I was too scared of the answer.

For the first time, I was glad to have the time off and to focus on something else. To focus on myself for a change and who I was beyond my profession. Because one thing became clear to me from my conversation with Kjell, my time with Theo, and Dawson’s words in that locker room after I had completely lost it: I wanted more. No, I *needed* more. I could no longer ignore that I felt lost and that I desperately needed other milestones in my life other than my career. Seeing my family seemed like the first step in the right direction. It had been rough—probably one of the most emotionally draining days I’d had in a while. And that said a lot considering the mental funk I’d been in since the Ortega Cup.

My mom and dad may have always wanted a child, but they never really learned how to be parents. And I supposed, in a way, I never figured out how to be their son. Things never worked out the way any of us wanted, but I wasn’t ready to give up just yet. We wanted to see what we still had and what we could be in the future. *I* wanted to try. Although things still felt a

bit tense between us, I had finally taken the plunge, and maybe one day I'd find the home I always lacked.

And while we didn't say it out loud, it was clear to us that our family was broken. But we still were a family. At least, we wanted to be. So when I'd left Hamburg, I had felt for the first time in years that our relationship might be at a turning point. Whether we could really change and repair what was broken remained to be seen. But it didn't feel impossible. Not anymore.

After I'd finished the sixth game of the first set with a backhand winner down the line, I walked over to the bench and took a sip of my drink. By now Cardy and I had both found our feet in this practice match, and the quality of our rallies seemed to improve with each point we played. And it felt good. Fuck, did it feel good to play again. The way my body moved so seamlessly every time I pushed off the ground, already anticipating Cardy's next move. The sound of the ball with just the right amount of spin leaving the head of my racket, knowing it would land right where I wanted it to. Regardless of whether or not I was going to win this match, at least I was feeling this special kind of excitement again. And oh, had I missed this.

I took another deep breath of the warm air and let my gaze wander over the grounds once more. Apart from a few exceptions, all the neighboring courts were occupied, and a growing number of spectators gathered to watch the first practice matches of the slam and catch a glimpse of their favorite players. There was a sense of lightness in the air, a positively charged mood that was slowly catching on. The "Happy Slam" is what they called the Australian Open, and perhaps with good reason.

This was the thought I had in my mind when I saw him. For the first time in more than four months.

Baldridge was the first to come around the corner, but Theo followed just seconds later. I could feel my whole body going tense in an instant. He was still quite a distance away from me, deep in conversation and completely oblivious to the fact that I was sitting no more than a few feet away. The way he moved confidently through the crowd, with his broad shoulders and his upright posture, instantly set him apart from the people around him. His mere presence demanded attention—*my* attention, at least. I was surprised by how exhilarating and, at the same time, unsettling it was to see him. I was definitely surprised at how much it still hurt. At least I was lucky enough to see him again with a safe distance between us. I could let my

reaction sink in unguarded. And when we would eventually meet again sometime in the next few days, I might be better prepared. Less affected, hopefully.

I mustered every ounce of willpower I had to focus on the match I was playing, to stay concentrated. But it was no use. I just could not tear my eyes away from him for more than a few seconds.

Theo and his team were almost past our court, and I slowly felt my body relaxing when a loud whistle sounded next to me. *Right.* How could I forget that Cardy was sitting beside me and that it would be borderline impossible for him to let Theo pass without a remark? For a moment, I was watching Theo's reaction in slow motion, frozen to the spot. The way he looked up, turning to find the source of the sound; the way he spotted Cardy and his familiar grin spread across his face; and then the way his green eyes ever so slowly reached me.

I didn't know what I thought Theo's reaction would be when he saw me again for the first time after walking out of that locker room without saying another word. Unlike last year, I was actually trying not to think about it. This time, I wasn't hoping for a life-altering encounter. No. *This time*, I was aware that things were truly over between us, and the only way I could cope was to actively keep my distance. I knew it would be hard because, God, did I still miss him. There was no point in pretending I didn't. But I knew it would pass; I just had to be patient. His hold on me couldn't last forever. I needed more time—four months simply wasn't enough. But when Theo's eyes met mine, every ounce of pain and longing I had just felt, every confusing thought that had passed through my mind, was also reflected on his face. I almost had to fight the urge to get up and walk over to him. But neither of us did. We just stayed there, unmoving, staring at each other for what could have been no more than a few seconds, but time seemed to stand still. Then someone called Theo's name, urging him to keep up with the team, and in the blink of an eye, we both snapped out of it. Unable to stop myself, my gaze followed him. Just before he disappeared around the corner, he turned around one last time. A quick look over his shoulder, but straight at me. Then he was out of my sight.

I slowly leaned back on the bench and let out the long, shaky breath that I had been holding in my chest. Had he been affected too? Or was I just projecting my own feelings onto him? Maybe it didn't matter either way.

Theo could not have made things any clearer between us—the person he had been with me was not his reality. The Theo I had gotten to know at the Ortega Cup was not the real one, as much as I wanted it to be otherwise. And no matter how much I wanted to make more space for the people in my life, Theo could not be one of them. I was only now starting to feel better, and I was too scared to risk taking a step back in my progress. Somehow, without really being able to explain it to myself, Theo was my weak spot. A trigger unlike any other, and I would be a fool if I pulled it again.

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Chapter 30

“Thank you, William. That will be all.”

I nodded at the woman in front of me and got out of my chair. I had another interview lined up in about an hour, and then my commitments for media day would be over. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, today was further proof that the media teams had warmed up to me since I paired up with Theo. It was obvious that Theo regarding me as a decent person was enough to make them reconsider their opinion of me in some way. Their modus operandi was clearly “If Theodore Eastwood likes someone, we should follow his example.” It was interesting to see how much power he held without even being aware of it. I supposed I could count myself lucky that they didn’t know we hadn’t spoken in four months. But I wasn’t going to complain. After all, our whole media strategy had worked. Minus the scandal, of course, but it seemed that our expensive legal teams had made most people too scared to mention it to us again. Still, their perception of me had changed. They didn’t regard me solely as a robot, as their Ice King, any longer. They might still not like me or my restraint on the court, but they seemed to see me as more human. More vulnerable. I supposed one of the worst times of my life had brought some good things after all. Or maybe it was a by-product of the new attitude that I was taking toward them. Although I was still reluctant to be in front of a camera, I just couldn’t get myself to care about it as much as I had before. After everything that had happened in the last few months, the low I was still fighting through, it all suddenly seemed so small in comparison. It felt almost alien to me how a day like this would have been my worst nightmare in the past, that I would have dreaded it like it was my only problem in the world.

While I was walking across the patio looking for a more secluded spot until my next meeting, I saw him coming through the open doors.

Right at me.

And this time, Theo spotted me at the exact same moment I did. Our gazes hooked onto each other, just like the other day. Only now we were so much closer, and our paths would inevitably cross unless one of us turned

around. I took a long, deep breath. It was bound to happen at some point anyway. I couldn't avoid him during this Grand Slam, and I'd rather run into him here on neutral ground than alone on some deserted floor of the same hotel we were staying in. So maybe now was the best time to get it over with. Rip off the Band-Aid.

"Hey," he said.

God, it felt good to hear his voice.

"Hi."

We stopped in front of each other, still at arm's length. For so long I had imagined how I would feel when we met again. I had built it up so much in my head that when the moment arrived, I was almost surprised at how ordinary it seemed. I thought he would feel like a stranger, but he didn't. Everything about him felt familiar, from the way his emerald eyes narrowed slightly as he took me in to the faint hint of a smile tugging at his lips, making it seem as if only a few days had passed since our last meeting.

"How have you been?" Theo said. "It's been a while."

"Fine. Good. Yourself?"

"Better now." The small smile on his face made me feel warm. "You've survived without me?" He nodded toward the press team on the crowded front of the patio.

Barely, Theo, I wanted to reply. "I've managed," I said instead, unable to take my eyes off him.

"I'm sure you have." I watched as his hand moved to the back of his neck, his fingers massaging into the muscle. For a moment, his grip tightened, and then, just as quickly, he dropped his arm again. "So, what great things have they prepared for us today? Let me guess, jump as high as a kangaroo and look like an absolute idiot?"

I let out a laugh. "No, but let me pass that idea on to them real quick before it's your turn," I said and pretended to turn around in their direction.

You're doing well, I thought to myself. I was acting casual, as if I hadn't spent the last four months thinking about when I would finally hear his voice again.

His hand snapped forward and he held me back, a grin spreading over his face. "Don't you dare, Will."

Why did he have to touch me? A warmth instantly began to spread through my body from where his soft fingers made contact with my skin, causing my chest to tighten.

Seeing my eyes wander to his hand on my arm, he instantly dropped it and took a small step back. We were quiet for a moment, but the silence between us was more honest than the words we had shared. It felt wrong to pretend nothing had happened between us, to talk without really saying anything, but what else could we do? We certainly could not get into anything that was unresolved between us now, not with a crowd of people around us.

“Do you think you could find some time to see me this week?” he then suddenly said, and my head snapped up, meeting his eyes in surprise. This I had not expected him to say.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked carefully.

“I thought maybe we could just talk?” He pushed his hair out of his face.

He was nervous, I suddenly realized. I knew that uneasy gesture of his, and that sharp feeling of familiarity gripped my throat for a moment.

“I feel I owe you an apology—you know, for everything. I felt so terrible about it. I still do,” he added more quietly so that only I could hear.

Apologize, right. It felt so easy and natural to talk to him that for a moment, I almost forgot how we got here and what his offer meant. Of course he would want to wipe his slate clean. I should have expected that. Theo liked to be on good terms with everybody, and it wasn’t a surprise that he couldn’t stand the thought of me going around hating him. As honorable as that intention might’ve been, it was just as selfish. Surely, he must know that meeting up would hurt me more than do me any good. Or maybe I should have been relieved that he didn’t seem to realize how much I was still struggling with everything that had happened between us. How painful it still was to look at him.

“You don’t owe me anything, Theo.”

“What?”

“It’s OK. I had enough time to get over it,” I lied, carefully concealing the pain behind my words as I held his gaze. “You don’t have to feel bad about it anymore.”

There, I said it. Now he could cross it out on his ledger and let me move on.

And yet his smile faltered. “OK, yeah. No, I understand. Bit too late now, right?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Four months can be quite a long time.”

“Four and a half,” he said. “And yes, it was a very long time.”

I didn’t answer him, and I didn’t think he expected an answer either. There was nothing left to say now anyway. I had to make a clean break; otherwise, I feared I would accept whatever little Theo had to offer, even though I knew it could never be enough. Being around him had made me feel lighter, and even now, I found myself craving that ease again. But his last betrayal had been too brutal and was still too present for me to do anything impulsive now. I could not give in. He looked at me and saw only a friend, whereas I looked at him and saw a person I would risk everything for. A person I wanted to trust so badly, yet he had shown me that I couldn’t. It would never work without breaking me.

Theo seemed to search my eyes for another moment, and then finally, swallowing hard, he looked away. “Alright then, I will leave you to it.” He attempted another smile.

“I’ll see you around, Theo.”

“Yeah.”

He was a couple of feet away from me when he suddenly turned around again.

“Hey, Will?” he called out.

I snapped up my gaze to meet his eyes. “Yes?”

“Good luck with your matches,” he said with a hint of a smile. He turned back around before I could say another word.

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Chapter 31

Gradually, I could feel my heart rate slowing down and the tension in my muscles easing. It always took some time after a match for my body to come out of overdrive after pushing it to the limit for over two hours.

Dawson came up beside me and handed me my refilled water bottle as I continued to pedal slowly on the bike to complete my cooldown routine. *Quarterfinals.* It was still surreal that I'd actually managed to push through this first week and secure my spot today. Going into each tournament, I always had high expectations for myself. If I was able to play my best tennis, I knew that no victory was out of reach for me. That was the kind of confidence that was essential for my game and what helped me reach my first Grand Slam final last year. But after its catastrophic ending, those expectations felt miles away from me. A different lifetime, really. But I regained my faith one step at a time during this tournament, and it no longer felt impossible to focus on my game without trying to solve ten unrelated problems at once.

"The early break gave you a lot of confidence today," Dawson said next to me.

"Yeah, I didn't think I would be able to get into his game so quickly in the first set. Apparently, he was more nervous than I was." I took another long drink of the salty water.

"He was nervous, alright, but mostly because he didn't think you'd play so aggressively so early on. You were the one setting the tone from the very first second, and you completely caught him off guard with that. Well done, William. That was some really great tennis today." I could hear the sincerity in his voice as he gave me a clap on my shoulder.

"Thanks, Tom." I could feel a warmth spread through my body at his words. I had missed this. Feeling proud of myself. Knowing I was able to translate my hard work into the matches again.

"I have a good feeling, you know?" he then went on. "You are taking initiative again; you don't wait for the other player to make the mistake like

you were doing at the end of the last season. In the first few matches, I could see that you were still too much in your head, but it looked like you managed to play yourself free from all that today. How did it feel for you out there?"

I listened inward for a moment, playing the previous match before my eyes. "It felt like it used to," I said. "Like it's supposed to. Calming, incredibly difficult, but I felt this hunger again, you know? Not just frustration," I finished, trying to catch my breath.

He nodded to himself. "Good. You're getting better. You *seem* better."

I gave him a faint smile and let my gaze wander to the TV screen in front of me. It was showing the current round-of-sixteen match that had already advanced well into the third set. It was the match that would determine who I would face in the upcoming quarterfinal. Usually, I tried not to worry too much about who I might play next. I had to accept the final score either way and then start to prepare my strategy accordingly. There was no need to drive myself crazy before the result was in. But it was different today. One of the players currently fighting for a place in the quarterfinals was Theo. *He* could be my opponent. And looking at the score, I feared that it was almost decided. He had already won the first two sets and was on the verge of breaking Harris's serve in this one. He played so well that it was almost impossible not to watch his every move on the TV screen. But then, I supposed it had been difficult not to watch his every move for a while now.

"He improved," Dawson said matter-of-factly beside me.

I nodded. "His strategy still seems the same. But he's more focused than he usually is."

For a while, we just quietly followed the match, yet I could almost hear him mentally noting any weaknesses in Theo's game. We both knew he would win against Harris even though neither of us wanted to say it out loud yet. Theo's "*Come on!*" echoed from the TV, and I watched him pump his fist after securing his break.

"If he's your next opponent, we cannot wait for him to crack under the pressure like we used to in the past. The way he is playing this tournament, that would be too arrogant. Reckless, even. But there are other ways to beat him," Dawson assured me.

I nodded hesitantly and returned my focus to the screen. Theo was now serving for the match. The camera closed in on his face, revealing a drop of sweat tracing its way down his sharp jaw as he took a long, measured breath. My thoughts were racing in my head, struggling to come to terms with his basically assured place in the quarterfinals. He deserved it, that much I could admit. But I had done my best to stay away from him the last few days, to not share more than a couple of words when we passed each other on the grounds or in the fitness room, just so I could stay focused. Since we hadn't been placed that close in the draw, it somehow hadn't occurred to me that I might play him at some point during this Grand Slam. Maybe I had underestimated him; maybe I had underestimated myself. Either way, I would no longer be able to avoid him if he managed to hold his ground in this match.

Theo smashed another winner straight through the middle, not letting Harris breathe for a second. At that moment, everything about him screamed triumph and dominance. I guess it was time to stop deceiving myself. He was going to win and enter the quarterfinals of the Australian Open. There was no question left about that. He would be my opponent, and soon we would face each other on the court.

My grip tightened on the bike handles. How would I play someone I couldn't even bear to look at? How was I supposed to win against someone I thought about every night before I went to sleep even though I hated myself for it? How could I beat someone who, honestly, I could hardly stand to see lose? Tennis was all about focus—and at a Grand Slam even more so than at other tournaments. Mental endurance was the key to winning the match. That was my biggest strength, what set me apart from many of the other players. But not when it came to Theo. I wasn't calm when he was near me, and I certainly didn't think clearly. And a couple of months ago, I would have said the same about him. But not anymore. He was playing some of the best tennis I'd seen him play in a long time, and even though we were well into the second week, he hadn't snapped once. I was almost impressed, honestly. He had left us and the whole nightmare scandal completely behind him and was now rising like a phoenix from the ashes. Who would have thought that he would one day be the mentally stronger one out of the two of us?

Game, set, and match Eastwood.

The crowd responded to the chair umpire’s announcement with thunderous applause as the camera zoomed in on Theo standing motionless on the court, his racket falling from his hands, his eyes closed.

“That’s decided then,” Dawson said dryly beside me.

I didn’t reply. All I could do was watch Theo’s face light up as he turned to his team.

// Australian Open Quarterfinal

I kept my eyes on the floor in front of me as the officials led us through the tunnel. I wasn’t even looking at the faces of all the past champions who had earned their place there, decorating the route to Rod Laver Arena. I didn’t know if it was the nerves before the match or the fact that Theo was walking right behind me, but I was more aware than usual of the camera following my every move. I tried to keep my face neutral, to stay concentrated, but I feared every close observer would be able to look right through me.

Since Theo had been set as my opponent, I hadn’t stopped worrying about how his presence would affect my focus. I had told myself a while ago that we would always be rivals first. For a sweet, oblivious moment, I had even hoped that we would be more than that. It was this kind of wishful thinking that had been the cause of my pain. But no matter what had happened between us, no matter what I had wished for once, Theo had to be my opponent today and nothing else. If I could remember that, I was confident I would beat him. I’d done it before, and my understanding of his game was probably better than anybody else’s. The Ortega Cup didn’t bring much good with it, but at least it gave me insights I could use against him today.

As we stopped in front of the entrance, the sea of noise carried in from the packed stadium. Thousands of people were waiting for us to finally enter the center court. It was a strange contrast to the complete silence between Theo and me ever since we’d entered the tunnel. Only broken by the sound of his shoes bouncing off the ground from time to time as he kept his muscles warm by jumping. We hadn’t even said hello to each other, just exchanged a curt nod, both equally determined to remain focused. Even though this was the same procedure with every player before a match, a deeply internalized routine, it felt unnatural between us today.

Theo went out first, the sound of the crowd celebrating his every step. Then I heard my own name over the speakers, followed by a roar of applause. And this time, it seemed louder than ever before. A strong wave of warmth spread through my body, leaving me strangely light. Maybe it was fate after all. By playing alongside Theo, he had helped me win over the fans, and now, after all these months, we were facing each other once again. Somehow, it seemed, it was always going to lead up to this moment.

I stepped out of the tunnel and onto the court, soaking up the atmosphere with every fiber of my being. This moment here, just before a match, this feeling, was what I was living for. The energy of the crowd mirrored my own, and I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my body, the excitement burning in my veins, and finally, my mind went quiet.

The warm-up passed in a blur, and the anticipation of what was to come drowned out everything else.

Thirty seconds.

I jogged over to my bench and took a sip of water before I let my gaze drift to my team's box. Their reassuring nods all told me the same thing: *Let's do this.*

I took a deep breath, grabbed my racket, and walked back to the baseline to bring myself into position. Although the sun was still out, it was hidden behind a thick wall of clouds, and dusk was slowly rolling in. I blinked, willing my eyes to focus against the bright stadium lights. And then finally, the voice of the chair umpire sounded throughout the arena.

First set. Theodore Eastwood to serve. Ready? Play.

/

The thud of the ball in the net made me instantly reach for the next ball in my pocket, only letting a couple of seconds pass between my two serves.

I repeated the movement. *Fault.* My second serve went just outside the service box.

15–40.

A double fault when it wasn't even a pressure point yet? I needed to get a grip. The next serve went in, and Theo returned the ball with his forehand

down the line, which I had already anticipated by moving to my left. I played a crosscourt backhand. *Fault.* Too wide.

1–3.

I completely blocked out Theo's shout and the roaring crowd as I walked toward my towel. I had practically handed him this early break on a silver platter, and I couldn't help but wonder if this lousy game had just cost me the first set. I had to try to slow him down somehow, *fast*, or this set would be over within the blink of an eye.

Theo served right into my body, and again, I wasn't prepared for that. Another ace followed, and then another.

1–4.

I held my next game, but more from sheer luck than anything else. I felt my body tighten up.

2–4.

Theo sent another forehand down the line, and I scrambled for the ball, knowing it was out of my reach. He was outplaying me again and again, not giving me a single moment to breathe.

2–5.

Come on, you can still do it. I just had to hold my serve and try again. Eventually he had to drop that level. He just had to.

30–30.

I bounced the ball three times as the crowd settled into absolute silence around me again, determined to put everything into the next point. I was desperate to find a winner. And being desperate for a winner almost always meant one thing: The ball would go long.

30–40.

Another break point. If I didn't save this one, this first set would be over before it had really begun. *Just breathe.* I tossed the ball and returned him the favor, serving it straight into his body. But unlike me, he was fast enough to return it at full speed, locking me into a crosscourt rally that was unfolding on his terms. He was pushing me farther out. Another one, another one, then he shot it down the line. My arm stung as I jerked it back to scramble for the ball, but I was too slow.

2–6. Eastwood leads by one set.

/

The security followed right behind me at a polite distance as I quickly made my way into the bathroom. I needed to get away from everyone's eyes for a moment, away from the constant noise, and try to collect myself.

I splashed cold water onto my face and closed my eyes for a second. I was completely overrun; each game went by faster than the previous one. Theo was so consistent in the power he put behind each ball that it was starting to worry me. Today he seemed to have all the angles and all the answers. I had to up my game fast and just pray that he would drop his level.

I walked back onto the court, into the sea of voices. By now, the sun was setting, and the clouds that had covered the sky this evening were glowing like embers. It almost looked as if the entire arena had been stained red, creating a sense of danger that seemed fitting for the tragedy that had just taken place on the court. Perhaps I would have appreciated the view more if I had seen it under different circumstances. Tonight, I only noted it in passing as I watched Theo get up from the bench and walk to the baseline.

Second set. Eastwood to serve.

/

By my third game, I could already feel the set slipping away. I barely managed to hold my serve, nowhere close to threatening his. How could he be so unfazed by all this? His concentration was stronger than ever, while I felt mine wavering with every point I played. We were now at 3–3.

He held 3–4. Easily.

And then broke my serve again, expanding his lead to 3–5.

I walked up to my towel, my hand tightening around my racket painfully. With more force than necessary, I dragged the towel over my face, wiping my sweat away before I threw it back into the box. This couldn't be happening, not after everything I'd worked for to get to this moment. I had to be the mentally stronger one. I *knew* I could do it; I just had to break him back immediately. Yes, I felt the pressure, but I was so sure Theo must be feeling it too. He must, knowing he was only one set away from winning the whole match if he won this game.

Breathe. I knew as soon as the ball touched my racket that Theo had no chance of reaching it at that angle.

Love–15.

I let out a sigh of relief. His next serve landed just behind the service line, and when he sent the second one into the net, I knew that he was really feeling the pressure.

Love–30.

But why didn’t he react? Normally he’d make his frustration over such an easy mistake visible for his opponents as well as the crowd. But he didn’t scream, he didn’t smash his racket, *nothing*. Today he just grimaced and went back behind the baseline, shocking me and the crowd when he served back-to-back aces to level the game. I would almost be proud of this newfound calmness of his if I didn’t find it so damn frustrating.

When my next return ended up a bit too long, and the out call echoed through the stadium, I felt my irritation growing.

His serve and also set point for him. *Again.*

I took a deep breath and got back into position, focusing on Theo and the ball he was bouncing on the other side of the net. This time, I wouldn’t give him the opportunity to outplay me. No, I would wait for the right ball, remain patient until I could shoot it down the line and out of his reach. But once again, I had miscalculated, failing to take into account that Theo’s game was no longer what it was months ago. Instead of trying to lock me in a rally, outplaying me with speed, he went for the drop shot instead. I didn’t even try to reach it in time—just stood there and watched it drop down right behind the net with perfect precision. Theo raised his fist in the direction of his team’s box in celebration.

3–6. Eastwood leads by two sets.

I shook my head in disbelief. This was a different player in front of me tonight. This was unlike any match I’d ever played against him. And for a moment, I wondered what else had changed besides his game. What else didn’t I know about him?

As I walked over to the bench, I tried to avoid looking at the scoreboard, which displayed the latest crushing results in oversized numbers. I had expected Theo to struggle as much mentally as I had with us being opponents, but he didn't seem to have the slightest problem with it. He played relentlessly, giving no indication that he felt conflicted. I was just like any other opponent of his on the court. I probably should've known, given the way he handled everything between us outside of the court, and I felt my jaw clench at the memory of it.

As "Macarena," the worst song in the world, blasted over the speakers and I watched the official stadium DJ firing up the dancing crowd, I felt more and more like I was stuck in some twisted nightmare. I draped my towel over my head and escaped into seclusion for the final few seconds of the set break. I needed to come up with a strategy *now* if I wanted to stay in this tournament and beat Theo today. I couldn't just keep doing what I was doing, or the third set would be over in no time. And yes, coming back from two sets down wasn't easy, but it wasn't impossible either. As trite as it may sound, the saying "The match is only over when it's over" was always true. But first, I needed a solution. Dawson had suspected that Theo's confidence wouldn't waver too soon, and he had been right. His precision today was almost frightening. I didn't see him suddenly giving away free points, and with time running out, I couldn't count on it anymore. But it was still Theo, after all. His game wasn't untouchable. Not even today.

/

Time.

Although I had just put on a new shirt, I could already feel it clinging to my back, and the chill breeze that swept through the stadium did little to cool me down.

I took off my cap and brushed back my curls before putting it back on. While one of the ball kids was placing two balls on my racket, I let my gaze wander to Dawson, who was now in hearing distance.

"He's everywhere. What the hell can I do?" I called up to him, my frustration breaking through.

"You're waiting for the ball—he's reading you, Will," Dawson replied, leaning over the railing to get closer to me. "Come on. Come on. Come on.

It’s time to turn this whole thing around.”

His words still ringing in my ears, I decided to start the third set on a different note, by running straight to the net after my first serve.

15–love.

I held.

1–0.

He evened out.

1–1.

I held again.

2–1.

He evened us out.

2–2.

Our rallies got longer and faster, and the ball was striking the court even more brutally, leaving us both breathless by the end. Right now, we were both playing at our highest level. So far, neither of us had been able to break the other’s serve, but I was in his game just as much as he was in mine. Around me, I could feel the crowd waking up again, celebrating us, wondering who was going to survive this marathon and if there really was a chance for me to recover from two sets down.

And I wasn’t losing my faith. Not yet.

I held my serve.

3–2.

And so did he.

3–3.

But as we were approaching the end of the set, I could feel my nerves starting to get the better of me again. It was getting harder and harder to drown out the overwhelming tension that had settled over the entire stadium. I tried to stay calm. I tried to breathe evenly and push down the strong sense of panic rising inside of me. But I failed. Once again, Theo broke my serve.

3–4.

The realization that he only had to win two more games before I was out of this slam was nearly suffocating me now. But I wasn’t giving up, not

when I had finally found my way into this match. My lungs were burning, and I could practically feel the blood pumping through my veins, but I made sure not to show any signs of exhaustion, maintaining my stoic facade. I just had to find a way to neutralize his serve.

Deuce.

Finally I was in his game. *Just keep your focus*, I told myself.

We went back and forth. One ball after another. Who would take a risk first? Who would change direction? *Not this one.* I knew I had to find the right ball. *Not this one.* Theo beat me to it. He moved quickly to avoid his backhand and instead hit an inside-out forehand with all his might. It had to go wide. It just had to. I waited for the out call, but it didn't come. It had fallen just inside the line.

Advantage Eastwood.

If I could just win the next one back to deuce, I could still do it, so I told myself to *breathe*.

I watched him pull up his shirt—which was once light blue, now darkened by sweat—and wipe it over his face before forcing my gaze away again.

The shot clock was running out behind him, giving him ten more seconds to serve. He took a deep breath. Then another one. And then played the fastest serve of the evening so far.

Ace.

Theo held his serve and validated the break.

3–5.

I pushed the crushing wave of disappointment away with every last ounce of strength I had left within me. I almost had him, and I would get another chance. I just needed to keep believing in myself. I just needed to fight back.

I played my strongest service game yet.

4–5.

I sat down on the bench, forcing down half a banana before I hid my face under a towel once again.

Keep the pressure up. Keep fighting. Be relentless.

I repeated those three things to myself over and over again, firing myself up for the next game. I only had this one chance, and I would put in *everything* that I had left. A drop of sweat ran down my temple, dripping onto my soaked shirt. In one swift movement, I pulled it off over my head and grabbed a fresh one from beside me.

I could do this. This was not over yet.

30–40.

At the end of the third set, I finally had my first break point. The opening I had waited for. At last, I managed to return his serves with enough power to get a foot in his game. I just needed to win this final point, and the match might take a completely different turn.

But Theo wasn't giving up that easily either, putting all his pressure into every ball he shot back at me. Until he went for the drop shot once again, trying to use my position far back at the baseline against me. But this time, he miscalculated. Even though he played a solid stop, I was fast enough. With all my power, I shot the ball across the court faster than Theo could react.

The scream that broke out of me mixed with the roar of the crowd. All the frustration, all the tension left my body, and I just let it out.

5–5.

In my next game, I didn't lose a point. Step by step, I was gaining more confidence, and I was beginning to feel unstoppable.

6–5.

He held his game, but I could feel him waver.

6–6.

We went into a tiebreak, and I felt a sense of calmness spread through my body, the noise from the crowd slowly fading out again. This was my set, I was locked in, and if he wanted to leave this court as the winner, he had to defeat me in the next one.

Theo was holding off the shift in momentum longer than I would have expected, but finally, he was losing his composure. He sent his ball out of bounds.

I served out an ace and earned myself the first set point of the day. Serving wide, I pushed him into the corner, leaving the whole other side of

the court open for my next shot.

7–2. Eastwood leads two sets to one.

I pumped my fist in the air and looked up at Dawson, who had jumped up and given me a firm nod. I knew we were thinking the same thing: I was in the match at last.

/

Now everything felt different. Every breath I took was lighter, and the pressure of the crowd was no longer suffocating but, instead, uplifting. In the fourth set, the cards had been shuffled and dealt again. In sets one and two, Theo had practically run me over with his first ace of the match, not allowing me to recover my composure, but it was now my turn to catch him off guard with my attacks. Every game he was trying to hold on, but I was closing in, point by point, on his service games. My body was exhausted—I could see my legs shaking beneath me—but my mind wasn't. I felt even more focused than I had been in the previous tiebreak. Despite my tired legs, I could feel the energy buzzing through my body.

As relentless as Theo was, putting even more force behind each ball he sent my way, I finally felt my mental endurance paying off. Whatever he hit me with, I had an even better answer, and with each return, I was gaining even more confidence. *You won't get past me, Theo.*

The next point felt almost like I composed it. Every note had been hit perfectly, the rich noise of the ball making contact with my racket a symphony in my ears. Finally, I broke his serve at 3–2.

Keep doing it just like this, I told myself. *Just keep your focus.*

4–2.

Theo was still fighting, still keeping his cool, but I managed to pull him deeper into the court, away from the baseline, and I was finally able to use my whole arsenal. We were really putting on a show for every tennis fan today, and they rewarded us with an energy I had rarely felt before. It was *exhilarating*.

He held his game, but barely.

4–3.

I was controlling the match now, finishing my game in under a minute and breaking his again just as quickly.

Two sets all.

/

And there it was, the deciding set. I wouldn't have thought we would really battle it out in five today. A couple of weeks ago, I'd been sure this would be the moment when I cracked under the pressure again. But now, despite my heart beating wildly in my chest, I still felt the sense of calm that had spread through my body at the start of the previous tiebreak. I was playing against Theo of all players, I had been two sets down, and I'd still managed to pull through and drag myself into the fifth set. If I could do that, I could do anything.

I served.

1–0.

Theo evened us out.

1–1.

With every ball I hit, my body hummed with excitement. For a second, I almost forgot who I was playing on the other side; I was simply caught up in the feeling.

30–love.

I missed my next serve, and when I played a much safer second one, I already anticipated Theo's powerful return and responded accordingly. Not cross, like Theo might have expected, but down the line at full pace. As soon as he realized what I was doing, he forced his body in the other direction, trying to get to the ball. The moment I saw him stretch his arm and racket to make contact with the ball, it was like everything happened in slow motion.

I watched, frozen to the spot, as Theo's ankle twisted under his body. His leg gave way and he fell, hitting the ground violently.

My heart dropped at the sight. *Fuck.* The collective gasp of shock that came from the crowd set my body in motion. Without thinking, I took off running faster than I had at any point this entire match. I willed my muscles, which were no longer showing any signs of fatigue, to jump high

over the net. Purely fueled by adrenaline, I had one goal: to reach him as quickly as possible. He was lying on his side, holding his ankle, and as I got closer, I could see that he was squeezing his eyes shut in pain. Instantly, I dropped my racket and put one hand on his arm and the other on his side. His body felt so familiar beneath my fingers, his skin hot.

“Theo?” I whispered, my voice laced with fear.

At the sound of my voice, he opened his eyes and looked straight into mine. All the noise around us drowned out completely, and I could see everything he felt, all his pain and his fear, reflected in his eyes.

“Are you OK?” I said, trying to hold his gaze even though it hurt to see him like this. His deep-green eyes, which I knew so well, helplessly bore into mine, desperately trying to find the answer to that question.

“I don’t know.” His voice trembled.

The sound of hurried footsteps jolted me out of the trancelike state I was in. It could only have lasted a few seconds, but somehow it had felt like an eternity. I slowly got up, trying to make room for the medics, and gave Theo’s arm a final squeeze before I tried to pull away. But as soon as my fingers left his skin, he reached over with his other hand and placed it on top of mine, stopping me from leaving his side.

I closed my eyes at the contact. I didn’t want to let go of him, but I knew I had to. So I did the right thing and slowly pulled my hand away, grabbed my racket behind me, and stepped aside.

As I sat on the bench, breathing loudly, I could barely process what was happening right now. Theo and I had both fought our way into the quarterfinals. After months of competition, we had met on the same court again—but as rivals who played only for themselves. We had pushed ourselves into a fifth set and had been battling it out for over three hours, and now it was all for nothing? A victory at Theo’s expense?

When I felt I couldn’t sit and wait any longer, I stood up again and came to a halt next to the chair umpire. I saw Theo shake his head repeatedly as he talked to the physio team until his gaze found mine once again. His lips formed a thin line, and I couldn’t help but think that was the saddest attempt at a smile I’d ever seen him make. When he extended his hand, I instinctively stepped around the physio and took it, as though I were in a daze. My body merely obeying the players’ protocol. For a brief moment,

our eyes met, but that was enough time for me to see his unspoken fear flickering across them once more.

I swallowed hard. That was it. Theo had retired from the match.

A wave of hesitant applause swept through the stadium as the shocked crowd seemed to realize what our handshake meant, the finality of this gesture.

Theo was out, and I was in the next round, and I couldn’t remember if a victory had ever tasted so bittersweet.

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Chapter 32

I closed the door behind me and leaned against it, taking in a deep breath of stale hotel-room air. *Finally*, I was alone. Every minute of my cooldown routine and subsequent press conference had stretched on for an eternity. I had to actively restrain myself from telling everyone to just leave me alone. To stop with their stupid questions about my entry into the semifinals or their comments about me demonstrating great sportsmanship by sprinting over to Theo on the other side of the court.

Demonstrating great sportsmanship. There was no other player for whom I would have instantly dropped everything and jumped over the net to be by their side. I hadn't cared about winning anymore. About beating him. I saw Theo was hurt and I came running. It had all been for him, as simple as that.

I pushed myself away from the door and threw open the window before sitting down on the bed, letting my head fall into my hands. It felt like everything around me was spinning, and I just wanted it to stop. To just clear my head for a moment, get everything quiet, and process what the hell had happened. But most of all, I wanted to know how he was.

When I'd heard that he had not canceled the press conference, I'd felt a wave of relief. If he was seriously injured, there was no way he would force himself to go through those questions. But other than that, I had no idea what was going on, and it was driving me mad. I tried to concentrate on my breathing to stop my brain from spinning for a second. But the moment I closed my eyes, images of Theo began to flash in my mind. How he fell and did not get back up. The way he had looked at me. *God*, the way he had looked at me. I tried to assure myself that he would be fine—he just had to be—but I still had to suppress a wince as Theo's quiet "I don't know" replayed in my head.

I knew it made no sense, given that we were in a stadium filled with thousands of people watching us. Yet somehow, those few seconds had felt almost intimate. For a brief, fleeting moment, it was as if I had been transported back to the Ortega Cup, before everything fell apart. But here we were again, and once more, everything was a disaster. What was it with

us? Even on the tennis court, things between us were doomed. I wondered if Theo had been thinking the same thing as the medics worked on his injury.

Desperate for information, I grabbed my iPad and searched for Theo's press conference. Motionless, I stared at the screen in front of me until finally, Theo appeared. He was using crutches, and even from the screen, I could see that he looked pale and tired. I tried to observe him more closely, to find any other clues to his condition from his behavior, but he just sat down, his face unreadable.

// Australian Open Press Conference

> **Interviewer:** Hello, Theo. I think what all of us want to know is —how are you? How is your ankle?
>
> **Theodore Eastwood:** I'm still in a bit of shock, honestly. But so far it seems like I just overstretched my ligaments, maybe slightly tore one, but we are optimistic that none of them are too badly damaged. I will know more when I get back from the hospital later. It's still the worst start of a season I could imagine, and I feel like absolute shit, to be honest. But it's not as bad as we first expected, and that is what I am trying to focus on right now. It could have been worse.
>
> **Interviewer:** What a relief to hear that the injury is less serious than expected. Can you tell us a bit about what went through your mind when you twisted your ankle?
>
> **Theodore Eastwood:** I mean, it happened so fast, one second I was in the middle of the rally, and the next I was on the ground. I guess all I was thinking about was the pain and "Please don't let it be serious. Don't let it be a major setback in my career." We'll see what it might mean later, but so far it seems like I got lucky. I mean, as lucky as you can get when you fall and lose the quarterfinals at a Grand Slam.
>
> **Interviewer:** We were all in shock when we saw you slip and not immediately get back up, but it was absolutely extraordinary to see your opponent, William, act so quickly and be by your side only seconds after it happened. Could you comment on that great sign of sportsmanship for a moment?

Theodore Eastwood: I didn’t even see him jump over the net and come over to me, to be honest. He was just somehow there in an instant, and it was really . . . it was really special. Because I know we were opponents today, but he’s also my friend, and him being there really helped. Getting hurt on-court always sucks. Most of us have been there at some point in our careers, and he took away some of that feeling of doom, if that makes any sense.

Interviewer: Theo, first of all, a swift recovery to you. Although the match ended in such a shocking way, we still saw some great sets from both of you today. Can you tell us how you managed to keep your composure and not let your emotions get the better of you when the match seemed to be going William’s way after the third set?

Theodore Eastwood: I’ve been working through a couple of things in the last few months. [Pause] I think you could say that I’ve managed to control my explosive personality a bit better.

Interviewer: Theo, since you mentioned that you and William have become friends despite being rivals, I was wondering how that has affected your friendship and what it is like playing against each other, since the last time you shared the court was as a team at the Ortega Cup?

Theodore Eastwood: I mean, obviously, you try to ignore that on-court. There are no friendships during a match—I think Will would agree with me on this. But for me it was pretty hard today, actually. I had a couple of moments where I thought it felt wrong to play against each other, that he should be on my side and not trying to beat me. That he should stop trying to wear me down, to go after my weaknesses. But of course I can only speak for myself. You’d have to ask Will how he feels about playing me again. I think he can separate himself from that a bit better.

Interviewer: Can you explain what you mean by that? In what way do you think he can separate himself better as a player?

Theodore Eastwood: [Pause] He can keep his distance more easily. I tend to cling to things too much, get stuck in them, and sometimes miss the right moment to understand that another person has a completely different view of a . . . situation. So

yeah . . . playing him is hard, but maybe he will tell you otherwise. I'm sure he will.

Interviewer: Theo, on that note, there was this whole rumor surrounding the two of you. Some secret source talking about you two being more than just friends. I know you haven't commented on this openly before, but the way you just spoke about William and your relationship made me wonder if you would share your thoughts on this now?

Theodore Eastwood: No comment. Or actually, let me say this much: If we were more than just friends right now, I don't see any reason why we should go out of our way to hide that. It wouldn't be anyone's business, but it wouldn't be news that needed to be kept away from the public at all costs either. It would not be a scandal, as many of you in the press have liked to call it. It would just be news about a normal relationship, and I don't understand where this insatiable interest comes from. At least that is my . . . let's call it "revised opinion" on that matter. Now, that being said, if you haven't heard or seen anything that would support your assumption, I think that should answer your question. But other than that, no further comment.

AO Official: Alright, we need to wrap it up now. Anybody have any further questions for Theo?

Interviewer: Theo, do you think you could have turned the match around in the fifth set? Do you think today's victory was taken from you by your unfortunate fall?

Theodore Eastwood: Not at all. The win was Will's anyway; there is no question about that. In the fifth set, I already felt that the window I had in the beginning of the match was firmly closed. I had missed my opportunity for victory; it was as simple as that. I'm proud of my performance here at the Australian Open, and yes, I am disappointed. But he deserved to win today's match. I hope he knows that and that my injury doesn't tarnish it. I wish Will all the best for the next round. [Pause] And it's not all bad on my end. Maybe after I've taken care of my ankle, I'll have some time to enjoy your great weather here and stay for a few more

days. Maybe I'll even get the chance for one more late-night swim. Thank you.

/

Blankly, I stared at the screen in front of me. What had just happened? I let myself fall back onto the bed and swallowed hard, heat rising to my cheeks. My whole body felt like it was in shock. Like I was both full of energy and deeply exhausted. All I had wanted was to see if he was alright. To know how serious his injury was and what it meant for his career. What I had not expected was for Theo to tell this room full of reporters that he was still stuck in our past. That I was apparently the one who had found a way to move on.

And while I had never been good at reading Theo, I could not help but feel like he was trying to talk to me as much as he had been talking to them. Which seemed impossible—not at all like something Theo would do. But there was just no other way for me to make sense of his words. Not that they could make any sense, because everything he just said about me couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, it had made me want to rush over there and interrupt him in front of everybody. I wanted to tell him to stop lying, because he was the one who moved on as if nothing had happened. *I* was the one who was still in pain. He came out of it largely unscathed, while I was still putting myself together.

I dragged my pillow out from behind me and threw it across the room. My entire body was shaking from the frustration burning inside me. What did he want from me? Why had he said all those things? We'd agreed to keep quiet about it, and we did. We'd kept it so quiet that even I sometimes wondered if everything that had happened at the Ortega Cup was just a product of my imagination.

Unable to lie on my bed any longer, I stood up and started pacing around my room. I'd never thought that I would think this, but today was the first time in my life I had wanted the reporters to be more intrusive and not let Theo off the hook so easily. His *revised* opinion? What did that even mean? I wanted them to ask him to repeat every single word he had just said and to explain what the hell he meant by them. I'd misunderstood Theo too many times to count, and it was hard to believe that this wasn't one of them.

When I reached the open window again, I rested my hands on the windowsill and let the cool night air brush across my face, my heart still pounding in my chest.

But he'd said he wanted one more late-night swim. That could only have been directed at me—even the most terrified part of me knew that. It was the fear of disappointment again, of going back to the way I felt a few months ago just as I was starting to get better, that held me back. Yet . . . it was Theo. Even now, he was *everything* I wanted. I could lie to myself about a lot of things, but not about this.

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Chapter 33

I clenched and unclenched my hands over and over again as the elevator made its way down to the lobby. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt such an overwhelming sense of nervousness, which seemed to flood every cell in my body. Not when I played my first Grand Slam final last year in front of a crowd of twenty thousand people, not even when I confessed my feelings to Theo last fall. Never like this. *Never* so all-consuming.

The doors opened, and for a moment I just stood motionless in the elevator, unable to set a foot out onto the polished marble tiles of the lobby, blood rushing in my ears. Did I really want to know? Could I even handle it if he wasn't there and this had all just been in my head after all?

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the cool mirror behind me, the doors closing again with a gentle hum. The lift didn't move, standing still on the ground floor as if silently asking me to make a choice —stay in or get out.

Maybe I'll even get the chance for one more late-night swim. Theo's words, and the image of his eyes boring into the camera, straight into mine, played out in my mind again and again.

I forced my eyes open. What was I doing? There was only one choice. I would never forgive myself if I didn't take this one final risk tonight and get the answers to all the questions that were still keeping me up at night.

I pushed the button to open the doors with more force than necessary. Despite my heart pounding in my throat, I crossed the lobby with quick strides before I could change my mind again. I turned into the dimly lit corridor on my right and didn't slow down until the sign reading "Outdoor Pool" came into view.

I took a deep, shaky breath. *I'll gain clarity.* If nothing else, at least I'd have that. If he wasn't there even after what he'd said, I would have my answer either way.

The huge sliding doors opened as I approached. It was almost cinematic as I stepped into an outdoor area that was illuminated by the bright moon

hanging heavy and full in the night sky. The atmosphere instantly threw me back in time, and I could almost convince myself I was in Spain again. The absence of sound except for the water splashing against the edge of the pool was so painfully familiar. My eyes were still adjusting to the light as I scanned the place. I could make out a figure at the far end of the pool.

I took a step closer, unable to fathom whether it really might be him—too scared to get my hopes up and have them crushed by mistaking a stranger for him.

The blood was rushing to my head, a surge of comforting warmth flowing through me. I had to suppress a smile. My body had recognized him even before my brain had allowed me to truly believe that Theo was here. By the pool. Waiting for *me*.

I let my gaze wander over to him unguardedly, taking in how he was sitting on one of the deck chairs with his head tilted toward the open sky. I felt a strange sense of déjà vu. Once again I was walking toward him, my feelings completely torn, without the slightest idea where this night would lead.

But even though this scenario was so similar to the ones from before, I wasn't the same person anymore. Back then, I felt as though I had lost every last shred of control without understanding why. Things had certainly changed. I had changed. I felt so different in so many ways, and yet . . . I felt exactly the same about the man sitting just a few feet away from me, who was still very much unaware of my presence. I took another step closer, and suddenly Theo's gaze snapped to me.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said after a moment, breaking the heavy silence between us.

"Hi."

For a moment, we just quietly stared at each other.

"Nice jump." A slight grin tugged at the corners of his mouth when I stopped in front of him.

His remark made me laugh. "How are you?" I asked and sat on the deck chair beside his.

Since our nights in Spain, Theo's features in the darkness had been engraved into my brain, I realized. The silvery light of the moon was reflected in his bright eyes, which almost glowed.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position and stretched his ankle, covered in a brace, out in front of him, his leg nearly touching mine. Just the fact that he was so close sent a shiver through my body.

“Oh, you know, not great. But it could be worse, I guess. The doctors said that I have a chance to be back on the court in four weeks. I just have to see what those four weeks off mean for this season.”

I nodded. A lot could happen in a month. We both knew that.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice laced with sympathy.

“Not your fault.”

“I know, but I’m still sorry.”

“Thanks.” He threw me a weak smile.

I looked down and regarded his injured ankle for a moment, feeling another wave of compassion for him. I knew exactly how he felt right now and how draining the next few weeks were going to be. His head must be spinning with all the different things he had to worry about. But still, he was here with me.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to be here,” I said.

He wrinkled his forehead. “Are you serious?”

“Why?”

“What do you think that press conference was for? There were only so many things I could say today to get your attention.” A slight smile played around the corners of his mouth. “*Obviously*, I was hoping you would meet me here.”

I was taken aback by his bluntness for a moment but quickly recovered. “I guess you got lucky I actually watched it.”

Theo’s mouth twitched. “I guess I did.”

I assumed it was safe to say we were done with the small talk now.

A hotel employee collecting towels on the other side of the pool drew my attention away from Theo. It gave me a moment to process what he had just said. I was surprised to hear him admitting to it. Just like that. No attempts to downplay his words or make me believe it was all just in my head. It really seemed as though he had changed in more ways than one.

I glanced back at him. “I genuinely can’t believe you actually did that today. You know, you could have just sent me a text? I mean, the press

conference was a nice touch and all, but a simple message would have sufficed."

He shrugged his shoulders, the slight grin still on his face. "Maybe, but it just seemed like the right way to go." His smile disappeared, and there was a hardening in his jaw, a more serious look on his face. "After the past few months, I felt like a big gesture was in order. Something to get your attention."

I almost had to suppress a laugh. He still did not understand that there was next to nothing he had to do to get my attention. He has had my undivided attention for a long time now. Longer than I even wanted to admit to myself.

"Well, it worked. I'm here, you're here. We're both at the pool, once again. But what is it exactly that you want from me, Theo? Did you just want to talk? Clear the air? Because I told you before: What's done is done. We're good, you're forgiven, I apologized, and there's no need for you to make amends or anything."

His eyebrows shot up. "Why do you keep assuming that all I want to do is apologize?"

"What else would I think? We haven't talked in . . . what, four months? And then you run into me and suddenly offer to talk? I could see your guilty conscience written all over your face. I think if you had something else to say, you would have made an effort to reach out sooner."

"First, four and a half. Believe me, I am aware how long it has been," he said with a slight frown on his face. "And I wanted to talk to you. I really did."

"It's a bit hard to believe when you didn't reach out to me once, Theo."

"I know."

"Not *once*," I repeated, my voice trembling slightly.

"I know," he said, rubbing his face with his hands. For a moment, he stayed quiet, his face still in his hands, eyes closed. Then he looked up again. "I just couldn't then, you know? Every time I picked up my phone, I just didn't know what to say. I was still working through a lot, and I just thought it wouldn't be fair to talk to you until I was more . . . stable. I needed to be surer of things first. But just believe me on one thing, alright? It really sucked not seeing you."

I regarded the pained expression on his face. I might not have been the only one who had suffered. My chest tightened at the realization. It would be so easy to lean over and brush the strand of hair that had just fallen into his face back with my hand. But even if he had also been thinking about me for the past few months, it could not make everything right between us.

“I mean, you just have to understand that everything that happened in Spain was new to me,” Theo went on. “Yes, I ran, and yes, I know that was cowardly, but you seemed so sure in that moment. And I didn’t even know what the hell was going on, and I just couldn’t think clearly then. I panicked.” He added the last two words more quietly. “And I know I probably hurt you, and I hate that I just left without really explaining myself, but you have to believe me—at that moment, I didn’t understand what I was feeling either. I didn’t know if it was just a one-time thing and that my life would go back to normal.”

“That would have been easier,” I replied matter-of-factly, gripping the metal of the deck chair more tightly.

Theo nodded. “Yes, it would have. And I’m not going to lie to you—I really did hope I could just shake you off when you were no longer around me every single day. But it’s been almost five months and I still think about you, so I think it’s safe to say that it wasn’t a one-time thing for me.”

I heard Theo’s words, but my brain was barely able to process any of them. I had been struggling for months now to get over him, and he apparently had felt the same. It just seemed like too much of a cruel joke to me.

I was beginning to understand that the space between us had been necessary for him to figure things out. And if I were being honest with myself, he had already told me so months ago. He did say he was feeling like a stranger to himself and he couldn’t bear it anymore. In a way, he had already told me his intentions then, but all I heard was that he didn’t want us. He didn’t want *me*. Nothing else had mattered. But he could have said he needed time. I would have given him all the time he needed if it had meant there was a small chance for us.

Maybe I should be thankful he didn’t, said a small voice in the back of my head. I could be angry with Theo as much as I wanted for making both of us go through all of this alone, but it did not change the fact that I had needed this last push to finally face the ghosts of my past. Yes, I had felt

like absolute shit because he had suddenly disappeared from my life. But in a way, it had been what I needed to finally start dealing with everything else that had been weighing me down.

“And before you say anything, I just have to say one more thing, because I still hate that I just shot you down when you opened up to me. And I just need you to know that those two weeks in Spain . . . nothing like that had ever happened to me.” He was speaking fast now, barely taking a breath in between his words, his nervousness suddenly very noticeable. “I still think about every single conversation we had; I replay them in my head. I don’t think you understand how much the things you told me—about my game, my mentality—have really helped me.” He let out a shaky breath and then went on, “But I don’t just think about that. Believe me, I still think about everything else we did besides talking. In fact, I think about it every day. And I know I ruined it, and me not reaching out probably confirmed your assumption that I just had my fun and moved on. But these last months have been everything but fun and had *nothing* to do with moving on.”

I stared at him, speechless, for a moment. My mind and heart raced in wild unison, and I could feel my cheeks growing red at his confession. Slowly, a soft smile was forming on my lips.

“We can agree on that. I don’t think I’ve ever had as little fun as I’ve had in the last few months.”

Theo nodded. “I almost had more fun today,” he answered, one corner of his mouth twitching toward a smile. Carefully, he stretched out his injured leg once more, his skin brushing mine in the process. God, it was ridiculous what kind of power he had over me. Even this small touch I could feel in every part of my body.

“I’m glad you told me,” I went on more earnestly, dragging my gaze away from his leg. “I really am. I mean, that is the reason why I came tonight. I was hoping that you could give me some answers to all these questions I had. It’s just . . . the end of last year really sucked. I think it’s fair to say that I hit rock bottom. And not just because of this thing between us—there were some other things I needed to take care of—but the whole process was a bit . . . let’s just say draining. I’m better now, and it feels really, *really* good hearing you say these things. But . . .” I trailed off, unsure of where I was going with this.

“But you don’t trust me anymore?” Theo replied flatly.

Did I no longer trust him? It was difficult for me to say. I'd never been good at trusting people in general. My entire childhood had taught me that much. And he had let me down and disappeared without another word, unconsciously triggering some things inside me that had lain dormant for a long time. But I was no longer a child who simply followed patterns because they seemed safe but never addressed them. A couple of months ago, there was no way I would have even given Theo a chance to explain himself. Usually, if you had disappointed me once, you were out of my life. But I was trying to let more people in, to trust them . . . and I really, really wanted to trust Theo.

"It's not that," I said, and I could see Theo visibly ease up when he heard me utter those words. "There are just a few things that still don't really add up to me."

"Ask me. *Please.*"

I regarded him quietly for a moment. "Who was that woman you were dating?"

I could tell from his face that he had not expected this question.

"I . . ." He seemed to be struggling for the right words. "Look," he then continued, "when I got home, I had so much on my mind, I didn't know where to start. Until I met you, I only ever liked women, I told you that. When I ran away from you, I was really running away from a part of myself that I didn't know was there and I wasn't ready to meet."

He paused for a moment and let out a dry laugh. "God, that sounds dramatic. But I don't really know how else to describe it. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I know this is no excuse for the way I left you, but I couldn't even face myself, you know?"

I nodded. I had never been in Theo's position of having to suddenly question such an intrinsic part of myself. Couldn't fathom how hard it must have been for him. But I got it. Or at least, some part of it. It was only recently that I stopped avoiding what could no longer be avoided, even though most of it had been tormenting me silently for years. I wasn't such a great example in this regard either.

"I tried the easy way out. Going back to normal, pretending my life could just go on the way it was," Theo said. "Trying to erase everything that

happened between us as a weak avoidance strategy. So I just thought it would be a good idea to, well, see someone?"

He seemed uncomfortable, almost making it sound like a question.

"But all of this, I guess it was just . . . just a show I put on for her, for my family, for the press, maybe even for you, but no one asked for that show, you know? I realized that I only did it for myself because I wasn't ready to face any of it. And once I understood that, I could no longer hide from the truth."

Our eyes locked for a moment, and a beat of silence stretched between us.

"The truth?" I asked.

He nodded. "That I like you. And not in a friendly sense. I don't think we have ever been friends, to be honest. We were rivals first, and I guess then . . . then we were more."

I felt my eyes widen as my mind desperately tried to make sense of what I was hearing, repeating his words over and over in my head. I swallowed, shaking my head in disbelief.

"But why not reach out to me the moment you came to that realization? Why wait so long to talk to me about all of that? Why let me . . . suffer?"

Theo flinched and let his gaze drift to the water for a moment. "It wasn't that long ago—just shortly before the Australian Open. And I just needed to do it face-to-face. I thought the only way to show you how much I regretted my behavior was to look you in the eye and explain myself."

I frowned. "But you didn't, though, did you?"

"I *tried*," Theo replied without hesitation. "But when I saw you after your interview, it was so much harder than I thought, so I just kept it as casual as possible at first. But when I'd asked you if you wanted to hang out . . . God, the way you'd looked at me. You seemed almost disgusted at the sheer thought of spending time with me again, and I was sure I had my answer then. I thought it was just too late."

"I just figured you wanted to be friends again and felt sorry for me or something," I put forth with an apologetic shrug of my shoulders while his words echoed through me. A warm flutter in my stomach started spreading through the rest of my body like a wave.

Theo shook his head determinedly. “No, that’s not what it was about. It was just . . . poorly phrased. Do you know how nervous I was talking to you? I don’t think you are aware of how intimidating you can be sometimes.”

“Why the sudden change of mind today then?”

“I don’t know. The way you rushed to my side. How you . . . looked at me.” He cleared his throat and let his gaze drop for a moment. “I was just hoping that maybe there was still something there and that if I reached out to you in the press conference, then maybe, maybe you would give me another chance. And it got you here, so I guess that wasn’t the worst plan I’ve ever had.”

I nodded, quietly processing Theo’s words. I could feel his gaze on my face, trying to read my expression.

“Is there anything else you need me to . . . you know . . . clarify?” he asked.

“One more thing, yes.”

“What is it?”

I took a beat, trying to figure out how to phrase my thoughts. “When I asked you if you regretted it then. You know, everything that happened between us. Regretted . . . me.”

Theo’s jaw clenched, and I saw his hand tighten around the edge of the deck chair. “You know, I actually felt quite relieved when I didn’t have to answer you then. For a second, I had thought about lying, but I just couldn’t seem to get the words past my lips. I almost caved before we were interrupted. I almost said that I wished I could say yes. That I wished I could regret all of it, but despite all of the chaos with the press, I could *never* regret you. But I guess I was saved by the bell then. I took the coward’s way out of the situation—believe me, I know that. But I wasn’t going to say yes. Even then, I couldn’t lie to both of us like that.”

I swallowed and leaned back onto my hands, like the weight of his words was settling over me, stunning me. “I get now why you didn’t tell me then, but just so you know, it still fucking hurt. I thought you just didn’t care.”

“I figured as much when I first saw you again. It’s bullshit—of course I cared. I still care. That’s why I’ve been working through all of this, why I went to the press conference today. It’s the only reason why I am sitting

here right now even though I can literally feel my pulse in my ankle. I just needed you to know how I feel, explain why I didn't reach out to you sooner. Even if it didn't matter to you anymore. I just hated the idea of you thinking I didn't care about you. It's actually ridiculous how badly I wanted to talk to you. But I thought it wouldn't be fair to make you talk to me just because *I* wanted to. Not when we're playing a slam. But then I had to play against *you*, out of all people. And, well, you know what happened then. It just felt right today. Somewhat of an all-or-nothing situation, you could say," Theo finished and pushed a strand of hair out of his face, his uninjured leg bouncing nervously.

I sat up again, leaning my arms onto my thighs. I was closer to him now, our legs almost touching each other, and he didn't back off. He just looked at me, waiting for me to answer.

"I understand," I said after a moment and lightly nudged my knee against his, gently stilling his bouncing leg. "And I am so fucking glad that you reached out today."

I could see a bit of the tension leave his face, his furrowed brow relaxing, and I had to actively force myself not to trace his scar with my finger. It became harder by the second not to touch him, especially now that we were so close.

"It feels a bit surreal that we are actually sitting here, by the way—you know, opening up to each other and all that. I mean, *you and me*. I don't think there are two people worse at this than us, yet here we are," I said with a small grin.

Theo let out a laugh. "You know, you'd think that, but it's actually less difficult when you're heavily medicated with painkillers."

I raised a brow, and my grin split into a full-blown smile. "Lucky you."

He returned my smile, and for a moment, we remained silent.

"I just wish I would've known sooner, you know?" I went on, speaking quietly. "That I wasn't nothing to you." Forcing myself to say this out loud while looking at him, allowing myself to be so vulnerable, was still difficult for me.

"I'm here now."

Another beat of silence passed between us.

“And I’m all in, alright? Because I have realized that the only thing I’m really afraid of is that I fucked this all up and you want nothing to do with me anymore. And I finally get it, you know? You’ve been right all along. It really would be worth trying to find out how great this could be.”

I let out a deep, shaky breath. Four months, and we hadn’t seen each other or spoken a single word. Yet here we were again, still feeling exactly the same as we did before. This thing between us, it was special. We couldn’t deny it any longer. And finally, I could believe him. I could accept it. It wouldn’t have worked between us then, because even if I had been ready, it hadn’t meant that Theo was. Yes, he could have communicated his feelings better. But wouldn’t I be the biggest hypocrite if I didn’t forgive him for something that I did myself? I knew best what it was like to be so absorbed in my own problems that I ended up hurting people. I’d never wanted to hurt Kjell and yet I did. Theo never wanted to hurt me and yet he did. Maybe that was the curse of being a tennis player. You always think of yourself first.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here, to be honest. It’s not like I really need any convincing. I mean, I came here hoping you would tell me exactly that,” I said with a shake of my head. “I wanted you then and I still want you now. I guess I never stopped wanting you.”

He dropped his head into his hands. “Fuck, Will, you’re cruel. You couldn’t just tell me any of this sooner?” His voice was pure relief.

I nudged his knee again with mine. “Be happy I didn’t make it four months.”

He let out a laugh, and slowly, he raised his hand to my face, placing it carefully against my cheek.

“God, I missed you.”

I felt his finger run along my jaw as I leaned into his palm. His touch felt warm against my skin, and I couldn’t quite grasp how right this all felt. How surreal and yet exactly how it should be. Like everything was *finally* falling into place.

“What?” I asked when I noticed a strange expression in his eyes.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just thinking that I’d really like to kiss you right now, but I’m afraid I can’t move very gracefully at the moment.” He gestured to his outstretched leg between us. “So maybe you could help me out here?”

Instead of answering, I just shifted in my seat and leaned closer to him. There was *nothing* I wanted more right now. I put my hand on the side of his face, letting it slide back into his hair.

“If I must,” I then replied with a smirk while my fingers curved around the back of his head, slowly pulling his face toward me.

I heard him swallow. Then his lips brushed against mine and he reached for my face as well. Theo kissed me slowly, his lips moving softly. But I could only hold back for a few seconds before I quickly deepened the kiss. Instantly, I could feel the heat rising in my stomach and moving through my body as it expanded. But it wasn’t just me who wanted more. Who wasn’t satisfied by a slow brush of our lips after all these months apart. Theo’s movements became hungrier, more desperate, until he tried to get closer to me, but his leg, still stretched between us, stopped him.

“This fucking ankle,” Theo said, leaning his head against mine, and I had to laugh at the frustration in his voice.

“Maybe it’s better we stop anyway. Unless you want us to make the front page today,” I whispered, knowing it was the only sensible thing to do.

He exhaled heavily. “Right. Maybe not today.”

I forced myself to lean back in my own chair, not wanting to let Theo go just yet. He seemed to think the same, because as soon as I’d put some distance between us, he reached for my hand and took it in his own.

“How long are you staying?” I asked, regarding my hand in his, following every move of his fingers across my palm, reveling in how natural it felt.

“Until you play the final, of course.”

I let out a quiet laugh. “I’d have to win the semis first. I’m not *that* close to the finish line yet.”

“Oh, you’ll win,” Theo said without a hint of doubt in his voice. “And I will watch you do it.”

“I like the sound of that,” I said with a grin. Even though that was a severe understatement. This was exactly what I wanted. It was *everything*.

But I still had to conquer the last stretch of the marathon first. I might have survived the first week and my match against Theo, but there was still so much more ahead of me. Last year I had lost too many semis, never able

to finish the race to the top. When I had at last reached the final at the US Open, my whole focus was on tennis and that addictive feeling of winning again, but then everything fell apart. Then Theo had thrown me completely off course and made me question every single thing in my life. And here we were now. I was inching closer to my dream of becoming a Grand Slam winner, and I wasn't alone in it any longer. It was no longer an all-or-nothing situation. I no longer had to choose between being successful at tennis and fulfilling my dreams or letting someone into my life. Maybe tennis wasn't as lonely as I had always thought. Maybe it really could be different, just like Theo had said to me on the terrace in Spain.

I reached out again and brushed a strand of Theo's hair away from his face. Could I really win my first Grand Slam title? Become one of the greatest, be like the tennis legends I had admired all my life, and have Theo there with me? It almost seemed too good to be true. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. I supposed I would have my answer eventually, but until then, *God*, was I hungry to find out.

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endlessly—enough for us to *finally* sit down and write our first book together.

We are so excited for everything still to come and for every single person who gets to meet Will and Theo. We hope you love them as much as we do.

Onto the next one.

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About the Authors

Anna Rowan and **Carla Brooks** are a best-friends-turned-authors duo. Even before they met, they shared the same passion: Ever since they learned to read, they were rarely found without a book in hand. It’s no surprise that most of their conversations take place in fictional worlds and their notes apps are overflowing with ideas. As devoted romance fans, the authors write their own love stories—full of tension, yearning, and just a touch of heartbreak. They divide their time between writing desks, tennis courts, and coffee shops, though their thoughts are almost always by the sea.

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