

# Chapter 1

*Kelsey*

## **7 days before Final**

“Down the line, Kelsey! Come on, hit that ball down the line!”

Clara rockets yet another forehand across the court. Exhausted, I lunge at the ball with a flailing backhand and miss completely. I slip on the slick clay court, lose my balance, and fall flat on my ass.

*Ugh. Welcome to Paris, Kels.*

“Get up,” Clara shouts, an utter lack of empathy in her voice. “You’re running out of time. First round is tomorrow!”

The cool clay feels blissful against my skin, which is hot and angry. Staring at the gray cloud cover, I raise my middle finger in the air and waive it in Clara’s general direction. It’s childish, but I don’t have any more fucks to give.

I don’t see the ball Clara hits at me until it smacks me in the side and bounces off my arm. “Hey,” I shout, scrambling to my feet, unable to ignore the wobbling. “What are you doing?”

Clara stands on the other end of the court, one hand full of tennis balls, the other holding a racket against her side. “More backhands, let’s go.”

“No,” I yell, my voice echoing around the empty practice court. “I’m done!”

“I’m your coach. You’re done when I say you’re done.”

I raise my racket and, with all the sarcasm I can muster, drop it like a musician leaving the stage. As I hobble towards the bench, another tennis ball flashes in front of me. “Clara!” Her second shot hits me in the shoulder. “Seriously, knock it off!”

Spotting a ball at my feet, I grab it and chuck it at her. She watches the ball bounce past and smack into the plastic padding on the wall. Then she looks at me with a boastful grin. “I was always more accurate than you.”

“Shut up,” I snap, feeling like I’m six years old again. Knowing she was right only makes it worse.

Clara places her hands on her hips. “If you quit now, you might as well quit the whole tournament because you aren’t going to win.”

I stop a few agonizing steps away from the chair and level a devastating glare at my sister, standing there righteously, hardly breaking a sweat. “I won’t win,” I say through gritted teeth. “If I’m playing on dog-tired legs.”

“You don’t have legs because you aren’t in shape,” she shouts as I collapse against the wooden bench and let out an audible groan. “You aren’t in shape because that jackass coach you had before me didn’t care about you.” Clara drops a ball to the ground and rifles one down the service line. It smacks against the plastic, a deafening pop that makes me jump. “All he did was string you along while he focused on his better, more-established clients.” Another ball sizzles across the net while Clara’s voice gets angrier. “He did nothing for your game or your career.” Clara turns and hits the last one inches from my feet. “Which is why you called me, right?”

I open my mouth to yell something, but nothing comes out. She’s right and she’s wrong all at the same time.

Yes, hiring Clara was the best thing that could of happened for my career. And by hiring, I mean pleading-because-you’re-family-so-have-pity-on-me-please-I-need-you.

But that was almost two years ago.

Now, I’m not so sure.

I scrape bits of clay from my neck and flick them to the ground, trying to stop the wheezing in my chest.

Clara sits down next to me and slips an arm around my shoulder. “Believe it or not, I’m trying to help you.”

“By being a heartless, overwhelming bitch,” I grouse in between gulps of Gatorade.

Clara smiles and picks bits of clay out of my hair, ignoring my statement. God knows we called each other worse things when we were growing up. “Have to admit though, you are seeing results, right? Where did you start, three-hundred and seventy-seventh in the world? Now you’re twenty-seventh. Been in a couple of finals in tournaments. And now look, your first top-ten seed in a major. In Paris, no less.”

I look at the famous Clara Chalmers, the perfect blonde farm girl from Iowa, winner of three Paris Opens and thirty other tournaments across the world, and frown. “Still haven’t won though.”

“No, but soon enough,” she says with a supportive smile that frustrates me even more. It’s the same smile our Dad used to give us, another reminder why working with family was not a good idea. “Your game isn’t there yet. There were so many things to fix, it wasn’t going to happen overnight. Just keep doing what I tell you and I promise the winning will come. Down the line, remember?”

I lean back and close my eyes, focusing on slowing down the whooshing blood in my veins.

*Down the line.*

In some ways, Clara was correct. Accepting her system, doing everything she told me to do and when, it all had worked. I was a better player now than I was two years ago.

But the last six months or so, things changed. Truth be told, I was sick of hearing the same old thing over and over again, like a bad song stuck on repeat.

“If you make tennis your life,” Clara says, grabbing her phone from her bag and clicking out a message. “Tennis will give back to you.”

I roll my eyes and stare at the top of her head. Had Clara pushed me as far as I could go? My fear was what worked for her Hall-of-Fame career wasn’t going to work for me. The game had changed. Girls now were bigger and faster.

Deep down, I knew I needed something else, another piece of the puzzle.

But that wasn’t just something I could come right out and say. And I couldn’t fire her because she’s family. If I did, I’d spend the rest of my life wearing the family title of ungrateful bitch. That would make Christmas even more awkward than it already was.

So, after running my fingers through my sweaty brown hair, I do the only thing I think might work.

“Camillie Jannessen served 120 miles per hour last week in Miami,” I say in a causal tone, trying not to be obvious. “That kind of power would be nice to have, don’t you think?”

Clara’s head sinks and her eyes close. “Not this again.”

“What? Just saying...”

“It’s not all about speed or power,” she says, hammering out another message. “The key is better stamina. I’ve told you. That’s what worked - ”

“- for you, I know,” I say with a loud groan.

Clara pockets her phone and holds her hands out, clapping them like a seal. “Thirty more minutes then,” she pleads. “I’ll go easy on you.”

Each of her claps is like an angry shock in my brain. “I mean it,” I say in a quiet, intense voice. “I’m *done*.”

This shuts her up for a minute. I finish the bottle of Gatorade and then chase it with another. Having her as a coach was like having medic who poured salt in the wounds.

“Okay, fine,” she says in a resigned voice. She looks at her phone and blows out a breath. “I guess the day before a tournament is not the time to work on conditioning. Right now, you need all the legs you have.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

Clara sighs. “You’re welcome.” She raises a finger and points it at me like our mother used to. “But that means you go straight to your room and rest.”

I’m ready to take her up on her offer, when a light bulb goes off in my brain. I look at her like she’s lost her mind. Clara was normally a steel trap when it came to my schedule. “I’d love to, but don’t you remember? The opening Gala is tonight, eight o’ clock. You know, hobnob with the people that give out the money?”

The fact takes a moment to sink in. When it does, Clara frowns. “Oh yeah, that.”

“You’re still going with me, aren’t you?”

Clara chews on her lip and looks at the ground. “Well, probably not.”

“Clara!”

She squats down next to me and puts a hand on my knee, her eyes becoming big and pitiful. “I’m sorry. It’s just the timing is perfect to call Sean and talk to my babies. Please Kelsey, I really miss them.” Clara’s face brightens. “Sean says they’re about to walk all over the house.”

Her sisterly guilt is so heavy that I groan. Clara had been five months pregnant and happily nesting when I’d showed up at her door, broken and lost. Since then, she’d barely spent time at home, leaving Sean to be a single parent to twin boys.

For me. By her count, I owed her two lifetimes worth of favors.

“You know I hate these things,” I say, spitting out bits of clay. “Especially when I have to go alone.”

“I know, I’m so sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

“How,” I ask skeptically.

Clara looks at her phone and then at me. “We’ll go dress shopping. Come on, my treat.”

“I want more than a dress.”

Clara looks at me with a frown. “Fine, I’ll buy you dinner. *To go*.” She stands and snaps her fingers. “But let’s go now. While we still have time.”

“Alright, alright, untwist those panties,” I say, standing up, muscles screaming for a hot soak in the hotel tub. “If I can’t walk tomorrow, I’m going to crawl over to your bed, and beat you with a racket.”

Clara bends down and picks up my stuff from the ground. “Don’t be so dramatic. Some food, water and rest is all you need.” She throws my bag over her shoulder and heads for the locker room. “Besides, you can beat tomorrow’s girl in your sleep. Let’s go.”

Sighing, I hobble towards the locker room with her. From behind us, a deep male voice shouts, “Excuse me, hello?”

We turn around and see a figure standing at the locked door to practice court.

“Who’s that,” Clara asks.

Since the fence around the court is covered with dark plastic, it's impossible to tell who it is. I shrug my shoulders. "Couldn't tell ya."

"Kelsey Chalmers," the man shouts. "We have an appointment! My name is Luca Wilde!"

Clara looks at me as if I had a third arm growing out of my head. "He seems to know you."

I shuffle through my mental Rolodex and then smack my forehead with my palm. "Oh, crap, I totally forgot."

"And you give me shit about forgetting things. So who is he?"

A wave of dread washes through me. I scratch at the ground with the toe of my shoe. "Remember a couple of months ago we talked about hiring a sports shrink?"

"Yeah," Clara says, crossing her arms. "I thought I told you no."

"I know, but last week in Miami, this girl was talking about what a difference it made for her, so I asked her for a recommendation. She mentioned him."

"We're not hiring a damn shrink."

"You're right," I say, ripping a sweatshirt from the bag and putting it on. "I'll make it quick. Just like test driving a car. One that you know you're not going to get."

Clara pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. "Does it have to be now?"

"It's okay, go talk to your babies. I'll ask him a few questions, tell him the bad news and then go to the Gala myself."

"But what about dress shopping? And dinner?"

I pull my phone from the bag. "Give me one of your credit cards."

Clara eyes me suspiciously. "You sure? You're not going to silently hold this against me for the rest of my life?"

"Yes, but how many things do we have against each other?"

"Okay," Clara says, fishing out her wallet. "But I want to hear about it first thing in the morning."

"Yes, boss."

"No drinks either. Water only."

I cross my heart with my finger. “I promise. My pee will be clear as crystal.”

Clara starts to turn, but then hesitates. I know what’s coming. It’s the same as every tournament, every new town, and it’s always hilarious. “And Kelsey,” she says, serious and quiet. “No nothing afterwards.”

I return her serious look, trying not to laugh. “What do you mean?”

“You know, no men.”

“No men,” I ask, yanking her chain. “I can’t talk to any men?”

Clara grimaces and her cheeks rouge. “I mean, none of...” She waves her hand in the general direction of my crotch. “*That.*”

Unable to hold back anymore, I burst out laughing. Most of the time, I wonder if my nephews were immaculately conceived. “Aw, and here I was going to bring two of them back to our room tonight.” Clara’s eyes grow wide with terror. I reach out and grab her arm. “Joking. Totally joking.”

She lets out a huge sigh of relief. “Okay, because you know I think that’s the worst thing for performance.”

“Yes, you’ve told me. Repeatedly. Dulls the senses...”

“...and weakens the legs,” Clara finishes, looking at the time on her phone.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back by nine thirty. *Alone.* Now go tell the boys Auntie Kelsey says hi.”

Clara turns and grabs the door. “Thanks, Kel,” she shouts just before the door slams shut.

I shake my head at my big sister and, after putting her card in my bag, hobble over to the other side of the court. “Sorry, you said you were Luca,” I say. “Luca Wilde?”

“Yes,” he says, backing away from the fence, trying to see around the large signs bolted to the door, the litany of private tennis club rules. “Forgive me for being a late. Paris traffic could turn a Saint in a fire-breathing lunatic.”

I open the door and the breath catches in my throat. *Holy bejeezus.* Tall and lean, Luca’s dressed in dark jeans and a button down dress shirt. His spiky brown hair and a confident grin, laced with a hint of devilishness, reminds me of a business-casual David

Beckham. Despite being covered in sweat and clay, a heavy wave of arousal runs through my body.

“No problem,” I say in a voice that sounds a mile away. “Come in.”

Luca walks by me in an easy, sexy saunter. Before he turns and hands me a card, I catch a glimpse of his shapely backside, framed perfectly by his jeans. “Again, my apologies. I don’t like to be late.”

“No problem,” I repeat, struggling to find something intelligent to say. “Traffic’s just as bad in Los Angeles.”

Luca studies me with his steely gray eyes, flaked with slivers of icy blue. After a moment, he flashes an earnest smile, creating deep dimples in his angled jaw. I can’t help but return his grin. A face like his was reserved only for dark nights in hotel bedrooms, covers muffling the motorized whine of *el vibratre*. “I have heard it’s pretty bad. Do you live there? Los Angeles?”

“What,” I say with an awkward laugh, my brain struggling to remember the rules of casual conversation. “No, I mean, well, sure, you can say that.”

Luca cocks his head and looks at me quizzically. “Why do you laugh?”

His gaze stops all rational thought. After a moment, I break away and hobble over to the bench, taking deep breaths as I go.

I sit down and start massaging a knot in my thigh. The pain of my fingers working through the ball of muscle helps me smother the image of riding him into oblivion. “I’m on the road nine months a year,” I say after a minute. “Home is a relative term.”

Luca sits down next to me and watches me sympathetically. As he does, I catch a whiff of his scent, warm and woody, like a low fire burning on the beach, and it dulls some of the pain. “I hear that a lot amongst other players. Is that something that bothers you?”

“Well, honestly, I’d rather be on a beach sipping something fruity,” I say with a painful laugh. “But that isn’t happening anytime soon. Right now, it’s practice, travel, compete. Practice, travel, compete.”



“So you are a tennis robot then,” he says jokingly, his silky French accent clipping the ends of his words. “Practice, travel, compete.”

I hiss as my fingers run over a tender spot. “If only,” I say with clenched teeth. “Robots don’t feel pain.”

Amused, Luca leans against the bench, long fingers framing his face, and smiles at me. Despite the cool breeze, my body warms down to my toes. “Robots also don’t have feelings though,” he says after a moment. “That would be bad for my business.”

His joke catches me off guard and I laugh earnestly, for what seems like the first time in forever. Reaching down, I grab a towel and wrap it around my thighs. When I look at Luca, I notice his eyes coming back up to mine. A delicious tremble fills my chest. “Don’t worry,” I say, words coming to me easier. “I think you’ll be safe for a while.”

Luca breathes a sigh of relief. “I am happy about that for sure. Apartments in Paris aren’t cheap.” He gestures towards me. “Or Los Angeles, I imagine?”

“Definitely not,” I say, pulling on a sweatshirt. “And it’s about half the size of this court. But that will change soon.”

“Oh, really? Why’s that?” I hesitate for a moment, debating how much I should tell him. Luca senses my worry and holds his hands up in surrender. “You don’t have to tell me. We can talk only about what you want.”

“It’s okay. Just caught me off guard.” I take a deep breath and yank off the sweaty wristbands. “I’ve finally made enough money this year to afford my dream house.”

“Congratulations,” he says, nodding his head.

“Thank you,” I say with a grin. “I’ve always wanted a place by the water. Just finalized an offer on a little place in Hollywood Beach.”

“Is it much bigger than this court,” Luca jokes.

I laugh, remembering the walk through with the realtor, which took all of two minutes. “No, but it’s sand right up to my back door. That’s all I need.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re able to enjoy the spoils of a really good year. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you started this year one-hundred and ninth and now you’re twenty-seventh?”

“That’s right,” I say like a concerned detective. “Did you read up on me?”

Luca laughs. “Nothing criminal, I assure you. When I talk with potential clients, I like to have some background before we meet.”

“Oh, really?” I chew on my lip for a moment and then playfully narrow my eyes at him. “What else do you know about me?”

“You finished ninth last week in Austria. More congratulations. I understand it’s your highest-ever finish on tour.”

“What about my middle name?”

“Marie,” he says casually. “But that’s on the WPA website.”

I laugh again, unable to wipe the grin off my face. “Hmm. I’m not sure I like that you know things about me, while I virtually know nothing about you.”

Luca looks at his watch. “I have a while before my next appointment. Ask away.”

“Okay. How many other girls on tour do you work with?”

The question makes him wince ever so slightly, the first emotion I’ve seen under that easy veneer. “None at the present time. I’ve experienced several challenges the last couple of years. Still trying to recover.”

“Oh,” I say, the heat in my body turned down. “I’m sorry. So, uh, are you working with any kind of athletes?”

“No. I’m actually running a program at the State hospital for at-risk youths. We’re using sports as a method of therapy.”

The heat in my body turns back up. “Wow. That’s awesome.”

“Yes,” Luca says, not entirely convinced. He clears his throat and moves around on the bench. “But I have to say, the idea of working with you, to help manage your performance sounds a lot more interesting.”

*You could manage a lot of things,* I tell myself.

“What else can I tell you,” Luca says.

I search the ground around me, buying some time, unsure of what to ask. A thousand questions bounce around in my brain and all of them related to sex. Finally, I blurt out, “how old are you?”

Luca laughs and unleashes a mega smile that makes my heart flutter. “I thought it wasn’t polite to ask someone their age.”

“Yeah,” I say with a shrug. “I suppose. Skip it.”

“It’s okay,” he says barely missing a beat. “I’m solidly in my thirties.”

I look at his face, just starting to see a line or two around his eyes and forehead. I guess thirty-seven, maybe thirty-eight. Before I’m even aware, the words leak quietly out of my mouth. “You married?”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise and then quickly return to normal. “Another personal question. Interesting.”

My face flushes in embarrassment. I hang my head in shame and hold my hands up. “I’m sorry. None of my business.”

When I look up again, Luca is looking directly at me, answering my question without words.

It’s the answer I hoped for.

“So,” he says after a second, “Normally, girls on tour want to talk to me when they are struggling, but you don’t seem to be that way. You seem to be headed in the right direction. May I ask, what it is you’re expecting from me?”

I take a deep breath, trying to get my wits about me. It had been a long time since I’ve flirted with anyone and with someone as hot as Luca, it was intoxicating. “I need another level,” I say, thankful to get back on track. “What you see is all I got. I’m maxed out and it’s barely got me in the top thirty.”

“And you think I can help with that?”

“I hope so. I’ve heard all good things about having a therapist. It’s just that…”

“What?”

“Well, my coach thinks talking to shrinks is a waste of time.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah,” I say, wincing. “She kinda called you folk a bunch of mind-fuckers when she played. Believes all an athlete needs is what’s below the neck.”

Luca is silent for a moment and then a knowing smile spreads across his face. “Your coach is Clara Chalmers?”

Shocked, I roll my eyes and let out a snort. “Well, Clara Chalmers-Brown now, but yes. You read about that, I assume?”

“Indeed. Made a few waves amongst us mind-fuckers,” he playfully chastises. “Well, regardless, I’m not interested in what she thinks. What does *Kelsey* Chalmers think?” The way he stresses my name, his voice a deep rumble, makes me tremble with delight.

“It’s something I’m definitely interested in. I’ve talked with a few other potential shrinks, but I have yet to find anyone that I feel comfortable with.”

“Do you feel comfortable with me?”

I chew on my lip and grin. “Starting to.”

Luca returns my grin with one of his own. “Well, I can assure you that talking with shrinks is absolutely worth it. An athlete’s mental state is every bit as important as their body.”

“Clara always had more of a caveman approach.” I hunch my shoulders and grunt, “See ball. Hit ball. Mind blank.”

Luca considers this for a moment and then cocks his eyebrow. “That does work well for some. Many pros I talk to say they play their best when they don’t think about anything.”

“Must be nice, but I can’t ever seem to shut my mind off. When it happens, I get pissed, which distracts me until I lose my focus. Then my game goes in the toilet.”

“What are you thinking about when you’re playing?”

“Previous shots. Trends. Percentages.”

“Sounds busy.”

“That’s what my previous coach wanted me to think about. Haven’t been able to stop.”

“Do you play your best in those cases?”

“Sometimes. It’s nice to have something to focus on. Clara wants me to have a blank mind, but I can’t seem to do that.”

Luca looks at me like he’s weighing something heavy in his mind. The longer he stays quiet, the more I’m intrigued, the more I’m turned on. A dangerous grin spreads across his face, and at that moment, I wish he could hear my inner thoughts. As the thoughts get hotter, more salacious, a warm blush spreads across my cheeks.

“Are you okay,” I ask after a minute.

Luca’s watch beeps at him and the grin falls from his face. He looks at me regretfully. “I apologize, but I have an appointment I need to get to. But I would like to keep talking, if that’s okay.”

I open my mouth, but the words stick in my throat. Even though the cupboard wasn’t overflowing with conquests, I’d had enough men to know what I liked. Intelligence and easy conversation. Luca was both. Add his drop-dead gorgeousness and he was a lethal combination. “I have to talk with my sister about this first.”

“Completely understandable,” he says, standing. “If you do decide to, call my cell and we can set up a time.”

With a small flourish, Luca reaches his hand out and I take it, feeling the tips of his strong fingers on my wrist. For the briefest of moments, a flash of lust breaks through the professional veneer on his face. Goosebumps erupt on my arm. I tremble and look at him with a quivering grin.

Being alone with him in an office full of sturdy, flat-surfaced furniture would be really, really difficult.

“Of course,” I say. “Nice to meet you.”

Luca takes his hand back almost sheepishly, as if overstepping an invisible line. “The same. Good luck this week.” He starts to leave, but then stops, forehead wrinkling in concern, needing to say something. My body tenses excitedly. “I really have to stress the mind-body connection is utterly essential for an athlete. It’s also...extremely powerful.”

His words cuts off the heat inside me like a light switch. I manage a polite grin. "I'm sure it is." I pick up my bag with a painful sigh, both from sore muscles and being aroused, and start walking towards the locker room. "But it can't add five miles an hour to my serve. Nice meeting you."

"In some cases it can," Luca blurts out behind me.

I stop and whirl around. "Wait, really? How?"

Luca opens his mouth, but then stops, his face falling, looking like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar. After a moment, he waves a dismissive hand in front of his face. "Maybe we could talk about it some other time. Good evening, madame."

A fat drop of rain plunks me in the forehead. "Oh, yeah, sure, okay." I watch him walk towards the door. When he turns around for the briefest of moments to look at me, my heart skips a beat and the light switch turns back on. Without thinking, I open my mouth and yell, "Hey, wait!"

Luca looks back. "Is everything okay?"

I jog over as fast as my dead legs take me. "What are you doing later?"

"Nothing, why," Luca asks with a curious look.

My mouth jumps ahead of my brain. "Well, there's this thing I have to go to later. It's a gala we have to attend before the tournament starts. Lots of donors and dancing."

"The Founder's gala. I've been there before."

"Yeah, that. Well, my sister was supposed to go with me, but she just bailed and I was wondering, do you want to meet me there? I'd love to hear that idea you have. And then maybe the gala wouldn't be so God awful."

Luca looks at me seriously for a moment, his face conflicted. I stare right back at him, equally conflicted. Finally, a delicious smile spreads across his face. "Okay," he says in a deep, sexy grumble. "What time?"

"8 o'clock?"

"Perfect, I'll see you then."

Luca turns and walks away. "Yes, you will," I mutter under my breath and let out a lusty sigh.

*Damn, Kels, that man was hotter than a sauna in the middle of the desert. And you just invited him to a party.*

A second raindrop smacks me on the head, followed by another. I turn and jog towards the door, unable to wipe the smile off my face.

As the musty stench of locker room embraces me, I look back one more time at the practice court door. Luca holds the door open, looking back at me. My cheeks rouge and I let the door shut, leaning back against it with my eyes closed.

That man's trouble. Glorious, intoxicating trouble.

And Clara would murder me in my sleep if she ever found out.

## Chapter 2

*Luca*

### **7 days before Final**

***Kelsey:*** *Running late. A roving gang of street mimes blocking the road. Really looking forward to hearing your idea.*

Standing at the bar in the Marceau-Baptiste Tennis Club, Kelsey's words send a terrified shiver down my spine.

*Your idea.*

Me and my stupid mouth. If I'd been thinking with my rational head rather than the other one, I wouldn't be in this mess.

I look down at my crotch.

*This is all your fault.*

Since I'd left Kelsey, my mind had tried to come up with a hundred different alternatives to the idea that popped into my head, but they were generic and bland, retreads of old cliches packaged with shiny new paper.

I rub my hand against my freshly-shaved jaw and sigh. My grand idea, the perfect solution for Kelsey, is one that could kill the rebirth of my practice.

Worse, I could lose my license for good.

Behind me, the ballroom is a swarming beehive of conversation, punctuated by bursts of drunken laughter. Vendors, tournament officials and very important people sparkle and mingle with the sixty of the best tennis players in the world, many of them with two drinks in hand.

My phone vibrates in my hand.