
DOWN THE LINE

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PROLOGUE

Luca

Kelsey: *Just read an article saying athletes perform better when they have sex the night before a big match. Tomorrow's final is the biggest match of my life. Come to my hotel and fuck me until the Arc de Triomphe glows bright.*

I READ KELSEY CHALMER'S MESSAGE TWICE AND consider her demands with a bemused smile.

Luca: *What happened to the girl who's willing to wait?*

Kelsey: *She's freaking out because she's playing in her first grand slam final tomorrow. Against Savannah freaking Sloane, the queen of women's tennis. In freaking Paris of all places.*

From my couch, I look out my window and down Avenue Generale. The last of the fading golden sunlight melts through the Eiffel Tower. Music and busy laughter from the dinner time rush overflows from the cafes on the street. A gentle warm breeze blows through the open balcony doors,

filling my apartment with the smell of buttery baked goods and arousing floral perfumes.

Kelsey: *So, instead of freaking, how bout some fucking? Distract me until I need to get on court. Please? I know I said I wanted to wait, but I was out of my mind. I want you Luca. I will beg if I have to.*

Her tempting words creates a stir in my pants and puts a smile on my face. From my window, I can see the corner of her hotel, the Chatelle Marceau. A five minute walk and I could be at her door. Five minutes and all restraint would be lost. Five minutes and I'd give Kelsey a night she'd never forget.

I kick around the idea, a silent, vitriolic debate between the angel on my shoulder and the devil in my pants. My dick gives the speech of a lifetime, making a dozen ridiculously good points, but I keep rooted to my spot in the living room, in front of a steaming plate of beef bourguignon, an open bottle of wine and Paris Saint-Germaine football on the television.

Where I should be.

Because I'm not in it for one night.

Tomorrow's final is only the beginning. For her. For me.

For us.

I start typing my condolences, wishing her a good evening, when she interrupts me with another text.

Kelsey: *I just stepped out of the shower and all I have on is this tiny hotel robe.*

I mutter something obscene under my breath. The nerves must really be getting to her, because she's going to play dirty. I tap the phone and chew on my lip. I want to fire back,

stoke the flames between us until they're roaring, but I have to be careful, because I don't want to lead her on about tonight. There's absolutely nothing she could say to get me to show up at her room. But I also don't want to frustrate her, because that would spill over into her performance tomorrow.

I type out and delete several responses, settle on something that has nothing to do with the fantasies bouncing around in my head.

Luca: *That article is nonsense. Sex before a match isn't a benefit.*

Her response is immediate, the little bubbles on the screen barely having a chance to appear.

Kelsey: *But it was written by a Luca Wilde, renowned sports psychologist, and he makes several excellent points. Ever heard of him?*

With a sigh of relief, I type quickly, happy to discuss something not involving her body.

Luca: *I wrote that for money and click bait.*

Kelsey: *Well, problem is, it got me thinking about things. About you. And now all I can think about is you finally fucking me with that beautiful cock of yours. Right here, right now.*

Shit.

On the television, Neymar scores a goal for Paris Saint-Germain and the crowd erupts in celebration. I barely register the commotion. In my mind, I'm in her room, her long, athletic frame pressed up against mine, drinking in the citrus smell of her shampoo, my fingers skirting the edges of

that robe, finding the heat radiating from between her thighs.

I take a deep breath to dismiss the fantasy. She'll need every ounce of strength and power tomorrow against Savannah. She knows that, right? Of course she does. We've talked about it the entire week.

Luca: *Nice try. I recommend a cold shower and a warm glass of milk.*

My phone chimes again. Kelsey doesn't want to listen to me.

Kelsey: *And right now, I'm running my fingers over my warm, smooth lips. Every touch gets me wetter. I want you Luca. I want you to make me come.*

My dick is now at full attention, excited to be back in the conversation. A frustrated smile spreads across my face. I didn't think she give up that easily. Her persistence is one of things I find so sexy about her.

Luca: *You need to be alone tonight.*

Kelsey: *I'm sliding my fingers inside my pussy, pretending they're your cock. I just need a little more and I'll explode. You can give it to me, Luca. Give me what I want and I'll scream your name.*

I set the phone down on the couch and blow a breath into the ceiling. More messages chime, one after another. The need to be with her makes me physically ache.

But our plan got her into the final and the plan doesn't call for celebrating the night before. It's bad for an athlete, or

anyone for that matter. Having the cake before dinner makes the cake a little less enjoyable.

Luca: *One more night, Kels. I'm not leaving my couch unless the building catches fire.*

That, and she wouldn't have any strength in her legs left after we'd be done.

This time, it takes a minute to respond.

Kelsey: *Sigh. So not the answer I wanted to hear.*

Her digital wound tugs at my heart, making a more convincing argument than my dick could ever make.

I still hold my ground. With a deep breath, I type out a message. The words flow across the screen slowly. I edit and change them, taking forever to say exactly what needs to be said. When I think they're perfect, I send them over.

Luca: *If I showed up at your door right now, I'd give exactly what you want. I wouldn't stop until we were both drained of every ounce of energy in our bodies.*

That's not what you need though.

When you win tomorrow, I promise I will show you more than you could ever dream of tonight. I will take you back into the stadium and fuck you right there on the court, right on the spot of your greatest victory. I will taste you and tease you until you can't take anymore and then I will make you come over and over again. You will be celebrated like the champion you are.

But that's after you win.

Right now, stay focused. Just a little bit longer, and you'll have everything you want, okay?"

Kelsey doesn't respond, which is good. It gives me a

chance to steady my breathing and lose my erection. After a minute, I get up and walk out on the balcony overlooking downtown Paris. The city is curtained in black and the Arc de Triomphe glows bright in pale yellow light.

On the street below, couples stumble from restaurants, drunken and happy, holding hands and clinging to each other. They head in every direction, towards apartments and events unseen, another romantic Friday night in the city of love.

I let out a deep breath, afraid of what she might say. If she doesn't listen to me, then I won't hold out any longer. I have no more willpower.

If she tells me to come over, I'll walk over to the hotel, give her what she wants and we'd both leave unfulfilled and empty.

If she trusts me though, if she senses what I sense, that unquestionable connection, then we'll both get everything we want.

And much, much more.

On the street below, a couple stops in front of *LaMarae*. Together, they point to something in the window. Suddenly, the man drops to one knee and puts his hand in his pocket. The crowd streaming around him stops and forms an impromptu audience. Silent words are spoken and the woman covers her mouth and nods her head. The crowd cheers as the man cradles her gently and kisses her.

My hand muffles the phone chime.

Kelsey: *Room service is on its way with a glass of cold milk and cookie. Warm milk is disgusting by the way.*

Unable to wipe the smile off my face, I take several shaky breaths.

One more night Luca. One more night and you can tell her everything you've been holding back.

When she wins tomorrow, you will both be rewarded.

Luca: *Sounds good. See you tomorrow.*

With hardly a pause, Kelsey texts back.

Kelsey: *That was a hell of a speech, by the way.*

At *LaMaraee*, the owner brings out a bottle of champagne for the happy couple and the crowd breaks into an impromptu chorus of La Marseillaise. The couple gleefully take a drink and whisper into each other's ears. They sit down at the table hand in hand, the first few moments of their rest of the lives together.

I look down at my phone, at Kelsey's words, and smile.

Luca: *Glad you liked it, been thinking about it, about you, all week.*

One more night and Kelsey and I will be that couple. Hand in hand. My phone chimes with Kelsey's cheerful tone.

Kelsey: *Food's here. Going dark now.*

Luca: *Sweet dreams.*

I pocket my phone and close the balcony doors. I turn to the television when my phone chimes once more. It's Kelsey's familiar ring.

Kelsey: *Okay, one more thing and then I'll go. This week has been one of the most amazing weeks of my life. You've become a part of me in so many crazy, exciting ways. How in the hell did I ever get so lucky to meet someone like you?*

CHAPTER ONE

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 the quickly return to normal. “Another personal question. Interesting.”

My faces 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 athletes 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 TWO

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.

Kelsey: *Five more minutes. Had to break out the Kung-Fu.*

Her text makes me smile for a moment and loosens the knot of dread in my stomach.

Your idea isn't a mistake, it popped into your head for a reason. That sly grin on the bench. That was it. Charged with interest and intrigue. It was like a hook that settled deep inside you and latched on. That's the reason you're still here.

That's the reason you know this is anything *but* business.

Luca: *Will wait all night if I have to.*

A bartender, dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans appears in front of me, a curious smile on his face. He points at my glass, which is all water and no ice.

"Bourbon," I say, holding two fingers up. "Neat."

The bartender fills a tumbler and slides it to me. "None of my business," he says in a heavy French accent. "But you've been waiting forever. Are you sure she's still coming?"

I stuff a fifty franc note in the tip jar and swirl the golden brown liquid around the glass. "She'll be here soon."

"Wife or lover?"

I snap my gaze up to his and set my jaw. There's no words

for what Kelsey might be. Not yet. The sly grin on the bench told me one thing, my rational brain told me something else. “Neither. Client, potentially.”

The words make sense, but don't fit.

The bartender stops his cleaning and stares at me for a second, shoulders hunched. “My mistake,” he says with an apologetic smile. “You have the look of a man who's smitten, not one who's ready for a business meeting. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Flipping a towel over his shoulder, he turns his attention towards a group of women in long cocktail dresses gathering at the other end of the bar. He calls out to them with a fake smile and heads their direction.

I look at my phone for an update and come up empty. The fiery scent of the alcohol makes my stomach churn. I shove it away and let out a large sigh.

Getting drunk isn't going to help me. My idea is insane enough. Being stone cold sober is the only way to deliver it. Any alcohol on the breath will make it seem like a joke.

I turn and face the crowd, leaning my elbows on the bar. A few of the athletes I've consulted with in the past wave at me before turning back to their conversations. A couple of others stare daggers at me, probably wishing I would explode on the spot.

There's nothing I could ever do to change their minds, which was sad.

After a minute, a tall, white haired man walks up to me, cheeks a drunken shade of red, a dimly-lit trophy girlfriend draped across one arm. A bolt of anger runs down my spine. Louis Martin, president of the Marceau-Baptiste Tennis Club. Bane of my existence.

“Luca,” he shouts, equal parts concerned and surprised. “What are you doing here?”

The smell of brandy is heavy on his breath and mixes

sourly with a nauseating beach cologne. I take a sip of water. "Just enjoying a drink, that's all."

Louis looks around the bar like a murder mystery detective. "Are you with anyone?"

"Waiting for a friend."

"Oh, really," he asks, smirking like an asshole. "Who's that?"

"Racket vendor," I lie through gritted teeth. "You might know him. He's off giving head to one of the wait staff in the bathroom."

Louis curls his face into a repulsive frown, even though I know I've piqued his interest. Men in charge of old-fashioned clubs like this one tend to keep things a secret.

To keep from saying something more to get me into trouble, I look at the girlfriend - tall, blonde, lost - and flash her a smoldering look. It breaks through the fog on her face and registers with the animal part of her brain, making her cheeks rouge.

"Well," he stammers, trying to regain his composure. "I guess that's better than you talking with any of our girls."

In addition to being the president of the club, Louis is on the board of the Women's Tennis Federation of France, which oversees all the amateurs in the country. Louis considers himself the father of all potential French champions and goes to criminal lengths to be in everyone's business.

He leans in close to me and talks slowly, making sure he enunciates every syllable. "Consider this your last warning Luca. You may have survived last time, but if I see you talking to anyone of the girls here, I won't bother calling the cops. I'll take care of things myself."

His words are hot metal blistering my insides. I bite down on my lip to keep the words in my mouth. Louis hangs around for second, a bastard grin on his drunken face. He wants me to respond, probably with my fists. Instead, I turn

around and stare at the cold beads of water pooling on the bar.

Behind me, Louis says, "Nice to see you again Luca. You take care of yourself."

Louis' overwhelming stench of brandy and cologne disappear with a laugh. I slap the bartop with my hands, drawing the attention of the bartender and the ladies down the way.

"Everything okay," someone says behind me.

I whirl around and spot Kelsey, phone and purse clutched tight against her chest.

The sight of her interrupts all thoughts of revenge and murder against Louis. A long red dress shows off every inch of her curvy, athletic frame. Her brown hair, hidden in a sweaty ponytail earlier, falls around her shoulders in soft waves, shimmering with streaks of red and gold. Large brown eyes watch me softly and cautiously.

A hundred replies shuffle through my brain. Ultimately, "wow" is the only thing that falls out.

Kelsey smiles bashfully and tucks some hair behind her ear. "Thanks. I'm not really a fan of it, but I was already running late."

"You look amazing," I say in between deep breaths, flushing the last few bits of Louis from my mind.

"Are you okay? I saw you talking with Mr. Martin and then slam your hands on the bar."

"Yeah," I say with a dismissive grunt. "We just don't see eye to eye on certain things."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Kelsey checks her phone. "Well, I can come back or we can do this another time if you like."

"No, really, it's okay. Can I get you a drink?"

"Ah, water would be great," Kelsey blurts out and then blushes. "Sorry, first round is tomorrow. I want to make sure I'm not hungover."

I glance around the ballroom at the other players,

laughing and sipping golden glasses of champagne. “Doesn’t seem to be stopping them.”

“Helps to be nineteen years old,” Kelsey says, turning her head. “At twenty eight, I can’t afford that luxury anymore.” She looks back at me with a resigned smile. “I am a dinosaur compared to them. If I want to win, I have to be meticulous. No fun allowed.”

I grab two waters from the bartender, who gives me a knowing smile, and hand one to Kelsey. “That’s not fair. Everyone should be allowed some fun.”

Kelsey rolls her eyes. “Not for me,” she says with a defeated sigh. “It’s down the line, all the time.”

I lean closer, struggling to hear her over the crowd. When I do, I catch a whiff of her warm, floral scent and I have to focus harder on keeping conversation. “What’s down the line?”

“My sister’s mantra,” Kelsey take a sip of water and then shouts over the crowd. “You know how like a ball goes right down the line in tennis? That’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“I see. Is that what you were referring to earlier? Your robot analogy?”

She reaches out and grabs my arm. “It is,” she shouts brightly. “You remembered?”

I move in even further, until my lips brush the edges of her ear. “I remembered everything from our meeting.” I pull back. A sly grin spreads across her face, the same one from earlier. “Can we go somewhere else where we can actually hear each other?”

Her chest hitches and she gives me a conflicted look. After a minute, she holds her hand out, inviting me to take it. Warning alarms sound in my head. Kelsey smiles at me warmly and a stab of yearning slices through my heart.

Normally, I could handle myself around an attractive woman. Plenty of them have sat on my couch and poured the

hearts and souls out to me. Some even tried to play out the ridiculous doctor and patient fantasy with me. Every single one I've just sat there and listened. Every single time I've been able to separate my feelings and remain neutral.

But not Kelsey. She takes my feelings and twists them into hopeless knots.

Before she can take it back, I slip my hand inside of hers. Our fingers immediately intertwine, fitting together like they were meant to be.

She nods vigorously. "Come on. I know a place."



HAND IN HAND, WE HEAD FOR THE WIDE MARBLE STEPS that descend into the club's famous cavernous gardens, the ones you see plastered all over the television during the tournament. The thick scent of booze and sweat disappears at the bottom of the stairs, replaced by the relaxing smell of sweet Gourdon flowers.

"Where are we going," I ask.

Kelsey grins that sly grin that hits me right in the gut. "Little spot I found during last year's tournament. Went there whenever I needed to think."

We slow down and for a minute, the only sound is the quick crunch of our feet on the gravel path.

"Something stuck out to me from earlier," I say as we pass over a small bridge over a bubbling creek. "When you mentioned your sister, you rolled your eyes and almost seemed dismissive of her."

Kelsey blushes and tucks her hair behind her ear. For a moment, I'm focused on the long line of her neck in the moonlight. "It's complicated."

"I'm in the mood to listen."

"The two of us are oil and water," she says quietly. "Do you know that expression?"

I nod.

"I'm sure when we were growing up, our parents wanted to give us away, even though they never said anything." Kelsey lets out a large sigh and a sad smile spreads across her face. "The only thing we have in common is we both love tennis."

The hedges on either of us side grow tall and thick, inviting us to get lost, away from the party, which was fine with me.

The more time I could spend with Kelsey, the better.

"At the beginning, my Dad hoped tennis would bring us together, but even on the court we just *had* to do things differently. Clara was single-minded and disciplined. Never missed a practice. Never went out." Kelsey lets out a frustrated laugh. "I was never that way."

"Little more rebellious," I ask with a smile.

"A *lot* more," Kelsey says, shaking her head. "My Dad, who had the patience of Saint, ended up losing it when I first got on tour. He stopped talking to me until I got serious about my game, to do it the way he taught us, the way that worked for Clara and for himself."

"Your Dad played on Tour as well?"

"For a couple of years. He was best known for upsetting McEnroe at Wimbledon. But then he met my Mom and promptly quit the Tour to be with her."

"How romantic."

Kelsey smiles. "It is actually."

"I'd love to hear the story sometime. I'm a bit of a sucker for good romance."

In the moonlight, I can see her cheeks rouge. "Well, anyway," she says, clearing her throat, trying to stay neutral. "Even Clara tried to call me at one point to convince me."

"I assume that didn't go well."

“No, I didn’t talk to her for a year.” Kelsey shrugs her shoulders and looks at me with a resigned grin. “I was angry. I didn’t want to hear any of her advice.”

I smile and squeeze her hand. “That’s perfectly understandable. We all want to do things our own way.”

Kelsey snorts and shakes her head, unconvinced of my statement. “For the first two years, I barely survived. Every tournament, I was trying every idea that popped into my head, looking for that magic potion that would make me win. Nothing worked of course. So when I lost, I partied to make up for it.”

The wall of shrubs parts, ushering us out to the famous lake in the middle of the gardens, the one in every television break during the tournament.

A large stone patio runs around the outside of the lake. To our left, a small stone structure with table and chairs, the club’s wine cellar and distillery. Before the sunset, this place was probably packed with the same people drinking in the ballroom. The Gala tended to be a day long caravan of rich drunks.

“Ah, the lake,” I say with a cheesy American accent. “Come here often?”

Kelsey laughs. “All the time. It’s my favorite spot. Cliche, I know. But at least it’s quiet. Especially right before the tournament starts.”

“I don’t mind,” I say, walking over to the black iron railing running along the edge of the water. “So tell me more, you lost and partied, lost and partied.”

Kelsey looks at me, her face flawless perfection in the moonlight. “Yeah, so, Rome, my third year, I met a coach from Austria who was big into analytics. Told me to analyze the stats, play the trends. Like that, I finished in the top fifteen my first two tournaments. Thought that was it. Then,

out of the blue, he stops showing up. No calls, nothing.” Her face falls. “Gave him every last cent I had.”

Kelsey’s crestfallen look makes my heart break. “Another victim of Boris Kovalchuk. I’m sorry.”

“Two years ago, I failed to qualify for the tour,” Kelsey says, looking out on the still black water, ribbons of moonlight curling over the surface. “It got so bad, I slept in my car for a while. Finally, I went to my sister.”

Her voice trails off and her jaw sets. Goosebumps raise on her bare, tanned arms, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

“I love my sister,” she says quietly. “I am forever grateful for what she’s done for me, but with her I’ll always be a puzzle with a missing piece. It’s just this feeling I have and I don’t know how I can tell her, you know? Considering all she’s done for me.”

I lean down and prop my arms on the cold metal, so we’re on the same level. She looks at me with a weak smile, big eyes boring into me, looking for an answer.

“Ultimately, you have to listen to yourself. Only you can decide what’s best for you. Trust that gut level instinct. If you need more, go and get it. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Kelsey’s face brightens and her shoulders relax. After a moment, she looks at me differently than she has all night. Mischievous. Lustful. Her look sends a nervous but delicious tremor right to my dick. When I laugh nervously, she tucks her hair behind her ear and looks away shyly. “Thanks,” she says. “I needed to hear that.”

“My privilege,” struggling to keep my mind professional. “The first one is always free.”

Kelsey pouts. “So does that mean I have to pay to hear your grand idea?”

I look out at the lake and run the top of my tongue along my teeth, at a loss of what to do. Arguments from the good

angel and the bad angel bounce around my brain. After a deep breath, I turn to Kelsey.

"It's no big deal," I say without any conviction, trying to listen to the good one. "I don't want to bore you."

Kelsey looks around at the empty patio questioningly. "I'm out here already. Way past my bedtime, mind you."

"Is your sister going to send out a search party?"

Kelsey smiles and laughs. "She did when we were kids."

I take my opening. "Then I should let you go then."

Kelsey reaches her hand over and looks at me with that sweet grin of hers, the one that makes her eyes sparkle. "No, I want to stay here a little longer."

The speakers around the patio plays something quiet and jazzy. On the tables, candles flicker low, their soft yellow light scattered by a bunch of empty glasses.

When she looks at me, my heart wins the argument. I push up from the railing. "Dance with me then."

Kelsey sucks in her bottom lip, hesitating only a moment before sliding her fingers around mine. I pull her in tight and slide my hands low around her waist, a feeling comforting and arousing at the same time. The Goldilocks feeling. Just right. She gasps as I brush the firm curves of her hips and ass through the thin fabric of her dress.

"You okay," I whisper.

She wraps her hands around my neck and nods. "You always take potential clients out to uber private locations and dance with them?"

I laugh to cover the nervous knot in my chest and Kelsey smiles. "No, you are definitely the first. And remember, *you* brought *me* here."

Kelsey shrugs her shoulders. "I find it hard to believe you've never done this before."

"On the soul of Saint Marie."

"Really? So that must make me special then." Kelsey

pushes herself tighter against me, grinding her hips against mine. “What do I owe the honor to?”

The feeling of her hips pressing against mine, the way her curves wrap around my erection, blends the lines into something I can't even see. I want her and I want to help her. I can't have one or the other.

Or could I?

“Can I be honest,” I whisper against her ear.

“Yes.”

“You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.”

Kelsey tenses in my hands for a second and then relaxes. “You're acting very unprofessional right now,” she teases.

“I'll stop if you tell me to.”

Kelsey lowers her head and nips at the skin on my neck, strengthening my erection. “No, just not what I expected from my potential shrink.” She bites down on my neck with her teeth and then soothes the spot with the tip of her tongue.

As Kelsey kisses my neck, I catch another whiff of her perfume, floral, feminine and seductive. A heavy hook latches deep in my heart and won't let go. “And you're beyond any expectation.”

Kelsey stops and looks at me, eyes big and fragile. When she smiles, I make up mind. I can't be professional with her. I don't know how the fuck I'm going to manage to keep this quiet, but I have to try. Everything about her feels so right. I slide my hand across her cheek and before I talk myself out of it, I pull her in and kiss her.

CHAPTER THREE

Kelsey

LUCA'S KISS MAKES ME LIGHT UP LIKE A NIGHT match at center court. Warning alarms go off inside my head, panicked by everything that's going in my body. I ignore them and dig my fingers into his hair, kissing him harder, as if this was the only kiss we'll ever have.

If it is, I'm getting my money's worth.

Luca groans as I dart my tongue into his mouth. His sounds go straight to my pussy, making me wet. He slips his hand around the back of my neck, fingers knotted in my hair, keeping me where I'm at, where I already want to be.

The warning bells in my head get louder. I've completely lost it. All sober thought out the window.

The moment I saw him in a suit, I had to have him. The way he looked at me in the ballroom, when he took his hand in mine, I couldn't say no.

After what seems like forever, Luca slowly pulls back. I whimper and open my eyes. He stares back at me with a boyish grin plastered on his face. "La perfection."

Unable to wipe the smile off my own face, I place my hand on my chest, struggling to catch my breath. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

Luca cocks his head. “You speak French?”

“Enough to be dangerous.”

“J’ai des problemes.”

“So does this mean we can’t work together,” I tease.

Luca slides his hand across my cheek and looks at me, his beautiful eyes meeting mine. “Not professionally. I could never let this happen if you were my client.” A wicked smile spreads across his face. “If we do this, it’s just you and me, understand?”

“Oh,” I say, feeling my eyes getting big. His words push me higher. Being with him is like leaving the door to the predator cage open at the zoo and throwing away the key. Whatever was happening, I wanted more. “I like the sound of that.”

He leans closer, his voice a husky rasp. “Then here it is. If you want that extra strength in your serve, you need to increase your testosterone.”

I lean back and look at him puzzled. “How would I do that? Don’t know if you’ve noticed but I’m not exactly a dude.”

Luca laughs. “I did notice. It’s been proven in the lab that for women when you anticipate sex, the testosterone increases in your body in response to the levels of increased estrogen.” He leans in and kisses me softly. “So my theory is, if you’re always anticipating sex, you’ll see an increase in testosterone...”

“...which will increase your strength,” I gasp.

He kisses me again, this time not so gently. “We spend the week teasing each other, keeping the levels as high as we can. On the court, it’s all you think about. No analytics. No trends.” I feel the rigid excitement in his pants against me.

“Do that, and I think it will give you that extra bit of oomph you’re looking for.”

“Damn that’s sexy.”

“But there’s one catch.”

I tease his lips with mine. “What?”

“You can’t orgasm. That drops your testosterone, dulls the mind.”

“That’s exactly what my sister says,” I say, shocked.

Luca shrugs his shoulders and pulls me in tighter. “It’s scientifically proven.”

Somewhere far away my phone sounds the twinkling techno chime given to my sister. Speak of the devil. The noise startles my brain into clarity for a moment, giving me pause. What are you doing, Kelsey? You should be in bed. Hydrating. Stretching.

Down the line.

I run my hands over his chest, feeling the hard muscle under the soft fabric of his shirt, the quickness of his breath, the hammering of his heart.

This is the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. You should be slapping the shit out of him and walking away.

“You really think this will help,” I say. “Or you just whispering a bunch of smart mumbo-jumbo in my ear to fuck me?”

He reaches out with one hand and pushes my hair gently away from my face. “When I look at you, I see a champion. A champion that needs to get over that final hurdle. Normally, I’d tell you to visualize success or breathe deep. But you’ve done that already. I know this will work for you.” He smiles and winks. “And after you win, I hope you’ll want to continue to see me.”

The breath catches in my chest. “You just say that to every girl,” I say weakly.

Luca moves his hand down from my waist to the seam of my ass, which makes me shiver and super heats my girlie bits. “I would never try this with anyone else.”

He looks at me and I see in his eyes he means it. It’s the same look he had when we first met. Like we were meant to be. The thought is scary and exciting at the same time.

A sultry, fragile grin spreads across my face. “So like what, are we just going to do it right here?”

Luca runs his fingers over my shoulder and grabs the thin strap of my dress. “No,” he says with chuckle. “That’s not how this works.” He pushes the silky fabric down until it rests around my elbow. Leaning in, he plants kisses on the skin just above my breasts. My nipples stand at attention, desperate to get in on the action. “If you can’t be patient, then tell me now.”

“I can wait,” I whisper.

“You sure?”

I nod eagerly.

“Good, because nothing about this will be quick.”

My other strap comes off with an easy flick of the fingers. Clara’s chime rings several times in a row, dulling the heavy waves of arousal. “Except that I really have to go home soon.”

Luca murmurs something unintelligible and reaches for the edge of my dress. Before I can breathe, he pulls it down and takes one hard, aching nipple gently in between his teeth. A strangled cry escapes my throat. Releasing it, he stands up and kisses me with the same crazy need I attacked him with earlier.

“Let me drive you home,” he says in between heavy kisses. “The street mime problem is worse this time of night.”

I push him away with a giggle. “I’d appreciate it,” I say, pulling my dress back up and smoothing out my hair. When my girls are safely tucked away, Luca pouts like a toddler. “But

we're going to have come up with a better excuse than street mimes."

"I'm sure we can come up with something," Luca says in between deep breaths.

"Good. Because if we don't, Clara is going to murder me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Luca

6 days before Final

KELSEY SQUATS LOW TO THE GROUND, SPINNING THE racket around in her hands, ready to receive serve. A broiling summer sun beats down on the court, but only one of the players is sweating. To my right, the electronic scoreboard reads 6-1, 4-0, advantage Kelsey.

Kelsey's first-round opponent, Anna Koveloska, wipes her forehead and blows out a heavy breath. Even though Kelsey's a higher seed, she's outplayed Anna by a mile, making her run around the court like a haggard animal.

It's beautiful to watch.

Anna bounces the ball twice, tosses it high into the air and with a loud grunt, serves the ball into the back corner. Kelsey springs to her right and rockets a forehand down the line. Anna lunges at the ball, her tall, wiry frame looking like it's stuck in quicksand. Somehow, she still manages to send a

floats back over the net. Kelsey is a half step ahead, sprinting forward to smash the ball into the forecourt.

15-love.

Kelsey stops just short of the net and pumps her fist. The lean muscle under her tanned skin flexes like bridge cable and the power in those arms and shoulders stirs my arousal.

As she walks back to behind the service line, her eyes dart up into the stands and catch mine. They're confident and focused, but even from ten rows up, I can see last night flash through those large, brown eyes. She's doing what I asked her to do. Focus on us. Remember the feel of the cool night breeze on hot skin. The teasing firmness of my tongue on her nipple.

I shift around in my seat as my excitement grows.

By keeping her mind on something else, her body is free to react. No thought about what to do. Just do. If I'm right, she won't remember half of the match, which is fine. That's what video is for. But for now, she's doing what every great athlete needs to do. Stop thinking and get out of their own way.

Kelsey smacks the bottom of her baby blue tennis shoes with her racket and jogs in place as Anna shuffles to the service line, looking shell shocked. Two bounces of the tennis ball and the first serve goes into the net with a dull plop. The second serve hits the net and falls to the ground.

30-love.

"This is an ass-kicking," a voice next to me says in a deep French accent. "And I sweating like a pig. Let's go."

Antoine Rousseau grabs the back of the empty seat in front of him and struggles to get up. "There's air conditioning in the vendor tent. And free food. My treat."

I push my sunglasses tight against my face and look up at the hulking gorilla, his Champion racket company polo dark with sweat stains. "I'll stay. I want to see the end."

Antoine looks out over the court, as if we were looking at two completely different things. “Why? You got money on it?”

“No.”

“One of them your relative?”

“No.”

He chews his thick lip, trying to figure out the puzzle before him. “You got a hard-on for one of them?”

My body goes cold and my hard-on deflates. I don’t say anything fast enough because he reaches over and punches me in the arm, hard.

“L’affaire avec vous?”

“Don’t start Antonie,” I mutter under my breath. “I don’t need it.”

“You clearly haven’t learned, have you,” Antonie says in an exasperated whisper. “If Louis even sees you breathing next to one of them, *les flics* will be pulling your body from the Seine.”

I look over and stare daggers at Antonie. “I did nothing wrong,” I remind him. “Even the Court of France said so.”

Antoine stifles a laugh. “You know regular laws do not apply to Louis Martin.”

“Louis is not above the law,” I grumble. “He doesn’t scare me.”

Working his sunglasses down his nose, Antonie looks at me as if I was crazy. “That’s some pretty big talk from you.”

I clench my jaw tight, not wanting to lash out at Antonie. I know where he’s coming from and it’s all friendship, but it’s still hard to not explain myself for the millionth time. I turn my head in time to see Kelsey zip a cross-court backhand by Anna’s racket. 40-love. “I’m just here watching some tennis. That’s *all*.”

Antonie blows out a deflating breath and shakes his head.

“Well, whatever,” he says, fanning himself. “Hopefully she’s worth dancing with the devil again.”

Anna lobs a serve over the net. Kelsey smacks a forehand to the far corner. Hands on hips, Anna watches the ball land just before the line and hit the canvas backing at the end of the court with a bang.

Game Kelsey. The sparse crowd applauds politely while both players switch sides. Kelsey glances my way for a half second as she passes, as to say, ‘it’s working, no?’

Antonie leans over, a mix of cologne and sweat radiating from his seat. “Tell me, ami? What do you see in them? Is it the short skirts? Because you can find a hundred of those behind the shops on *Lalori*. Those might only cost you a night in the cell instead of being dead.”

“Shut up Antonie,” I mutter through gritted teeth.

He laughs and smacks me in the arm again. “I’m just giving you shit,” he whispers. “Truthfully, I don’t care who smacks your balls around, that’s your business.” His large hand pats my shoulder. “I just don’t want to read in the paper that your bloated corpse spoiled some old lady’s dinner cruise. That’s all.”

“Can we stop talking about this? I thought you were getting a drink.”

Antonie grimaces and then shuffles around to get out of his seat. “Just be careful where you step in Louis Martin’s flower garden.”

“Thanks for the tickets,” I mutter as Antoine stands and walks down the stairs, stopping to sell, or maybe flirt, with a young male tennis pro sitting in the box seats.

While Kelsey positions the strings on her racket, I glance through the crowd, looking for Louis. Most likely, he wouldn’t attend such a low-seeded affair. The major television cameras would be focused on the main court and players like

Savannah Steele and Camillie Jannessen. An attention-whore like Louis would make sure he was seen as often as possible.

A *powerful* attention whore, I remind myself. In addition to being President of the Marceau Tennis Club, he was an elected member of Parliament and retired mayor of Paris.

Kelsey pockets a tennis ball and then bounces the other with her racket. As she toes the service line, a cold sense of dread invades my body. Antoine was right, if Louis wanted blood, he always got it.

As Kelsey takes a deep breath, my mind replays the security camera footage for the millionth time, the same images presented in court. A young woman stumbles down the street outside my office wearing a long raincoat in the middle of a sunny day. She fumbles with a bottle of liquor before it smashes on the cement. Indifferent, she walks into my office and checks herself in for her appointment.

In my office, I talk to her professionally. Compassionately. It isn't the first time a pro athlete's come to me drunk or on drugs, but it's the first time anyone's taken off their coat and been completely nude underneath. Or tried to kiss me. Or grab at me.

The security footage went on to show me pushing the woman away, walking out the door, and calling the police from the lobby. Angry and crying, the woman found a lighter and my recycling bin full of paper.

That woman in the security footage was Alize Bencic. Niece of one Louis Martin.

I pull the brim of baseball cap lower on my forehead and clench my jaw. On the court, Kelsey rocks back on her heel and tosses the ball high into the air. I hold my breath as she tightens her athletic frame, building power in her long, muscular legs. As the ball drops from its apex, Kelsey uncoils and unleashes all her power through her arm, hammering her

serve right past Anna, who hardly moves, standing there, rooted like a tree.

15-love.

The yellow digital signage spits out the miles per hour on her serve. 125. As the ball boy hands her another ball, Kelsey grins stupidly and shakes her head in disbelief. I keep my face placid, desperately not wanting to show interest or attract attention, but inside I'm smiling. It's her fastest serve of the match. Faster than she's ever served before.

Our plan is working.

Kelsey strides up to the service line and stares out over the net at Anna, who dances back and forth, trying desperately to conjure up energy to make a comeback. Kelsey's confident and assured, the same look I saw last night on the dance floor. My arousal returns. Kelsey's like a drug that I must have, damn the consequences. I'm sure of it.

Another ball zips across the court. Anna swings defensively and the ball ricochets off into the crowd.

30-love.

In my pocket, my phone buzzes.

Antonie: *Heads up, Louis is headed your way. Umpire's side.
Time to disappear.*

I look quickly through the tall wooden chair across the court in time to spot Louis' perfectly placed silver mane of hair emerge from the tunnel. In front of him, Anna lunges at a ball, returning it weakly to Kelsey's forehand. In return, Kelsey rifles a shot back into the corner.

My legs tense, ready to leave. But then I watch Kelsey bounce the ball twice and hammer a serve right down the center line for the victory. The crowd cheers as Kelsey raises her arms briefly to the sky before she quickly jogs up to the net for a genuine handshake with Anna. Kelsey then claps her

hand against her racket, thanking the crowd. As she walks back to her chair, she glances up at me, her competitive focus washing over her face. She's already put the victory behind her and is ready for more. The look on her face make my legs relax. Louis could go to hell.

I wasn't going anywhere.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kelsey

CLARA TALKS TO ME FROM OUTSIDE THE SHOWER, but I can barely hear her. I keep the vision of Luca bending low, claspng a nipple between his teeth, sending a surge of arousal flooding my lady parts. As the hot water cascades over me, I feel every inch of my body tingle with electricity, a mix of strength and horniness. A body at peak performance. It's better than I've ever felt before and I want more.

Lots more.

A dangerous smile spreads across my face as I let Clara's voice back into my head and turn off the water.

"Kelsey, that was amazing," she says, handing me a towel. "Seriously, only four unforced errors and your first serve percentages were off the charts."

I wrap the warm, plush cotton around myself and squeeze the extra water out of my hair. "Could have been better," I say stoically, trying to keep the sense of accomplishment tucked away. Dominating Anna felt good, but considering she was ranked well below me in the world rankings, I knew I hadn't

done much. “Dropped a game in the first set. Savannah Steele wouldn’t do that.”

Clara flashes a comforting smile as she follows me into the small, but ornate locker room. “Yes, you’re right, good thought.” She squeezes my arm lovingly. “But I’m just so excited for you! Clearly, down the line is working!”

I nod in distracted agreement. I’m after my phone first and foremost. I hear it buzz from inside my duffel bag. There’s several messages from friends and family, but my heart does a little flip when I see one from Luca.

Luca: Watching you play tennis was just as beautiful as seeing you last night. Good job. Oh, just so you know. I will be checking out the club’s museum display for a while before I leave. I hear it’s really, really boring and that hardly anyone ever goes, but I’m a sucker for history.

I grin from ear to ear. The museum is in the conference center which is used for media during Open week. Right next to interviews.

Throwing on clothes, I turn and say, “how long until we have to talk to the press?”

“Uh, half hour or so,” Clara says stunned. “Why?”

I put my hair into a messy ponytail and stuff everything into my bag without concern. “I want to drop my stuff off and take a little walk before I go in there. See you in there?”

“Okay,” Clara says, still confused. “Sure.”

I give her a sisterly kiss on the cheek. “Perfect. I’ll find you.”

I head out the locker room door and into the brilliant sunshine. The conference center sticks out like a sore thumb, it’s ultra modern glass lines contrasting with the brick and vegetation of the original club. It’s only a two minute walk. I silence my phone and toss the bag over my shoulder. As I go,

clapping and cheers erupt from every corner of the grounds. Sixteen players being whittled down to eight. Fans hustle across the cobblestone paths to catch portions of every match, their passes fluttering around their necks, hoping to see history.

A large roar erupts from behind me. The sound is loud enough to make me jump. I turn and look in the direction of Centre Court, a huge green structure, covered in a pale, retractable roof.

Roars like that were usually only reserved for one woman.

"Excuse me," I say to a kid walking by, wearing the official purple polo of the club and a walkie talkie looped around his chest. "Who's playing on Centre Court?"

He looks at me as if I'm stupid and then laughs. "Savannah Steele. Who else would it be?"

I'm not stupid. "Could be someone else," I lie.

He scratches his hair with an amused smile. "Not when you've won four majors in a row and are like, the best tennis player ever."

A motherly need to correct him swells inside my body. "It's only three in a row."

"No, it's four. You're not counting this one."

I scoff, trying to hide the stab of despair in my chest. "You're awfully confident."

Extending his hand, he presses each finger down to make his point. "She murders everyone she plays, averages twenty five aces a match and hasn't dropped a set in her last forty-two major matches. So yeah, I'm pretty sure she'll win."

"Thirty-two matches," I say meekly.

Frustration furrows his brow. "Is there something I can help you with? Directions or something?"

"No, thanks."

The crowd erupts again as he jogs off, giving me one final pissed off look. I take a deep breath, suddenly shaken. The

confidence drains from my body. That gangly punk cements what I already know. Even if I play my best tennis, it was a foregone conclusion.

Savannah is the undisputed queen.

The rest of us were merely jesters in her court.

Inside the conference center, the bustle of the fans is replaced with the bustle of media members. Same passes swinging around the necks, completely different attitude. I shuffle through the surly ones, stomping their way down the halls, deadlines and tweet limits on their minds. In front of me, the main ballroom glows bright with spotlights, the blue sponsor background and table with microphones visible from the doorway. I walk towards it, then turn right shortly before the door, down a long, quiet hallway.

The museum is an overly large, cold space filled with glittering display cases, a reminder of how pretentious Marceau flaunted itself to be. I catch a glimpse of a white polo shirt standing at the far end of the museum, admiring the black and white, World-War II era photos on the wall. The breath catches in my throat.

Luca.

I want to run to him, but I pause. Last night flashes in my mind. The kiss. The fire in his eyes as he grabbed my dress, his hot mouth on my nipple, tasting me like I was a delicious treat. For the first time though, I look at what happened as a sane woman. What the hell were you thinking Kelsey? You let a man you barely know take you out in the middle of nowhere and treat you like a naive teenager?

As I stand there, looking at his broad shoulders straining against the cottony fabric, the Devil inside of me speaks up. *Come on, Kelsey. You let him do it because you wanted it to happen. You're a grown ass woman. Own your desires.*

I let out a heavy sigh, drawing his attention. When he sees me, his face brightens and a large smile spreads across his

lips. “Kelsey,” he says in a rumbling voice that burrows deep into my heart.

It’s enough for me to drop my bag near the hall and run to him. Luca slips his hand around my waist and leans in to kiss me. When I back away slightly, he looks at me concerned. “What’s the matter?”

A small groan escapes my lips. “Sorry. My mind’s a little jumbled right now.”

Luca releases me, but holds on to my hand. “Why? Did something happen?”

Hundreds of answers race through my mind until I decide on, “the youth of today are assholes.” Luca looks at me perplexed. “Sorry, apparently everyone around here has anointed Savannah Steele as champion. My confidence took a sudden and drastic hit.”

Luca lets out a sigh of relief. “I was worried I had done something to offend you.”

I open my mouth to respond, but pause just long enough to send another wave of concern across his face.

“Have I offended you?”

“No. Well? No.”

Luca squeezes my hand and leans in, staring at me with his beautiful eyes. It’s enough to take my breath away. “Please, Kelsey, tell me,” he says quietly.

“Well, about last night,” I stumble, unable to keep my cheeks from flushing. “I’m thinking should have slapped the shit out of you for what you did.”

A mischievous grin spreads across his face. “Oh, that.”

“Yeah, *that*. I need you to know I’m not normally that kind of girl.”

“Noted.”

“Good. So because I’m not that kind of girl, this *thing* we’re doing is really confusing.”

“Why is that?”

“Well,” I say struggling to find the right words. “Have you ever bought something before that you’ve been really, really wanting, but you know you shouldn’t? And then after you bought it, you constantly go back and forth about it?”

Luca looks at me amused. “I once owned a Ducati for a week. Probably the best worst decision I ever made.”

“Okay, good,” I say with a sigh of relief. “So right now, *this* is my Ducati.”

Luca laughs and kisses the back of my hand. “I understand. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

He leans in, his lips nestled against my ear. I close my eyes and inhale the crisp cologne on his neck. “Did you enjoy last night?”

Heat blooms across my chest and my nipples stand at attention, eager to be attended to. “Yes.”

“Did you think about it today?”

“Yes.”

“Did it help you?”

“Well, maybe...”

“It certainly looked like it to me.”

“Yeah, but that girl wasn’t any good,” I say, pointing my thumb in the direction of Centre Court. “I don’t really think it’s going to help me against Savannah-freaking Steele.”

Luca pulls back. His smooth, steely eyes search mine and a disappointed smile spreads across his face. “If you think that’s the case, then you should slap me now and I can get my car before traffic.”

I bite my lip and consider his offer. “Shame,” I pout. “The feeling’s passed.”

He reaches up and runs a strong hand across my cheek, sending out signals to the rest of my body. “Then how could I make *this* less confusing?”

I look at him dead in the eyes and say flatly, “if I wasn’t a

tennis player and I met you last night, would you have done the same thing?”

“Yes.”

“So then, this isn’t some weird professional experiment? You don’t get your kicks off taking advantage of your patients?”

“Not at all. Like I said last night, it’s just you and me, our professions aside.”

His voice is clear and unwavering. He looks at me with a steady gaze and I start shutting down some of my defenses. I hadn’t slapped him or reported him for a reason. I wanted him. I wanted whatever *this* was. “Okay,” I say with a wicked grin. “Prove something.”

“Anything.”

I take his hand from my cheek and pull away, not oblivious to the arousal in his pants. “Look at the exhibits with me.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep,” I pull my phone from my pocket. “Just look at them with me. I have fifteen minutes.”

Luca smiles at me, takes a deep breath, then gestures to the photo wall next to us. “After you then.”

We walk over and settle in front of a black and white photo of two women dressed in sweaters and ankle length skirts standing next to the net, along with several men in army outfits. I adopt a fake artsy scowl and then glance over at Luca, who stops next to me and clasps his hands behind his back.

“Did you know that during the war, they had to take all the iron net posts and melt them down for bombs,” I say professionally.

Luca leans in and studies the picture closely. “I did. But did *you* know that decision was made the day before Germany surrendered, so they just reinstalled the posts?”

I grin. "Hmm, I did not know that."

He looks over at me like a professor addressing a student. "It's much less patriotic, so nobody mentions it."

A flash of fantasy rushes through my brain, forcing me to look at floor. "Ah," I mumble. "I see." We move down the wall and I point out a picture of Jeanine Connors, the famous American tennis star in the fifties, winner of five Paris Opens. "Do you know who this is?"

Luca moves next to me, hands still behind his back. He bumps up against me with his shoulder, but says nothing. The feeling of the hard muscle under his shirt sends a tremor down into my belly. "That's the second-most famous American tennis player in history."

His response catches me off guard. I let out an odd laugh. "Second-most? Who's the first," I ask, expecting Clara or Savannah Steele to come out of his mouth.

He looks over at me and smiles. "You, of course."

Instinctually, I smack him in the arm. "Shut up."

"One of these days, you're going to have your picture up here and some couple is going to be standing here saying the same things we are."

The word *couple* lights a small flicker in my chest, sounding odd but good at the same time. "You don't mean that."

"I'm sure of it," he says plainly.

I look back at the photo, trying to subdue the wave of arousal. His blunt confidence is downright sexy, more than I've ever had. Maybe that's my problem. "My forever fantasy is to win one of these things, to join my sister as only the third American to win in Paris."

"In less than a week, you won't have to imagine anymore."

"Provided Savannah doesn't get there first."

"She won't," he says with a confident smile. "She'll be looking up at you on the winner's platform."

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, well, we’ll see.”

Luca forms a rectangle with his thumb and forefingers. “Imagine,” he says, holding his imaginary frame up to the wall, next to a picture of Clara. “Your picture here, holding up the famed golden chalice.” He moves his fingers lower down the wall. “Then a picture of you in action.”

Discarding the frame, he steps back and, closing one eye, measures out an imaginary space. “There will be a big plaque that’ll read ‘Kelsey Chalmers: American Muscle.’” He looks over at me, eyes beaming. “What do you think?”

A broad smile spreads across my face and a little hook latches deep within my heart. “Will it say anything else,” I ask quietly, warmth washing across my cheeks.

Luca takes my hand in his. “Considered a late bloomer, Kelsey Chalmers didn’t win her first Paris Open until the age of 28. After defeating Savannah Steele in an epic three-set showdown to claim her first major title, the sister of Clara Chalmers went on to win six of the next eight Paris Opens to become the winningest American in tournament history.”

Well, damn. His words fill my body and make it weightless, the delicious buzz of adrenaline coursing through my veins. I inch closer to him, my mind running a million miles an hour, my arousal not far behind.

“Stepping out of her sister’s considerable shadow,” I offer tentatively, searching his molten, lustful eyes for the rest of the words. “Kelsey out-muscled and out-hustled her opponents, powering her way around the court like a brawling, unrefined Midwest muscle car.”

Luca flashes a grin that melts my knees and superheats my girly bits. He slides a hand up my arm and lightly brushes the skin on my neck. I lean into his hand and let out a soft moan. “Wielding this immense power, Kelsey dominated for the next decade,” Luca whispers, his voice a delicious low rumble. “Winning in New York, London and Sydney, eventually

racking up more than a dozen major titles, Kelsey cemented her status as one of the greatest American tennis players *ever*.”

With a smile, I lean in and plant a soft kiss on his sharp jawline. “And this is going to be right where we’re standing now?”

His strong hand runs through my hair and then gently pulls my head back. “Absolutely,” he says before leaning in and kissing me.

I whimper and throw my arms around his head, keeping him there, not wanting him to escape. He has no interest in leaving, parting my lips with his tongue.

Without warning, Luca backs us against the wall, right in the spot of my future plaque, and presses his weight against me. My pulse triples as I greedily push back against him, my body aching for more contact, every inch of skin wanting to be stimulated at once, wishing there wasn’t so much cloth between us. Luca grabs my legs and lifts them up. I wrap my ankles tight around his waist and pull him closer. A sharp gasp echos around the empty room when I feel his hardness grind between my legs, stroking my tender, aching need.

“You’re so close Kelsey,” Luca whispers low in my ear. “You’re almost there.”

I close my eyes. He was right about close. I could orgasm without shedding a stitch of clothing.

“All thanks to you,” I mutter, knotting my fingers in his hair, amazed how well we fit together. “You’re incredible, you know that?”

He looks at me, eyes locked onto mine. “So are you.”

The sincerity in his voice sucks the breath from my chest. “I can’t believe what I’m doing,” I whisper.

With a mischievous grin, Luca takes his hand from my thighs and grabs the bottom of my sweatshirt and t-shirt. Before I can gasp, the fabric is up around my armpits and

Luca kisses the small mole on the top of my left breast. His lips on my skin is electric, sending thrumming waves down to my toes. "They're even more beautiful in the daytime."

Before I can say anything, a shrieking woman's voice fills the room.

"What the *hell* are you doing?"

I look towards the opening of the museum. Clara stands there in doorway, hands on hips, nostrils flaring.

"Oh shit," I whisper.

Luca whips his head around. "Who is that?"

"If you value your life, let me go."

Luca looks at me quizzically, but does as he's told. I quickly pull down my sweatshirt and try to take an actual breath, which doesn't happen because Clara storms over to Luca, murder in her eyes.

"What are you doing," Clara screeches. "Who are you?"

"Je suis désolé. S'il vous plaît, pardonnez-moi." My horny, panicked brain translates his words roughly as, "I'm sorry, please forgive me."

Luca places his palms together in front of his chest, like he was practicing yoga, and then extends his hand out towards Clara. "Hi. My name is Luca."

Clara looks at his hand like it's Devil and then slaps it away. She thrusts a finger in his face. "I don't care who you are," Clara spits, cheeks hot as molten lava. "You get away from my sister!"

"Please, madame, let me explain."

"No! Get out of here before I call the cops!"

"It will only take a second."

"Now!"

Luca looks at me and without another word, slinks his way around Clara and out of the room.

After he leaves, Clara wheels around and stares daggers at

me. The vein above her temple throbs wildly. “Who is *that*,” she seethes, her voice not entirely human.

I take several shallow breaths, trying to diffuse the intense waves of horniness still washing through my body. “No one,” I whisper. “Just no one.”

“No one,” Clara’s repeats like a pissed-off cockatoo. “How was that no one? He was trying to mount you to the wall!”

Clara’s grating voice helps dissipate my arousal, but it’s an empty feeling. A feeling I don’t want to have ever again.

I stare into space until I come up with a reasonable lie. “Okay, fine. I met him on the airplane.”

Clara jams her hands on her hips and stares at me the way our mother used when we’d get into trouble. “Who is he?”

“Does it matter,” I say, regaining my bearings.

“Who *is* he?”

“Oh, good lord. He’s a racket rep from Champion. We talked on the plane and he said he was going to the gala last night.”

Clara gasps and slaps me hard in the arm. “You didn’t sleep with him, did you?”

“Ow,” I say, rubbing my elbow. “What does it matter to you?”

“Listen to me,” Clara snaps, her chest visibly shaking. “Men take the strength from your legs and make your mind dull, okay? You’ll never win a major if you’re constantly running around getting dicked.”

“Clara,” I shriek. “How dare you!”

“I mean it. You stay away from him, you hear me? I’ve never seen you play better tennis than what you did today.”

“Clara, listen to me...”

“No.” She grabs my arm and pulls me towards the corridor. “We are going to go talk to the media, head over for treatment and then go right back to the hotel.”

“Stop grabbing me,” I say, twisting out of her grip. “I’m not a child.”

Clara wheels and glares at me, her mind contemplating a ton of venomous, sisterly things to say. “Do you want to win a major or not?”

“Come on...”

She pinches her thumb and forefinger together. “You’re this close from breaking through, Kelsey. All this practice? The nutrition? *It’s all working.*”

“Yes, but...”

“No, no but’s about anything. You keep doing what I tell you. You keep up this boring routine and I’ll get you your major title. Isn’t that what you want?”

I open my mouth, about to automatically answer yes, when I stop. Is this what I really want? The grind? The boredom? The travel?

Out of nowhere, a thought roars through my brain. I’d be okay with just Luca. The idea is hot, emotional, like wanting to touch a live star. But it’s there and it’s real. Real scary, I yell at myself. It’s only been 48 hours with a man I know barely anything about.

My rational brain struggles to find a footing. As fun as he is, a major title lasts forever. And maybe Clara had a point.

“Yes,” I say, unable to convince myself. “You’re right. I was stupid.”

Clara’s face visibly relaxes and the color in her skin returns to normal. We stand in silence for a minute, wondering who will speak first.

“Good,” Clara finally says with an exhale. A quick smile flashes across her face. “Look, Kelsey, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t of yelled like that.” She reaches out and grabs my hand. “I get it, sis. Men can be fun,” she says, making it sound like we’re talking about a craft project. “And at times, giving up fun things can be really frustrating.”

Before I can say anything, she slips her arm around mine and leads me to the conference center. As we get to the hallway, she stops and looks around the empty space. A sultry grin spreads across her face and she whispers, "can I tell you a secret?"

I steel myself, not knowing what is coming. "Sure."

"Maybe it will help you understand where I'm coming from."

"Okay."

Clara ignores me and leans in. "I think about my trophies all the time while Sean fucks me."

I stop dead in my tracks, not knowing my big sister was capable of the f-word. She understands the gravity of her words and breaks out into a blushing giggle. My mouth opens but nothing comes out.

She pulls me towards the ballroom at an easy pace. "Because you know what? One of these days, Sean's little trophy ain't going to work no more. But that's okay. And you know why? Because I got my titles. Those will never go away."

As we get to the entrance, Clara gives my arm a sisterly squeeze and smiles. "Don't make a stupid decision, Kelsey. Hardware lasts forever. Hard-ons don't."

CHAPTER SIX

Luca

5 days before Final

Luca: *My deepest apologies, I didn't mean to make your sister upset.*

KELSEY TAKES A WHILE BEFORE SHE RESPONDS. I TAKE A deep breath and sip some coffee, watching the good people of Paris navigate their way through the morning chaos. Horns honk down the way on Avenue Generale and the cars move around the Arc de Triomphe like sap on a tree.

I'm anxious to talk to Kelsey. She'd responded a while after I left, wanting to talk, but then didn't answer my text or call until this morning.

Halfway through a croissant, my phone dings.

Kelsey: *You have nothing to apologize for.*

Luca: *Are you sure? I couldn't help but overhear that I am*

messing with your plan. If that's the case, then I am sorry and, if you wish, I will stop seeing you.

A long digital silence passes. I toss the phone on the couch and knot my hands behind my head, staring out into the Paris morning. My heart hammers in my chest. I don't want to lose her. I believe in what we're doing, but I'm also not in the place to piss anyone off.

Kelsey: *You want to stop?*

The characters on the screen hit me in a place I haven't felt before. For so long, I've remained detached, keeping the feelings hidden deep down, accessible to no one. The last time I felt like this, I got burned down to the very depths of my core. In response, I threw myself into my work.

And then that burned down as well.

But with Kelsey something feels different. A crack in the dam. A tiny green plant in a barren wasteland. I type back quickly, not wanting there to be any question.

Luca: *No. But I also respect the relationship of an athlete and their coaches.*

Kelsey: *How honorable of you. But Clara isn't the boss. I am. And I don't want to stop either.*

My chest seizes and my heart skips a beat. A well of heat rises in my stomach and settles in my groin.

Luca: *Even if that messes with your plan?*

The text bubbles appear and disappear a dozen times before Kelsey responds.

Kelsey: Yes, Clara has been good for me. I can now actually afford to make rent payments and pay bills. I totally understand that. But I told you, she's gotten me as far as she can go. Deep down, I know I need something more. Is that something you? I don't know yet. It feels right though, and that's all that matters. I couldn't sleep last night because the thought of you kept me up. I just don't know how to tell Clara, because she's my sister. Do you have a sister? Do you know how hard it is?

My fingers tremble at her validation. It's the same thoughts I've had. That instant searing connection that you were meant to be. My rational brain keeps trying to push it away, but my heart is overwhelming, pumping out the same thought over and over and over again.

This is more than just a thing.

Luca: So we keep it a secret?

Kelsey: Yes, but it will be hard to do. Clara's watching me like a hawk.

Luca: Should you go then?

Kelsey: She's in the shower. Will be for a while.

Luca: You sure?

Kelsey: Trust me, it's her "alone" time. Since we've been on the road, she takes lots of showers.

I let out a laugh that echoes off the walls, breaking the tension in my chest.

Luca: How do we get her to take even more showers then?

Kelsey: Funny. Don't worry about Clara, I'll figure something out. When can I see you again?

Just then, there's a knock on my door. I'm ready to ignore it when I hear a familiar voice call out from the other side.

I drop the phone on the table and scramble to open the door.

Simon Doubis, the chairman of the Psychology Licensing Board, stands there with a serious expression on his face and a newspaper rolled up in his hand.

“Simon,” I say, startled. “What are you doing here?”

A petite man with a ring of short, spiky gray hair, dressed in slacks and a dress shirt, Simon grimaces like he’s eaten a bad snail. “Forgive me for interrupting so early in the morning,” he says in a clipped tone. “But we need to talk.”

“Of course,” I say, heart hammering inside my chest. “Please come in. Coffee?”

“Iced.” His voice is as cold as the word itself. “Hotter than piss out there. Can’t stand Paris in the summer. Either too hot or too muggy. No in between.”

My phone dings. “No kidding,” I say, struggling to come up with words. My mouth is drier than sandpaper in the desert. I grab the phone on the way to the kitchen. “Are you hungry? Want some crepes?”

I look down at the phone.

Kelsey: *Still there? When can I see you?*

Mind racing a thousand miles an hour, I whip out a response and toss the phone on the counter.

Luca: *Tomorrow night. After you win.*

The presence of Simon Dubois was a really bad thing. I could only imagine what I had done to deserve an at-home appearance. Dubois had a mansion in the Le Visinet area and a membership at the tennis club to occupy most of his time. A trip to the city must mean something. Jamming some beans into the cold press, I look out and watch Simon walk around

my apartment, looking at every wall and piece of furniture like an overzealous detective on a television show.

Kelsey responds and my phone sends an electronic whoop. I nearly spill the coffee grabbing at my phone.

Kelsey: *Boo. That's too long. I want to see you today.*

I quickly put the phone on silent, but not before I send Kelsey a message.

Luca: *That's good, no? We go dark and then maybe Clara won't suspect anything.*

Pocketing the phone, I grab the coffee and hand Simon the glass. He accepts it without a word.

"Amazing tennis yesterday," I say, wanting to fill the cold silence. "Not a bad match out there."

"I thought we were past this," Simon says quietly, staring at me with cold brown eyes, magnified by a pair of golden-rimmed glasses.

My phone buzzes against my butt. I desperately want to see what Kelsey said, but Simon's grim expression as he takes a drink tells me to leave the phone alone.

"What's that," I say in a casual tone before taking a shaky sip of coffee.

Simon's face falls and he shakes his head disappointingly. "So now you're a liar, too?" A pang of guilt stabs me in the core. "I just happened to be in the volunteer tent yesterday at the tournament when a startled volunteer came running in, hardly able to speak. When I asked was wrong, she said she found you in the museum 'having your way' with Kelsey Chalmers. The crudeness of your 'act' caused this poor lady to be very distraught. She ended up in the hospital after suffering an anxiety attack from the incident."

I open my mouth, ready to unload another white lie, just something enough to deflect the situation, but Simon stares me down with his cold eyes and the words evaporate on my tongue. “It’s not what you think, Simon.”

With a heavy sigh, he sits down in a chair, suddenly looking ten years older. “That wasn’t the answer I was hoping for Luca. You admit to being involved with her?”

Sitting down on the couch across from him, I pull my phone out and briefly look at Kelsey’s message.

Kelsey: *Fine. I don't like your answer, but I accept it. It's just boring over here at Hotel Kelsey. Much rather be with you. Might have to take my own shower later.*

A knot forms in my throat. I type a quick message and then set the phone down as Simon stares at me, non-pulsed.

Luca: *No masterbating.*

I clear my throat and take a sip of coffee. “I can explain.”

“That’s good, because I didn’t come over here looking to chit-chat.”

On the table, my phone buzzes. I grimace and give the message a very brief glance.

Kelsey: *Hard not to. Remembering how incredible your cock felt against me. Wish I could feel it somewhere else.*

Despite the inquisitor on the other side of my coffee table, I get turned on at thought of her long curves wrapped around me, keeping me inside her pleasure, begging me to stay.

I turn the phone over. After a deep breath, I look Simon

directly in the eyes and state matter-of-factly, “Kelsey is not my client.”

Simon puts down his coffee. Pressing his fingertips together, he studies me gravely, looking for any telltale signs of lying, just like he taught me during my residency. I stare back at him confidently, knowing what I’d said was the absolute truth. “Are you sure about that?”

“Absolutely.”

My phone dings again. I look down and do everything possible not to pick it up.

“That’s her, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say, unwilling to lie. Not that it mattered, Simon sniffed out liars like a bloodhound finds criminals.

“You two in a relationship then?”

“Well, no, not officially.”

Simon nods. “Fooling around?”

Another ding. *Answer me, Luca. Please.* After a subtle moment of relaxation, Simon gestures towards the phone.

I snatch it off the table and nearly choke on my breath.

Kelsey: *Better yet, I want to taste your cock. I want explore the hard ridges with my tongue, feel your hot skin in my mouth.*

A bloom of heat rushes across my cheeks. I toss the phone onto the couch and breathe deep, trying desperately to compartmentalize my thoughts. “What did you ask me,” I say with a strangled voice.

“You are in no way offering any sort of professional advice in exchange for this fooling around?” Simon’s face goes from hopeful to serious. “Because six months ago, you sat in my office and passionately told me you’ve always been strictly professional with every player you’ve ever counseled.”

“That was true then,” I say, my skin prickling uncomfortably. “And it’s still true now.” Even if what we’re doing is

between consenting adults, I understand the perception. What it would mean to the licensing board. What it would mean for rebuilding my career.

“And six months ago I believed you,” Simon says, leaning back in the chair. “Even when the young lady accusing you of this same type of behavior made some very detailed and convincing statements against you.”

The rush of bad feelings is enough to blunt the overwhelming horniness. Like a refreshing summer rain, it clears my mind enough to allow me to focus on Simon. “She was mentally unstable and completely whacked out. I was nothing but professional with her. I even recorded our sessions so people could see her behavior.”

“I agree. Which is the reason why you still have your license. But where one could be an outlier, two becomes a pattern, understand?”

“Yes. Completely.”

Simon exhales deeply, stands, and walks over to me, his reedy, well-dressed frame casting an unlikely, imposing figure. “I think you’re a fantastic psychologist. The best one I ever had come through my office.”

“Thank you,” I say automatically.

Simon grimaces. “But I can’t give you any more chances Luca. You willing to give up everything for this girl?”

I nod.

“If this little *thing* gets out,” he says, waving a limp finger at my phone. “Or if I even hear a rumor of you being with your clients, I’m pulling your license and you won’t practice in this country again.”

My voice is quiet but calm. “I understand.”

He pats my chest and heads for the door. “I won’t mention this to Louis. We both know he’s still sensitive about this topic. And I convinced the volunteer that I would handle

this matter, being on the board and all, and made sure they went home with an extra swag bag.”

“Thank you.”

He turns to me with a sad smile. “You’re a good looking guy, Luca. If you want, I can introduce you to any number of pretty daughters at the club.” He adjusts his glasses. “None of them would cause you any trouble, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I say quietly.

Simon frowns. “So be it. You sure this isn’t professional?”

“I’m sure.”

“I hope so, Luca. Fool me once and all that shit.” Simon takes a breath. “Will I see you on Sunday?”

It takes a moment to register his words and then the light bulb clicks. “The hospital? Yes, I will be there, first thing.”

“Good,” Simon says with a smile. “You should be proud of the program you’ve built, there’s a lot of good work going on.”

His words are hollow. Truth was, the hospital program did nothing for me. I could drop it tomorrow. But until my client list came back, it paid the bills. “Nice to hear.”

“I’ll bring along a new intern, fresh from London. Gorgeous Pakistani girl.” Simon opens the door and stares me down. “Eager for a *close* mentor relationship.” He smiles a dirty old man smile. “Good night.”

The door shuts behind Simon without ceremony.

From behind me, a siren wails on Avenue Generale. The low thrum of bass from next door bounces off the walls. I sit in the middle of my apartment, unable to keep a straight thought in my head. The Devil and Angel war with each other, neither able to convince each other of anything.

I grab the phone and my fingers hover over the keyboard for what seems like an eternity. I listen as the angel makes a pitch. *She isn’t worth it. You have a career to rebuild. Bills to pay.*

Luca: Still there?

Kelsey: For another minute. The water just turned off. You didn't say anything about my text earlier.

Luca: Sorry. Unexpected visitor. Was a little distracted.

Kelsey: Oh, everything okay?

Luca: Yeah, everything's fine. Before you go, I want to make a plan for tomorrow night.

Kelsey: All ears. And everything else.

I smile. The angel in me screams even louder. *It's a waste of time! You don't know if this girl is worth it! Stop right now!*

My fingers ignore my brain.

Luca: Do you like lingerie?

Kelsey: Maybe. (Wink wink.)

Luca: Can you meet me at Sabbia Rosa at 8:30pm? It's the finest shop in Paris. My treat.

Kelsey takes a minute to respond. The breath seizes in my chest and my heart rate increases. Did Clara come out? I didn't like hiding in my apartment. I'd prefer to go over there and talk to her face to face. But I'd honor Kelsey words. Clara was her challenge.

Fortunately, the text bubbles appear on screen.

Kelsey: Wait, so all you're going to do is take me shopping?

Grinning, the Devil and I kick the Angel off my shoulder. Kelsey was worth it. Worth everything. I hammer out my response and press send.

Luca: No. Not even close.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kelsey

4 days before Final

WITH THE VISION OF LUCA WRAPPED IN MY LEGS, PRESSING his erection against my wanting need, I toss the ball high into the air and hammer the final point past Amarosa Garcia for the victory.

We hug briefly at the net just as the first big drops of summer rain begin to fall. I waive to the crowd and grab my stuff, looking up into the seats to where Luca sat before. Wearing the same baseball cap and sunglasses, he claps politely then leaves his seat as if he left the stove on.

The post-round interviews happen in a strobe-filled blur. With only four girls left, there's more reporters and more questions. Three girls are supposed to be here. I'm not. So I'm the topic de jour. Clara Chalmers' little sister finally grown up, trying to be like Clara. One reporter even goes so far to ask if I think I can beat Savannah Steele. I laugh

politely and remind her I'm playing Camillie Jannessen in the next round, not Savannah. One day at a time I hear myself saying. Focus on practice and recovery.

Down the line.

In the locker room, I tune Clara out. I nod in all the right places, but I'm entirely focused on Luca. Maddening as it was, he'd kept his promise. Not a peep.

But tonight is the night I finally get to see him and my mind and body are a live wire of anticipation.

Wrapping fresh grip tape around the handle of my racket, Clara looks at me, her mouth curling into the briefest of smiles. "You were hitting it pretty hard out there. How are you feeling? Is your shoulder okay?"

Normally, halfway through a tournament, my legs and shoulder feel like they've been putting through a mashing machine. "Feeling great," I say, taking off my sweats and sweatshirt. "But I'm still going to get into the ice bath."

Clara looks at me shocked. "Really?"

"Yeah. We both know Camillie is a hundred times tougher than Amarosa. I'm going to need to be at my peak so I can beat her and there's hardly any rest before Friday."

My words lift Clara's spirits. She stands a little taller as she slips one racket into the thermo bag and takes out a backup racket to retape. As I grab a towel, she gives me a sisterly glance. I'm not forgiven for my stunt in the museum, but I'm at least on my way.

The ice baths are down the hall in the training room. I put earbuds into my ears and find the best post-match music in the world, Beyonce. Muttering a string of obscenities under my breath, I slip into the torturously cold tub and reach for my phone.

I bring up Luca's number, now listed as my favorite pizza delivery place in Los Angeles to throw Clara off the scent, and type out a quick message.

Kelsey: Looking forward to tonight.

I hold my breath and wait for the bubbles to appear on the screen. When nothing comes, I'm not disappointed. His silence allows my mind to wander, to dream of things I'd be embarrassed to tell anyone.

With Beyonce's sultry voice in the background, I close my eyes and fantasize about Luca. I imagine being inside his apartment, warm golden sunlight spilling through the windows, the Paris Open trophy on the bed next me and Luca's hot tongue gliding over my pussy.

As the world goes on below us, Luca takes his time, sending electricity surging through my body, turning everything on to want, to need more. As I tighten my fingers in his hair, he builds my pleasure, nice and steady, responding to the rhythm of my hips moving up and down, adding to every stroke of his tongue. When my breath becomes sharp and quick, he focuses his work around the hood, sending quick, intense zaps of electricity through my legs. A deep, primal feeling starts to rise in my abdomen, spreading to every corner of my body.

The pleasure Luca gives me turns into strength. As I eagerly grind myself against him, creating bliss from the depths of my soul, I can feel myself change, unlocking a level I didn't know was possible.

I imagine pushing Luca's head lower, until he's exploring my entrance with his tongue. My legs shiver and start to quake. Without needing a hint, he speeds up, pulling the sensation up to the surface, rising, ready to breach...

The door to the training room slams open. Eyes flying open, I shriek and slosh around to try and cover myself.

My opponent, Amarosa Garcia, looks at me suspiciously as she drops her towel and slides into her tub without a word.

After a few deep breaths to recover, I step out of the tub, grab my own towel and run back down to my locker.

Clara's nowhere to be found. I quickly glance at my phone, but there's nothing. Not from Clara or Luca.

With a stupid grin, I quickly put on my clothes. As I do, I feel the benefits of Luca's ideas. I'm powerful and lithe, a force to be reckoned with. The thought makes me giggle.

Clara rounds the corner of the locker room. "Hey. Just got finished talking with Sean," she says, pushing the phone in her back pocket and looking forlorn. "Both the twins just walked by themselves, like at the same time." She lets out a wistful sigh. "Soon enough, we're going to be in real trouble."

"Awh," I say supportively, reaching for her arm. "Don't worry, you'll see them in a couple of days."

"Yeah, true," she says, shaking her head to clear the mistiness in her eyes. "Anyway, ready to go? I hear the selection on the hotel television is excellent tonight."

"I'll buy the lean and green," I say with a polite smile. I understand what Clara is giving up to be here with me. But I also don't need the guilt trip.

Even as we get in the courtesy car and drive off the grounds, I'm already thinking how I'm going to sneak out.



AT 8:15, CLARA DOES ME A FAVOR AND PUTS HERSELF TO BED early with a bottle of water and Ambien. A little while later, I tiptoe out of the room and run for the elevator. Outside, warm summer rain smacks the pavement as I raise my arm in the darkness towards to the approaching cab.

The cab stops with a squeal of brakes and I clamor in.

"Sabbia Rosa," I say, wringing out my hair. "And hurry."

He looks at me suspiciously, no doubt trying to put the pieces of a wet American wearing sweatpants together with a

lingerie shop. Thankfully, he just shrugs his shoulders and pulls into heavy traffic.

I pull my phone from my pocket and find Luca.

Kelsey: *Will be a few minutes late, but mother's out like a light.*

Luca doesn't immediately respond, so I drop the phone on the seat and look through the rivulets of water on the window at the people passing on the street. Despite the rain, couples huddle close to each other in the cafes, nibbling and laughing in one other's ears. On the sidewalks, they walk quickly underneath small umbrellas, the rain glistening golden from light in the windows.

A giddy smile spreads across my face as I imagine Luca and I bunched together, arm in arm, running for some unknown location. Somewhere deep down, a piece of my heart cements my feelings for him.

My phone dings. I grab it quickly, making sure he's okay with me being late. Instead of Luca, it's a text from Barbora Strycova, who I've trained with in the offseason and, like me, was still in the tournament.

The smile disappears from my face while I read her message.

Barbora: *Rumor is you're with Luca Wilde. Not my place, but he's a total manipulator and a fraud. Get away from him while you can.*

My body goes cold. With leaden fingers, I type:

Kelsey: *What do you mean?*

Barbora: *Look up Alize Bencic. Gotta go.*

The sudden crunch of brakes makes me look up. A stream of red taillights flows in front of the cab.

Smiling, the cabbie says into the rearview mirror. “Tis construction ahead. Will be a few minutes. Sorry.”

“Sure,” I mutter, face falling back into the phone.

“You okay? You look like someone died.”

I ignore him and quickly google Alize Bencic and Luca Wilde. My breath stops when I read the first article from the Paris Gazette.

“Ever heard of Alize Bencic,” I ask the cabbie without looking up from my screen. The name sounds familiar, scratching at the outer edges of my brain.

“No,” he says as a question. “Should I?”

“She was a tennis player. On the Future’s tour.”

“Afraid tennis is not my sport. Is that who you are going to meet?”

“She’s dead,” I say flatly. “An overdose last year.”

“That’s terrible.”

Holding my breath, I read more of the article. Alize’s struggles. Luca’s professional guidance. The mention of security camera footage showing Alize nude in Luca’s office makes me sick to my stomach. I roll down the window for some fresh air. How did I miss this, I scream at myself. How did I not know?

I’m tempted to reach for the door when I scroll down a little further. I gasp when I see Alize’s photo and her dark, serious expression.

“What’s the matter,” the cabbie asks, inching the car down the street.

I look up at the cabbie. “I knew that girl.”

“That’s terrible,” he says smiling, but lost in the conversation.

The sick knot in my stomach starts to subside and I let

out a strangled laugh. “No, it’s okay. Well, I mean, no, it’s bad, but you want to know something?”

“I have nowhere to go,” the cabbie says with a grin.

“What’s your name?”

“Pierre.”

“Nice to meet you Pierre. My name’s Kelsey. A couple of years ago, I was up in Toronto for a tournament.” I shrug my shoulders. “Actually, I’d failed to qualify and was spending the night in my car.”

Pierre opens his mouth to say something, but a horn blasts behind us, urging us to move. Pierre obliges silently with a wave of his hand.

“I was parked at this sidewalk next to a club and this girl came stumbling out. She went right up to me, got in the car and told me to drive. I was too shocked to say no.”

My phone dings. It’s Luca. My heart swells.

Luca: *You didn’t drug her, did you?*

“Why did she get in your car,” Pierre asks, turning onto a side street.

I laugh and reply back to Luca, feeling the blood flow again. “Apparently, she had called for an Uber, but she was so drunk she forgot and thought I was it.”

Kelsey: *She drugged herself. Now passed traffic jam. Pierre is bringing me to you, post haste.*

“Alize was a total wreck in the car. Drinking, drugs, babbling on and on about screwing all these men.”

“Sounds like a peach,” Pierre says sarcastically.

“She was especially focused on this one guy, said he was some kind of shrink.”

Luca texts back and my smile brightens.

Luca: Waiting patiently. Looking at lots of fun toys.

“Kept going on and on about how she was trying to have him, throwing herself at him, begging for it.”

Pierre stops momentarily before turning onto a narrow cobblestone street. “Interesting. Does that mean something?”

“To me,” I say with a laugh. “You wouldn’t believe how filthy this girl was. Granted, she was drunk out of her mind, but she kept blasting him for saying no. Like any man could refuse her.”

I quickly glance through a follow-up article about the court finding Luca innocent and the struggles to put his career back together.

“Sounds like a smart man to me,” Pierre says, slowing the car.

“A good man,” I say, holding the phone to my chest.

Pierre stops in the middle of a row of white-washed stone buildings without any signage.

“Sabbia Rosa,” I ask.

“Wie,” the cab driver nods, pointing to a small black door. “Sabbia Rosa.”

“You sure,” I say, gently teasing him.

Pierre looks back at me, grinning. “Wie. Was here last week with the missus,” he says wiggling the golden ring on his finger. “It ‘tis very good store for the boom-boom.”

I smile at Pierre. “How long you been married?”

“Twenty-two years,” he says with a smile.

“Amazing,” I say, reaching for the door. When I see the sparkle in his eye, I hesitate. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Did you know right away that she was the one?”

Pierre smiles. “Wie. She sat right about where you are now.”

“Is that how you met?”

“Well, yes, but it wasn’t that day,” he says with a laugh. “She had her nose buried in a textbook. Didn’t even see me.”

“How did you meet then?”

Pierre’s smile grows. He reaches over and stops the meter. “A couple weeks later, I see the same textbook in her arm as she waves me down. The minute she gets in, book goes up in front of her face. It’s called Human Anatomy and there’s a picture of a skeleton on it. So, I say, ‘what do skeletons say before eating?’”

“What,” I ask.

“Bone Appetit,” Pierre chuckles. “But she doesn’t say anything. Disappointed, I turn back and drive in silence. After a few minutes, I hear, ‘Why don’t skeletons eat much?’ I look in the mirror and I see a beautiful face looking back at me with a goofy grin. I knew from that one look that we were meant to be.”

I reach out and squeeze his arm. “Thank you.” Without another word, I pay him and run for the door.

Inside, the air is warm and smells like a mix of perfume and vanilla. Luca stands at the counter, chatting friendly with the clerk and testing a small metal clamp with a black rubber end.

Enjoying the delicious shiver in my belly, I take a deep breath and stroll up to him.

“I hear those are good for hanging Christmas Cards,” I say as casually as ordering coffee from Starbucks.

Luca turns to me with a warm smile. “Funny.” He puts the clamp down, slips an arm around my waist and kisses my neck softly. “They’re not for Christmas cards though.” He leans in and whispers warm into my ear. “It’s for your clitoris.” My pulse doubles at his words. “Do you like a little bit of pain?”

“Sometimes,” I whisper. “If it’s with someone I trust.”

“Mmm, good to know,” Luca mutters. “Maybe one day I’ll be able to earn that trust.”

Before he lets me get out a word, he kisses slowly and deeply. It's everything a kiss should be and combined with the sight of him playing with clamps, my body is heated and ready for action.

"You're on your way," I whisper.

Luca pulls away and looks at me with a grin that's not just sex. It takes me by surprise and even scares me when it hits a little close to the heart.

I open my mouth to say something but a grotesque image of Luca and Alize in his office flashes in my brain. I grimace and try to dismiss it. Luca cocks his head to one side quizzically.

"Everything okay," he asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Good. Congratulations on your win today. Once again, you looked amazing out there."

When he squeezes my hand and the look fades, I take a deep breath. "You're only saying that to get in my pants," I come back with a flirty roll of my eyes.

He looks down at the heavy cotton material and smiles. "You're mistaken. I'm trying to get you *out* of those sweat pants," he says in a low, rumbling tone that turns up my heat.

"How dare you," I say, wide eyed in fake disgust.

Luca pulls me away from the counter with a gentle tug, keeping his hand clasped in mine, a simple gesture that seems just right.

"Come on then," he says. "Let's go explore."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Luca

AROUND US, SABBIA ROSA IS QUIET BUT NOT empty.

A few other couples wander around, fingers grazing the fabrics on the racks and materials on the heavy wooden tables. They stick close together, whispering suggestions into each other's ears, making jokes, playfully exploring each other's limits and deepening their connection to each other.

But I can't help but wonder if they see Kelsey and match her with the girl on the front of the sports section, the surprise of the tournament, the only other story besides Savannah Steele.

Holding up a sheer black lace bra with delicate flowers stitched into the sides, Kelsey looks back at me and smiles. "I like this one."

One photo and we're front page news.

"You have good taste," I say with an expert nod. "Hand stitched by the nuns of Saint Trinity in Marseille. Paris' finest seamstresses."

Kelsey looks at me, shocked. "Really?"

I shrug my shoulders. "No idea actually."

Kelsey laughs, her deep brown eyes sparkling in the low light. It's a face that washes away any of the threats from Simon or Louis. It's a face that takes my troubles away, a face that gives me a direction.

"What about this one," I ask jokingly, pulling out a garish red, feathery thing.

Kelsey wrinkles her nose in disgust. "Looks like a Mrs. Claus drag show number."

I pull a pale blue bra off the table next to the rack. "I think this would look a thousand times better on you."

Rubbing the silky fabric in between her fingers, Kelsey says, "I would actually wear this."

I lean in and graze her ear with my lips. "There's rooms over there to try them on."

"What fun is that," Kelsey retorts. "I'd be all by myself."

"I'd be in there with you."

Kelsey raises an eyebrow. "Now that sounds more fun."

"We French know that things like this should be done together." I wrap my hands around her waist and kiss her. "And I don't plan on only watching."

I hear Kelsey's breath catch in her throat. Without a word, I let her go and move further down the table, picking through some more bras. When I turn and look back, heat flushes her cheeks and her eyes sparkle wickedly.

"God, you're dangerous," she says.

Grinning, I keep moving down the rows. "Why's that?"

"Because everything you say makes me want you more."

A cool smile spreads across my face. I study the tags on the merchandise like there's a secret code hidden inside. The two sides of my brain continue to war with each other. With Kelsey's words, the side attached to my heart is in the lead.

I look up at her. "That's good, because I want more of you."

Cheeks reddening, Kelsey searches me for any hint of bullshit. “What do you mean by that,” she asks quietly.

I walk back and close the space between us. Kelsey holds her breath and locks eyes with me. “Whatever this is between us, it’s the start of something. Not just a stupid experiment. Something real. I want tonight to be what we look back on and say, that’s when we knew.”

The thought is powerful and unnerving. It’s against everything I’ve been working for. After my office burned to the ground, I avowed to rebuild my career, starting with the people of Paris. My neighbors. The kids on the street. Then come back to the tour.

Now I was ready to leave it all?

It would certainly solve my problem with Kelsey. I’d be free. No guilt. No worry.

Kelsey looks at me and flashes a warm, sultry smile that makes me weak in the knees. No one’s ever gotten me like she has and I’m not so dense to miss the significance.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” she says with a low laugh.

“You don’t have to be. Whenever it is, next week, next month, next year. Just know I’ll be waiting for you.”

With a smile, Kelsey looks down at the table. “There you go again,” she says. “Saying amazing things that melt me into a puddle.”

“So you agree with me then?”

Kelsey hesitates. “I don’t know yet,” she says with a sparkle in her eye. “Why don’t you pick something else out and we’ll worry about it later.”

Before I can answer, she reaches up and kisses me, like she trying to assure me of something she doesn’t want to say. She pulls back and flashes an amazing grin.

Feeling good, I look around on the table. The first thing that catches my eye is unexpected, but perfect. I grab it and

hold it up, making sure the sparkling gold thong is on full display, the thick bulge for male support. "I think this is perfect on me."

Kelsey lets out a laugh that travels through the store. A couple of people look our way. I see them recognize Kelsey and then whisper to themselves. My chest freezes for a second before they go back to their business, oblivious to us.

"You okay," she asks, laughing. "You suddenly look like you've seen a ghost."

"Yeah," I say thickly. "Suddenly thought of a work thing."

Kelsey faces falls. "Oh, is it important?"

I reach out and grab for her hand. It's warm and fits mine perfectly. "No, absolutely not important."

Letting out a large breath, Kelsey relaxes. She squeezes my hand and that sultry smile spreads across her face again. As she tugs me towards the dressing rooms, I start thinking about writing the email to Simon, one email to completely change my life, and the thought warms me to my toes.

I catch up to Kelsey and wrap my arms tightly around her waist. She squeals as I lift her up and carry her towards the dressing rooms. Laughing, I put her down in front of the attendant, who stares at us with cold eyes.

"Trying something on," she says flatly.

"Yes," Kelsey says sheepishly.

I hold up my golden thong. "Me too."

The attendant snaps a key from the desk and rolls her eyes. "This way."

Inside, the dressing room is large with a bench along one wall and a dressing screen on the other. Enough mirrors almost give the room a funhouse effect.

I tip the attendant a ten franc and then lock the door. As I turn, Kelsey slides one hand around my neck and kisses me tenderly, then firmly. I slip my hand around her waist and kiss her back.

“You’re amazing,” I say hoarsely.

Kelsey flashes a foolish grin. “We haven’t even started yet.”

I’m tempted to spill everything in my head, but I keep it firmly bottled up. Down the line, I laugh to myself. When she wins, the time will be right. Until then, stay focused.

“Ready to see this thong,” I whisper.

Kelsey laughs and shakes her head. “God, no. It’s hideous.” She puts a finger in my chest and moves me back towards the bench. “You sit. I’ll be right back.”

I walk back to bench, keeping a eye on Kelsey the whole time. She disappears behind the privacy screen with a wink. Sitting down on the bench, I breathe deep, trying to quell the trembling in my chest. I try to think about everything else instead of what’s behind the screen. Would that mean selling my condo? Finding another job? Getting another license?

“You ready,” Kelsey asks.

“Absolutely.”

“Here we go.”

There’s a momentary pause and then I see a flash of skin come around the corner of the screen. When I see her, my heart stops.

Kelsey stands in front of me, hands on hips, wearing nothing but a smile.

CHAPTER NINE

Kelsey

LUCA'S REACTION CAUSES A POWERFUL SMILE TO spread across my face. I stand there and let his eager eyes drink in my body. He spends a few seconds taking in all the bits and pieces, but then locks onto my eyes and doesn't let go. I see the appreciation of me as a whole woman and it takes my breath away.

"Surprise," I whisper.

"Si belle," Luca says in a low, sexy rumble. "Tu es si belle."

His words sends a delicious shiver through my belly. "You really think I'm beautiful?"

Luca stands and runs a hand through his hair, the unbelievable smile plastered to his face. "Yes." His erection strains against the fabric of his jeans. I shiver as he approaches, a mix of nervousness and overwhelming arousal. He touches his forehead to mine, his lips so achingly close. "You okay," he asks quietly. "You're shaking."

I nuzzle his neck and inhale his scent, cool and crisp, like morning on the ocean. "I'm okay."

He pulls back and looks at me with concern. "We can stop if you want."

I reach around the back of his neck and pull his head down to mine, meeting my lips with his. "I don't want to stop. It's just that you make me a little nervous." With my other hand, I wrap my hand around his erection and squeeze. A low groan escapes his throat. "In a good way."

"Trust me, I will protect you," Luca says.

"Then kiss me again."

Without hesitation, Luca holds my face in his long, powerful hands and kisses me. My body lights up like a Christmas tree, every cell and molecule begging for sex. I let out a whimper and Luca responds by kissing me again, deeper, like he's trying to satisfy me with a kiss.

It almost works.

I press tight against him, rubbing the long rock in his pants. Luca runs his hands down my back, every movement shooting electricity down to my pussy. Through the wildfire of arousal, I ask, "no sex, right?"

"No," Luca rasps, gently kissing the tender skin my neck. "No sex. Teasing. Exploring." To illustrate his point, he dips his head down and takes one of my nipples in between his teeth and gives it a little tug. "Remember, the more you want sex, the more strength you'll have."

I skim the top of his jeans with my fingers, feeling the soft trail of hair over his hard abs. I slide my hand down in his underwear and graze the tip of his penis, smiling at the feeling of his hot, soft skin. Luca closes his eyes and groans. "Teasing is okay," I say, feeling the large veins around his shaft. "As long as I eventually get to have this."

Luca looks at me and smiles. "Soon enough."

I remove my hand and kiss him, falling hard for how perfectly my hands fit around his neck without effort, like they

were meant to be there. A dangerous flash of emotion washes through me. Instead of panicking, I let it stay with me, let it mix with my arousal, creating a feeling I've never quite felt before.

And when Luca grazes my cheek with his thumb, a tender, vulnerable smile of his face, I know it's the only feeling I ever want again.

"My turn," he whispers.

Luca plants small kisses down the side of my neck. My nipples perk in anticipation and a trail of sensation goes all the way down to my pussy, the exact path I want him to kiss. But when he reaches my collarbone, he moves out past my shoulder and then around to my back. As he plants warm, tender kisses on the large deltoids and trapezius, a hitch of self consciousness catches in my throat. They're the worst part of me, so unfeminine, but necessary for my career. I squirm and try to move him lower to where I want to be kissed.

"What's the matter," Luca whispers, hands sliding to my hips, kissing the deep ridges on my back.

"I'm not sexy back there."

He tenderly runs his lips over the hollow of my lower back, tongue exploring the seam of my ass. "You're sexy all over."

"The trolls on the Internet don't think so," I say hoarsely, the flames of my arousal intensifying.

"Fucking idiots," Luca says, running his fingers along my hip bones, following the deep crease of my lower abdominals, slowly reaching for my pussy. "All of them."

My legs wobble from the intensity. I want his hands everywhere at once, worshiping me like no one has before. "Other men left my bed. Called me Hulk."

Luca stands and slides his hand over my mound. I gasp at the rush of sensation and grab at his head behind me. "I mean

it when I say you're beautiful. I would never kick you out of my bed."

He gently kisses my neck as he pinches the hood of my pleasure between his fingers. I cry out and nearly topple over from the surge of pleasure. Someone taps on the door and a muffled female French accent fills the room.

"Madame, is everything okay in there?"

I open my mouth to say something, but then Luca releases my clit and swirls it around with gentle fingers, short circuiting any words on my tongue.

"We're okay in here," he says, kissing the sensitive skin behind my ear. "Just tripped on something."

"Let us know if you need anything," the voice says after a short pause. Sharp heel clicks move away quickly.

"You're going to get us caught darling."

"You said these rooms were for couples."

"Yes, but only to see the merchandise."

"Then you better stop right now," I purr, working my pussy against his fingers. Luca continues to leave his hand against me. A devilish smile spreads across my face. "That's what I thought. I want you inside me," I whisper.

"Tempting," Luca whispers, his breath hot against my skin. "Very tempting."

Luca puts his hand in the middle of my back and pushes me to the wall, bending me at my hips. I widen my legs and look back at him trembling, face full of pulsating heat. He stares back, focused on me, watching my pleasure.

"Tell me if you're going to come," he says.

I nod and watch his hand follow the curve of my ass, slide past the forbidden knot between my cheeks and find my wet heat. I moan and press back against his fingers, needing them inside me, wanting them to stroke the pressure inside me, to build it up, to help it release.

But Luca is unwilling to give it to me yet. He strokes

each one of my lips, pulling on the soft hair on the outside, exploring the wet creases on the inside. The level of arousal keeps building, way past a point I've ever felt before. It's as if he's trying to turn on every single cell in my body. It's maddening and powerful all at the same time. I can feel more of my body than I ever have. Every sharp breath pulls me to a place in my body I've never explored before.

"You're a goddamn tease," I say with an angry groan. "Give me more."

Luca flashes a knowing smile, keeping his eyes locked on mine as his fingers move slowly around my opening. Feeling the tips of his strong fingers so close to the needy flesh inside me makes me whimper.

"Donne le moi."

Before I can say anything, he slides his fingers inside me. I let out a huge gasp. I greedily push back, taking more of him in me. I keep my eyes locked on his, watching our connection. Every time he moves his hand back and forth, he builds the heavy pressure inside my core. My legs begin to tremble and my breath becomes short. Luca keeps his steady rhythm, building the heavy pressure. I close my eyes, focusing solely on my pleasure. After a second, I feel his thumb pressing firmly against my forbidden skin. The dual sensation makes the pressure surge, freeing it to release, rushing it to the surface.

"Stop," I gasp. "Stop!"

Luca stops his movements, leaving his hand still until the build up of pleasure starts to subside. I whimper at the loss of feeling as he slowly moves his hand away.

"That was close," Luca whispers.

I'm about to respond when there's a loud knock on the door.

"Whoever you are," an impatient voice comes through the

wood. It's the same lady from before. "I must insist you stop whatever you're doing in there and leave."

I shoot Luca a whoopsies look. He grins and shrugs, handing me my sweatpants.

"I'll be out in a second," I say, tugging them on quickly.

Luca pulls on his blazer and fishes out a pair of sunglasses. "Here," he whispers. "Wear these. We don't need anyone to recognize you."

Giggling, I put on the sunglasses and pull the hood onto my head, tucking my hair into a ratty knot. Satisfied with my camouflage, I open the door and see the angry French woman standing next to the door, arms crossed. "Mi scuse," I say quietly, ducking through the door and out into the shop. Luca's voice rumbles behind me, "forgive us" and together we walk quickly out of the shop and into the night.

Outside, the rain has stopped and the bright yellow lights of Paris reflect in the pools on the cobblestone streets. Luca grabs my hand.

"Let me give you a ride to your hotel," he says, smiling like a teenager.

"No," I say with a grin. "I need to walk. If I get in the car with you, I won't be able to stop myself."

"It's more than a half hour."

"I'll walk all night if I have to."

"A kiss goodnight then?"

I hesitate for a moment. One kiss couldn't hurt, right? No. I was fooling myself. One kiss was all it would take. I kiss the palm of my hand and blow it to him. He clutches his heart like he's been stabbed and stumbles backwards. I turn without another look and start walking down the street.

"Win big," I hear Luca call out from behind me. "I'll be there cheering you on."

CHAPTER TEN

Kelsey

2 days before Final

SHORTLY AFTER THE WATER IN THE SHOWER TURNS ON, I yank the phone from my sweatshirt and hammer out a message.

Kelsey: 6-0, 6-0. Not bad, huh?

With one eye looking at the bathroom door, I chew on my lip and wait for an answer. Impatient, I hammer out another message, one that sends a delicious shiver into my belly.

Kelsey: All I thought about was your hands on my pussy. Bet your tongue feels even better.

A stifled moan escapes from the bathroom. Shaking my

head, I grab the remote and turn up the volume on the television. On the screen, a girl breaks down after not receiving the red rose of ridiculousness. I roll my eyes and sip a protein shake.

My prize for my biggest victory to date, a fifty-four minute whipping of Camillie Jannessen, was being kidnapped by my big sister and made to stay in my hotel room.

I shift the ice packs around on my knees and wait for Luca to respond. I don't need the ice packs, they are to keep Clara happy. My body is strong and taunt as bridge cable. It's operating on a different level, supercharged by Luca.

Even Camillie noticed. When she walked up to the net, she asked what happened to the old Kelsey. Keep it up, she said, and you'll beat Savannah on Sunday.

I agree. Confident as I am, the thought terrifies me.

My phones chirps. I look down and let out a defeated exhale. My aunt Susan congratulates me with a hundred heart emojis. I send her a quick thanks and then figure out what I'm going to tell Luca next.

I've already told him a little white lie. While Camillie was running all over the court, I was thinking of more than what we could with our bodies. While I sat in between sets, towel draped over my face, my heart and brain started a war over Luca, entrenching themselves deeply on either side of the line, no accord to be found. As I raised my hand and racket to the crowd, the thought popped into my head for the first time.

What about next week?

I don't want to tell Luca. The whole point was focus on the moment. Don't look ahead. Luca would chastise me. Even Clara's voice pops into my brain.

Down the line.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to come up with an answer, to settle the debate.

Next week is Luxembourg. The Swiss Masters. Problem solved.

But, my heart says, it's only two and a half hours by train. You could see Luca at night and be back to play in the day.

I drop the phone with two messages in my brain. One sappy, one fit for a porno. Part of me is glad he's not responding, because I don't really know what to say. But his restraint, his silence, turns me on even more.

Burying my face in the starchy hotel pillow, I let out a growl. Why did I let my brain and heart get involved? My pussy was doing just fine calling the shots.

Next to me, a muffled chime.

Luca.

Luca: *Can't wait to get my tongue on you. I bet you taste delicious.*

A stupid grin spreads across my face and my heart beats a little faster. I grab the phone and roll onto my back.

Kelsey: *Hi. I was hoping you would answer.*

Luca: *Not getting you in trouble am I?*

I look over at the bathroom door. The steady whoosh of water bleeds through the door.

Kelsey: *I have a few minutes. I needed to talk to you.*

Luca: *You have my full attention. What's going on?*

I chew on my lip and my fingers hover over the keyboard as my brain, heart and girlie bits make their final pitches. Ultimately, I choose none of them and all of them.

Kelsey: *My mind is a mess. I've never made a Slam final. And against Savannah Steele of all people.*

Luca: *You can beat Savannah. You know you can. I know you can.*

Kelsey: *I know. Well, I think I know. It's just every time I think about it, I get overwhelmed. I need you to distract me.*

Luca: *How can I do that?*

Kelsey: *Fill my head with good thoughts. New thoughts.*

Luca: *Like what?*

Kelsey: *Tell me exactly what you're going to do to me when I win on Sunday.*

Luca takes a minute to respond.

Luca: *How about you come over and I whisper it into your ear?*

My brain screams at me that it's a terrible idea. The rest of me yells at my brain to shut the hell up. I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

Kelsey: *Can't. Clara promised something called 'complete blackout.' Whatever that is. I probably won't see you until after the match is over.*

Damn you, Clara.

Luca: *If that's the case, we should make plans now. Are you leaving same day or the next day?*

Kelsey: *Next day. Taking the train to Luxembourg.*

I listen for the shower, which still runs. I shake my head and worry about the water supply of France.

Luca: *Good. Then when you're done winning, meet me at my place? Apartments Triomphe.*

Heart rate tripling, I quickly type out my response.

Kelsey: *It's a date.*

I'm in the middle of typing something else when another message from Luca appears on the screen.

Luca: *Excellent. And what about next week?*

The words race directly to my heart. I type out a message with shaky fingers.

Kelsey: *What do you mean?*

His words are immediate.

Luca: *I want to see you next week too. If you want me to of course. I could meet you in Luxembourg. Do you want me to come with?*

Before I can answer, I realize the water in bathroom is off. The door handle turns as I jam the phone in my sweatshirt.

Clara emerges wrapped in a fluffy white robe, ringing water out her hair, and wearing a large smile on her face. "I so needed that," she says breathlessly. "The water pressure in this hotel is *amazing*."

My heart hammers in my chest as she rummages around in her bag for clean clothes. "You can ditch those ice packs now. It's been long enough."

"Sure," I squeak, trying to get my breathing under control.

Dressing with military efficiency, Clara belly flops on the

bed next to me, her wet hair spraying me with dozens of tiny droplets. “I have to say Kels, I have never seen you play better tennis than what you did today.”

Instead of words, I clear my throat and nod, praying that Luca doesn't text me again.

“You've just exploded in this tournament. I mean, I'm just amazed. I really am. I was worried about you earlier, but I can see now, what we are doing is about to pay off.”

“All thanks to you,” I whisper, wishing to my very core that Sean would call her immediately so I could cover my tracks. “Have you called Sean tonight,” I suggest.

Clara waves me off. “Already did. Besides, as of right now, we are in complete blackout mode. Only you and me for the next forty-eight hours. No television, no Internet.” Clara tucks some hair behind her ear. “We are going to practice, rest and fuel your body. The only person I want you to focus on is Savannah.” Clara reaches for her laptop on the nightstand. “I've got enough film on her to last us a week. You ready?”

I nod.

“Good, now turn off the television.”

The screen goes dark just before the last remaining girl and guy kiss on the beach. In the momentary silence, my phone chirps. I freeze and do everything in my power not to blush.

Clara glances over. “Phones too.”

“Yeah, sure,” I say breathlessly. I slide the phone from my pocket and reach for the power button. Before I can turn it off, another message appears on the screen. And then another.

Like some blonde Midwestern ninja, Clara snatches the phone out my hands before I have a chance to move. “Gimme.”

“Hey,” I snap, face flooding with anger. “Give me my phone!”

I lunge for her hands. Clara sees me coming, rolls off the bed, and springs up. “Kelsey,” she shouts. “What’s wrong with you?”

Because modern technology is stupid, my phone chirps again and the messages present themselves to Clara. I don’t know what they say or who they’re from, but the way Clara’s face hardens, I know exactly who it is.

A hundred apologies sit on my tongue. Instead, the only thing that comes out is, “Clara, wait.”

Clara looks up at me and I’m taken aback. There’s no anger. Big tears well in her eyes, her face falling. She smiles, struggling to put herself back together.

“Is this the same guy from the other day,” she asks quietly.

I lunge for the phone, but Clara backs away into a different corner of the room.

After quickly scrolling through our conversations, she looks up at me, broken and disappointed. “I told you to stay away from him Kels.”

“Let me explain.”

Clara shakes her head. “No. Don’t bother.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know exactly what you’re feeling right now.”

The lack of anger in her voice is unnerving. Clara’s default was yelling, just like our mom. Having it gone makes me boil over. “How do you know,” I shout. “You never once did anything on tour! You slept, practiced, slept! I never talked to you because you were always asleep!”

Clara laughs bitterly and stares up at the ceiling. “I wasn’t always like that.”

It takes me a minute to figure out something to say. Her words are loaded and I struggle to understand what they might mean. “What are you talking about?”

"You think my life was just about tennis?"

"Wasn't it," I ask, exasperated.

She bites her lip and shakes her head. Tears well up in her eyes. "No," she says with a bitter laugh. "I was right where you are. Same dopey thoughts in my head."

I open my mouth to yell at her but she holds her hand up.

"Remember when you were in high school and I was just starting on tour?"

I jam my fists on my hips without a word.

"Seems like forever ago," Clara quips. "But when I first started I felt exactly like you. That I could have both. The career. The men." She laughs wistfully. "I certainly had the men for sure."

My mouth falls open in shock. Clara blushes and shrugs her shoulders, her eyes focused squarely on me. "I'm not as prudish as you think, Kelsey. A young, single girl traveling all over the world is bound to *sample* the locals." She laughs to herself. "But doing that caused problems. During my second year, I even briefly got engaged in Brussels."

I take a step backwards, Clara's words hammering at me like runaway boulders. Feeling the edge of the bed, I sit down and stare numbly at the floor.

"His name was Christian and god, he was *beautiful*." Clara walks over and sits down next to me. "I said yes on our second date."

"Sounds amazing," I say without tone. "What was the problem?"

"Problem was I was still seeing two other men and a week after Christian proposed, I found out I was pregnant."

I snap my head up from the floor. "What," I shriek. "Oh my God!"

Clara wipes tears from her eyes. "Surprise," she laughs sarcastically, waving her hands around. "Your sister was a bit

of a whore.” She lashes at the tears with her hands. “Ain’t that some crazy shit?”

“But,” I studder stupidly. “Pregnant? *How?*”

Clara frowns. “Do I need to draw you a diagram? Turns out one of the other two had poked holes in his condoms.”

“So what happened?”

“I had to tell Christian. He freaked out and left. When I confronted the other two, the one from Morocco confessed and then ordered me to marry him.”

I bury my face in my hands and groan.

“I wasn’t going to have any of *that*, so I threw my phone in the river and disappeared on a train.”

The absurdity of the story bubbles over and I have to stifle a sick laugh. Clara, the saint of saints, the Mother Theresa of tennis was a basket full of drama.

Clara rubs her hands on her thighs. “A week later, I had an abortion and faked a back injury to cover it.”

“That’s what your back injury was? The one that kept you out all year? I remember Dad talking about it like it was the end of your career.”

“Didn’t matter because I was playing like shit anyway. I was so wrapped up and exhausted from the romance and the travel that I can barely function on the court. I wasn’t practicing, wasn’t even thinking about tennis at all. Yet, I would lie awake at night and berate myself because I knew I was better. I knew I should be winning.”

Clara’s words flow through my brain like a river without stopping, not knowing what to make of my sister’s confession.

Smoothing her hair, Clara takes a deep breath. “When I was recovering, I realized that in order to achieve something, you have to sacrifice. Whatever it is. Men. Money. A life. Everything and anything. So, I swore off men. I swore off friends and nights out. I practiced, slept and practiced some

more. I ate clean, gave up the booze and never missed a stretching session. And you know what?”

“You won,” I say numbly.

“I won. In Australia and in Paris. The next year...”

“New York and Paris again,” I interrupt.

Clara puts her arm around my shoulder and whispers in my ear. “I told you earlier Kels, a major trophy is better than any dick you could ever have. I truly mean it. Dicks betray you, okay? They lie. They stop *working* for crying out loud.”

She giggles and gives me a sisterly shove.

“I can have both,” I say quietly.

Her face stills and then grows dark. “Give him up Kelsey. You are running out of time. Girls are getting younger and faster. Give him up while you still have the chance.”

“I don’t want to.”

Clara looks up at the ceiling and lets out a vicious sigh. “Christ sakes,” she cries, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her body trembles, trying desperately to hold things together. “Okay, fine, I’ll make a deal. Win and you can have him, if he’s still around. But that means you stop seeing him until then. 48 hours. You can handle that, can’t you?”

Her words are a ultimatum, a salesman’s final offer. If I say no, she’ll break. Part of me wants to break her. Part of me wants her to stay.

I take a deep breath to steady the shaking in my chest. Clara’s words make sense, I get why she wants to protect me, but she doesn’t know I need more. She doesn’t want to listen. I am not Clara. “No,” I whisper. “I don’t want to. I want to see him tonight.”

Clara lets out a shriek that would make a banshee blush and grabs her head with her hands. “Oh my God, Kelsey! I’m trying to get you something nobody can ever take away from you! You don’t know what this guy will do! He could disappear next week!”

“I don’t care. I want to see him right now.”

“He’s using you Kelsey,” Clara shouts. “Don’t you see it? Your little thing is criminal!”

“Shut up! I’m sick of you telling me what to do!”

“Stay away from him,” Clara seethes through gritted teeth. “I mean it.”

“Fuck you,” I roar. “Leave me alone!”

Clara opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. She looks at me and I know I’ve broken her. After a deep breath, Clara looks around the room, her gaze settling on the fireplace.

Before I can move, Clara walks over and slams the phone into the sharp corner of the wooden mantle. The glass screen shatters and plastic things snap with a loud pop. She bends the thin metal in half and drops the phone on the ground.

“You’re so close Kels,” she whispers, her voice cracking. “But I can’t do this anymore. I quit. In the morning, I’m going home. Now, get out of my room.”

I stare dumbfounded at the dark pieces of screen littering the floor. A connection fractures in my head and I go cold. Instead of blistering anger, my body is leaden. I open my mouth to say something, but the words evaporate on my tongue. Clara sets her jaw and stares at me unblinking, eyes bright red and glistening.

My racket bag sits on the table. Without another look at Clara, I grab it and walk out the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Luca

SITTING AT MY DESK, MY OFFICE IS QUIET. THE clock on the computer tells me it's past dinner time, but the bag of kebabs I picked up sits cold next to me.

It's been a couple of hours since I last heard from Kelsey and I'm starting to worry. She won't answer any of my messages and I wonder if I've done anything wrong.

Did I go too far asking about Switzerland? Yes, that's it. That was my mistake.

I twirl a pencil between my fingers cursing myself silently. Now I've messed things up. I want to fix things, but if I can't talk to her, I don't know how and that drives me nuts.

With a frustrated sigh, I smack the space bar on my keyboard and wake up my computer again. On the screen, my email to Simon stays half-written. *We need to talk Sunday. I'm sorry to say...*

After checking my phone again, I delete and rewrite the same line over and over, questioning my instincts.

Deep down inside, I know I'm right about Kelsey. There's

more to us than this fooling around. But the thought is buried under a mile of reasons why I'm wrong.

She's just rebelling against her sister. She just wants a distraction.

She's focused on her career.

I laugh in the darkness at the thought. That's what someone would say about me. Putting the Alize situation in the past. The progress with the kids at the state hospital. A promise to expand the program across the country. A lengthy article in the leading world-wide psychology journal.

...I need to step aside from the program at the hospital, effective immediately. I've had a sudden change of passions.

Leaning back in the chair, I study the words as if they were a foreign language. Resignation is not something I ever thought I would say.

Deep down, I think you understand. A man needs to follow his heart if he truly wants to succeed.

But if it means having Kelsey, without any distractions, any suspicion, then that's what it needs to be.

Provided Kelsey wants me.

Which is suddenly the big question.

A half hour later, the message is perfect. The sudden end of a large chapter in life, another one needing to begin.

I open the bag of food and absently munch on some cold potatoes, getting used to the idea of being a tour boyfriend. The travel would be nice, a much needed break. Sipping some water, my mind wanders to the future. Maybe a life in the States. A room full of psychology students while Kelsey coaches tennis. An old dad to three whip-smart athletes.

The harsh buzz of the front door makes my heart stop for a moment. It's past 10 o'clock. The buzzing comes again and again. I grab my jacket and run down the hallway to the main lobby. Someone is huddled tight against the glass, trying to avoid the rain, hood covering their face. After flipping on the

lights, I unlock the door. The rain pops against the cobblestone streets and cars whoosh by with large rooster tails.

“What’s the matter,” I say stupidly. “What’s wrong?”

Kelsey stands in the doorway, my business card in hand, shaking. “Thank God. Take me somewhere. Anywhere.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kelsey

2 days before Final.

I'M GRATEFUL LUCA STAYS SILENT AND DRIVES.

We leave Paris quickly, the bright lights fading away into blackness, enough noise in my head that there's no more room for anything else. Screaming. Breaking glass.

I quit.

Clara's words bounce around in my head until a headache erupts behind my eyes. I sink low in the seat and breathe deep.

Stupid Kelsey. Stupid, stupid Kelsey. Deep down you knew Clara was a mistake. Oil and water. Gas and a match. Sure, Clara had always been a ball buster, but there was usually a reasonable side to her. Maybe that had been surgically removed along with her kids.

I smack the back of my head against the seat, trying to ignore the loud, negative voice in my brain.

Luca is just some stupid whim, a mistake to look back on and wonder what the hell I was thinking. *Of course* Luca is into it, I'm letting him play with me like some real life sex doll. To him, I'm nothing but a titillating experiment.

There's nothing real here, the voice screams at me.

But the thought doesn't settle well.

Luca looks over at me and smiles, a patient smile that says I can stay quiet for as long as I want, but I can't stay silent any longer.

"Clara quit," I say quietly, looking at my feet on the floorboard. "Kicked me out of our room.

Luca is silent for a minute. "I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"No," I say, grabbing his arm. "It's not your fault, okay? This is actually a good thing."

He lifts an eyebrow. "How is that?"

In the darkness, I can express what I've known for a long time. "I haven't wanted to work with Clara for a while. I just didn't know how to say it."

"Still, there's a better way."

I roll my eyes and let out a loud exhale. "Maybe, but our family sucks at talking about feelings. So it probably happened the way it needed to. We can't end things like civilized human beings."

Cars whoosh by us, their headlights filling the car with light and then disappearing, plunging us back into darkness.

"Clara would say the same thing if she could," I say, needing to hear the words out loud. As I say them, my body starts to relax and the screaming in my head dissipates. Each word starts to put the pieces of my heart back together. The hold is tenuous, but a hold nevertheless. "I've seen the texts to her husband, the whispered conversations around the corner. She never flat out said anything, but she really, really misses her new life. A life that doesn't include a tennis court."

"Will you speak to each other again?"

I let out a loud exhale. "Maybe when I retire from the tour in ten years."

"That's terrible Kelsey," Luca says gently. "You should be able to talk to you sister."

I wave my hand in the darkness. "Not the time to think about it."

"Are you sure? I can try to talk to her."

"Thank you, but no. I got what I wanted. Crazy as it sounds."

"What do you mean?"

I manage a half a smile. "She gave me a choice, her or you."

Luca's face appears briefly in a flash of light. He stares at me, a quivering smile spreading across his face. "Kelsey," he says quietly.

"I don't know what this is between us yet," I say with all the courage I can muster. "In fact, it's scary as shit, but I want you." Tears well in my eyes and threaten to spill onto my cheeks. "I want you to be there on Sunday when I beat Savannah. And then I want you in Switzerland. And then London and New York."

Luca lets out a whooshing exhale. In front of us, a car blasts its horn. Luca swerves us back into our lane in plenty of time to miss the other car. As the driver yells something at us going by, Luca pulls over on the shoulder and we stop with a crunching skid.

As soon as the car is stopped, he reaches for me, pulling me close, and smashes his lips against mine. My body melts as his hands slide into my hair, keeping me in his kiss.

Not like I want to go anywhere else.

"I will be there," he whispers in my ear. "Cheering you on. Switzerland, London, New York, wherever you need me, I'll be there."

Before I can get a word out, he kisses me again for what

seems like forever. As I open my lips and feel the tenderness of his mouth against mine, I can tell for the first time, our kiss is different. Not the kiss of two people trying to come together. Instead, it's the kiss of two people who are one.

And it's the only kiss I ever want again.

Luca nibbles on my lip and an absurd thought in my head makes me giggle. I lean back from him, placing a hand on his rough cheek.

"What's the matter," he asks.

"If you come with me, won't people miss you at work? I mean, don't you have kids to attend to?"

Luca looks at me seriously. For the briefest of moments, I think everything between us is about to crumble. Then he grabs my hands and squeezes them, a megawatt smile spreading across his face. "Not at all. Before you came to the office, I quit my job."

The words make me flinch, like I've been smacked in the face. "Quit? What do you mean?"

Luca snickers. "It means I resigned from my position at the state hospital and told the psychology board I no longer wish to counsel athletes." Soft as a feather, he brushes the back of my hand with his lips. "My work at the hospital, it doesn't mean anything." He looks at me, hopeful. "You mean everything to me. You are where I want to be."

It takes a moment for his words to sink in. Whereas Clara quit to get away from me, Luca quit to be *with* me. The thought steals the breath from my lungs and heats up my insides.

"Luca," I whisper. "That's..."

"Do you know I've never left France?"

I shake my head.

"I thought that was life. I had my work, I had my place and that's that."

“That’s okay,” I whisper, hearing Clara in head. “Sometimes that’s the way life goes.”

He places his hand on my cheek. “It didn’t make me happy. You, on the other hand, bring joy back into my life. I want to be with you.”

Before he can blink, I grab the back of his head and kiss him. Luca sucks in his breath and then attacks me back, his tongue finding mine, our lips so tight together, the feeling in them disappears.

I pull my lips away a fraction of inch and stare at him with a beaming smile. “Never been out of France? Really?”

Luca puts a hand to his heart. “My passport is empty.”

“Wow. I never would have imagined.”

Luca shrugs his shoulders. “What is after New York?”

I look up at the ceiling and think for a minute. The Tour calendar wasn’t the first thing on my mind. “Uh, Miami? Yeah, then Mexico City. After that, Colombia.”

“They all sound great.”

Leaning back against the cold window, I run a hand through my hair. Waves of arousal crash around inside me like water sloshing in a bucket. Luca grins at me, which makes me giggle. “This is crazy. You really want to be with me? Living in hotel rooms? Sitting on a plane?”

“Yes,” Luca says quietly. “Practice, matches, I want to be there for all of it.”

I chew on my knuckle, my smile increasing in size. “Mmmm, that sounds really boring.”

“I don’t think so.”

With a roll of my eyes, I lean in slowly, stopping when my lips are next to his, inviting him to kiss me. “Just know, I don’t plan on supporting you. You’ll eventually have to get a job.”

Luca moves closer, his words rumbling low from his throat. “You mean sex and encouragement won’t be enough

for you?" He slides his hand up my sweatshirt and cups my breast, pinching my nipple through the wet fabric.

"For a while," I say breathlessly. "But I like a man with a job."

Luca lets me go, pulls away and puts his hands on the steering wheel. He leans his head on his hands and looks at me, eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "I'm considering becoming a teacher. Psychology 101. Online to start."

A sultry grin spreads across my face. "Does that mean I can call you Professor?"

"You can call me whatever you want."

"That's so hot," I whisper.

Luca smiles contentedly. "You really are amazing Kelsey Chalmers."

"You're not so bad yourself."

"This is the start of something amazing, you know that?"

My body shivers, a mix of his beautiful words and chilly cotton fabric. "I think so too. But can we turn the car back on? I'm getting cold."

Luca laughs to himself, reaches down and starts the engine. I immediately put my hands on the vents, feeling the warmth of the engine seep into the car.

"We need to get you warmed up."

I look out into the vast blackness, no idea where in France we are. "Is there somewhere close?"

"My family has a place about twenty minutes away. A little house on the cliffs."

"Sounds great."

My stomach lets out a loud rumble and Luca smiles.

"Looks like we need to feed you as well."



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, WE TURN OFF THE HIGHWAY AND work our way through a small town. Luca drives through a couple of streets full of houses, which abruptly stop, replaced by fields of tall grasses and dark, gnarled trees, twisting their way up into the night.

Luca pulls into a narrow, rutted driveway that seems to go on forever.

“If I didn’t trust you,” I say, squinting through the window for anything remotely civilized. “I’d say this is looking more and more like a horror film.”

Luca smirks. “I admit, the lead up isn’t much, but the house is better than you could expect.”

“You said this is your house?”

“My parents left it to my sisters and I. We use it when we need a getaway.”

“You have sisters,” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“Two,” Luca says. “Here we go.”

Around the bend in the driveway, a house appears in the darkness. Through the quick flash of headlights, Luca appears to be right. The house is well-maintained, a low one-story, white-washed structure with dark, thatched roof. More importantly, it was devoid of anything that would appear on a horror set.

Luca stops the car. “Welcome to the house by the sea.”

I step out, my nose immediately fills with familiar salty scent of ocean. I take a deep and relaxing breath. “I love the water.”

“Then you’ll love the view in the morning,” Luca says, opening the truck and fetching my bag. “Right now, it isn’t much.”

A gust of wind swirls the grass around us, making me shiver. “Not as warm as Los Angeles though.”

Luca reaches his hand out and we jog towards the door. “It’s much warmer inside,” he says, turning the key.

The house is small, filled with white walls and stone floors. A kitchen gleams from the corner of my eye and the living room smells like burnt firewood.

“Someone’s been sleeping in your bed Goldilocks,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “Smells like a campfire.”

“That would be Emilie. She’s here the most. Kind of the caretaker of the place.”

I look back at him as he closes the door. “Which one is she? Older? Younger?”

“Older.”

“I bet that was fun,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “Living with one was tough enough. Can’t imagine two.”

Luca takes off his coat and hangs it up on a wooden coat rack next to the door. He looks at me and gives me an I-hear-you-sister grin. “We had our moments,” he says with a diplomatic shrug of his shoulders. “But when shit happened, we’re usually there for each other.”

“What kind of shit happened,” I ask, checking out the pictures on the fireplace mantle.

Luca flips on a light switch in the kitchen, casting a small yellow glow over the sink. “My parents died in a plane crash when I was six,” he says matter-of-factly, searching the area around the stove. “Aha, here they are.” He holds up a match like a miner holds up a diamond. “Do you want some coffee or tea?”

“Uh, tea, I guess. I’m really sorry about your parents.”

Luca pulls down some mugs from above the stove and shrugs his shoulders. “Happened a long time ago. It was tough because the three of us ended up with the government.” He looks at me cautiously. “Sugar?” I nod my head and he disappears behind the cabinets. His voices trails out from the kitchen and mixes with the rustling and clinking of things on the shelf. “Couple of the houses really put us through

some hell, but then we got lucky and finally found a good home.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Who ended up taking you in?”

Luca lights the kettle and smiles warmly. “A pair of little old psychology professors in their sixties. Oma and Louie Wilde. They always wanted kids, but never could.”

On the mantle, a picture of young Luca, lean, a messy mop of brown hair, just blossoming into handsome, standing with his sisters and people that could easily be their grandparents, stood next to large silver candlesticks. “Is that them?”

“We took that picture right next to where we parked.”

“They look like really good people.” A light bulb goes off in my head. “Is that where you got the idea to be a teacher?”

“Learned psychology from them,” Luca says, digging in the fridge, finding some bread and cheese. “Learned how to listen to what was really being said and read body language.”

“Oh, really,” I say, shivering. I rub my arms vigorously with my hands. “Here’s a test, what is my body language saying right now?”

Luca puts the knife down on the counter and stares me from across the room with a grin that makes me shiver in my lady parts. He tilts his head back and forth, eyes unapologetically roaming my body. “Be right back.”

“Where are you going,” I ask, a little disappointed.

“It’ll just be a sec,” he yells from over his shoulder before disappearing down the hall.

I stand there and shiver some more, looking around the house, imagining a young Luca running around the halls, learning from his wise old adoptive parents, and the noise of teenage squabbles.

Luca appears a second later, holding some clothes and a blanket. “Heat’s on, but it’s going to take a while. In the meantime,” he says, dropping the pile on the couch. “Here’s some warmer clothes. Emilie is just about as tall as you.”

“Thank you,” I say sweetly. “But my clothes are dry. I think I’ll just wait for the tea.”

Luca steps close. The warm, woody smell of his cologne fills my nose and makes my heart beat faster. My breath catches when he raises his hand, ready to put on my cheek. Instead, he pinches the heavy cotton material of my sweatshirt and rubs back and forth. “Still damp,” he says, frowning. “No wonder you’re cold.”

I reach up, run my hand along the smooth fabric of his suit coat, and raise my brow. “You’re not bone dry either.”

“I’m not the one shivering like an abandoned dog.”

“I’ll be fine in a little bit.”

Luca looks at me steadily. A wicked smile flashes across his face and then settles into something else. Something deeper. Something protective. “I’m taking these clothes off of you right now,” he says huskily. “Then I’m going to warm you up and feed you.”

He grabs the thick band of my sweatshirt and pulls up. I raise my arms without fuss. The cool air instantly raises goosebumps my skin. He slides his fingers over the sides of my bra and shakes his head. “It’s soaking wet.”

I barely have time to open my mouth before he leans in, releases the hooks and drops the plain tan fabric to the floor. As he pulls away, he plants warm kisses on my neck, biting gently on the spot above my thrumming pulse. He reaches for my sweatpants, tugging them down while he sinks to his knees. He lifts one foot out and then the other, tossing the thick material off to the side. My eyes shutter and close as he runs his hands up my thighs and grasps the wet fabric, pulling them down, leaving me exposed before him. His warm breath tickles the soft hairs between my legs. I look down and see him staring back at me, a look of worship and love on his face. His lips are a fraction of inch from my pussy. Just a slight movement and his mouth would be on me without

objection, tasting me, exploring me, but he's comfortable with his restraint. Comfortable waiting until the time is right.

The thought ignites a fire inside of me.

Luca turns and grabs the clothes from the couch. Quickly and quietly, he dresses me in jeans, undershirt and a thick sweater. After he pulls the sweater down over my head, he kisses me tenderly. "Better?"

"Yes, thank you," I whisper.

Smiling, Luca turns and heads for the kitchen. "Do you like crepes?"

"You mean pancakes," I say jokingly. Luca shoots me a dirty look and shakes his head. "Yes, I love them."

"Sweet or savory?"

His words send my stomach into another growling fit. "Savory."

"Good," Luca says, smiling. "I don't have much of a sweet tooth."

"Mmm, then we might have a problem, because I do."

Cabinets open and shut with wooden squeaks. Metal pans clatter against the stove and soon the house fills with the salty and sweet smell of bacon and dough.

I sit down at the small wooden table in the corner of the kitchen as Luca fills up a glass with water and puts it in front of me. "You should open a restaurant," I say with a smile.

Luca laughs and wipes his hands on a towel. "I know enough meals to last a weekend. That's about it."

"That's two more days than I know. Unless you consider protein shakes meals."

Luca smiles and dumps flour into a mixing bowl in a measured lump. He cracks the eggs and then adds milk, sugar, salt and vanilla. "Good thing about crepes is you can eat them anytime of day."

As he stirs, the muscles in his forearms ripple like waves. I lean my elbows on the table and watch him, picturing those

hands on my body. Not just tonight, not just through the tournament, but every Friday night. Every long, rainy Friday night, letting those hands hold me, protect me, explore me, finding the endless depths of my pleasure, leaving me satisfied and free.

He whistles something under his breath while mixing the flour, sugar, milk and eggs together. As he stirs, he looks back at me and gives me a mischievous grin, which makes my heart skip a beat.

I let out a quiet exhale, trying to stifle a grin as my mind fantasizes about Luca being on tour with me.

The forty hotels a year look inviting with Luca in them. Easing the pain from my body with his. Whispering encouragement into my ear. Spectators fade to a blur, hearing Luca's voice from the stands. The rented condo next to the practice facility suddenly feels like home.

"I know enough to survive," he says. "As you said, crepes are like pancakes. Should be able to make them any time."

"Well, you're certainly impressing me."

Lucas smiles to himself as he takes bacon from the pan, chops it up and sets it aside. He cooks some mushrooms in the bacon fat and wilts some spinach. "Good," he says, grating some cheese. "Hopefully they taste as good as they look."

Luca folds up the loose ingredients, slices up a pear and sets the plate in front of me. "Bon appetit."

As Luca sits down with his own plate, my heart and brain feels settled.

Watch out Tour, here we come.

"They look better than amazing," I say, cutting out a large bite and stuffing it in my mouth. "Oh my god."

The slightest blush spreads across his cheeks. "Those are my mother's, my real mother's, recipe. Oma cooked them for us."

"They're incredible, really."

"Glad you like them," Luca says, taking a bite.

We smile at each other, a tender pause between us. I cut another hunk of crepe with my fork and stuff it my mouth. And then another. Before I know it, half of it is gone and I start to feel grounded again.

I push the plate away and let out a contented groan, looking at Luca with a smile. "I'm going to want these again. Like real soon."

Luca looks at me steadily for a minute, before spearing a wedge of pear and biting off half of it. "How about Monday morning? After you beat Savannah."

His words make me grin stupidly. The way his voice rumbles in my ear makes me believe him even more. "Sure." I lean in on my forearms, remembering the deal between us. "Something tells me I'm going to be really hungry."

Luca cocks his head with a grin. "What do you mean?"

I look at him wickedly, feeling a delicious tremor in between my legs.

"Oh, that," he whispers.

With a smile, I dip my finger in my water and run it along my lips. "Yes," I say, sucking on the tip of my finger. "*That.*"

Luca lets a low laugh and smiles. He presses the tip of his tongue against his teeth and exhales. Leaning in close enough to tantalize me with another whiff of his cologne, he whispers, "win Sunday and you'll be able to find out."

"That's the plan," I say with all the confidence in the world. A wicked thought runs through my brain. I should be focusing on Savannah, watching film, analyzing tendencies. But the only thing I can think about is what's inside Luca's pants. "Now, you going to show me where we're sleeping," I ask with a flirty grin. "I got a big day coming up that I need to get ready for."

Luca looks at me for a moment, reads my body language

and laughs to himself. He holds his hand out and I place mine in his. He leads me from the table and, hand in hand, we walk down the hallway to a bedroom.

“When do you need to be back,” Luca asks, closing the door gently behind us.

I wrap my hands around his neck and kiss him. “Not tonight, that’s for sure.”

To prove my point, I press my body against his, backing him against the door. Luca groans as I grind my hips against him. His hands grasp my lower back. They hesitate for a moment, but as I kiss his neck softly, he slides them to my butt and squeezes hard. “What about a place to stay,” he whispers. “Or a new phone?”

His words stop when I grip his erection through his jeans. “We’ll figure it out later, okay?”

Luca looks at me with a relenting smile. “Later then.”

“Good,” I whisper. With a firm grip, I tug on his cock, pulling him towards the bed. “Now, I’m gonna tease you and taste you until you shout my name.”

“Kelsey,” Luca whispers excitedly.

When my legs bump against the bed, I release him and run my hands up and down his chest. I unbutton the top two buttons on his shirt and kiss the soft hair over the hard muscle. “Once you shout my name,” I say, nipping his darker, more sensitive skin. “Then I’m going to tease you some more.”

I undo the rest of his buttons and push the shirt off his shoulders. The sharp, deep lines of muscle under smooth brown skin makes me inhale sharply. I run my fingers lightly over his chest and down his abs, feeling Luca’s quick breaths.

“Only when you can’t speak anymore,” I whisper, popping the button open on his jeans. “Will I let you come.”

I pull his zipper down slowly, the room filling with lovely metallic clicks. With two fingers, I hook his underwear and

push all of it down his legs. Luca kicks them off and stands before me.

Amazingly, he's hid more in his jeans than I imagined.

"Look at you," I say with a grin.

Luca smirks and gently chastises me. "So we're not going to sleep?"

"We are," I say, sitting on the bed. "When I'm done."

Before he can retort, I grab him and run my tongue from his testicles to his tip, eliciting a low groan. A drop of precum escapes and I taste his salty male essence. "Did you like that?"

Luca looks at me and runs his fingers through my hair. "Yes," he says thickly.

I do it again, this time paying attention to the large ridge on his head. Luca lets out a harsh breath and I can feel his body tremble with delight. Feeling the arousal coursing through his body ignites my own. I want nothing more than to pull him on top of me, finally feeling him inside of me, but I know now, I can wait.

I will get my wish Sunday night, major trophy in hand.

Tonight is about Luca.

"Lie down," I order him in a sultry voice.

Luca smiles and does as he's told. "You're breaking our no sex rule, you know that? No orgasms."

I slide my hands up and down his thighs. "Technically, I'm not," I say, tracing my fingers over his cock, feeling the thick veins wrapped around his shaft. "You said I can't come. There's nothing in there about you."

"I'm just trying to be fair..."

Luca's words stop when I take him in my mouth. Luca groans as I work up and down, wanting to make him feel as good as I felt in the lingerie shop. "Oh, God," he mutters. "That feels so fucking good."

Encouraged, I slow down and take him as deep as I can go. Luca gasps and smacks at the headboard, letting out

another string of expletives. I look up at him and the deliriousness on his face creates a surge through my body. My cells fill with sex and power as I build Luca's pleasure, creating peaks and valleys, measured by his ragged breathing.

"Fuck...Kelsey...God," Luca whispers.

I lift my head. "I think you like being teased."

He looks at me with his lust-filled eyes and groans. "You're going to get yours on Sunday."

I don't say anything, just go back to Luca. After a minute, his hands grip the sheets and I know he's about to lose it. Seconds later, Luca's body goes rigid and he releases with a cry that fills the room.

I bring him down slowly and gently and then head for the bathroom. When I come out, Luca watches me take off the sweater and jeans and get into bed next him. He turns off the light, sidles up next to me and cradles me in his arms. His body feels loose and relaxed. Mine is on fire. Strong, but on fire.

"I have like five television interviews in the morning," I say in the darkness. "We need to leave early so I can get prepped."

"Okay," Luca says behind me. "Then I will get up early and make you breakfast."

I close my eyes and smile. I've never had a man cook for me before. I could get used to it pretty quick. "You don't have to do that."

"Nonsense. What else do you need?"

I roll over and look at Luca's face in the darkness. "I need a place to store my stuff. Preferably close to the tennis center. I don't want to have to worry about traffic."

"My apartment isn't that far away." Even in the dark, I can see his large smile.

I chuckle and run my hands through his hair. My body tells me it's the perfect idea, but I disagree. "No," I say

quietly, "I want to be by myself." The words sound awful, and I rush to explain. "Just until I beat Savannah. And then I'm all yours."

Luca is quiet for a moment and a sliver of nervousness works itself into my chest.

"It's just I've never won a match against Savannah," I stumble with a nervous laugh. "And call me crazy, but what we're doing is working. I just want to see it to the end. I don't want to eat my dessert and then regret it because I ate it too soon."

The tips of his fingers brush my cheek, run down my neck, and over my shoulder. I close my eyes and let out a loud exhale. God, his touch is amazing. Like a lightning bolt of arousal and happiness.

"I will stay away," he whispers, before kissing me lightly. "And wait for you."

"But you'll be in the stands though?"

"Absolutely. Afterwards, you come to my apartment and I'll make sure you wait no longer."

With Luca's words, the nervousness disappears with a quiet whoosh. "Thank you."

Luca slips his hand into mine and squeezes. "I believe in you," he says heavily.

I let out a large yawn, feeling happy and strong. As the dark waves of sleep wash over me, I can only feel sorry for Savannah on Sunday.

She's has no idea what's coming.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kelsey

BALL IN HAND, SAVANNAH STEELE BLOWS OUT A breath and stares at me from across the net.

She's up 5-4, serving for the second set. Win and we're all tied up one set a piece, heading for a decisive third set.

I lean over and sway back and forth, focusing on the ball and not her death stare. She deliberately takes her time, bouncing the ball for what seems like an eternity, trying to get me frustrated, trying to mess with my head. But what she can't see is while I wait, I picture Luca's cock in my hands, the look of passion in his eyes when he said I would get mine. What she can't see is Luca's love waiting for me at the end of the match. It's the perfect cherry on top of the sundae and the thought makes me smile from ear to ear.

Gritting her teeth, Savannah growls and tosses the ball in the air. Her big, powerful frame coils and then unwinds, smashing a serve right down the centerline. I lunge to my left, but the ball just grazes the top of my racket and smacks into the wall behind me.

The crowd lets out a tremendous roar and Savannah tops them with a primal scream and a savage fist pump. Then she looks at me like she wants me dead and points her signature finger in my direction.

One set a piece.

We say nothing to each other during the short intermission. I can feel her intense gaze on me the whole time, wondering how I am even in the match. Savannah's won the last three majors and was going for four in a row. Tennis' brightest star. People love her on and off the court. The entire crowd wants to see history.

And I'm getting in the way.

I tighten my shoelaces and drink some Gatorade. High up in his green chair, the umpire calls us back to the court. As we pass each other, Savannah grumbles, "I'm going to fucking destroy you."

"Not today bitch," I say chipperly. "Today's my day."

The crowd drowns out Savannah's response with a raucous chant of "Sa-van-nah, Sa-van-nah!"

I hold my hand up for tennis balls from the ball boy. I pick two and then toe the service line, imagining Luca's hands on my pussy, sending shivers of electricity through my body.

Today's my fucking day, I mutter to myself.

I toss the ball in the air and rocket a serve to Savannah's backhand. She stumbles backwards, trying to get a full swing on the ball, but instead misses completely.

15-love.

The crowd stays silent as I send an ace down the line for a 30-0 lead. There's a smattering of applause, but most of the crowd stares daggers at me.

Savannah takes a deep breath and stares me down. My first serve goes into the net. The second is a bit off target. Savannah scrambles to her right and unleashes a shot into the

back corner. I hustle to get back and deliver a cut shot that drops just over the net. But Savannah is fast and reaches the ball in enough time to flip it onto my side. I sprint up and reach out, flicking a high, arching floater into the back of the court. The crowd gasps as Savannah spins and sprints backwards, circling the ball like an animal circling prey. With a scream, she hammers a forehand away from me. I spring to my left and somehow catch the ball enough to send it back, eliciting a groan from the crowd. Undeterred, Savannah loads up again and rifles a shot past my backhand. The crowd erupts in cheers before the ball hits the back wall.

Savannah yells out and points her finger at me. I put my hands on my knees and take several deep breaths.

When I look up, a twinge of nervousness erupts in my chest. She's looking at me differently, like a light bulb in her head has turned on.

It doesn't take long to figure out what she's thinking.

Every point afterward becomes a slog. Her shots come over with less power, more precision, hitting spots all over the court. None of them are in the same place.

Instead of trying to overpower and dominate me, Savannah is going to simply wear me out.

When we take a break after the fourth game, I look at the large clock on the court. It's been an hour since Savannah switched tactics. I cover my face with my towel to hide the pain. My body is shaking and my lungs feel like they are filled with blistering hot needles. Hearing Luca's words in my head, I focus on him, the feeling of completeness when he wrapped his hard body around mine in bed.

The memory helps calm the trembling, but it doesn't go away. For the first time in the tournament, my well of strength is draining.

I take the towel off my face and look at the scoreboard. We're only tied 2-2. I somehow have to win four more games.

Savannah is already pacing the service line when I get off the chair. She bounces around and watches me with a murderous grin, finally having cracked my code. I try to ignore her and look for Luca.

The breath catches in my throat when he's not there.

I shake my head and try shove all thoughts from my mind. He's probably just in the bathroom, I tell myself. Now relax. This is still your fucking day. This is your day to win. Right?

Blowing out a deep breath, I lean over and wait for Savannah's serve. She tosses the ball high and then hits a spinning shot that hits the ground and shoots sideways before I have a chance to react.

Savannah ignores the cheering crowd and walks to the other side of the line, smirking. She's having fun reaching into her deep bag of tricks, trying to keep me guessing, trying to mess with my head.

And I get the feeling she only just started.

Deep in the back of the court, I bounce around and get ready for the next serve. Savannah coils and launches a serve that I barely see. Thunderous applause erupts from the crowd.

"30-love," the chair announces in cold, clipped French accent.

As I walk to the other side of the court, I again look up in the stands for Luca. A stab of panic settles in under my ribs when he's not there.

Where is he?

There's not time to think because Savannah serves again, this one much more returnable. But my focus is off slightly and I hit the ball high up on racket, sending her a weak return. I freeze, waiting for her to hammer something away from me. Instead, she returns it to me softly. We volley back and forth a dozen more times, each one of her shots making me run back and forth across the court.

Her next serve is the same and when Savannah wins the game with a slicing lob that sticks to the ground like velcro, I bend over and grasp my knees, fire burning in my lungs, barely able to breathe.

3-2. Advantage, Savannah.

Through the chanting crowd, I hear someone yell, "come on Kelsey, you can do this!"

I look around the court and see Clara sitting in the coaches box, hands clasped over her mouth, looking at me with utmost concern. She sees me and motions with her hands for me to get up.

The next thought in my head is brief, but powerful.

For the first time, I think I should have listened to her.

I stand up and motion the ball boy for some tennis balls. I look for Luca one more time. The slice of panic turns to dread, releasing a wave of nausea that rolls through me, sapping more of the strength that's rapidly dwindling.

Multiple thoughts race through my head as I toss the ball into air and smash a serve right at Savannah. She sidesteps it nimbly and returns it cross court, making me race across the clay and lunge at the ball, sending a return down the line. Savannah sprints over and lobs one over my head into the far back corner. I race back and have to hit the ball from between my legs. Savannah runs up to the net, eyes wide, ready to smash the ball into the ground and another point.

I hesitate, waiting for the crowd erupt. Instead, she sends a weak forehand across the court. Easily reachable, but it's another four full strides. Unwilling to let it go, I sprint over and blast a shot down the line. Savannah pounces and blisters a backhand winner to the opposite corner.

15-love.

My next serve is slow and straightforward, an invitation to score an easy point. Savannah doesn't miss, hammering a shot to go up 30-0.

The crowd goes nuts. I stand there, feeling dumbfounded. If she wins the game on my serve, it's over. I'm giving her everything I've got and it's still not enough. I poked the bear and now I'm feeling it's claws. Today was going to be my day. Today was going to be my victory.

A dark thought collects in my brain, short circuiting all the positive emotions and sapped all the remaining strength from my legs.

That's why Luca left.

Because I'm going to lose.

I hear Clara yell something again, but it's lost amongst the noise in my head. The thought of Luca leaving because I'm not good enough is loud and powerful. The words repeat over and over, in every negative voice I've ever heard. Luca wants a winner, someone who's successful, someone else.

That's ridiculous. There's a reasonable explanation. Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a deep breath and try to focus on the sight of Luca in ecstasy, hands gripping the sheets, feeling his hard, pulsing dick in my mouth.

He wants you Kelsey. More than just the sex. He's told you over and over again.

There's a damn good reason why he isn't here.

With that thought, I get angry. Angry at doubting myself and doubting Luca. I bounce the ball once, toss it high in the air and then with a tremendous grunt, hammer a serve down the centerline. Savannah barely has to time to flinch as it whizzes by and pops against the back wall. I scream out into the stunned crowd and pump my fist.

30-15.

The next serve is just as fast and caroms off her racket into the stands, eliciting a loud gasp from the crowd. Savannah looks at me and gives me a little smirk, as if to say, game on, bitch.

Her look pisses me off even more. The surge of anger

fuels my body. I unleash another serve that zooms by Savannah.

And just like that, I'm leading again, 40-30. One point away from holding serve.

"Go Kelsey, you can do this," Clara yells.

I hear Clara's words, but it's Luca I'm holding onto. With him, I can be whole.

Ball in hand, I rear back, ready to win the game and be tied 3-3. My serve is as powerful as the last two, but Savannah gets into position and rockets a return right past me. The crowd chants her name again and she gives a little fist pump.

40-40. Deuce.

I blow out a deep breath. Now I need two more points for the game. No matter. I have the strength I need.

I serve the ball even harder. Savannah flashes into position and sends the ball back, a yellow streak I can hardly see. With a scream, I hit the ball across the court, trying to overpower and break her, believing in Luca's words, believing my body could be unlocked. To achieve a level I've never attained.

To achieve victory.

Savannah puts two hands on the racket, winds up, and fires a return, matching my fury, unwilling to break.

We volley back and forth, legs and arms a blur of motion. Savannah grunts and screams, every one of my shots returned with increasing speed, pushing me beyond the level my body can go. Warning sirens go off in my head.

I push further, asking my body to do more. Shot after shot is rifled into the corners. I'm playing her game, trying to wear her down, but she's up for the task.

After she returns the ball, I see the briefest of openings when she slips. I wind up and swing as hard as I can, aiming for the other side of the court. The shot comes off the racket perfect, a yellow missile. The crowd gasps as Savannah covers

the distance in two powerful steps and hammers the ball down the line so fast, I'm unable to move.

The crowd explodes into deafening cheers.

Savannah throws her fist into air, biceps bulging. She lets out a scream I don't hear and she throws a savage glance my way, thrusting her finger at me.

She knows exactly what I know. There's no way I'm going to win this.

I've lost the championship.

And I've lost Luca.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kelsey

THE SECOND-PLACE TROPHY TAKES UP SO MUCH space in my bag, I'm tempted to leave the stupid thing behind.

Angrily wiping away tears, I cram and fold my clothes around the hulking piece of silver and listen to the constant chiming on my phone.

Stupid Kelsey.

Clara was right. All along, that dick fed you a line and you believed it. Craved it even. You ignored how stupid his idea really was because you were convinced there was more. That it was the beginning of something truly special. That you loved him.

But then, you gave him the only thing he wanted and he took off.

You were just some nothing lay of a pretty boy mindfucker.

Stupid, *stupid* Kelsey.

Nevertheless, I look at my phone for the millionth time. On screen, a long line of support. Family. Fellow pros. Clara.

But nothing from the person I want the most. If Luca would text me right now, then things might still be alright.

The thought guts me with a thousand searing daggers.

With a grunt, I zip the suitcase shut and stomp off towards the door. People in the elevator shrink away from me until we reach the lobby. As I turn in the key, the lady behind the desk tells me she was rooting for me. That I was so close.

Tears crest and run down my face.

“Thanks,” I whisper, barely making a sound.

Outside, Avenue Generale is packed with people walking away from downtown, headed for their homes. Couples walk by arm in arm, huddling against each in other in the spitting rain. The sight of them makes me nauseous.

Clara told you this would happen.

I weave through the stream of bodies and try to hail a cab. For once, I’m happy with Clara’s need to immediately leave a tournament site, win or lose.

Clara.

A bitter lump forms in my throat as I realize I should have listened to her more.

She was there in stands when Luca wasn’t. Even though she said she would leave, she didn’t. And you told her to go to hell.

My phone buzzes in my hand, but I ignore it. A thousand screaming voices fill my head. I need to leave and put as much distance as I can from this shitstorm. Maybe I can go back to Los Angeles for a couple of weeks. Or months. Or years.

People passing on the street wish me condolences. I nod and focus my vitriol on the cabbies, who seem to ignore my insistent hand.

“Kelsey,” someone shouts in the crowd.

I ignore it and wave my arm in big circles at a line of cabs down the street. The voice yells again. I turn my head and see

nothing in the sea of heads walking past. As I turn back to the cabbies, I see a flash of white shirt break through the people and Luca emerges, looking haggard and out of breath.

I seize up at the sight of him, raw, blistering emotions surging through me, a mix of anger and arousal heating my face.

“Kelsey,” he pants. “Thank God.”

He steps forward and reaches out for me. I instinctively take a step backwards, my feet tripping on the curb.

“Kelsey!”

A horn blares at me as I stumble into the street. The whoosh of air as a white taxi swerves around me brings the world into glaring focus. Luca jumps out, grabs my arm, and yanks me back onto the curb. “Are you okay,” he shouts, his voice trembling and scared.

The mix of adrenaline and emotion short circuits my brain. I reach up, slap him, and push myself out of his arms. Finding my bag, I hastily march down the street.

“Kelsey, stop!”

“No,” I scream, unable to control the shaking in my chest. My voice erupts from my throat like a volcano. “You abandoned me!”

“Let me explain,” Luca yells.

“Fuck off!”

Luca’s hand grabs my elbow. I whirl around, ready to strike again. Luca backs up a step and holds his hands up. My arm softens when I see the large blooms of red blood on his sleeves, the sterile white bandage around his skin.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

Luca opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Tears fill his eyes and run down his face. The sight of him crying cools the anger and starts to bring things back into focus.

“I went to the hospital to turn in my badge,” he says,

looking pained. “Just like I told you. It was only going to take a minute. Grab my stuff. Say my goodbyes.” Luca’s face turns white. “Then come watch you. That was the plan. But...one of the kids, he tried to...” Luca stops, eyes glistening in the twilight. “He found a knife somewhere and...I’m sorry, Kelsey. I couldn’t leave. I’ve been at the hospital. I...I couldn’t be there with you. It was so chaotic, I didn’t, I wasn’t able to call you until now.”

I turn the phone over in my hands. Several messages from Luca fill up the tiny screen. Just in the five minutes since I left my room.

Where are you?

Call me right now.

Next to us, a couple of waiters step out from *LaMaraee* and watch us with concern. I hear some muffled French, enough to know they heard me scream and slap Luca.

I put them out my mind and stand there, studying Luca’s face, the pain in his eyes all too real. Deep down, the pain and the anger pour out of my heart like someone pulling a plug.

“I lost,” I say quietly, tears welling.

“C’est ok,” Luca whispers.

A painful mix of relief and humiliation spreads throughout my body. “I lost because I looked up and you weren’t *there*.”

“Forgive me,” Luca says, hands held out in front of him. “I never meant to leave you alone.”

I open my mouth, but the words don’t come out. Too unexpected. Too scary. I came to Paris to win a tournament, not fall in love. I look at him and somehow want to believe he still isn’t the answer.

But I can’t. Because with him, I am complete.

Luca closes the gap between us and delicately puts his hands on my waist. Taking a deep breath, I force the words out of my mouth. I don’t ever want to feel the pain of losing

him again. "I needed you." I bury my face in his neck, inhaling his sharp masculine scent. I angrily kiss and then bite on his stubbled flesh, marking him, making him mine. "I *need* you."

Luca lets out a small growl. He whispers from above me, "you have me. I'm not going anywhere."

I touch my tongue to the spot where I bit him, blow a cool breath to ease the pain, and then burst into tears. "I thought you left because I was losing. I thought you left because you were just some dickhead mindfucker."

Luca runs his hands up my sides and knots them in my hair. He pulls my head back and looks at me with those heavy steel eyes, tortured by my words. "I'm sorry you had to think that. I will never leave you. I will always be there. Always."

Without waiting for a response, Luca pulls me in and kisses me. Around us, the people in the restaurant cheer.

I burst out laughing and lash at the tears on my face. "I'm so sorry. I've should've never thought that. I should've known there was a reason."

"Kelsey, stop. It's okay."

"But I hit you," I babble, putting my hand to his face, feeling the still hot skin under his eye. "I called you a dick-head mindfucker. I..."

"You're forgiven," he says breathlessly. "I forgive you."

I grab the back of his neck and crush my lips against his. Luca slides his hands down to my butt and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around him and kiss him some more, the last few of my salty tears mixing with our saliva.

Luca bites my lip. "I want you," he growls in between kisses. "I *need* you. Right now."

"But I didn't win," I whisper, shuddering as Luca pulls me in closer, feeling his erection pushing against me.

"It's not about winning," he breathes. "I'm going to make love to you whether you're in first place, last place or

anywhere in between. I'm going to be there for anything you ever need."

His words sends an enormous wave of arousal all the way to my toes. "I just checked out. I don't have anywhere to go."

Luca releases me but keeps me close, his face shining in the golden street light. He gently pushes a strand of hair from my eyes. "My apartment is just up the street." A wicked smile sends a delicious shiver down to my girlie bits. "Has a great view of the Arc de Triomphe."

I place a hand on his cheek, my body shaking with elation. "I've never been so glad to lose."

"You've already won," Luca says, taking my hand in his. "Come on."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Luca

“I NEED A SHOWER,” I GASP IN BETWEEN KISSES.

Still wrapped in my arms, Kelsey kicks the door closed with her foot and plants another big one on my mouth. “As long as I get to join,” she breathes.

“Hoping you would.”

With a smile, I grab her hand and pull her down the short hallway into the bathroom.

Inside, she settles into my arms, looking at me, hot and expectant. Time for me to deliver on my promises.

I slip a hand behind her neck and kiss her deep. She squeaks and then returns the kiss.

After what happened on street, I want to deliver more than just one night. I want Kelsey never to worry again. I want to erase any doubts in her mind.

Still locked together, I find the handle for the shower and turn it on. As the water sputters and hisses, I grab the zipper of her sweatshirt and yank down. It opens in a flash. I push it off her shoulders as she grabs the edges of my shirt and pulls.

The fabric rips and tears, sending buttons ticking around the tile floor.

“Oops,” Kelsey says with a giggle.

I grin and shake my head. “It was ruined anyway.”

Kelsey runs her hands lightly over my chest, the tips of her fingers sending an electricity to my dick, strengthening my already rigid erection. A wisp of steam floats between us and Kelsey looks at me with a smile. “Water’s hot.”

I run my fingers over the fabric of her bra, then grab the thick waistband of her sweats. “We can’t go in like this.”

“Well, what are you going to do then,” Kelsey asks invitingly.

With a smirk and a kiss, I free her from the rest of her clothes. She yanks my jeans open and pushes them down my legs. When we’re properly naked, I open the door and pull her in the shower.

Kelsey squeals when the spray hits her. I turn and block the water with my back.

“What about your bandage,” Kelsey asks.

In the heat of the moment, I’d forgotten, but it’s already too late for caution. “We’ll have to change it later.”

Her eyes shift from my arm to watch the rivulets of water run down my chest, pushing them around my nipples and down my stomach. After a minute, she looks at me - her flawless face covered in glistening droplets - with a look of happiness. Her look sears in my brain and it’s the only look I ever want to see again.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she says. “But it’s been a while since I’ve done this.”

I grab the body wash bottle and hand it to her. “What, wash somebody?”

She flicks water at me. “You know what I mean.”

“You’ll be amazing. You already are.”

Kelsey’s cheeks blush. She opens the bottle and pours a

generous amount of green goo into her hand. She spreads it across my chest, generating a large amount of bubbles. Pleased with the thick suds, she pushes it around, running her hands over my shoulders, down my arms and around my waist. Every new spot she finds turns me on even more. She washes my legs and then finally my cock. Her slippery hands make me groan and a sultry smile spreads across her face. "Like that?"

"Yes," I say thickly.

She twists her hands around my head and then down my shaft. I grit my teeth and breathe deep, not wanting to end things before they even begin. Kelsey seems intent to stay in water, but I have other plans.

I back up suddenly. The water jumps over my shoulder and splashes her. She shrieks and lets go of me. Quickly rinsing off the soap, I turn off the water and face her. "Come on," I say, grabbing a towel. "There's something I have to show you."

"But, I've already seen it," Kelsey jokes, grabbing her own towel and scampering across the hall into my bedroom.

Wrapping the towel around my waist, I look back at her and smile. "Trust me, this is even more impressive."

I grab the edge of the curtain by my bed and start to pull. Behind me, Kelsey gasps.

"Oh my God," she whispers.

Slowly, I reveal the rest of the floor to ceiling windows spanning the entire wall. Across the balcony, the massive Arc de Triomphe glows golden yellow in the night.

"Used to be the emperors palace back in 1850," I say, as Kelsey walks up behind me, the towel clutched to her chest. "Before they cut it up into apartments."

"It's so beautiful."

I turn around and drop my towel. With gentle fingers, I grab the cotton fabric and pull it away from her. I drink in

her body, tracing her curves with my eyes. Athletic and feminine. Powerful and sensual. The golden glow from the street light makes her look like an angel. “*You’re* beautiful.”

Kelsey blushes and shivers. She glances out the window and holds her hands over her breasts protectively. “Can anyone see us?”

I take her hands, put them around my waist, and kiss her deeply. “Not unless they’re in a helicopter.”

Her body softens in my hands. She pushes herself on her tiptoes, her lips brushing my ear. “Good,” she whispers. “Then fuck me. Please.”

The words send a jolt of electricity through my body, unleashing the animal I’ve kept in the cage. No more games. No more waiting.

Growling, I reach down, grab her butt and lift her off her feet. We’re at the bed in a second and, with a squeal, we tumble into the soft sheets.

Kelsey gasps as I push her legs apart and press my mouth against the center of her, holding it there, unable to control myself anymore. Having fantasized about her all week, finally able to taste her heat, I groan and run my tongue slowly up her hairy flesh, finding the small, hard button of skin. She jumps and cries out as I make hard circles around the outside of her hood.

“Oh, Luca,” she whispers thickly.

I run my tongue lower, circling and tasting her opening like she’s the most delicious treat I’ve ever had. Kelsey moves her hips up and down against me, trying to get something she’s missing.

“Faster?” I ask. “Slower?”

“My clit,” she says in a strangled voice. “More.”

Smiling, I find her clit again. A loud moan escapes her throat and she grabs at the sides of my head with her hands. “That’s-, ohh, *God*.” With every long flick, I want to hear

more. Her voice is the only voice I want to hear again. In the morning and at night. In laughter, in pain, and in orgasm.

Moving in sync with my tongue, her body stiffens in my hands, breath becoming more ragged and shallow. I'm pushing her closer to the edge, needing just a little bit more. I work my tongue around her hood more deliberately, ready to feel her come.

But instead, she pulls at my head, tugging me up until I'm looking into those gorgeous brown eyes. Right now, they're full of sex and passion, but the memory of the hurt in her eyes stabs me like an icy dagger. I vow to never hurt her like that again.

Kelsey runs a soft hand across my cheek. "I want you inside me," she says, her voice quiet and full of anticipation. "Do you have a condom?"

I brush the tip of my dick against her wet pussy. Kelsey gasps, her eyes getting bigger. I grin and pull myself back, leaning over to grab some protection from the drawer. Kelsey barely waits for me to roll it on before she grabs the back of my neck and pulls me down, planting her lips on mine. As my body falls, I thrust into her as far as I can.

Kelsey moans in my mouth, then breaks our kiss. "You're a thousand times better than I imagined."

I touch my lips gently to the hot skin on her neck and nip my way up to her ear. "How do you want to get fucked," I whisper.

She digs her fingers into my back. "Just like you ate my pussy. Slowly. Lots of clit."

I smile. She is the teacher and I am the willing student. I tilt my hips forward and grind my cock down the center of her. "Like that?" Kelsey opens her mouth to say something, but stops when I do it again. Instead of words, a delicious gasp fills the room. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Don't stop," Kelsey says.

I do as Kelsey instructs, pressing all my strength against her, holding nothing back. My hands and mouth roam her body, turning her gasps into moans. When our hands find each other, I whisper, "you're incredible."

Kelsey mutters something unintelligible, her face, half-covered in velvety brown hair, completely lost in the sensation. "Faster," she manages.

Grinning, I pick up my rhythm, breathing hard to not be overtaken by the feeling of our bodies moving together, her hot, soft skin under mine. She grabs at me desperately, trying to pull me closer than I already am. I grind against her harder and faster as the moans and shrieks build. Kelsey digs her fingers into my back, keeping me in place. "*Hunb-ub*," she pants. "*Hunb-ub*." When her hips thrust up to meet mine, I bend my head down and clasp one her nipples in my teeth. Her breath catches and then she cries out in ethereal bliss, the orgasm pulsing throughout her body.

I stay with her until she comes down. She runs her hands over my head, breathing deep.

"That sounded like a good one," I say.

Kelsey laughs. "More than good," she says breathlessly. After a couple of deep breaths, she lifts her head up and kisses the stubble on my cheek. "But I'm not done."

I look at her. She smiles from ear to ear. "What do you mean?"

"I'm ready for another one," Kelsey says, her eyes glittering. "You think you can handle it?"

After a shaky breath, I laugh. "I'll give you whatever you want."

I lean down to kiss her, but she puts both hands into my chest and pushes me backwards. Moving out from under me, she positions herself on all fours, looking directly at the Arc de Triomphe. She glances back at me, her face bathed in the golden Paris light.

"This is what I wanted," she says. "What I fantasized about. Now come here."

Moving across the bed, I grab her hips. The look on her face when I slide my cock in nearly sends me over the edge. Fortunately for me, she turns her attention to the view.

"You don't have to be slow for this."

Her words send an animalistic shot of adrenaline through my veins. I grip her hips tight and thrust powerfully, starting slowing and then building up speed. Kelsey keeps her gaze towards the Arc, but her words curl back to me, dripping with lust.

"Harder," she demands. "Give it to me."

I let go of a hip with one hand, grab her shoulder, and start pulling her back into me, burying myself as far as I can go. Kelsey lets out a small shriek every time we meet. Feeling the hot rising of my orgasm, I tear my eyes away from watching her, focusing instead on the line of cars circling the stone monument to buy myself some more time.

"Faster," she pleads, reaching back for my hand clamped on her hip, squeezing my fingers. "Faster."

Wanting to give her everything she wants, I squeeze down on my own orgasm, keeping it back a little longer. I put both hands back on her hips, trying to steady myself, desperately counting the number of trucks circling the Arc.

I feel Kelsey stiffen in my hands. With a quiet moan, she lowers herself down and I see her hand snake in between her thighs, working herself in quick circles. With a shallow and rapid breath, the second orgasm hits her hard and fast, her body jumping at each of my thrusts. Her screams in the room are too much and I let my own climax rip through me, powerful contractions that drain every ounce of strength from my body.

With a gasp, Kelsey collapses onto the bed. I fall down

next to her and for several minutes, we lay there boneless and breathing heavy.

“Now I’m done,” Kelsey mutters into the fabric.

“Good,” I say into her back. “Cause I’ve got nothing left. At least not for a while.”

Kelsey laughs to herself. “You were fucking amazing. You deserve a break.”

She reaches back with her hand, finds mine and slips her fingers in tight. I smile in the darkness, feeling Kelsey’s back rise and fall with each breath. Below us, Paris moves on in a busy commotion. A siren wailing down Avenue Generale, cheers from the restaurants, a baby crying down the hall.

“This is only the beginning,” I whisper.

Kelsey lays still for minute and then I feel her body shift. “What do you mean?”

It takes me a while to figure out the words. When I’m ready, I prop myself up and bury my chin into her shoulder.

“Since my practice burned, I’d been shut off from the world, wasting my breath and biding my time. I wasn’t happy, Kelsey. With anything. When I met you, it was a like a jolt of life. You’ve given me something to look forward to again.”

Kelsey looks back at me, a large smile spreading across her face.

“I knew for the first moment I saw you I wanted to be with you.”

“I want you too,” she says quietly.

“And this was never about the money or anything remotely professional.”

“I know,” she says, reaching for and squeezing my hand.

I open my mouth to say more, but Kelsey yawns and lays her head back down on the pillow. I smile and stare out into the night.

Now that I had Kelsey, I wouldn’t change what happened for anything. Losing my client list, being dragged through the

mud by the paparazzi, it all brought me to here. To her. To an exciting new chapter.

Paris has given me everything I need.

It's time to move on.

I plant small kisses on the firm ridges of her back muscles, the ones she hates, the ones I adore.

They will deliver her the championship she deserves. As I run my tongue down her spine, I realize I can't help her in that area.

But I know who can.

She won't want to hear it, so I keep it to myself.

I know what I can do for Kelsey and I'm happy to do so. For her.

For us.

"Thought you said you were done," she mumbles.

I look down and notice I'm ready to go already. "Guess I can't get enough of you."

Kelsey rolls over and looks at me with a sleepy, contented smile. The desire is there in those big eyes, but so is the exhaustion.

Untangling our hands, I lead her to the pillows and pull the blankets up to her chin. "When we wake up in the morning, I'll have you again."

Kelsey yawns. "I'd like that. And those crepes."

I let out a quiet laugh. "You've got it."

"Everyday?"

"Everyday."

Eyes closed, Kelsey grins. "I like the sound of that."

We lay quiet for a moment. I listen to Kelsey's soft breath, finding her hand again. Feeling the pulse in her fingers knocks down the remaining part of the wall around my heart.

From this moment, I want no one else. Kelsey is all I need.

"How about we drive to Luxembourg tomorrow," I say,

breaking the silence. "Spend a day or two to ourselves before the tournament."

Kelsey doesn't answer for a moment. I smile, ready to pull my hand away when she clamps onto my fingers. "Yes," she says into the sheets.

I scoot closer to her, until I can feel her breath on my cheek. I plant a small kiss on the tip of her nose. "I love you."

"I love you too."

EPILOGUE

Kelsey

MATCH POINT, GIRL. ONE MORE SERVE AND THE title is yours.

I wipe the sweat from my brow and hold my hand out for some tennis balls. Even though it's nighttime, the late August heat is suffocating. Chants of "here we go, Kelsey" roll around the packed stadium. American flags dance in the stands. The New York crowd is happy an American reached the final of their tournament.

Camillie Jannessen bounces around on the other side of the net, trying to psyche herself up for some miraculous comeback. She's already taken out Savannah in the last round and she spent the entire press conference dubbing herself the "American Killer".

I select the best tennis ball, pocket another for the second serve, and walk up to the line with a smirk on my face. Looking over at the scoreboard, the American Killer is down 5-1 in the second set.

Bouncing the ball, I take a deep breath and picture Luca

standing there on the street in Paris, his beautiful eyes locked onto mine. My body calms and the raucous noise of the stadium fades away. As I toss the ball into the air, my mind focuses on Luca, letting my body take over. I hardly feel the serve. It's an effortless swoosh of motion, a body at peak performance.

Camillie lunges for the ball, but it's by her before she can swing her racket. For a moment, I stand there stunned, hands on the sides of my head. Then, feeling the thunderous applause, I pump my fists in the air and let a primal scream.

From the corner of my eye, I look over at the coaches box. Clara is dancing around, clapping her hands. Next to her, Luca reaches both arms into the air and yells something into the night. I break out laughing. The two of them are still figuring out how to get along, but they understand that I need them both.

Because together, Luca convinced me, we win.

Together, we are one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Piper Lee Burns is an emerging author of sports romance. A sports reporter in a former life, Piper is now playing a different game.

Committed to writing passionate stories about strong men and even stronger women, many of whom are athletes, coaches, executives, reporters, and fans. Piper's stories are like an epic sporting event: full of highs and lows, excitement and drama and complete with breathless, victorious endings.

This is Piper's first published story.

Liked Down the Line? Want to be kept in the loop about future releases? Visit Piper's website and sign up for an infrequent, but informative newsletter.



