



# MATCH

# *Point*

A Reverse Harem Romance

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CASSIE COLE

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# Match Point



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# 1



## Miranda

March 2009

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Ellie asked as we tiptoed down the hallway.

“It’s fine,” Hailey replied.

“We’re going to get caught!” Ellie insisted.

“Oh, stop it. Miranda isn’t scared.” Hailey glanced at me over her shoulder. “Are you, Miranda?”

I hesitated.

“Oh, come on,” Hailey hissed at me. “You’re going pro any day now. You need to have some fun before you leave us.”

“I’m... I’m not going pro,” I protested. “At least, I haven’t heard anything from my coach.”

Hailey gave me a skeptical look. “Do you want to go back to your room and go to bed before curfew, like a good little girl?”

“Nope,” I lied.

Hailey nodded and continued on. Ellie gave me a betrayed look.

There was a curfew at the Lafayette Tennis Academy in Trenton, New Jersey. That curfew passed two hours ago. But there was a party in the boy’s wing of the dormitory, or so the rumors said, and we didn’t want to miss out on the action.

At least, that was the idea when we left our rooms. A chance at some excitement to break up the monotony of daily practices and workouts. But now that we were nearly to the

party, and at risk of getting caught by the Academy supervisors, I was having second thoughts.

Ellie looked at me as if to say, *we never should have left.*

We crossed beyond the invisible barrier that separated the girls' wing of the dormitory with the boys' wing. Now we were in an area where we weren't allowed to be. Now we were doing something forbidden. The thought thrilled my sixteen year old mind as much as it terrified me. I had never gotten in trouble in my life.

All the rooms in the dorm looked identical, but Hailey seemed to know the way. We rounded a corner, walked for a bit, and then came to a door just like all the others. Up close, I could hear the soft thumping of music inside. Hailey collected herself, then knocked.

The music dimmed, and then the door opened a crack. "Yo, it's Hailey and her friends," a male voice said inside. The door opened the rest of the way and we were hurriedly ushered inside. As soon as the door was closed, the music was turned back up.

I gazed around the open communal space. There were nine or ten other students here; our arrival brought the male-to-female ratio close to even. And they were some of the best tennis prospects in the world, many of whom were close to going pro. There was Dominic deGrom, one of the few American boys who looked like a man fully grown despite just turning sixteen. Tristan Carfrae, Australia's best tennis prospect since Lleyton Hewitt, was playing beer pong against a pair of girls. Several others were crowded around the fridge in the kitchen, arguing over what drink to get. Two girls were making out on the couch while all the nearby guys pretended not to watch.

*So this is what a party is like?*

The host, a guy named Marty who Hailey knew, welcomed us and offered us drinks. I had never had beer before, so I accepted a Mike's Hard Lemonade instead. It was tart, and had a strange aftertaste unlike anything I'd drunk before, but it wasn't bad.

A TV in the corner was playing the Australian Open. Even though it was late at night here in New Jersey, it was daytime in Melbourne, and the Grand Slam event was well underway. Federer was about to defeat an unranked opponent in straight sets.

“Stop watching TV,” Hailey scolded me. “We’re at a party. Let’s have fun!”

We watched beer pong for a little while. I had never seen it played in person; only on cheesy TV shows. With his messy blond hair and square jaw, Tristan reminded me of Heath Ledger—who had just passed away last year. The swoony Australian accent certainly added to the illusion. Hailey openly ogled the tall boy.

When one team lost, we jumped in and played a game. It was simple: throw a ping pong ball at the beer cups across the table. For the next hour, I stopped thinking about the enormous pressure I was under and allowed myself to relax. I drank, and teased, and flirted. Things I had never been allowed to do considering how my life had gone.

I had been playing tennis since I was six. As soon as I showed any aptitude, my parents devoted their lives to helping me become the best player possible. The last ten years had been nothing but tennis camps, and private lessons, and weekend tournaments. All that hard work paid off and I was one of the top-ranked Junior Tennis athletes in the country, and was poised to go professional soon. Every minute of every day I felt the pressure to perform, to continue winning and advancing and improving.

So it was nice to stop thinking about all of that, even if it was just for one night.

After beer pong, everyone at the party—fourteen of us by now—got together and played *Never Have I Ever*. After that, someone announced that it was time to play *Spin The Bottle*. We gathered in a circle and placed an empty bottle of Mike’s Hard Lemonade in the center. One or two people stepped away and said they weren’t going to play.

At this point, I was delightfully buzzed. Everything sounded like a good idea to me, including this game, so I sat down and eagerly waited my turn.

The girl next to me spun, and the bottle came to a stop in Marty's general direction. The two of them knelt in the center of the circle to kiss. Yet as they locked lips, someone began calling out tennis scores. "Love! Fifteen! Thirty! Forty! *Game point!* Okay, that's enough you two. Way to start us off."

I bit my lip. I thought we would just be sharing a quick peck on the lips. Not five full seconds of making out. I glanced at the couch on the other side of the room, but decided I didn't want to make a scene by leaving early.

The next guy went, and then the girl after him. My nervousness grew stronger. I had only kissed one boy before, and that was when I was fourteen. A brief peck on the cheek. It hardly counted.

Then it was Tristan's turn. The Aussie hunk grinned around the circle, took hold of the bottle, and gave it a hard twist. The glass spun on the carpet for an incredibly long time, finally slowing down...

...and it stopped on me.

"Miranda!" someone cheered. "Get it, girl!"

For a few seconds, I was mortified. Somehow, in my naive buzzed state, I never expected to *actually* have to kiss someone in this game. But now that someone was staring at me from across the circle, a dirty-blond Australian boy with a disarmingly-goofy grin.

I crawled out to the middle of the circle with him until the bottle was the only thing between us. His eyes were soft compared to the rest of him, which was chiseled with muscle beneath his long-sleeve cotton T-shirt. Even as he gave me a warm smile, I wondered: *is this really happening? There's no way he would want to kiss me.*

We both kept leaning forward, faces drawing closer. And then Tristan lunged the final few inches to connect with my

lips. Electricity seemed to course through his body and into mine as the students around us began to chant.

“Love! Fifteen! Thirty!”

Tristan reached up and cupped my cheek, holding me close to him while his lips churned against mine. I closed my eyes and savored the way he felt, wanting it to go on forever.

“Forty! Game point!”

He pulled away, and I tried to lean with him at first before allowing the kiss to end. We were both breathless after, and his dark eyes were wide and surprised. He covered it by leaning back on his palms and trying to play it cool, but his gaze never left my face as he searched for how I was reacting.

*That was my first real kiss. And it was with the best junior tennis player in Australia.* I felt myself blush.

“Gabriel!” someone said. “Your turn!”

The boy next to Tristan leaned forward to take the bottle, but I was still staring back at my kiss-mate from across the circle. He wore that disarming goofy grin that he always did, but there was a curiosity in his eyes, now. Like he was really seeing me for the first time, and wondering why it had taken him this long.

*Stop it, I told myself. You’re imagining things.*

“Miranda!” Hailey blurted.

I gave a start. “Huh?”

She pointed at the bottle in the circle. It was facing me again, but at a slightly different angle than before. The boy who had spun it had an angular face and curly brown hair. He was smaller than the guys on either side of him—in fact, he almost looked too small to be at the Academy at all.

“What’s the rule about repeats?” someone asked.

“It’s up to her.”

“Well? Miranda? You can kiss Gabriel, or make him spin again.”

I blinked. “I...”

The boy who had spun the bottle—Gabriel—wincing at me. “You do not have to,” he said in a thick French accent, “if you do not wish it.”

“No!” I found myself saying. I didn’t want him to think I was reluctant to kiss him. “I’ll go again, if you want to.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied. That accent made me tingle inside.

The group around me cheered as I crawled forward, just like I had done seconds before. This time it felt natural; a repetition of muscle memory. The alcohol in my veins dispelled any embarrassment I had about the situation. This was as natural as doing a split-step before receiving someone’s serve. It was the norm.

This time, I leaned in to initiate the kiss with Gabriel. His lips were cool and wet. I moved against him, and he kissed me back, but there wasn’t the same spark that I had felt with Tristan just moments ago. The students around us chanted the count-down: “Love! Fifteen! Thirty!”

And then Gabriel’s tongue slid into my mouth. I was shocked for a brief instant, but then it woke something inside of me. My body came alive and I pushed my tongue up against his, letting the two dance together wetly. What was this feeling? Why did everything suddenly feel so warm?

“Forty! Game point!” they finished loudly, but I didn’t stop kissing Gabriel. And he made no move to pull back, either. His tongue felt so good against mine that I didn’t want it to stop—

“Okay,” one of the other guys said, pulling Gabriel away. “Leave some for the rest of us, Napoleon.”

Gabriel’s fair skin turned three different shades of red, each darker than the last. He glanced up at me, then immediately returned his gaze to the floor, embarrassed.

*He’s cute*, I thought, seeing him in a new light. He had been overshadowed by Tristan on his left and Dominic on his right, but now I saw him for the beautiful boy he was. I could still feel his tongue inside my mouth. I wanted to keep going. New

thoughts sprang into my mind, fueled by the alcohol. Could we leave the game and go off alone together? How would I even ask that in front of everyone? Just *thinking* about that sent a chill of indecision through my body.

“My turn,” Dominic deGrom said, reaching forward to grab the bottle with a wide hand. He grinned up at me. “Maybe someone *other* than Miranda Jacobs will get to play.”

A nervous flutter ran through my chest. Dominic was the most popular guy at the Academy. He was #1 in the World Tennis Junior Rankings. He was confident, not cocky, which was rare for someone as talented as him. Rumors said he was the next big Andy Roddick, only *better*, if that was possible.

But for now, all I saw was a sexy guy who somehow knew me by name.

He spun the bottle. It only made two or three rotations before coming to a stop. I don’t know how I knew that it landed on me, because I was still staring across the circle at the dark-haired, brown-eyed dreamboat. I couldn’t look away from him.

A girl to my left groaned. “Seriously? It must be broken.” She shot me an annoyed look like it was somehow *my* fault.

“How can a bottle be broken?”

“Spin it again. Harder this time.”

Dominic shrugged, then gave the bottle a proper twirl. He did it so hard that the bottle slid over to the edge of the circle, spinning wildly. And when it finally came to a stop, it was still facing me.”

“Must be fate,” Dominic said, leaning into the circle.

Numb to the fact that I was about to kiss a *third* guy in a row, I crawled forward until I was face to face with Dominic. As he put his hand on the back of my head and pulled me in, every nerve ending in my body came alive with excitement. Everything around us faded away; I couldn’t hear the others chanting the countdown. All that existed was the intimate connection of our lips grinding together.

Remembering the way Gabriel had kissed me, I shoved my tongue into Dominic's mouth. He was surprised, but then accepted it eagerly. His own tongue undulated against mine, and he made a soft sound deep within his throat.

It lasted five seconds, or five hours. It was tough to tell.

People were laughing and cheering as we finally pulled apart, but I barely registered it. Everything seemed silent beyond the gaze Dominic and I shared, held together like magnets, unbreakable by any force.

He smiled, and my heart melted.

When I finally looked away, I realized the other girls around the circle were sneering at me. Were those stares judgmental? I wasn't the one who had chosen to be kissed three times in a row, yet their eyes placed the blame squarely on me.

"I'm going to get a drink," I said, jumping to my feet and retreating to the kitchen.

"Good," someone behind me said. "Maybe one of *us* will get a chance to play."

All the elation I had felt from kissing Dominic faded. The room was suddenly very warm. I opened the fridge and stood in the doorway, letting the cool air wash over me.

I was aware of someone nearby. I turned and saw Gabriel standing in the doorway to the kitchen, looking awkward. He was shorter than I expected; at least a few inches below my height of six feet.

"Sorry," he said in that French accent. "I will wait until you are done."

"It's a kitchen, not a bathroom," I replied. "Get what you want."

He hesitated, then went to the pantry to get a bag of tortilla chips. He lingered there with the bag in his hands.

"I have seen you play," he said suddenly. "Your one backhand. It is very smooth."



I chuckled. “It took me over a year to switch from a two-handed backhand, but I wanted to play like Federer.”

“Don’t we all?” Gabriel replied with a small smile.

Tristan strode into the kitchen like he owned the place. Which might have been true; I wasn’t sure which boys lived here. Without even glancing at Gabriel, he handed me a note and said, “That’s my number, if you ever want to practice.”

We didn’t have time to practice outside of our regimented schedule at the Academy. At the end of the day, we barely had enough energy to lift a racquet. I started to say as much, then realized the subtext behind the offer.

*Is he asking me out?*

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

Before Tristan could say anything more, the third boy I had kissed poked his head into the room. Dominic smiled and then walked into the kitchen. “Sorry if that was awkward. You being put on the spot like that three times in a row.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t mind.” I gave a start. “I mean, I was just playing by the rules, so...”

“Hey,” Dominic went on. “I know we don’t have a lot of free time around here. But if you...” He trailed off, then glanced at Tristan and Gabriel. Then he saw the piece of paper in my hand.

“You already asked her out?” Dominic asked.

“I gave her my number,” Tristan replied with a note of defiance in his Aussie voice. “In case she wants to practice.”

“And you?” Dominic asked Gabriel.

“No! I did not,” he replied. His eyes met mine, and then he looked down at his feet. “But I did think on this. Yes.”

“You were third, mate,” Tristan said. “Third in the game, third to get here. Just like you’re third in the standings.”

Dominic bristled at that. “Based on the World Tennis Junior Rankings...”

“Nobody cares about that,” Tristan shot back. “On the *internal* ladder at the Academy, you’re third. Behind me and that Russian kid, Aslan.”

Dominic visibly relaxed and turned back to me. “Nobody owns Miranda. She can go out with whoever she wants.”

All three of them turned to face me.

*Is this happening? I wondered. None of the boys have ever shown any interest in me. And suddenly they all want to ask me out?*

Suddenly, the door to the living area flew open and two adults strode inside. The students in the living room all went silent as two of the Academy supervisors surveyed everything going on.

“I would expect this from Tristan,” the male supervisor said in a serious tone. “But from *you*, Aslan? And you, Justin?”

“Ellie, get back to your room right this instant,” the female supervisor snapped. “Hailey. I’m certain you’re the one who convinced poor Ellie to come. Did you drag Miranda here, too?”

“I wanted to come,” I said, stepping out of the kitchen. “Nobody made me.”

Orders were given and students were scolded. When the others had scattered, the female supervisor grabbed my arm and pulled me into the hallway.

“Staying up late. Drinking. You would think none of you had any care in the world about the tournament you’re playing in tomorrow.” She gave a loud sniff. “I want to see you at the courts at five o’clock.”

“Five o’clock! That’s five hours from now!”

“You should have thought of that before staying up so late,” she replied. “I’m going to make you run lines until you throw up every ounce of that beer.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Dominic, Tristan, and Gabriel were all standing in the hallway watching me go. Tristan was smiling, but the other two looked worried. When the dust

settled from this night, I wondered which of them would ask me out first.

I had no idea I wouldn't see them again for over a decade.

## 2



### **Miranda**

### **Present Day**

“Miranda Jacobs,” the interviewer said from the chair across from mine, “it was just one year ago that you stormed into Melbourne and won the Australian Open, that elusive victory that had previously prevented you from completing your career Grand Slam. Now, you’re back here under very different circumstances. Can you tell us what led to your decision to retire at the height of your dominance, rather than defending your title?”

I was prepared for the question. It was the only question anyone had asked me since announcing my retirement two weeks ago. I smiled, glanced at the video camera aimed directly at my face, then turned back to the interviewer.

“Ever since I was a little girl, it was my dream to win one of the four major championships,” I explained. “It took me over a decade to finally realize that dream, winning Wimbledon at age eighteen. After that, the next logical goal was to win them all. Completing a career Grand Slam became my passion for the *next* ten years of my career. And it wasn’t an easy road. I won Wimbledon again, and the US Open twice. After two years spent focusing entirely on playing on clay, I finally won at Roland Garros. But the Australian Open eluded me. Every year I felt like I was good enough to win, but I always came across an opponent who was better than me that day. Years went by, and I left Melbourne as a failure.

“Until last year, when the stars finally aligned and I defeated Victoria Azarenka in the final.”

The crowd of tennis fans gathered around the outdoor pavilion cheered at that. I paused for it to die down before continuing.

“I reveled in that win for a while. It meant a lot to me. Even more than winning the US Open, which takes place practically in my backyard in Flushing. But I’m the kind of woman who needs a big goal to push her. All my life, I’ve had a big, juicy carrot dangling in front of me. After winning here in Melbourne, I didn’t have that anymore. I had won a career Grand Slam. What more could I have done?”

“Why not a *calendar* Grand Slam?” the interviewer prodded. “Winning all four major championships in a row?”

“Oh, I tried that!” I said with a chuckle. “But after losing in the final at Wimbledon last year, the dream was dead. I’m happy to end my career on top, rather than slowly falling out of relevancy over time. I only just turned thirty; I still feel like I have my whole life ahead of me.”

“What *is* next for Miranda Jacobs?”

The question froze me. It was another question everyone had been asking me since I made the announcement two weeks ago. It was the same question I had been asking myself.

And I didn’t have a real answer.

“Hopefully I’ll find out soon,” I said. “I’m looking forward to taking some time off, watching the sport for pleasure rather than as a job.”

“What about your personal life?” he asked. “You’ve said in past interviews that your training schedule didn’t leave room for a love life.”

I chuckled. “Sure. Maybe I’ll fall in love, now that tennis is no longer my husband. Or maybe I’ll do some television commentary.”

The interviewer jabbed a finger in my direction. “Just don’t steal my job!”

The two of us laughed, then shook hands and ended the interview. The fans were shouting now, so I walked over and

spent some time signing autographs. It was one of the favorite parts of my job, and it was even more enjoyable now that my schedule wasn't strictly controlled.

My agent, a former Australian pro named Hamilton Burger, stepped up next to me and said, "It must be easier doing these interviews now that you're retired and the pressure is off."

I responded while signing a headshot for another fan. "It's the opposite, Hammy! It was easier when I was a player, because I could answer the questions with empty statements." I took on a mocking tone. "I'm just trying to work hard and keep my head down. I'm focused on the next opponent. I'm just happy to be here." I chuckled. "But now, I don't know *what* to tell them."

"You'll figure it out," he replied, scratching at his left eye. He had lost the eye while celebrating a cricket match, and now wore a prosthetic. "And when you *do* figure it out, I'm sure I'll be the first to find out. Right?"

"I promise I'm not keeping anything from you," I said. "I legitimately don't know what I'm going to do next."

"Because you have offers," he said. "NBC is putting feelers out about you commentating the US Open in August. I've been contacted by *six* different tennis academies—including Lafayette."

"All I want is to relax and *not* think about tennis for a while," I replied. "The last thing I want to do is coach teenagers."

The fan in front of me suddenly asked, "What about coaching an adult?"

I gave a start. The other fans were gone, and the only person remaining was a tall man wearing tennis shorts and a compression tank-top. He was maybe forty years old, and seemed vaguely familiar.

"Talk to Hammy," I told him. "He handles all of my public appearances."

"Yes, talk to Hammy," Hamilton said gruffly. "Here's my card. But I should warn you: the price for a private lesson from

Ms. Jacobs is quite high. And there's an extra fee if you want to be photographed with her."

The man—who sounded American—smiled at that. "I'm not asking about a lesson, and it's not for me. I coach one of the pros—someone ranked in the Top 20. And I think you can help with some issues we've been having lately."

That piqued my interest. "One of the pros? Is it Coco Gauff? Or Jessica Pegula? I heard she was having issues with her serve..."

The man's smile deepened. "It's neither of them."

"Then who is she? Is she American?"

"It's not a *she*," he replied. "And he's Australian, actually."

I could almost hear him say the name before he actually said it.

"I'm the coach for Tristan Carfrae."

### 3



#### Miranda

I stepped out of the cab in front of the ballroom and almost fell flat on my face. I grumbled as I adjusted my heels. I never had to wear these when I was still a player. Back then, I could get away with wearing tennis shoes everywhere—even when I was dressed formally.

“Told you coming here was a mistake,” Hamilton said as he exited the cab behind me.

“I just want to talk to Tristan. See why he wants me to consult.” I smoothed out my cocktail dress. “It’ll be quick. Twenty minutes. Besides, I’m the reigning champion. I should make an appearance.”

“I just don’t understand why you would want to work with another player,” he grumbled.

“You’ll get your cut,” I teased. “Even though I didn’t need you to get me this gig.”

“I’m not concerned about the money. Miranda, you’ve spent the past year telling me you’re burned out. That you’re ready to retire, ready to step back from tennis for a while before figuring out what to do next. That has been the plan all along. And suddenly, within a day of arriving in Melbourne, you’re changing your mind and jumping on the first coaching job that comes along.”

“It’s not a coaching job,” I replied as we walked toward the doors, my heels *clomping* on the tile floor as if I were a prize horse. “It’s a temporary consultation.”



We flashed our badges to the security agent, who then opened the door for us. “What is this really about?” Hamilton asked me. “Is this personal?”

“No,” I said a little too quickly.

He frowned at me. “You attended the Lafayette Academy of Tennis. I believe that’s where Tristan also went. Did you two know each other?”

“We did not know each other at the Academy,” I replied. It was mostly the truth. Aside from seven seconds of kissing, and the phone number he gave me in the kitchen afterwards, the two of us had never even spoken.

“I don’t think you should take the gig,” he insisted. “You shouldn’t work with Tristan.”

It was my turn to frown at him. “Why are *you* so opposed to this? And don’t tell me it’s for my own good. You’ve been my agent for most of my career. I know when you’re scheming.”

“I don’t scheme!”

“You absolutely scheme. It’s why I hired you.”

Hamilton laughed at that, then gave me a sideways look. “Tristan turned me down as an agent a long time ago.”

“Ah hah!”

“It would’ve made my career to sign an Aussie like him,” Hamilton said. “But he didn’t take my offer seriously. He made fun of me.” He scratched at his prosthetic eye.

“Thank you for your honesty,” I said as we entered the ballroom, soft violin music filling the open space. “But I’m going to consider their offer.”

“Very well.” Hamilton looked around the room. “If you need me, I’ll be looking for Tatjana Maria. My German is rusty, but I heard she’s unhappy with her representation. I need to expand my portfolio now that my star client has retired.”

I touched his arm, and he disappeared off into the crowd. I sighed as I looked around the room. I had been coming to these welcoming dinners for years, and typically hated them.

Granted, that was because I was never able to drink at them since I usually had a match the next day. A server walked by with glasses of wine on a tray, and I accepted one with a smile. Retirement had its benefits.

As I gazed around, I realized I was one of only a few retired players here. Former champions were always invited—especially the reigning champion, although I wasn't defending my title.

“There she is!” shouted Ashley Loggins, an American who was five years my junior and in the prime of her career. Next to her was Catherine Schultz, a German who was my age and struggling to stay ranked in the Top 100.

“How are you enjoying your retirement?” Catherine asked in very good English.

I raised my wine glass. “I can drink without worrying about how it will affect my game!”

“Cheers to that!” Ashley raised her glass of sparkling water. “Did you see the interview?”

“What interview?”

Catherine shook her head. “The arrogance. You would think he was Napoleon himself.”

Ashley handed me the water glass so she could fish her phone out of her clutch. She pulled up YouTube and navigated to the last viewed video, then held it up for me to watch.

The face on the screen was one I was familiar with—for more reasons than one. Gabriel Moreau still looked like that bashful teenage boy from the Academy all those years ago, although there was a fire in his cunning eyes now, and a smirk on those lips that I had kissed.

“Competition?” he said in a smooth French accent, responding to a question from a reporter. “There is no competition this year. The only one who can potentially match up well against me is Dominic deGrom, but he can never seem to win here in Melbourne. I can assure you he will not make it to the semifinals.”

“What about Nadal?” the interviewer asked. “Or Carfrae?”

Gabriel waved a hand dismissively. “Nadal is too old. Perhaps if we were playing on clay he would prove a challenge for me. And Carfrae?” He barked a mocking laugh. “Tristan Carfrae is no threat to anyone, let alone me. He will lose in the second round to that American boy. Brooksby.”

“How can you be so certain, Gabriel?” the interviewer asked.

He rolled his blue eyes. “If you knew what I knew about Carfrae, you would feel the same. When this tournament is completed, I will have taken the World #1 ranking from deGrom. Perhaps I will do so without losing a single set the entire tournament. I do not believe that has ever been done, no?”

Without waiting for an answer, he winked at the camera and walked away.

I shook my head. “Wow. Bold words before the first point has been played.”

“You went to the same Academy as Gabriel, did you not?” Catherine asked me.

“I did.”

“I bet he was just as cocky back then,” Ashley said.

I thought back on the Academy. Although I had never interacted with Gabriel much, that night at the party stuck out in my mind. He was so shy back then, barely able to look me in the eyes the whole evening. After French kissing me, he blushed the rest of the night. It was tough to believe that the man in the video clip was the same boy.

“Surprisingly, no,” I replied. “He was kind of bashful back then.”

Catherine snorted. “You are a retired woman now, Miranda. You can gossip all you want.”

“I haven’t been retired *that* long,” I replied.

The two of them laughed at that. And when Catherine shifted her weight to one leg, I caught a glimpse of the coach who had stopped by my interview earlier today. Standing next to him was the man I had spent all afternoon thinking about. Time seemed to slow for just a fraction of a second. His tall frame exuded an air of confidence that seemed to command attention without effort, and my gaze traced the lines of his well-fitted suit that hinted at a careful attention to detail. A subtle gasp escaped my lips as my heart quickened its pace, responding to the magnetic pull of Tristan's presence.

As he moved with a fluid grace, my eyes lingered on his strong jawline, catching the play of light on the faintest hint of stubble. His piercing eyes, a shade of deep ocean blue that was nearly black, held a captivating intensity that seemed to see through the surface, igniting a spark of curiosity within me. A lock of dirty-blond hair fell carelessly onto his forehead, adding an element of casual charm that was impossible to ignore.

I found myself momentarily lost in the way he carried himself, a blend of self-assuredness and approachability that made my heart flutter. My lips curved into a soft, involuntary smile as I watched him move across the room, admiring the way he engaged with those around him, his laughter filling the air like a melody.

And in that fleeting moment, I couldn't help but feel a subtle connection, a recognition of something captivating that extended beyond the surface. My admiration was not solely for his striking appearance, but for the enigmatic aura he carried, leaving me with a desire to know more about the man who I had kissed all those years ago.

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" I ducked away from them and walked toward one of the *other* boys I had kissed that night so long ago.

*Okay. Let's see what offer they have for me.*

# 4



## Miranda

Tristan Carfrae had been tall as a teenager, and he had added even more height in the fourteen years since the Academy. He was the tallest man in the room by a wide margin, standing almost a full head higher than the coach next to him. That's what made him such a strong serve-and-volley player: his height allowed him to hammer his serve with much more power than the other players. He was famous for being a lighthearted goofball, one who joked with his opponents on the court and fist-bumped the ball boys in between points. His glass of champagne looked tiny in his massive hand, but he had not yet taken a sip. With his open face and wide smile, somehow the years had made him look *more* like Heath Ledger than I remembered.

Even after all this time, the sight of him in person gave me butterflies. I had watched him on TV plenty of times, but our paths had rarely crossed over the years; whenever I went to events like this, he abstained. If I had a match in the Grandstand, he was scheduled in Louis Armstrong Stadium. Now that I gave it some thought, it felt so unlikely to *never* run into him. It was like fate had conspired to keep us apart.

I took a moment to quash the nervous feeling in my stomach. *I'm not a sixteen year old girl anymore. I'm a retired champion. I have more grand slam wins than him! He should be the one nervous to talk to me!*

I downed the rest of my wine, grabbed another glass from a nearby server, and then charged forward like a Roman centurion in heels.

Tristan blinked in surprise when he saw me approach, then a huge grin spread across his face. His coach saw me and said, “This is the consultant I want to bring in. Her name is—”

“Miranda,” Tristan said softly. He sounded awestruck, like someone viewing Everest for the first time—although he had to look *down* at me instead of up. “It’s been a very long time.”

“Fourteen years.” I tried to extend my hand, but he opened his arms wide, and we shared an awkward little half-hug. And just like that, I felt like I was that same sixteen year old girl again.

“Good, you two know each other,” the coach said. He was wearing a suit, not a tux. “I know we all hate these kinds of events, so I’ll get right to the point.” He looked around to make sure nobody was nearby, then lowered his voice. “Tristan has been struggling with an oblique injury for the past six months. It’s on his left side, affecting his backhand swing.”

I sucked in my breath. “So that’s why you’ve been running around to use your forehand more. “I knew something was different about your play style. When you did that against Djokovic in the semis at the US Open, I assumed you were just trying to throw him off his rhythm.”

“If only.” He began to take a sip of his champagne, then stopped himself with a grimace. “Every backhand was excruciating. Still is.”

Tristan didn’t seem like the lighthearted goofball I had seen on TV. He was almost bitter. I took a long sip of wine. “Okay. Why are you telling me this?”

“You dealt with a similar issue five years ago and managed to overcome it,” the coach said.

“Sure, by temporarily switching from a one-handed grip to a two-handed backhand. It gave me a lot more stability, and took pressure off the obliques.”

The coach pointed at me. “Yes, exactly. I want you to teach Tristan to do the same.”

I chuckled at that. “It didn’t solve the core issue, though. It was only a Band-Aid. The best thing for you to do is take

some time off and recover. Allow your injury to heal.”

“Our trainers have told us the same.” The coach looked sideways at his player.

“No,” Tristan said emphatically. “Absolutely not. I can’t afford to take that time off, not at this point in my career.”

“So you’re hoping to make the adjustment before Roland Garros in May?” I asked.

“We’re hoping to make the switch immediately,” the coach explained.

I blinked at him. “Immediately? You have a first-round match the day after tomorrow!”

“Not so loud,” the coach said. “If everyone knew about his injury, they would hammer his backhand non-stop. Listen. Tristan was primarily a two-handed backhand player until three years ago, when he changed to a one-handed grip. It shouldn’t be too hard to go back to it. He’s in a softer side of the bracket for this tournament. The first three rounds will be a cake walk. That will give Tristan time to adjust.”

“I still don’t understand why you don’t wait until after the tournament to make the adjustment. With three months until Roland Garros...”

“What’s your agent think about it?” the coach said, nodding to my right. “He probably wants you to take the gig, right?”

I glanced over at Hamilton, who was trying to chat up a female player in German. “Actually, Hammy is opposed to it. But only because he’s holding a grudge that you didn’t sign with him when you were an amateur.” I raised an eyebrow at Tristan.

A big smile split the tall tennis player’s face. “Oh, yeah. I remember that. He introduced himself, and I couldn’t stop laughing at him.”

“Because of his fake eye?” I asked, frowning.

“What? No! Because of his name.” When I didn’t understand, Tristan explained: “Hamilton Burger? *Ham* Burger?”

I stared at him. “He’s been my agent for ten years and I never made that connection until now.”

“He got offended by my laughing and stormed off before I could apologize,” Tristan said, running a hand through his hair. “I was just a stupid kid laughing at what I thought was a joke name. I probably would have signed with him if he had not run off so fast.” He shrugged.

“Well?” the coach said impatiently. “Will you work with us or not?”

Tristan was looking at me hopefully. He had grown into such a handsome man, a deeper attractiveness than his boyish good looks. All my protests were meaningless. I knew what my answer would be the moment I saw him.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

“Meet us at the private indoor courts at seven o’clock tomorrow morning,” the coach said.

Tristan gave me a final grin. “See you then.”

They wandered off to chat with some other players, with Tristan glancing over his shoulder at me once.

The butterflies remained in my stomach after the conversation, even while I was mingling with some of the other female players at the welcome dinner. Everyone was really friendly to me now that I was no longer their competition.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling that I didn’t belong here anymore.

I finished my wine and said goodbye to the women I was talking with, then turned to go find Hamilton. Before I could, someone touched me lightly on the arm.

“Miranda?”

I turned toward the last person I expected to speak to me.

*Dominic deGrom.*



# 5



## Miranda

Although I had watched him on television plenty of times, and had been in the stands for a few of his matches, it had been fourteen years since I last saw Dominic deGrom up close like this. When he was a teenager, he looked like a man fully grown, and the years didn't appear to have changed him much. Tall and confident, he moved with an ease that suggested a familiarity with attention, yet it was his genuine demeanor that drew me in. His dark hair was tousled in just the right way, lending a touch of rugged charm to his otherwise polished appearance. The soft chandelier light on his features revealed a chiseled jawline that seemed carved by an artist's hand.

As our eyes locked, the world of tennis around us faded away. His eyes, a rich shade of green, held a depth that spoke of experiences and stories yet untold. It was a gaze that seemed to invite me to explore the mysteries of fourteen years hidden beneath the surface.

I felt my cheeks grow hot as I realized I had been caught in the act of admiration, but the brief embarrassment was overshadowed by the thrill of this chance encounter. I couldn't shake the feeling that this was more than just a passing encounter; it was the spark of something yet to unfold—an encounter that had left an indelible mark on my heart. In that instant, I felt a magnetic pull, a desire to bridge the distance that separated us and discover the man that he had become since the last time we had spoken.

*I never saw him in a suit at the Academy, I thought while trying to work moisture into my mouth. He looks like he was born to wear one.*

“Dominic,” I said. The butterflies in my stomach turned into a flock of pigeons. “It’s been...”

“A long time,” he said with a chuckle. “I was hoping to run into you. Drink?” He was holding two highball glasses filled with some sort of mixed drink, and held one out to me.

“I’m good,” I said. “I was actually just leaving...”

“Aw, come on,” he said. Warm, not pushy. “I had the bartender make this especially for you. It took some convincing, and a twenty dollar bribe. Australian dollars. I don’t know if that’s more or less than the American kind.”

I accepted the glass and gave it a suspicious sniff. “What is it?”

“Try it first.”

“Girls are taught not to accept strange drinks from men they barely know,” I pointed out. When Dominic’s eyes widened, I quickly added, “I’m joking. I know you’re not drugging me.”

I took a sip. The drink was bubbly and had a refreshing pucker to it. “Mmm. What is that?”

“Vodka lemon spritz,” he explained proudly. “It was the closest thing to a Mike’s Hard Lemonade that the bartender could make.”

“Why would I want a Mike’s...” I trailed off. “That night at the party. I was drinking Mike’s Hard Lemonade! You remembered after all these years?”

He shrugged and sipped his own drink. “How could I not? I meant to buy you one at the Wimbledon welcome dinner three years ago, but I think you went to bed early that night. I bet it’s nice to finally be able to drink, now that you’re retired.”

“It really, really is.” I nodded at his glass. “You’re drinking, though.”

“I always have one drink at the welcome dinner for good luck,” he replied. “But you were famous for your strict diet. No alcohol for a month leading up to a major. All-natural meals, high in protein. No dairy, no processed foods. Nothing with added sugar.”

“I didn’t get *really* strict with my diet until 2018,” I said.

“That’s still a long time to go without having sugar,” he pointed out.

I sighed happily. “I had my first slice of cake two weeks ago. Has food gotten better in the last four years, or is it my imagination?”

“To the starving man,” Dominic said, “a loaf of bread is a feast.”

“True words. Who said that?”

“Dominic deGrom,” he replied. “Right here. Just now. You heard it in person.”

“Lucky me. I didn’t know you were so philosophical.”

“I don’t think you know a great deal about me.”

“Never had much of a chance,” I said. “The only time we ever talked at the Academy was at that silly party, and then...”

“Then you got sent to play in the Abu Dhabi tournament, which won you a slot at Roland Garros, where you made it to the semifinals as a sixteen year old,” he finished for me. “Launching your tennis career and leaving the rest of us behind.”

“It’s strange,” I said, sipping my drink. “Sometimes it feels like that was a lifetime ago. But sometimes it feels like it was just yesterday.”

“I know what you mean. Time is a strange thing.” He leaned in closer. “I hope this isn’t a douchebag thing to say, but...”

“But you’re going to say it anyway?” I teased.

“I just wanted to say that you look *amazing* in that dress,” he whispered. “You were beautiful back at the Academy, but you’ve grown into such an incredible woman. I wish I had asked you out long before that party.”

That couldn’t have been true. Dominic was flattering me. He was a dreamboat back then—and still was—but I was an awkward teenager back at the Academy, tall and gangly after a growth spurt.

“You clean up nicely in a suit, too,” I said, allowing myself to admire him up and down. God, he looked good. And for once, I didn’t have an upcoming match.

But he did.

“I know you probably have an early bedtime, so I’ll stop talking your ear off,” I said. “It was great catching up with you \_\_\_”

“Then let’s keep catching up,” he interrupted. “Stick around a little longer. At least until I finish my wanna-be Mike’s Hard Lemonade. My first-round match isn’t until the afternoon tomorrow, and I’d rather hang out with you than talk to all these other players who are laser-focused on winning this week.”

Dominic had a charisma about him when we first met at the party, and he still had it today. I wanted to say yes to him. I wanted him to give me his full, undivided attention. Now that tennis was no longer the focal point of my life, I wanted so many things.

“Sure,” I said. “For once, I don’t have anywhere else to be.”

# 6



## Dominic

Fourteen years.

Fourteen *long* years.

In tennis, it was common for women to go pro before they were eighteen. Men took longer to mature. I didn't play in my first tournament as a professional until I was nineteen. It took another five years to win my first major, at the US Open. By that time, Miranda was an established champion, ranked #1 in the world.

She was out of reach. Out of my league.

I had tried to find excuses to run into her over the years. You might think it would be easy since we were playing in many of the same tournaments, but you would be wrong. Schedules were stringently controlled, down to the minute. The four hours before a match were spent fueling and preparing, and the four hours after were spent recovering with a gauntlet of stretches, massages, ice baths, and nutrition.

And the few times when our paths *did* briefly cross, I had no idea what I was going to say to her. How could I possibly ask her out? I couldn't buy her a drink because she didn't have alcohol ten months out of the year. I couldn't take her to dinner because she only ate meals cooked by her nutritionist at home. I couldn't even ask her out to coffee because she didn't consume caffeine. This was further complicated by the fact that she still lived in New Jersey, and my home was in Queens.

On top of all of that, Miranda made no effort to try to run into me. Why would she? By the time I was finally making a

name for myself, she was already on top of the world.

*It's not meant to be, I told myself. I should move on.*

And that was true... until the interview I saw earlier that day.

I was in my hotel room, getting a sports massage after a tune-up session with my coach. I had the TV on for background noise, and they were showing coverage of the Australian Open. I was only half listening until I heard the name Miranda Jacobs.

I opened my eyes and stared at the TV. I hadn't realized Miranda was in Melbourne; now that she was retired, I expected her to stay away from the big events. But I guess she had to make an appearance as the reigning women's champion.

The sight of her on TV transfixed me. She had always been an attractive woman, but age had only deepened her beauty. Her raven hair hung down her back in waves, in stark contrast to the tactical ponytail she usually wore while playing tennis. Sharp eyes seemed to process everything the interviewer intended to ask before he actually voiced the question. That heart shaped face and dimpled chin that was striking as a teenager was now devastatingly beautiful.

And just like that, all my feelings came rushing back to me.

The interviewer asked her something about her personal life, and Miranda replied, "Maybe I'll fall in love, now that tennis is no longer my husband."

She glanced at the camera, and I swear to God it felt like she was staring directly at me. Just like she had looked at me that night in the Academy dorm, while the bottle spun between us and landed on her. Something twisted in my chest, just behind my breastbone, and it had nothing to do with the masseuse stretching out my pectoral muscles.

In that moment, I knew I had to shoot my shot. Even if it meant staying up a little later than I originally intended.

"Sure," Miranda said to me in the ballroom. "For once, I don't have anywhere else to be."

We found an unoccupied table and sat down with our drinks. “So, how’s retirement?” I asked.

She let out a long sigh. “It’s great. I mean *really* great. You don’t realize how much pressure is on you until it’s suddenly gone.”

“I definitely realize how much pressure is being put on me,” I replied. “I feel every pound. Every *ounce*.”

She leaned forward and raised an eyebrow. “Trust me: it’s a lot more than you think. I feel like a new woman. Like I’m starting a new life.”

“And what are you going to do with this new life?”

“Hell if I know!” she replied, which made us both laugh. “Right now, I’ve been enjoying sleeping in until seven every morning.”

“Seven? That’s your idea of sleeping in?”

“It is when I’m used to waking up at four!” she argued. “Those extra three hours...” She pressed all the fingers of one hand to her lips and made a kiss, like a chef.

“I usually don’t start my day until six,” I said.

“You don’t start working out until *six*? The sun is practically up by then!”

“Working out?” I chuckled. “No, six is when my alarm goes off. I relax and enjoy breakfast and coffee for an hour, then begin my training around seven. Maybe you should have tried my routine.”

She leaned forward with a mischievous grin on her lips. “Maybe that’s why I was ranked number one in the world for three hundred straight weeks, and you’ve only held the spot for barely a year.”

I clutched my chest like I had been stabbed. “Ouch. That one stung.”

She winced. “Sorry. Bad joke. You’re at the top of your game right now. I don’t see anyone unseating you for a long time.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” I replied, “but that arrogant French prick has a good chance of taking the number one spot this tournament.” Realizing what I had said, I glanced around to make sure nobody had overheard.

“Gabriel Moreau?” she asked.

I nodded. “He’s right behind me in points. If he advances one round deeper than me, he’ll end the tournament ranked number one, and I’ll get bumped down to two.”

“But if you both make it to the finals?” she asked.

“Then I’ll maintain my spot, no matter the result.”

Miranda shrugged and gestured at me with her drink. “I think you match up well against him. And you’re in the best shape of your life, no matter what time you wake up. Seriously, Dominic, you look amazing.”

The compliment was like cold water to my thirsty ego. “I was thinking the same about you, Miranda. You look like you could go three sets against prime Serena tomorrow.”

“You’re exaggerating, but thank you.”

“I’m completely serious. You look more beautiful right now, sitting here with me, than you have in the fourteen years I’ve watched you play. You’re stunning.”

She took a slow sip of her drink. “You’ve been watching me for fourteen years?”

*Crap. She probably thinks I’m a stalker.*

“Here and there. Whenever I get a chance to watch tennis for fun. Which, if I’m being honest, isn’t too often.”

“I was only talking about your fitness,” she said with a half-smile. “But you think I’m beautiful?”

I winced internally. “Well, I mean...”

“I think you look handsome yourself,” she said before I could answer. “That attractive boy from the Academy has grown into an incredibly sexy man.”



I raised my glass, and she clinked hers to mine in a silent toast of appreciation.

“Okay,” I said to change the subject. “I know you’ve only been retired a short while, but what do you miss about it?”

“I miss having something to wake up for,” she immediately said. “When I was playing, every morning I had a singular focus in my life. To continue winning tennis championships. Every meal I ate, every mile I ran, every footwork drill I completed, was toward that goal. I enjoy sleeping in now, but I do miss that drive. My days feel a little... aimless.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “What *don’t* you miss?”

She smiled. “Probably all the same things you hate about the sport right now.”

“Interviews!” I said, and she emphatically nodded in agreement. “Answering the same asinine questions at every press conference.”

“How do you feel about tomorrow’s match?” Miranda said, mimicking the tone of a reporter. “Are you afraid of so-and-so’s powerful serve? Is your head stuck up your ass?”

I laughed at that. “Getting bombarded by fans everywhere I go. I *like* the fans, don’t get me wrong, but sometimes I just want to walk to dinner in peace.”

“I don’t miss the strict diet, either,” Miranda said. “If I never have to hear a nutritionist tell me how I need twenty grams of protein to hit my macros for the day, I will die happy.”

“I actually like my nutritionist,” I mused. “She’s good at finding ways to keep my diet varied, so I don’t get bored.”

“Does she let you eat cake?” Miranda asked.

“She hasn’t uttered those words like Marie Antoinette, but yeah, I eat my fair share of dessert. I burn close to four thousand calories a day. A few hundred calories from sugar doesn’t affect me. And if that makes me a tenth of a percent worse at tennis, then that’s worth it to me.”

“Lucky,” she muttered.

“You know, you had complete control over your career,” I pointed out. “You could have asked your nutritionist for a cheat day once a week.”

“Yeah...” She pursed her lips. “But I wanted to be the best. I wanted to grab every advantage I could, even if it meant making small sacrifices.”

“The results speak for themselves,” I agreed. “Six major championships is an impressive career. You should be proud.”

“I am,” she said wistfully. “I really am.”

“But now that it’s over, what are you looking forward to the most?” I asked. “Aside from eating cake whenever you want.”

“It’s really just the cake thing,” she replied. I grinned widely, and she smiled right back at me before continuing. “No, but seriously. Playing tennis for fun. I’m looking forward to that. And watching the sport without feeling like I’m doing homework on potential competitors. I can’t remember the last time I truly *enjoyed* watching the game.”

“It’s been a while since I played for fun,” I agreed. “Sometimes, I’ll pass a public court and see regular people playing. They look so...”

“Happy?” she finished for me.

“Yeah. Happy. They’re *choosing* to play as a hobby, not as a career. It’s their leisure. When I have free time, tennis is the last thing I want to do.”

“Maybe when you retire, you’ll get to enjoy it again,” she said. “Speaking of that, how long of a career do you want to have?”

“Well, athletes are playing later and later into their life these days. Serena retired at forty. Federer was forty-one. I could, potentially, have another decade of tennis in me.”

“I didn’t ask what you *could* do,” she clarified. “I asked what you *wanted* to do. Can you really see yourself doing this ten years from now?”

“No,” I answered immediately. I was surprised by my own response. It was emphatic, and came from deep within myself.

Yet once I had said it, I knew it to be the truth.

“I don’t want to play for another ten years,” I explained, both to myself as much to Miranda. “Five years, *maybe*. But even that is a stretch. I don’t know. I would like to win a career grand slam, but the men’s ladder is awfully competitive.”

“What are you missing? Roland Garros?”

I nodded. “Clay was my best surface. When I was younger, I thought I would easily win in Paris. But the competition...”

“Gabriel Moreau is a big roadblock at the French Open,” she agreed. “He’s like the reincarnation of Nadal. It’s crazy to think that’s the same kid who went to the Academy with us.”

I gave a start. “Moreau was at the Academy with us?”

“Are you joking right now?” She blinked at me. “You’re serious? You don’t remember him?”

“There were two dozen other boys my age at the Academy. I spent most of my time focusing on myself. Although I’m surprised I didn’t remember that cocky bastard.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” she said. “He wasn’t cocky back then. He was downright *quiet*.”

“I can’t imagine that at all.”

“He was actually one of the guys who played spin the bottle with us at the party that night,” she explained. “He kissed me right before you did.”

I thought back to that night in the boy’s dorm. The Foo Fighters were playing on the stereo, and we were drinking whatever alcohol we could manage to find at the time. I could see Miranda across the circle from me, two spots of red on her cheeks as she leaned in to kiss me. And I distinctly remembered the smile she gave me after. But the rest of the night was a blur. I certainly didn’t remember Gabriel Moreau kissing her first.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember kissing me during spin the bottle,” Miranda warned.

I furrowed my brow. “You’ll have to be more specific. I kissed a *lot* of girls back then. You can’t expect me to remember every single one.”

Her eyes widened and she downed the rest of her drink. “If I hurl this glass at the number one ranked player in the world, do you think they’d kick me out?”

“If they did kick you out, I’d go with you,” I immediately said. “You’re more fun than this place, anyway. Of course I remember that night, Miranda. How could I not?”

“You were so popular at the Academy,” she said. Two spots of red touched her cheeks now, and I had an intense sense of *deja-vu*. “I was just a girl you kissed during a stupid game.”

*You’re not just some girl I kissed. You’re so much more than that.* The words were right there, on the edge of my tongue. I wanted to send them out into the air. I wanted her to know.

Instead, I said, “So, have you kissed a lot of boys since then?”

She snorted. “Not many, no. Not many *men*, either.”

“Really? I would think being the top female tennis player in the world would make you quite attractive to the fellas. In addition to your natural attractiveness, of course.”

“I never had much time,” she replied with a rueful smile. “And I was afraid people were *just* attracted to me because of my status. It’s tough to trust someone in that environment. What about you?”

“No,” I said without skipping a beat, “I haven’t kissed many boys since the Academy.”

She gave me a playful glare.

“I’ve dated here and there,” I admitted. “Nothing has stuck.”

“Huh. That surprises me.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I always figured someone would scoop you up and never let go,” she replied.

*Funny, I thought. I always assumed the same would happen to you.*

“It has felt like everyone I’ve ever dated has just been interested in me as a status symbol,” I explained. “An accessory for their Instagram story or TikTok reel. I’ve gotten good at spotting that ahead of time, and I avoid those kinds of people. Unfortunately, that’s pretty much the only kind of person who asks me out.”

“So you’re not dating anyone right now?” Miranda casually tried to take a sip of her drink, then remembered that it was empty.

“No,” I said with a smile. “I’m happily single.”

“There are worse things to be,” she replied with a smile of her own.

The two of us stared at each other for a long time.

“Well, I think I’ve had enough of this party,” Miranda said, standing and stretching. I tried not to admire the way she looked in her dress. “Do you mind if I get a quick selfie with you for my Instagram story?”

“Go to hell,” I replied with a chuckle.

“What? I bet you would double my daily impressions. That’s the only reason I hung out with you, after all.”

I took out my own phone and wrapped an arm around Miranda’s waist, pulling her close to me. She put one hand on my hip and let the other one rest on my chest as I held my phone up, taking a selfie of the two of us.

“Aw, you ruined it by making that face,” I said.

“What?” she asked innocently. “Don’t guys like it when a woman makes a face like a duck?” She repeated the exaggerated face, causing her lips to bulge out like someone who’d had one too many Botox injections.

“Take another one. Seriously this time.”

She leaned in close again, molding her body to mine. Her scent overwhelmed me, flowery and more intoxicating than

the lemon vodka spritz. I wanted to hold that pose forever, to savor the way her waist felt in my palm, and the tickle of her hair against my cheek.

The screen flashed, and we pulled apart.

“You’d better tag me in that post.” She aimed a warning finger at me. “I could use the impressions.”

“I’m not posting this one,” I replied. “This selfie is just for me.”

“Okay, weirdo,” she replied, but her smile was more genuine now. “Good luck in your match tomorrow.”

“I don’t need luck. I’m well-rested because my alarm doesn’t go off until seven.”

She giggled, then gave a little wave and turned away from me.

*I can’t let her walk away from me again. I can’t go another fourteen years without seeing her.*

“Miranda?” I blurted out.

She paused and turned back around.

“There’s a bar at the hotel where I’m staying,” I found myself saying. “I’m only going to have water, but I’d love to buy you a drink.”

I saw her think about it. Those dark eyes held a thousand and one thoughts. I was terrified she might say no... but I was just as scared she might say yes. What did I want to happen?

“No thanks,” she said.

A dagger to my heart. “No worries, I—”

“Does your room have a minibar?” she asked. “Because I’d rather have one of *those* drinks.”

I smiled. “I think it does.”

# 7



## Miranda

Fourteen years ago, I had kissed a handsome boy at the Academy. I didn't really know him back then, beyond his notorious skill on the tennis court and popularity among the other students. I had this *idea* of Dominic deGrom, an idea that had fermented in my mind in the years since, maturing like a fine wine. And even though our careers had similar trajectories, it still felt like we had been worlds apart for the last decade.

I never thought I would have another chance at him. And thanks to a few drinks, and my low tolerance for alcohol, this time I wasn't going to miss my shot.

"Does your room have a minibar?" I asked. "Because I'd rather have one of *those* drinks."

I cringed as soon as I said it. How could I blurt out something so *cheesy*? He was going to laugh in my face. I would be too embarrassed to talk to him for another fourteen years.

But instead, he smiled. "I think it does."

We were making out as soon as we got into the back seat of the taxi, bodies connecting and hands exploring. I didn't even care that the driver could see us. I felt the chiseled muscle underneath his tuxedo, like steel that was plated with gold, and his lips were warm and hungry.

*He kisses just like how I remember, I thought as the taxi pulled up to the hotel. And somehow even better.*

Dominic took me by the hand and we ran inside, giggling as the hotel staff watched us in confusion. There was another couple in the elevator with us, one of whom looked like a low-ranked male tennis player whose name escaped me, so we had to put a stop to our fun. But as soon as the elevator stopped on their floor and they got out, Dominic pushed me up against the wall and kissed me harder than before, pressing his body between my legs.

I barely remembered leaving the elevator and stumbling down the hall to his room—I was too focused on the wonderful way his lips churned against mine. There was a beep, and a click, and then we were out of the hall and into his enormous suite.

“I have a confession,” he suddenly said.

I gazed up into his green eyes, terrified of what he might say.

“I don’t actually have a minibar in my room,” he said. “I have a full kitchen, but there’s no alcohol.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “I have a confession, too.” I leaned in until our faces almost touched. “The minibar was just an excuse to come up to your room.”

He gasped softly. “You would do that? Lie to a man just to get up to his hotel room?”

I gave him a slow, wet kiss on his chin. “Like you’ve never done the same.”

“I can honestly say,” he said with deadly seriousness, “that I have never lied to a man to get him up to my hotel room.”

I squinted at him. “You know what I meant.”

“I’ve never lied to a woman, either.”

“Except you did exactly that to me by claiming you had a minibar.”

“Are you upset about it?” he asked.

“No.” I smiled. “Not even a little bit.”



Our mouths locked together automatically, and this time his tongue flicked out. I parted my lips and accepted it eagerly, moaning softly in my throat as he led us over to the bed. We fell onto it, bouncing softly but never breaking our connection.

*This feels so good.* For the past decade, I had spent a large amount of time trying to avoid making mistakes. Mistakes on the court, in public, and in my private life. Now that I was retired, I didn't have to be so cautious. I could think with other parts of my body other than my brain.

But old habits die hard, and I found myself pulling away from him. He gave me a confused look.

"I usually don't do this," I explained. "I typically like to get to know a guy first."

"We do know each other," Dominic said. "We go way back."

"We shared a kiss fourteen years ago," I argued. "That's hardly the same as *knowing* each other, aside from what's public knowledge."

"Okay," he said, eyes twinkling with humor. "If it'll make you feel better, we can play a game."

I perked up. "What kind of game?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and ran his fingertips up my thigh, right to the hem of my dress. "We take turns making guesses about each other. Something that's *not* public knowledge. If we get it right, the other person takes off an article of clothing."

I scooped over to the edge of the bed next to him. "Like *Guess Who*, but with stripping? Count me in."

"You can ask the first question."

"All right." I frowned in concentration. "I can ask anything?"

"Within reason," he said suspiciously.

"I bet you collect something," I guessed. "Like baseball cards. Or those little Hot Wheels toys. But definitely some sort of collection you obsess over."

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Signed baseballs. I have over a thousand signed by various baseball players.”

I squealed with excitement. “Do I get to choose the article of clothing?”

Dominic reached down and pulled off both shoes and socks. “Nope. My turn.” He cocked his head while studying me. His green eyes sparkled when he came up with his guess. “You listen to podcasts.”

“Everyone listens to podcasts. You need to be more specific than that.”

“Okay.” Dominic bit his lip. “True crime podcasts.”

I grinned. “Nope!”

“I don’t believe you.”

I retrieved my phone from my clutch, unlocked it, and tossed it to him. “See for yourself.”

His angular face was illuminated by the glow of the screen as he scrolled through it. “Wow. There are a lot of nude selfies in your camera roll.”

“HEY!”

He quickly flipped the phone around, showing me the podcast screen. “Just kidding. I’m respecting your privacy.” Dominic scrolled some more. “*The Daily. Okay. Stuff You Should Know.* That’s a good one.” His eyes widened. “Ah hah! How do you explain this?”

I squinted at the screen. “1865? That’s not a true crime podcast. It’s history.”

Dominic began reading the description out loud. “President Lincoln is dead and the country is in turmoil. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton takes control, determined to bring the assassin to justice.”

“Exactly,” I insisted. “History.”

“A crime was committed,” Dominic said. “And it was *true*, as opposed to made up. Therefore, it is a true crime. I rest my case.”

“You might think you’re smart,” I said sweetly. “But technically, you said I listen to true crime podcasts. *Plural*. This is the only one that has anything to do with crime. So you are still wrong.”

“Oh, so that’s how we’re going to play?” he shot back at me with a laugh. “You’re going to remain clothed based on a technicality?”

Taking pity on him, I took off one shoe. “That’s all you’ll get. Guess better next time.”

He grumbled, but didn’t argue further.

“Now, for you...” I glanced down at him. “You injured your ankle at some point, and it still bothers you every now and then.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s public knowledge. I missed Wimbledon because of it.”

“That’s only half of my guess,” I replied. “Your *public* story was that you injured it while practicing doubles. But I think that’s a lie. I believe you injured it doing something in your free time.”

He gave me a long stare. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“You injured it doing something *stupid*,” I guessed. “Something you wouldn’t want the public to know.”

Dominic glared at me—he was gorgeous even while glaring!—and rose from the bed. He unbuckled his belt and then let his pants slide to the ground. His grey boxer-briefs were plastered to long, powerful thighs, and the outline of his semi-hard cock bulged across the front.

“Well?” I asked. “How did you injure it?”

“I don’t have to tell you,” he said.

“What! That’s no fun!”

He sat back down before I could ogle him too much. “My next guess. Your match against Sharapova at Wimbledon, back when you were just getting started. You dropped out in the second set with a mysterious injury. I think you made that up.”

I winced. “I was outmatched, and she was crushing me in the second set. I was only a teenager, and the pressure got to me. So I pretended like my elbow was injured, and I went back into the locker room and cried.”

He put a comforting hand on my knee. “Oh, Miranda. I didn’t mean to bring it up...”

“Don’t apologize! That happened over a decade ago. It doesn’t sting anymore.” I aimed a warning finger at him. “But if you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

Dominic held up his palms. “I can keep a secret.”

I stood, unzipped my dress, and shimmied out of it. I was glad to be wearing one of my sexy bras underneath. The pink fabric and white lace held my full breasts nicely. Dominic allowed himself a generous stare, and made a deep sound in his throat.

“Take a picture—it’ll last longer,” I teased.

He immediately reached for his phone from his jeans on the floor and held it out to take a photo. I laughed and slapped it out of his hand. “I was joking!”

“That one I *would* have posted to Instagram,” he said with a huge grin. “You didn’t have to go straight to your dress, you know. You still had a shoe you could have taken off.”

“I’m happy with my choice,” I said, enjoying the hungry look in his eyes now. “Let’s see. Publicly, you’ve had... what, two girlfriends?”

“Two since I’ve gone pro,” he replied. “Eloise, the model from New York, and Tatiana, the Ukrainian tennis player.”

“Two public girlfriends,” I mused. “I think you’ve dated a lot more than that, but are very good at keeping it a secret. I think you’ve hooked up with a *lot* of women.”

Dominic smiled. It was a smile of embarrassment, and for a moment I regretted asking him. It shattered the illusion that there was something special about what we were doing tonight.

But he surprised me by saying, “Nope. Those two girlfriends are basically the only relationships I’ve had.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yep.”

“Someone like you has only dated two women in a decade?”

He frowned. “What do you mean, someone like me?”

I waved at his body. “Uh, hello? Do you not know what you look like? Famous *and* sexy as hell?”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

“Don’t change the subject. Two girlfriends? You’ve never had a random hookup or one-night stand? *Never?*”

“Never,” he repeated, a serious look falling across his face. “I really don’t like hooking up with random girls. Especially not the girls that typically try to attach themselves to professional athletes. I’m just...” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I realized I was holding my breath. I let it out slowly and asked in a quiet voice, “If you don’t like hooking up with random girls, then why invite me up to your hotel room?”

He took my hand in his, and all the while his gaze remained focused on me. There was a deepness in his stare, a universe of knowledge and thought. *This is something he’s thought about*, I realized.

“You’re not just some random girl, Miranda.” He shook his head. “I know we haven’t spoken in over a decade. And I know we barely knew each other at the Academy. But that night at the party, the night we kissed...”

I was kissing him again before I knew what was happening, fingers unbuttoning his dress shirt and practically tearing it away from him.

“Woah, you didn’t make another guess,” he said when I paused to pull the shirt off. “What about our game?”

“Games are dumb,” I said. “*Kiss me.*”

## 8



### Miranda

Dominic dove into me, pushing me back onto the bed and covering me with his chiseled body. It was more muscular than I could have imagined, totally defined in perfect contrast, hardly an ounce of fat on him. The veins bulged in his arms as he planted them on either side of my chest and kissed me harder, and the world dimmed until there was only him, and me, and our lips.

He pulled away long enough to say, “I want to taste you.” Then he was lowering himself to the edge of the bed, fingers exploring my skin and raising goosebumps where they touched. He curled his fingers underneath the waistline of my thong, sliding them off tantalizingly slow. Down my thighs, over the knees, then off my calves and feet—though it briefly got tangled in the one heel I was still wearing. I quickly kicked it off. I would have felt vulnerable to be totally nude with someone for the first time, but I trusted him in a strange way. I *wanted* him to see me, all of me.

*It doesn't feel like the first time, I realized, because I've been fantasizing about Dominic since I was a teenager.*

Dominic made a trail of kisses up my inner thigh, using his wide palms to spread my legs. He inhaled deeply of my scent, then his long tongue lashed out to lick the outside of my pussy lips. Just a flick against my skin, like he was trying to tease me with as little contact as possible.

“Oh, that's torture!” I moaned as I enjoyed the sight of his dark hair between my legs.

He looked up at me with an evil smile. “You want me to stop?”

“God, no!” I practically screamed at him.

He licked up and down around my lower lips, tasting the fold of skin between them and my thighs. Kissing everything *but* my pussy itself. His tongue moved inward, breath tickling my sex. Then his fingers spread my lips wide, and finally he jammed his tongue deep inside.

“Ohh,” I sighed, arching my back on the bed. The sudden pleasure was so intense, and bordering on what I could handle, that I clutched the bedsheets in my fists. “Oh, Dominic...”

He began slowly, long waves of his tongue that rolled up and down inside my pussy. Devouring me like we had all the time in the world. And just when I needed more, his thumb found my clit, running circles around it while he ate me out. An index finger slid inside me with ease, then a middle finger joined it as he pistoned me with his muscular arm, fingering me into the bed.

Normally, I couldn't get off very easily with a partner. It was just one of those things I wasn't born with, even though I enjoyed being eaten out. But the way Dominic was moving his fingers and tongue, it was hitting *all* of my buttons in the right order.

It was like he knew exactly what I wanted before I knew myself.

Dominic rotated his fingers so they were horizontal instead of vertical. He paused to look up at me, breath hot on my sensitive pussy as he grinned with mischief. Then he curled his fingers in a *come here* motion, rubbing against the ridges of my G-spot.

My eyes widened and the muscles in my legs tensed around his head.

“*Holy shit,*” I gasped, curling my toes.

Dominic dove back into my pussy with animal-like frenzy. His fingers moved at the perfect pace in conjunction with his

mouth, which was now devoted to my clit—licking, pushing, and sucking it into his mouth.

“I love how you taste,” he rumbled.

“Yes, yes, *yes!*”

My body twisted and bucked like I was being electrocuted as pleasure surged through my bones. Dominic managed to stay focused on his task as I planted my hands on the bed and pushed my sex into him, smothering him with it. I let out a ragged scream of ecstasy as I came all over his face, everything turning white and tingly.

When I finally came down from my drug-like high, Dominic was grinning up at me. He kissed my thigh softly, and then kissed his way up my body to my mouth.

“I want you to know how good you taste,” he said, kissing me on the lips with a little flicker of tongue.

“Mmm, you flatter me.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “I love the way your pussy tastes. I could just eat you up again.” His grin deepened. “But there’s something else I’d rather do.”

Before he could tell me what it was, I pushed him sideways, and rolled him over so that he was lying flat on his belly. Then I sat on his sinewy butt.

“I’d like that too,” I said while running my hands over his back. “But give a girl a minute to recoup, yeah?”

“Mmm, okay. What are you doing?”

I caressed my fingernails over his back, up one side and down the other. “Giving you a massage.”

“A massage?”

“Your first match is tomorrow afternoon. You should relax.”

“I have a dedicated masseuse,” he replied. “I don’t need—*ohh.*”

He trailed off as I dug my palms into his shoulder blades, gently kneading the muscle back and forth. I admired him



while I worked. He had the most incredible set of back muscles. His shoulders were corded and bulging, but the lower part of his trapezius muscles were leaner. They twisted and moved as he adjusted his arms, placing them underneath his head.

“Miranda, I think I’ve gone to heaven.”

“Now you know how I felt a minute ago.”

“This is better,” he insisted, voice muffled by the comforter. “We don’t even need to have sex. Just keep doing *that*.”

I massaged most of his back, light tension with some gentle caressing to make it more relaxing than a sports massage. The last thing I wanted to do was injure him the night before his first match, after all. I enjoyed sitting on his butt while I worked—it was big and warm and squishy with muscle. It felt so nice that I wanted to crawl off of it and sink my teeth into the flesh, biting a chunk out of it!

I didn’t say that, though. That was the kind of thing that might scare a guy off.

Touching his chiseled body got me hot and bothered within minutes. When I couldn’t stand it any longer, I slid down off his butt and brought my lips down to his skin, kissing him gently on the spine. I slid a hand underneath his body until I found his cock. It was already rock-hard, radiating heat.

Dominic moaned as I stroked him while kissing up his spine. I loved the way his skin felt; it was almost like I could taste the powerful muscle underneath.

With my free hand, I grabbed a handful of his plump butt. Yeah, that felt *nice*.

My intention was to stroke him, turn him over, and then give him a fantastic blowjob as payback for the amazing way he had gone down on *me*. But before I could put my plan into motion, Dominic twisted sideways underneath me, reached back to grab my arm, and yanked me down to the bed next to him.

“Give me some of that ass,” he said, rolling me onto my side away from him. I squeaked as he guided his hard length into

me from behind—I was sopping wet and he slid right in, his thickness pressing tight against my inner walls. My entire body shuddered from the explosion of pleasure caused by his cock.

“God,” he groaned into the back of my head. “I take it back. This is better than the massage.”

Still on my side, I twisted my head around so that I could kiss him. I jammed my tongue into his mouth, and then when his began to swirl against mine I pulled it into my mouth and sucked it between my lips, like I was giving his tongue a miniature blowjob. Dominic responded by increasing his pace, fucking me harder. Hair from his happy trail tickled my ass as he slid in and out, wet and thick and full.

The angle was intense, but exactly the right amount that I needed. Soon I was arching my back and shoving my ass against him, meeting his strokes halfway.

“Miranda.” My name was a prayer and a curse on his lips.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Harder. Fuck me. Just like that. Harder! *Don't stop!*”

He didn't. He pumped faster and faster until his fingers were digging into my hip, and then he cried out with ecstasy and pushed as far as he could, coming deep inside of me, filling me with his warmth. I twisted around again and kissed him as he came, the passion in our lips diminishing in time with the throbbing spurts of his cock. We slumped over into the pillows, too spent to move.

I savored the feeling of his dick inside me, slowly softening while I squeezed it tight with my inner muscles. I didn't want him to leave me.

“No massage is *that* good,” I breathed.

He vibrated with silent laughter that I felt through our conjoined skin. “Not any massage I've ever had, at least.”

We closed our eyes and enjoyed the peaceful, quiet moment for a while.

Normally, I wouldn't *dare* tease a guy in bed. You just never knew how a man might react. But I felt like I could be myself around Dominic, and the moment called for some lighthearted teasing.

"So," I said evenly. "Was I just that good, or do you normally only last a few minutes?"

His shocked reaction made me bust out laughing.

"You're not very funny," he said.

"Who says I'm joking?"

He grinned mischievously. "Then I guess we'll have to do it again."

"I'm already worried that I've worn you out too much," I replied as he readjusted himself onto the bed, allowing me to cuddle up against his warm body. "Wasn't it Rocky's coach who told him women weaken a man's legs before a fight?"

"The advice didn't help. He still loses to Apollo Creed."

"Wow, spoilers," I said.

"I think the statute of limitations has ended on a movie that came out in the seventies."

"Regardless. I think I've sapped too much of your energy tonight. The last thing I want you doing is blaming me if you somehow lose tomorrow."

"You think I'll lose tomorrow?"

"I think you'll dominate tomorrow," I replied. "But stranger things have happened. I lost in the first round at Roland Garros four years ago because I wasn't focused enough."

"So you think I'll be too distracted by tonight's events to focus?"

"Stop twisting my words," I murmured into his chest.

We cuddled in happy silence for a while.

"Miranda?" he asked softly.

"Hmm?"

“I wish this had happened sooner.”

I sat up onto an elbow so I could look into his beautiful face. “Me too. You should have bought me a lemon vodka spritz *years* ago.”

He snorted. “I was too intimidated.”

“Intimidated?” I almost choked laughing. “Of me? I was intimidated by you!”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. You were the popular guy at the Academy. Everyone liked you. All the girls had crushes on you. There’s *zero* reason for you to be intimidated by me.”

Dominic sat up in bed. “By the time I played in my first major, you were ranked number one in the world. You were already halfway to a career grand slam, with wins at Wimbledon and the US Open. I was a nobody.”

I shook my head. “No. You weren’t.”

“I was, Miranda.”

“You weren’t a nobody to me. You were...” I trailed off.

“What?” he asked, eyes boring intently into mine. “What was I?”

“You were one of the first boys I ever kissed,” I replied. “You were the guy I thought about for years later, long after the Academy was a distant memory. And when you finally made the pro tour, and were coming to all the same major tournaments as me, you acted like I didn’t exist.”

“To me, I felt like the noob who didn’t belong,” he replied gently. “I knew you existed, Miranda. How could I not? I watched every one of your matches. All the ones I could, anyway. If I had known...”

I chuckled softly. “I can see your point. And I’m glad to know how you felt. But it’s in the past.”

Dominic cupped my cheek. “The past sucks. I like the present. And at present, I know exactly what I want to do.” He crawled toward me until I was falling back on the bed.

“What about women weakening legs?” I asked.

He grinned. “Fuck my legs.”

As he kissed me, I forgot all about my protests.

# 9



## Tristan

When I was healthy, I was the best male tennis player in the world. And yes, that's my totally biased opinion, but I also happen to think it's the truth.

I won my first major, the US Open, when I was eighteen. I defeated Djokovic—the world number one at the time—in three straight sets, dominating him with my powerful serve and then finishing him off at the net. I followed up that win with three more majors in the next four years, cementing my place as one of the top men in the game.

But since that hot streak, I had struggled with physical limitations. First was an injured rotator cuff that sidelined me for six months. Then a sprained ACL. One by one, the little injuries piled up; just when I would heal from one thing, another would pop up. For the past five years, there has always been *some* lingering problem with my body. It was frustrating having a body that would not cooperate with my ambition.

I've gotten a lot of advice over the years, both good and bad. My coach told me to take some time off and heal. My best mates in Sydney told me to harden the fuck up and play through my injuries. I usually tried the former, allowing my body the rest it needed to keep up with such a grueling schedule. But I was in my thirties now, and I couldn't afford to take time off. Time was the one resource I was rapidly running out of. When I went to bed at night, and when I woke up in the morning, that clock was ticking in the back of my head. Reminding me that I couldn't do this forever.

The one major I had never won was the one that mattered the most to me: the Australian Open. The one that took place in the city where I grew up. My window for winning in Melbourne was closing. It felt like a noose tightening around my neck. Soon, I wouldn't be able to breathe. I needed help if I was going to accomplish the one goal I cared about.

And the woman who was supposed to give me that help had stood me up.

*Again.*

I checked my watch and glanced at my coach, who only shrugged. We were on the first court of the indoor practice arena, which was blocked off from most of the fans. But there was a roped off section over on the side where fans with a special Platinum Pass could watch us practice. They had been respectful so far, watching quietly without screaming for autographs. Since Miranda was late, I grabbed a pen from my bag and wandered over there.

Signing autographs always lifted my spirits. It reminded me that I was only here *because* of the fans; without them, there would be no prize money, no tournaments, no endorsements. I owed my entire career to them. The great Australian player Lleyton Hewitt had signed an autograph for me when I was ten, and it made my day. Hell, it made my entire *year*.

Interacting with the fans did raise my spirits a little bit... until one little boy walked away, muttering to his friend, "He used to be fun. Now he just seems annoyed all the time."

I clenched my teeth and finished signing a tennis ball for a teenage girl. "Sorry, that's all I have time for. Need to get back to practice."

The smattering of fans thanked me and gave a little cheer as I walked away. But all I could hear in my head was that little boy claiming I wasn't fun anymore. It didn't sting because he was wrong—it stung because he was *right*. It had been a long time since tennis was fun to me. Now it was just a job, and one that I was consistently failing at.

"She's late," I said to my coach.

“It’s only a quarter past,” he replied. “She’s probably getting mobbed by fans on the way here. Let’s warm-up while we wait.”

Even though he was probably right, her absence was like a dagger to my gut. It was the same pain I’d felt fourteen years ago. Hopefulness, followed by crushing disappointment. I still didn’t know why it bothered me so much, but it did. The last thing I needed was to go through that again.

“I’m not convinced I should switch to a two-handed backhand,” I said while my coach and I lightly hit the ball back and forth.

“The alternative is continuing to struggle,” he replied. “Or drop out entirely and rest up before the French Open.”

*No, I thought bitterly. I can’t drop out of another tournament. I need to win the Aussie.*

“You could switch to doubles in the short-term,” my coach suggested. “For the French, and maybe Wimbledon. Your partner could pick up the slack on your backhand side. It would keep you sharp while you rest, and the doubles pool is weak this year.”

“I don’t want to play doubles,” I said stubbornly.

My coach rolled his eyes, but didn’t press the issue further.

I knew when Miranda was arriving because the fans in the Platinum section started shouting for autographs. The sight of her took my breath away: a short black tennis skirt and a deep blue top, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. The tennis bag over her shoulder was almost as large as she was.

“Miranda!” one little girl shouted. “Are you helping Tristan Carfrae practice?”

“He doesn’t need my help,” she replied. “We’re just old friends getting together to hit the ball a little.”

*Old friends.* Is that what she thought we were? Before last night, I hadn’t spoken to her in over a decade.

“Sorry I’m late!” she said in a chipper tone while joining us. “Still jet-lagged, I think.”



All of my frustrations melted away as she smiled at me. “You’ve only been retired a month, and you’ve already gotten used to sleeping in, eh?”

Her smile widened. “It’s so nice not having to wake up at four in the morning.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you?” I replied.

She unzipped her bag and pulled out a tennis racket. “If you insist. I had several alcoholic drinks last night. And after our practice, I’m going to eat an enormous breakfast without my nutritionist counting how many carbohydrates I get. Then I might take a nap...”

“You’re fired,” I said. “Maybe we can hire Sharapova instead.”

Her eyes widened with fake anger. “If you want someone *shrieking* like a banshee every time they hit the ball, then go ahead.”

“I’m telling her you said that,” I teased.

She grimaced. “Ugh, please don’t. I said something *mildly* unflattering about Kuznetsova ten years ago, and I still have reporters asking me about it. Should we get started?”

“We’re all warmed up and ready to go,” my coach said.

Miranda jogged over to the other side of the net, where a bucket of fresh tennis balls was waiting. “Let’s hit a few so I can see what I’m working with. Don’t worry about hitting winners back; just focus on smooth contact.”

She grabbed a ball and hit it to my backhand side. I took a few steps to my left, pulled back my racket, and smoothly returned the ball with my normal backhand motion. Even though I used about half my strength, the swing caused a flare of pain in my side.

“No, no, no,” Miranda said, catching my return in her palm. “Two-handed backhands only. I want to see how your form looks.”

A tiny part of my mind whispered, *she wants to see my form*. I ignored the thought and returned her next hit, this time

gripping the handle of the racket with both hands. The motion felt vaguely familiar, even though I hadn't used a two-handed backhand in several years. But familiarity aside, the ball sailed directly into the net.

"Keep at it," she commanded, hitting another ball to my left side. "I want you to do this for ten minutes before I make some adjustments."

We did just that, hitting the ball back and forth for the next ten minutes. I sprayed my shots all over the court, but she always returned them to the exact same spot to my left, forcing me to use my backhand. After a few dozen shots, I started to get into a good groove. The longer we rallied, the harder we hit the ball, until I was hitting with about 90% effort.

"It still hurts," I told her when she stopped and came around the net to my side. "Not as much, but I can feel it in my side."

She nodded as if she expected that. "Your swing is good, but you're receiving the ball in the same position as you would if you were making a one-handed backhand. Extending your arms out during the swing puts more emphasis on your obliques. Make the motion for me?"

I obeyed, gripping my racket with both hands and holding it out to the left. Miranda stepped close enough for her scent to surround me, flowery and clean. She grabbed both of my forearms and moved them closer to my body, until my elbows were touching my torso.

"I want you swinging like this. It takes a lot of pressure off the oblique muscles that are bothering you. But since you're hitting the ball closer to your body, you need to focus on your footwork. It puts you in a better position to make this shot, so you don't have to overcompensate by extending your arms."

Her fingers lingered on my forearms a moment longer, cool to the touch. Then she stepped away. I gave a practice swing like that, keeping my elbows close to my body. It felt different, but *right*.

"Okay," I said. "I think I can do that."

Miranda jogged back to the other side, long legs moving smoothly underneath her tennis skirt. I shook off the sight of her. *Focus. My first match is tomorrow and I need to get this right.*

Even though I had spent two decades of my life hitting with a two-handed grip, it was tough to erase the last couple of years where I had switched to a one-handed backhand. We rallied for a little while, and I tried to adjust my footwork to get closer to the ball before each shot. My returns went all over the place—long, wide, and into the net. After a few minutes, I found the sweet spot and began striking the ball better.

“There you go!” Miranda shouted from the other side after a particularly strong return. “How do your obliques feel?”

“Good,” I replied. “Barely any pain.”

“Keep at it,” she said, hitting the ball again.

My entire attitude had changed in just a few minutes. Being around Miranda was uplifting, even if there wasn’t any progress to feel good about. But there *was* progress. I was starting to believe that if I focused on this during my free time, I could implement this change during the tournament.

Someone over on the side whistled. Miranda ignored my return shot and turned to smile at the man. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

Dominic deGrom and I didn’t have a rivalry in the traditional sense, but he *was* one of my rivals on the men’s circuit. He was the current world number one, a position he had defended for over a year. I had held that rank for a few months back when I was in my prime, but thanks to my numerous injuries I had struggled to remain in the Top Ten for the past few years. In head-to-head matchups, we were evenly matched at 2-2. But the two wins I had over him had come almost a decade ago. In our recent two matches, Dominic had beaten me without losing a single set.

*What’s he doing here?* I wondered.

“Dominic,” I said with a polite nod. “They didn’t double-book me again, did they? We’re supposed to have this court reserved for two more hours.”

He dropped his bulky tennis bag on the ground and shook his head. “I’m over on court seven. Just wanted to stop by and wish you luck.”

He shook my hand, and I returned it numbly. Something was off, here. Dominic and I weren’t enemies, but we certainly weren’t friends.

“Maybe we’ll meet in the semifinals,” I said.

Dominic shook his head. “I hope we don’t. Your serve always gives me nightmares.”

*I hate how humble he is.*

“How’s retirement treating you, Miranda?” he asked.

“It’s delightful,” she replied. “Calm and boring, just the way I like it.”

Dominic gave her a half-smile. “I bet you’re getting into all sorts of trouble.”

“If you don’t mind,” my coach cut in, “we’ve got a lot of work to do before Tristan’s match tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Dominic looked back and forth between us. “I didn’t realize this was a working practice. Miranda is...?”

“Consulting on some footwork issues,” my coach replied.

“Ah. Now I *really* hope we don’t meet in the semis, Tristan.”

From anyone else, it would have been a sarcastic comment. But Dominic always seemed genuine. It annoyed me even more.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. Miranda, mind if I pick your brain real quick?”

Dominic gestured and the two of them walked a few meters away. Even though they spoke softly, their voices echoed in the cavernous indoor facility.

“It was great seeing you again.”

“Yeah, you too,” Miranda replied.

“You forgot this.” He handed her something small and metallic.

“Crap. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

“Good luck this afternoon!” she said a little louder, for everyone’s benefit. The two of them parted without any other interaction, aside from Dominic glancing over his shoulder at her. But Miranda was blushing now, and the object was still in her hand. She put it on her wrist and tightened the strap while turning back to me.

“Okay, where were we?” she asked.

My eyes were locked onto her wrist. It was an Apple watch. Which Dominic was discreetly returning to her.

*They slept together last night.*

Miranda was explaining something to me now, but I didn’t hear the words. All I could feel was the same pain I felt when I was sixteen years old, as fresh as the night it happened. The pain from my oblique now paled in comparison to the twisting knife in my gut.

She stopped talking, so I said, “Let’s get to it, then.”

I turned and walked back to the baseline to practice more, but my backhand was now the last thing on my mind.

# 10



## Miranda

Even though I slept in, I was in the best of moods that morning. Waking up snuggled against a sexy guy would do that to a girl's mood. Having it be Dominic Freaking deGrom, the guy I had been thinking about since I was a teenager, made it even better. Despite knowing I was running late, I stayed curled up against his body for a long time, watching his bare chest rise and fall with each breath.

It had been so long since I'd had fun like this. Since I had allowed myself to *let loose*. I loved that I could do that now, and not worry about how it would affect my on-court performance. I was a little dehydrated, both from the alcohol and from the sweaty fun we'd had, but it didn't matter. I could chug some electrolytes and go about my day without panicking. The change was refreshing in a way I had never expected when I considered retirement.

After sneaking away, I rushed home, took a quick shower, and changed into my tennis clothes. I had brought along my gear bag as a force of habit, just in case I found an opportunity to play for fun with some of my old competitors. I didn't think I would use it in a *coaching* capacity.

And it was so good to see Tristan again! His dirty-blond hair spilled out underneath his backwards cap, and there was a determined look in his eyes as I showed him how I wanted him to adjust his swing. He was taking this seriously. He wanted my help. He smiled at me like we were old friends, rather than one party interaction separated by fourteen years.

But after Dominic stopped by, Tristan became quiet. I got the impression he wasn't listening to my instructions, and he seemed to lose focus while we practiced. He was swinging as hard as he could on every shot, sending the ball directly into the net or sailing past the baseline. Only one shot in ten landed inside the lines.

"Ease up a little bit," I called. "Focus on making smooth strokes while you rebuild that muscle memory."

Tristan did slow down for a few rallies, but then ramped up his power again. The sound of his racket smacking the tennis ball echoed in the indoor facility. It reminded me of the sound of a boxer laying into a punching bag.

"Okay, let's make another adjustment," I said, leaving my side of the court and coming around the net. "When I was injured, and I switched backhands, my footwork was the biggest issue. You're doing a good job on getting closer to the ball, but your body positioning is still not ideal. So much of the power in a backhand comes from—"

"We don't have time for a long explanation," he interrupted. His normally smooth Australian accent sounded annoyed. "Just show me."

"Your right foot needs to be more forward. That allows you to turn sideways, and really *twist* your body as you drive through the ball." I showed him by turning my body almost sideways to the net.

"Right," he said, without making any effort to copy my footwork. I glanced at his coach, who gave me an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Let's do some more drills," I said. "Do we have any cones? I know how to burn it into your muscle memory if we—"

"This is a waste of time," he interrupted again. "It's not working."

"We've barely been at it an hour," I replied. "It takes time."

He put his hands on his hips and towered over me. "Time is the one resource we do not have. My first match is *tomorrow*."

“Then why did you bring me here at all?” I asked.

“This is what you wanted,” the coach told Tristan. “A way to compensate for your injury *without* backing out of the tournament.”

“I was wrong.” For some reason, he wouldn’t look me in the eye. “This was a mistake. I’m going to stick with my regular backhand.”

“Even if you have less power?” his coach asked. “Even if your opponents hammer that side in your matches?”

“Tristan, hold on a minute,” I said, stepping closer and touching his arm. “I really think this can work if we—”

“It’s my decision, not yours,” he said emphatically, jerking away from me.

I was shocked by his outburst. I understood being frustrated with an injury, but I didn’t expect him to take it out on *me*. I glanced at his coach, who gave me an apologetic grimace.

*Is he embarrassed about being coached by a woman?* That would explain why his attitude changed after Dominic saw us working together. But Tristan didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would care about that. Maybe if it became public, but he certainly wouldn’t care about another men’s player knowing.

“What is this really about?” I asked.

“It’s not *about* anything,” he snapped. I stared into his eyes, and for a brief moment he didn’t seem angry. He seemed, if anything, *hurt*. “Thanks for the help, but you can go now. Enjoy the rest of your time in Melbourne.”

“Good luck tomorrow.” I collected my things and left the practice court.



# 11



## Miranda

I went back to my hotel, changed into some regular clothes, and then returned to Melbourne Park. I could get VIP seats at any of the matches, but I wanted to watch some tennis today without fans constantly asking me for autographs and selfies. With my Mets cap pulled down over my eyes, I managed to walk around the grounds without drawing any attention.

After watching one men's match and two women's, I grabbed some lunch at a food cart and then headed into Rod Laver Arena, the largest court on the grounds. My seat was up in the nosebleeds, but it was a small arena, so my view of the blue court was still good. I took off my baseball cap and sighed happily; the sky was overcast, but it was pleasantly warm outside.

The players had already been announced, and were hitting a few warm-up serves before the match began. Dominic was wearing white shorts, a black polo shirt, and a white hat—all of which bore the swoosh logo of his sponsor, Nike. Even though he was six feet tall, his opponent was a Swedish man who was nearly a foot taller. But the Swede was unranked, and didn't *really* pose much of a challenge to the current world #1.

*Unless something goes wrong,* I thought.

I was used to the way tennis matches were scored, but it was undeniably *weird*. Players started at zero points, which was called *love*. After winning a point, they went to 15. Then 30. Since it's multiples of 15, the next point should be 45, right? WRONG, the next point is 40 for some reason. Win one more point after that, and you win the game.

Players alternated serving per game. After winning six games, players won a *set*. Women's matches were best-of-three sets, while the men played best-of-five.

Right before the match started, the big screen in the arena was showing celebrities in the crowd. Mostly they showed other tennis stars who had come to watch the match, but Hugh Jackman was also in the crowd, which prompted one curly-haired brunette woman to scream, "I LOVE YOU WOLVERINE!" and try to flash the camera before being escorted out.

I was laughing at that scene when another round of applause went up in the arena. My face was now on the big TV screen, with the words, "2022 Champion Miranda Jacobs."

I forced myself to smile for the camera. But as the applause in the arena grew louder and louder, my smile became more genuine. One of the Aussie fans behind me clapped me on the back and said, "Retiring while you're on top, good on ya. That's the way everyone should go."

I politely dipped my head and gave a little wave. Maybe I should have kept the Mets cap on after all.

Fortunately, the match started right after that, and the other fans around me turned their attention to the court. Dominic got to serve first. Dominic started off strong with an ace (a serve that the opponent never even touches with his racket.) That put him up 15-0. The next serve was returned, but after a quick volley Dominic won the point, putting him up 30-0.

But then the opponent smoked his return on the next point, hitting a shot that Dominic couldn't chase down. Now it was 30-15. Dominic also lost the next point on an unforced error, hitting the ball into the net on his backhand. Now it was 30-30. On the next point, he missed his serve both times—resulting in a point for the opponent.

Now Dominic was down 30-40; if he lost this point, he lost the first game. Traditionally, players had a *massive* advantage when they served, and it was considered a huge upset if they lost a game while serving. There was a buzz in the air now, with fans cheering on Dominic—and some cheering for his

opponent to break the serve. I leaned forward in my seat and clutched my hands together.

Dominic accepted a ball from the ball boy, then bounced it twice on the ground. He paused, tossed it into the air, and contorted his body backwards—then violently forwards, hitting his serve. The opponent took two steps to his right and hit a blistering forehand, which clipped the edge of the line. Dominic sprawled toward the ball, but couldn't get his racket on it.

The crowd went wild as the chair umpire announced that the opponent had won the first game. Dominic walked back to the bench with his head held high, but I could tell he was rattled.

“Losing on his serve in the first game of the tournament,” an Australian fan said behind me. “Wonder if that’s ever happened to the number one player in the world before.”

“Doubt it,” another fan replied. “Especially against someone unranked.”

I closed my eyes. Was this my fault? Was the coach in Rocky right when he said that women weakened a man's legs?

But tennis matches were long affairs, and there were several dozen more games to play. Dominic came out blazing in the next game, breaking his opponents serve and evening the score. After that, it was never a close match: Dominic won the first set 6 - 3, the second set 6 - 1, and the third set 6 - 2.

“Game, set, match,” the chair umpire announced when the last point was won. “Dominic deGrom, from the United States.”

Dominic tossed his sweat bands into the crowd and gave a wave to the cheering fans. But I was already leaving my seat and heading down to the ground level, where I could use my VIP pass to get into the restricted areas.

I intercepted Dominic on his way to the press room, where two dozen reporters were waiting to ask him questions about the match. His smile was even bigger when he saw me than it was when he won the match.

“Do they know you snuck back here?” he asked. “Should I call security?”

“Being a former player has its perks,” I replied. There were other players and a multitude of staff within sight of us, so I resisted the urge to kiss him on his sweaty lips. “You had me worried there after you lost your first serve.” I lowered my voice. “Maybe last night was a mistake?”

“Definitely not a mistake,” he replied, which instantly soothed my concerns. “I was actually distracted in that first game because they showed a beautiful woman on the Jumbotron, and I couldn’t get her out of my head.”

“The Hugh Jackman fan who flashed the camera?” I replied. “I don’t blame you. She had a great rack.”

Dominic leaned closer. He smelled strongly of deodorant and manly musk. “She wasn’t the one I was referring to.”

The compliment made my heart soar, but I tried to joke it off. “That’s nice of you to say. But she definitely had better boobs.”

“I like yours more.”

“Now I *know* you’re lying.”

He looked like he wanted to kiss me, but was restraining himself. “Hey, I’m glad you came down here. I wanted to talk to you about last night.”

I felt myself tense. “Oh?”

“I do need to focus on my game the rest of the tournament. That means early bedtimes.”

“No, yeah, of course,” I said. *Play it cool, Miranda.*

“But I don’t want last night to be a one-time thing,” he added. “Maybe after the tournament, when we’re both back home, we can get together for a slice of cake and a drink?”

“Make it *three* drinks, and you have a deal,” I replied.

“Mr. deGrom?” an aide called. “They’re waiting for you in the press room.”

“I’m envying your retirement right now,” Dominic said as he walked away.

“It’s the best!” I called after him. “In fact, I might have an afternoon beer while watching the Moreau match!”

He flashed me a smile and disappeared into the press room.

# 12



## Miranda

The next day, I took my seat in the VIP section to watch Tristan's first round match. He grinned for the crowd during warm-ups, and signed autographs before the match began while joking with the spectators. He seemed like his normal, goofy self that the home crowd loved.

But I could tell it was forced.

Despite his weak backhand, he managed to beat his opponent that day in four sets: 6 - 4, 4 - 6, 6 - 3, 6 - 4. Even though it was a match he was heavily favored to win, he pumped his fist and tossed his cap into the crowd after winning. And for a few heartbeats, it looked like he was staring directly up at me in the crowd.

His second round match the next day didn't go so well. His opponent had clearly watched the tape of Tristan's first game, and spotted the weakness in his backhand. He hammered Tristan's left side, over and over, every single point of every single game. Tristan eventually became frustrated by this, and tried hurrying to that side so he could use his forehand instead. But of course that opened up the entire rest of the court, which his opponent took advantage of.

While he was down in the third set, Tristan tried switching to a two-handed backhand. But he was out of practice, and sent both shots sailing long.

Tristan didn't have much spark after that, and lost in straight sets: 4 - 6, 2 - 6, 1 - 6.

The Melbourne crowd, which had been hoping their hometown boy would go deep into the tournament, was disappointed with the showing. Many fans booed Tristan as he packed up his gear. Eventually, the Aussie turned his cap around to shield most of his view from the angry crowd.

I felt bad for him. I knew what it was like to lose on the big stage, and in front of a home crowd. I'd had my share of embarrassing losses at the US Open. I left the stands and went down to the tunnels leading to the press room.

Tristan was already inside, taking questions from reporters. I stood outside and listened for a minute or two.

"Tristan, it's clear that something is wrong with your backhand. Have you been playing through an injury?"

"Ask any player on tour if they're playing through an injury, and every single man and woman will say they are," he replied.

"But yours seemed quite obvious. Especially considering the way Anthony focused on that side the entire match."

"I have some aches I'm working through with my coach," he said bluntly. "Some rest will do me good, then I'll be proper fit for the French Open."

"Are you disappointed losing in the second round here, in front of your fans?" someone else asked.

"Disappointed?" He snorted. "I was disappointed when Ted Lasso left Richmond AFC and went home to Kansas. I'm disappointed when ALDI is out of Vegemite. When I lose here in Melbourne Park, I'm proper fucking *devastated*."

The curse caused a flurry of camera flashes from the photographers in the room, and the reporters all talked over one-another to ask the next question. I turned away from the room... and almost ran right into Tristan's coach.

"Thanks for trying," he said. "Shame he's so bloody stubborn."

I sighed. "Yeah. It is. Do you know *why*? Is it because he was embarrassed to be coached by a woman?"

His coach shook his head. “It’s not that. I get the impression it’s personal, though. You two have any kind of history together?”

*We kissed at a party fourteen years ago. And then never spoke again until this week.*

“Not really,” I said. “Barely had any interaction at the Academy. Think he’ll ask for my help again?”

“I hope not.” He held up a hand before I could demand to know why. “Not because you weren’t good. You were. But because I want him to spend the next three months resting before Roland Garros. By then, hopefully his oblique will be healed and we won’t need to switch up his backhand. But if we do need you, I won’t hesitate to call. Enjoy retirement, Miranda. You’d make a good coach, if you want to go that route.”

I left the tunnel before Tristan could see me. If he didn’t want to see me, then I didn’t want to see him.

The rest of the tournament was a blur. My agent Hamilton had scheduled several more interviews during the two-week span, and I even put on a microphone and gave television commentary during one of the women’s semi-final matches. But it was the men’s tournament that I *really* cared about. Dominic crushed the competition in his bracket, losing just two sets in his first six rounds.

On the other end of the bracket, Gabriel Moreau was even more dominant, losing just a single set on his way to the finals. The two men were like a pair of bullet trains speeding toward each other.

The men’s final was on a Sunday at the end of January. Rod Laver Arena was packed for the match, and I was grateful to have a reserved seat in a box down close to the action, which I was sharing with several past champions. Despite playing professionally for a decade and a half, I still felt honored to sit next to legends like Martina Navratilova, Steffi Graf (and her husband Andre Agassi!) and Kim Clijsters. It was a good thing Serena Williams wasn’t there, or I might have *actually* embarrassed myself by weeping with happiness.



“How can you sit there, glued to your phone?” I whispered to Hamilton in the seat next to me. “We’re surrounded by three of the best female players in history!”

“Four, counting yourself,” he replied without looking up from his phone. “But I’m on the clock right now. A new opportunity has popped up that is time sensitive.”

“It feels like you’re cheating on me, handling business for your other clients while we’re together,” I teased.

Now he did look up. “This opportunity isn’t for one of my other clients. It’s for you. I’m emailing a producer from CBS. The next season of *Celebrity Survivor* begins filming next month, and someone backed out. I might be able to get you on the show.”

I gasped. “Survivor? Really? That’s my favorite reality show.”

“I know this,” he replied, “because I’m your agent, and I am eminently good at my job. Also, they’re offering this much money.” He held the phone up so I could see the six-digit number.

“They would pay me that much?” I asked. “Hammy! Tell them I accept!”

“I can get you more. Sit tight and let me negotiate.” He returned to tapping on the screen.

I wanted to tell him to forget the money and accept the offer immediately, but the crowd noise grew louder as the two players walked out onto the court. Dominic deGrom looked dashing in white shorts and a blue technical shirt that fit his broad-shouldered frame perfectly. Behind him, Gabriel Moreau was wearing all black, except for a red stripe that ran diagonal across his shirt next to a red Wilson logo. With his hair slicked back behind a red sweatband, and the cocky way he strutted out onto the court, he looked like the villain in a Disney movie.

Not being able to see Dominic for the past two weeks had been frustrating. At least twice a day I considered texting him to see if he wanted to meet up for dinner and *dessert*. But now

that I saw him here, competing in the finals, I was glad I hadn't bothered him. The last thing I wanted to be was a distraction.

When his name was announced over the loudspeaker, I stood up and cheered louder than anyone.

The two players—who were ranked #1 and #2 in the world—went back and forth for the first hour of the match. Dominic won the first set, but Gabriel came right back and won the second. It was like they were testing each other out, playing conservatively while waiting to see what strategy the other would employ.

After Gabriel won the third set, I could feel the championship slipping away from Dominic. But he battled back and broke the Frenchman's serve in the first game of the fourth, eventually winning that set and evening them up at two sets each.

The fifth set felt like a heavyweight boxing match, with both players hammering their opponents with everything they had left in the tank. Dominic's shots were perfectly placed, but Gabriel managed to chase most of them down. Gabriel rushed to the net to volley on most points, forcing Dominic to hit a flawless shot around him, or a lob over his head. The two men grunted, and groaned, and pumped their fists after every single point.

After several brutal games, Gabriel was up 6-5 in the final set. A player had to win a set by two games, so he needed to win this game, or else it would go to a tiebreaker scenario. Dominic was serving, and hit an unforced error to start the game. After a flawless serve return from Gabriel, and another unforced error from Dominic, the American found himself down 0-40.

"Match point," I whispered. "Come on, Dominic. Fight back!"

And fight back he did. The next serve was an ace to make it 15-40. Gabriel hammered the next serve down the line and then rushed up to the net, but Dominic got to the ball with just enough time to flick his wrist, sending the ball soaring over

Gabriel. The Frenchman leaped, but missed it by an inch. Now it was 30-40.

I was sitting on the edge of my seat, barely able to watch. Paradoxically, nerves were easier to deal with while I was *playing* tennis. I felt helpless as a spectator.

The crowd went silent as Dominic bounced the ball in front of him. Then he tossed it into the air, bent backwards like a boomerang, and uncoiled like a spring to strike the ball. It was a perfect serve, landing right on the line down the middle.

But Gabriel had anticipated it, and hit a blistering forehand return. Dominic darted after the ball, but he had so much ground to cover. The arena held its breath as he leaned toward the ball, extending his racket, flicking his wrist...

The ball glanced off the racket frame, dribbling pitifully into the net.

“Game, set, match,” the chair umpire tried to say, but the crowd noise drowned him out. Dominic slumped his head for a moment, then proudly walked up to the net to shake his opponent’s hand.

But Gabriel wasn’t paying attention to him. He threw his racket into the air and pumped his fist. He tore his shirt off and tossed it into the crowd, then strutted around while beating his sweaty chest. Dominic stood at the net, politely waiting the entire time.

“I’ve seen peacocks act more modest than him,” Hamilton muttered.

“No kidding.”

After an extended period of celebration, Gabriel made his way to the net to shake Dominic’s hand. The American was a good sport, clapping him on the arm and saying something congratulatory, but Gabriel quickly hurried over in our direction. I was sitting in the front row, so I had a perfect view as Gabriel went to the box next to ours and reached up to take his girlfriend’s hand, squeezing it tightly and blowing her a few dramatic kisses.

Our paths had crossed dozens of times over the years, but we never actually interacted. We just happened to be at the same event at the same time, at welcome dinners or award banquets. But this was the closest I had gotten to him since we were teenagers.

Out on the court, Dominic was looking at me. When he saw that I was looking back, he smiled and gave me a wink. He didn't look disappointed that he had lost. If anything, he was almost relieved.

I glanced sideways at Gabriel's blonde girlfriend. She was model-thin, with a chest that could *not* have been natural. She covered her heart with her hand and made a dramatic face for the camera, as if *she* were the one being honored.

Gabriel blew her a final kiss, then turned back toward the court.

And stopped when his eyes fell on me.

He froze, then took a step in my direction. He removed his sweatband and ran a hand through his curly brown hair. "Miranda," he said in a thick French accent.

"Hi, Gabriel," I replied. I didn't know what else to say.

His blue eyes were round and full of shock, like he had seen a ghost. The cockiness he displayed on the court was gone, replaced by something... different. For a few heartbeats while we stared at each other, he reminded me of that bashful little boy again, the one who had French kissed me in front of everyone else at the Academy. For a few heartbeats it seemed like that was the real Gabriel.

"You are glowing," he breathed. "It appears that retirement suits you." He held my gaze a moment longer, then turned back to the court, his cocky persona sliding into place like a mask.

*Who is the real Gabriel Moreau?* I wondered as he stepped up to take his championship trophy.

# 13



## Dominic

Being a professional meant knowing how to win gracefully. But more importantly, a pro had to know how to *lose* gracefully. The way a player lost said a lot about them. Did they hang their head and pout? Did they refuse to shake their opponent's hand? Did they cry, or snap at the line judge, or embarrass themselves in any other number of ways?

For me, losing was a part of life. I had been playing tennis competitively since I was four years old, which meant I had lost *a lot*. Today's loss held more significance, though. Since winning the US Open two years ago, I had been the number one ranked male player in the world for 70 straight weeks. I had dominated the sport in that time, making it to the finals in every major championship and only losing one of them. During that time, I had defeated Gabriel Moreau in three tournaments. But each match, he came a little bit closer to figuring me out.

Until today, when he finally emerged victorious.

Even though I was still technically the number one ranked male player, it felt like my career had peaked. He was a little bit younger, a little bit faster, and a little bit hungrier. I was on the back end of my career, now. Today's loss carried more weight than any other I had ever experienced. Yet the crowd was cheering, and watching, and waiting to see how I would react.

I congratulated Gabriel and smiled and waved to the crowd. But I didn't have to fake it. I was soaking all of this in,

enjoying it while it lasted, because I knew I wouldn't have many more moments like this.

Life was short, and I was luckier than most.

"You'll come back strong at Roland Garros," my coach told me on the flight back to America. "I have some thoughts on how to defeat Moreau there, if we happen to face him."

"I'll be glad to hear them," I replied. "For now, I'm looking forward to a few weeks of rest."

The trip home took over twenty-four hours, with a layover in LAX. It was five in the afternoon when we landed at Newark Liberty International, and I was ready to take an Uber home and immediately fall asleep.

But when I walked out to the baggage claim, I was bombarded with cheers. Two dozen men, women, boys, and girls were crowded together with signs exclaiming their love for me, and that I was still number one. I smiled broadly as I walked up to them.

"You didn't have to meet me here," I told my mom.

My very small, *very* Italian mother clung to me in a tight hug. "It's not every day my favorite son returns from the Australian Open."

Another man to my right grunted. "He's your favorite?"

"You were my favorite when you got that promotion last month, Tony," she replied while cradling my head in her hands. "Today, it's Dominic."

"Uncle Dominic!" a high-pitched voice called. "We watched you on TV! You did *so good!*"

"Thanks, Becky," I said to my niece.

I spent at least ten minutes greeting all the members of my family: my dad, four of my brothers, three sisters, and eleven nieces and nephews. By then my baggage had come off the carousel, but I was still fending off well-wishes and hugs from all the members of my big Italian family.

Rather than going to my apartment, we went back to my childhood home in Montclair. When I won the US Open, I used most of the prize money to renovate the dilapidated house. Now it was new and pristine, with an open floor plan and an enormous kitchen where our family could cook together. We all donned aprons, washed our hands, and immediately began rolling dough so we could make pasta.

“Do not stop!” my mom, the matriarch of the family, commanded while slapping my brother’s hand. “Never stop making gnocchi!”

I shared a look with my sister across the table, who was grinning while chopping her strand of dough into thumb-sized pieces. “How are the ladies treating you?” she asked.

“Let me guess,” my other sister next to her said. “You’re too busy for women.”

“I am too busy for women,” I replied.

“See?”

“But... I met someone.”

Every head within hearing range turned to me. For the next ten seconds I was bombarded with questions, accusations, and demands.

“It’s nothing serious,” I told them. “Not yet, at least. I don’t know if we’ll be able to line our schedules up. Especially since I’m flying to Dubai in two weeks.”

“Excuses, always excuses,” Mom chided down at the other end of the table where she was stirring pasta sauce. “Find a woman, make babies. No excuse.”

“I think we’re all proud of Dominic,” my brother said while passing around glasses of wine. “A toast, to Dominic! You’re the best of us, brother.”

“And the worst looking,” my other brother said.

We playfully shoved and teased each other while making the gnocchi, my loss at the Australian Open long forgotten.

# 14



## Gabriel

Our plane was one of the last to land in Paris, and the terminal was deserted. Quiet, wan faces stared at the baggage carousel before shuffling off to their automobiles. I was equally exhausted after the flight, which had taken place after several hours of interviews in Melbourne.

The Australian Open was my first major win. I had come close many times before, always falling short in the finals or semifinals. But not this time. I was beginning this year as a champion.

I did not expect my parents to be waiting at the airport. Throughout my life, they had never shown their support in that way. But a small part of me had hoped, and a small part of me felt disappointed.

“Nobody knows,” I said in French while looking around the airport terminal. “It is like nothing has changed.”

“Hmm?” my girlfriend said. She was staring down at her phone. “Did you say something?”

“No. Nothing. It is fine.”

She continued tapping at the screen. “Timothée Chalamet and Kylie Jenner broke up.”

“Wow.”

We took a taxi to my flat in Montmartre in silence. Occasionally my girlfriend’s face lit up with a huge smile, but it was only because she was taking a photograph for Instagram; the smile lasted only as long as the photograph.



The driver glanced at us in the rear-view mirror several times, but gave no indication that he recognized me. We got out and carried our bags up to my flat on the top floor.

“It is not *too* late,” I said. “Shall we get supper? Maybe celebrate a little?”

“I’m ordering sushi right now,” my girlfriend replied. She glanced up at me. “Do you want me to get you something?”

“Double whatever you’re getting,” I said.

We ate the food quietly at my breakfast table, facing the glass windows that overlooked Square Louise Michel. My girlfriend ate her sushi with one hand while scrolling TikTok on her phone, looking bored the entire time. The room was silent except for the sound of chopsticks clicking on plates.

Was this the life I wanted? I thought it would all be so different once I won a major tournament. Yet I felt like the same man I had been two weeks ago, unsatisfied and hungry. After one piece of sushi, I put my chopsticks down.

“I do not think this is working,” I said.

# 15



## Miranda

Even though I was technically retired now, my life didn't seem to be slowing down any time soon. When I returned home to New Jersey after the Australian Open, I immediately turned around and flew to Los Angeles for a week of auditions for *Celebrity Survivor*. That's right: a full week of interviews with the producers, directors, and writers (yes, writers) of the show. There was a lot more scripted content than I expected for a reality show. But all the work was worth it, because at the end of the week I found out I was being given the last slot on the show.

When I got home, I immediately texted Dominic. It took him several hours to text me back.

**Me:** I'm finally back in New Jersey! Got any plans this weekend?

**Me:** More specifically: got any plans you'd be willing to cancel to get dinner with me instead?

**Dominic:** Sorry for the slow response. It's 6:00 AM here in Dubai.

**Me:** Crap! I forgot all about the Dubai Invitational.

**Dominic:** Coach wants me to stay sharp between now and the French. I'll be home in two weeks, and I

intend to keep a completely empty schedule until the Quebec tournament.

**Me:** Two weeks? UGH.

**Dominic:** What?

**Me:** In two weeks, I fly to Costa Rica for the next season of Celebrity Survivor.

**Dominic:** I wish you could see me right now, because I'm laughing really hard at the mental image of you eating bugs.

**Me:** You don't think I could do it?

**Dominic:** I think you would crush the physical competitions, but fall apart when you have to do something gross.

**Me:** I played outdoors when I was a little girl. Bugs don't scare me!

**Dominic:** How long is filming?

**Me:** One week of prep work, then thirty days for the competition itself. Or, at least however long until I get voted off.

**Dominic:** Is it bad that I'm kind of hoping you get sent home early so I can see you?

**Me:** Is it bad that I'm hoping you lose in the first round of the Dubai Invitational for the same reason?

**Dominic:** Wow. Uncalled for.

**Dominic:** But also totally understandable. That will be a nice silver lining if I lose.

**Me:** I'm still MOSTLY rooting for you!

Dominic *didn't* lose, and won the minor tournament. This wasn't too surprising: most ranked players were skipping the tournament this year, including Gabriel Moreau. And the day Dominic landed at Newark, I was already on a flight down to Central America.

Filming Survivor was so much fun. I made it to the final week before being eliminated, but most of the cast had to stick around for interviews and minor reshoots.

And by the time I got home, Dominic was off to Quebec for another tournament. I briefly considered flying up there to surprise him, but ultimately decided against it. That felt like too big a move considering we'd only been on one date together. And it really wasn't a date—just a few drinks before hooking up.

In the blink of an eye, it was mid-May and the French Open was looming. Dominic flew to Paris a week early to get used to the time difference, and to shoot a few commercials. I was scheduled for a flurry of interviews and match commentary gigs with NBC, so I flew to Paris three days before the tournament began. I landed in the morning, and immediately scheduled a dinner with Dominic.

"I booked a nice place for us for dinner," he said on the phone. "I'm shooting a cologne commercial all day, so I'll meet you there at seven."

"Cologne commercial?" I replied. "Well aren't you Mr. Fancy Pants?"

"I seem to remember a former female tennis player doing a lot of perfume commercials."

"Don't change the subject. This is about you, not me. Besides, that was me in a former life. I'm a new woman, now."

There was a ruffling noise on the line. "Gotta go—the makeup girl is waving at me. See you tonight!"

I checked into my hotel, took a nap, and then got dressed for dinner. I picked out a little black dress that I rarely got a chance to wear, with a lacy hem and a neckline that was *just*

low enough to show off a tasteful amount of cleavage, especially when paired with a silver tennis pendant on a chain. I turned several heads as I left my hotel, and all from people who didn't recognize me from tennis.

The restaurant Dominic had picked was just two blocks from the Champs-Élysées, with only seven or eight tables inside and two more on the sidewalk outside. After giving the host the name of the reservation, I was seated at one of the latter tables, giving me a nice view of the Parisian pedestrians going about their business.

Before the waiter could take my order, I got a text from Dominic saying he would be thirty minutes late. After going several months without seeing him, I could wait a little bit longer. Besides, I was in one of the greatest cities in the world! I ordered a glass of wine and enjoyed the scenery.

I had visited Paris every year for the past fourteen years, but I had never gotten to *really* experience the city. I was usually too busy preparing for Roland Garros—the name of the French Open. And as soon as it was over, I was launching straight into preparations for Wimbledon, which began the next month. And even when I *had* gone into the city for a nice meal with my coach, I couldn't enjoy it the way I wanted to. The stress of the upcoming tournament poisoned everything with anxiety.

Sitting at my little table with a glass of wine, watching the people walk by, was strangely soothing. It was like finally sitting down and watching a movie that I had only caught snippets of. The full experience was so much better than the abridged version I was used to.

I was finishing my first glass of wine and preparing to order a second when I heard a group of men laughing. They were walking along the sidewalk, joking and carrying on in French. Two of them glanced at me in passing, and a third took a very long look at my legs, but otherwise they didn't stop.

After they had passed, a memory clicked into place. The fourth man, the one who hadn't looked over. It couldn't be...

“Gabriel?” I called.



## Miranda

Gabriel turned and looked over his shoulder. His friends kept walking, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw me. Then he grinned.

The sight of Gabriel loosened something that had been knotted in my chest. The last time I had seen him in person, he was drenched in sweat from his match at the Australian Open. His angular face was quite striking, in a more mature way than when he was a boy, although his curly brown hair was completely unchanged by the fourteen years that had passed. His jeans fit him snugly, and he had his hands shoved into the pockets of a leather jacket.

“Miranda Jacobs?” he asked in that smooth French accent of his. “What are you doing in my city?”

“I’m joining the broadcast crew for some of the matches next week,” I replied.

I stood and hugged him, and when we let go, he braced me by the arms so he could look me up and down. “I meant every word that I said in Melbourne. Retirement suits you. You are stunning.”

“Thanks,” I said, blushing at the compliment.

One of his friends called out to him, and he replied in French. “Mind if I sit?” he asked, taking the seat across from me.

“I’m waiting on a date, but he’s running late.”

“He has terrible priorities, then.” He called out to his friends in French again. “I told them I will catch up. I cannot pass up the opportunity to share a drink with the number one ranked woman in the world.”

“*Former* number one,” I corrected.

He held up a finger and grinned at me. “Ah, but no. You are still number one until after the points of Roland Garros are calculated. And even so, Iga Swiatek must advance to the semifinals to accrue enough points. Because who knows?” He spread his hands. “It is possible that you will unretire at any point.”

“I can promise you I won’t change my mind,” I said with a laugh.

A man wearing a chef outfit burst through the door from the restaurant. “Gabriel!” He rattled off a flurry of French too fast for me to catch, and the two of them embraced. As they spoke, I noticed that Gabriel seemed totally different. He wasn’t the cocky, arrogant player I saw on the tennis court and in front of television cameras. He was more soft spoken, and humble. It reminded me of the boy from the Academy.

“Louis,” Gabriel said, “this is an old friend of mine. Miranda Jacobs.”

“Any friend of Gabriel is family to me,” the man said in stunted English. “Please be welcome at my restaurant. You also tennis?”

“I used to play,” I said.

“Miranda won Roland Garros twice,” Gabriel explained.

Louis clapped a hand over his mouth and began babbling in French. He rushed inside, almost knocking over a customer in the process.

“Louis says he has a special appetizer he is bringing out for us. And a better bottle of wine. He says customers like us deserve the best.”

I winced as we sat back down. “I prefer it if people don’t know who I am. I don’t like using my fame for special

treatment.”

“This isn’t just about our status in the tennis world,” Gabriel explained gently. “Louis is an old friend of my family. My parents were coming to his restaurant before I was born.”

Louis returned with a basket of bread, a steaming pot of what looked like cheesy dipping sauce, and a bottle of wine that was covered in dust. “I know Gabriel since he is boy,” he explained while uncorking the wine. “He was wonderful boy, but he is even better man. Very generous. He is family to me.”

“You are too kind,” Gabriel said. He actually looked like he was blushing. “Louis and his restaurant are very special to me. It is one of the few places where I feel like myself.”

“Anything you want, please ask,” Louis told me. “Your money I cannot take. Please, be welcome.” He dipped his head and went back inside.

“He has to let me pay,” I told Gabriel. “I didn’t come to Paris to freeload.”

“I always slip some money to the waiter. Do not be worried.” He raised his glass to me. “Santé. To an unexpected rendezvous.”

We touched glasses and drank. The wine was *extraordinary*. I was curious how expensive it was, but didn’t want to appear rude by examining the bottle. The brand appeared to be *Premier Cru*.

“Your date who is late,” Gabriel said while rolling the wine stem between his fingers. “Is it serious? A boyfriend?”

“It’s kind of a first date,” I said. “An old friend. Nothing serious, yet.”

Gabriel studied my face with sharp eyes and nodded slowly. What would he say when Dominic arrived? I wondered if Gabriel even remembered that night at the party, and how his kiss was bookmarked by kisses with Tristan and Dominic.

“It is so good to see you, Miranda,” he remarked. “Of course, I have seen you many times on my television, and



from the stands during your matches. It is quite funny that we never ran into each other over the years.”

“Tell me about it. Sometimes I think everyone from the Academy has actively tried avoiding me.”

“It did not help that you left first,” Gabriel said. “By the time we joined you on the tour, you were quite successful. You were intimidating. Even more intimidating than you were at the Academy.”

I snorted a laugh. “I wasn’t intimidating at the Academy. I was a lanky teenage girl who was too shy to talk to anyone outside of practice. I didn’t even have any friends.”

“You were intimidating to me. I was terrified to kiss you when the bottle stopped spinning.”

*Ah. So he does remember that night.*

“Believe me: I was more scared,” I replied.

Gabriel sipped his wine and stared at the glass. “I have thought about that night quite often over the years. Have you?”

Before I could respond, I got a text from Dominic. “Sorry, one second,” I said while pulling out my phone.

**Dominic:** You’re not going to believe this. They want to reshoot everything again. We only have the studio until tomorrow, so they won’t let me leave. I’m not going to get out of here until midnight.

**Me:** Aww. No problem, I understand.

**Me:** Although now I’m all dressed up with nowhere to go. I might have to find a young French man to take me out.

**Dominic:** If you can find someone who can handle the amazing Miranda Jacobs, then he deserves you ;-)

“You look disappointed,” Gabriel observed.

“My date just canceled.”

He spread his hands wide. “As I said! Your date has terrible priorities. A woman such as yourself should never be made to wait for any man.”

“Thanks, but like I said: I don’t want special treatment just because of my tennis fame.”

“I was referring to your beauty, not your fame,” he replied smoothly. He held out his hand. “Give me your phone, and I will tell this man of the mistake he has made.”

I chuckled and considered telling him that my date was Dominic deGrom, his rival. But I held back. For one thing, I didn’t want my date with Dominic to be fodder for the tennis tabloids. And for another thing, I didn’t want to upset Gabriel by mentioning his rival.

“Are you ready for Roland Garros?” I asked. “Feeling strong?”

He shrugged. “I am as strong and ready as I possibly can be. I think I can win. My draw is not the easiest route to a victory. I will have Medvedev in the quarterfinals, and Alcaraz in the semis. And of course, deGrom in the final, if he advances that far. I *believe* I can win. I am strong on clay. But anything can happen.” He shrugged again. “We shall see. I am trying not to think about it too much.”

“That’s very... diplomatic of you,” I said.

“It is the truth. I will do my best, and hopefully that will be enough.”

I glanced at my watch. “Thank you for the wine and appetizer, but I think I’m going to go back to my hotel to try and reset my internal clock.”

I reached into my purse to pay the bill, but Gabriel quickly put a hand on mine to stop me. “You are in my city. A guest. Please, allow me.” He placed two hundred Euros onto the table. “And you cannot go back to your hotel. That will not do. I must show you around Paris, to make up for your date’s foolishness.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, referring to both the money and the offer to show me around the city. “What about your friends?”

“I see them quite often. They will not miss me.” He glanced at his watch, and his eyes sparkled with excitement. “Come. There is much for us to do.”

I smiled as he took my hand and led me away.



## Miranda

Gabriel led me three blocks away from the restaurant, where a motorized scooter was parked on the sidewalk. He hopped on and patted the seat behind him. Ignoring how high I had to hike up my dress, I squeezed onto the seat and wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Shouldn’t we wear helmets?” I asked.

“We probably should, yes.” Without another word, the scooter engine pattered to life and we shot out onto the street. I yelped and held on tighter to Gabriel’s midsection.

We cruised through Paris, the cool air blowing my hair back as we weaved in and out of traffic. I didn’t know the city very well, and had no idea where we were going—except that the Eiffel Tower was in the distance to our left, illuminated brightly against the deepening night sky. As afraid as I was when we first began driving, I quickly trusted Gabriel to navigate us through the city. He seemed used to this mode of transportation, and always narrowly avoided the other cars on the road.

Gabriel was smaller than most tennis players, but his body still felt sturdy and strong as I clung to him. His curly brown hair smelled like fragrant shampoo, and I breathed in the scent while trying not to be too conspicuous about it.

We stopped in front of a bakery, and Gabriel hopped off the scooter. “It’s closed,” I said, pointing to the sign. I didn’t know much French, but I knew what the word *fermé* meant.

But Gabriel only smiled. “Wait here.” He went up to the door and cupped his hands to peer through the glass. Within seconds, a woman with white hair came running up and unlocked the door for him, babbling at him in French while kissing him on the cheek. He disappeared inside, then returned with three baguettes in a bag.

“Three more stops,” he said.

“I didn’t realize we would be doing your grocery shopping,” I replied.

He smiled without looking back at me. “Hold on!”

I let out a squeak as the scooter shot back into traffic and cut off a car, which blared its horn at us.

I didn’t know what we were doing or where we were going, but it was nice not knowing. For the past decade and a half, I’d had every minute of every day meticulously planned and scheduled. Practices, meals, cross-training, exhibition matches, tournaments. My life was basically a shared Excel spreadsheet of tasks. Letting Gabriel lead me around Paris on a scooter was a refreshing change of pace.

“This is the most stereotypical French that I can imagine!” I said to Gabriel when we were stopped at a traffic light. “Riding around Paris on a scooter with a bundle of baguettes clutched to my chest!”

“I will fetch you a beret as well,” he asked. “And a cigarette. Then you will truly be French.”

He stopped to get soup, pasta, and wine—all at different restaurants. The grocery bag was so full that I struggled to hold onto it while also keeping an arm around Gabriel. Then we were zooming away on the scooter again, deeper into the heart of Paris.

“I know where we are,” I said. “The Louvre is right over there! I saw the top of the pyramid thing.”

Gabriel turned down an alley and then slowed to a stop. “Yes. Come, this way.” He took the groceries from me and led the way down the alley, stopping at an unmarked steel door that didn’t have a doorknob or handle. Gabriel made a phone

call, said a few words in French, and then the door opened. A large man in a suit with a walkie-talkie poked his head out, gave me a *very* long look, and then nodded to Gabriel.

As we followed him inside, I was too scared to ask where we were going. The hallway was narrow and illuminated by harsh white light every thirty feet, leaving the spaces in between dark. The three sets of footsteps echoed strangely, like we were in a cave. I began wondering if it was a good idea to follow Gabriel, a man I didn't really know that well.

The hallway ended at a door, and we passed into a larger room. The air was very cool, with a hum of overhead fans and circulation that stirred my hair. Wooden crates were spread out, spilling over with straw.

"Paintings that are not on display," Gabriel told me.

"Shh," the other man hissed.

That's when I began to realize we were in a wing of the Louvre itself. I gawked as we passed oil paintings locked in glass cases, protected from the elements. I knew next to nothing about art, but many of them looked familiar. At the very least, they were *good*.

The museum employee—who I now recognized as a night guard—opened another door and gestured for us to go inside. That doorway led into the museum itself, with its high ceilings, broad walkways, and paintings sparsely spaced on the walls next to placards that described them. It was completely deserted; the museum had been closed for hours. Gabriel held up a finger to his lips and led me deeper into the museum, twisting and turning through hallways and rooms as if he knew the route.

The paintings ended, and we passed through a wing of the museum featuring medieval artifacts. Glass cases full of swords and daggers, and displays of elaborate suits of armor. Gabriel had moved briskly up to this point, but he slowed down when passing one such suit of armor, polished so finely it shone like a mirror. He lingered there, eyes unreadable in the darkness, before moving on.

At last we came to a room like any other, except that there was a false wall positioned in the very center, with a rope queue leading to the front. That's when I saw it. My breath caught in my throat, and my feet carried me toward it as if pulled by some unseen gravity. The frame was gold colored with some intricate carvings, and the painting itself wasn't as large as I expected; it was less than two feet wide, and not even three feet tall. I ducked under the rope queue, my eyes never leaving the painting as I drew closer.

“Do not step past the last rope,” Gabriel called. “It will trigger the alarms, and then we will have a very bad time.”

“The Mona Lisa,” I breathed.

# 18



## Miranda

I was ten feet away from the Mona Lisa now, close enough to stare into her ageless eyes. Close enough to see the brush strokes. “How did you get us in here?”

“You may not wish to take advantage of your fame,” Gabriel replied, “but I have no such qualms. Come, sit. We have a feast.”

He sat on the floor in front of the Mona Lisa and began unpacking the food. Still mesmerized by the painting, I joined him, although it was difficult to sit on the floor in this dress.

“It feels like we are doing something very illegal.”

“The law is for normal people. As you Americans say: I know a guy. He will ensure we are not disturbed during our meal. Wine?” He uncorked the bottle and filled two paper cups that I had not seen.

It was a surreal experience as we ate our little picnic on the floor of the Louvre, under the watchful eyes of the most famous painting in the world. But the chicken was moist, the pasta and bread were fresh, and the company was better than I had expected.

“Have you enjoyed your retirement?” he asked me.

“I really, really have. I was worried that I would get the itch to play, but it’s been so nice not having to constantly think about the next tournament. Maybe I’ll change my mind in a month or two, but for now I am happy.”

“I can see that,” he said, smiling behind his cup of wine.



“What about you? How long do you see yourself playing?” Gabriel was thirty years old, which was typically when male tennis players started declining. His career, however, was just taking off.

“I do not intend to think about retirement for a very long time,” he replied, lounging on his side with a head propped up by a hand. “I will play until I can no longer win. It took me quite a long time to reach this point, winning my first major tournament and being ranked number two in the world. I intend to stay here as long as possible.”

“I can see that.” I chewed and swallowed a fork of pasta. “You still seem hungry.”

“I am hungry for wins,” he agreed. “There are many more items on my to-do list. Winning Roland Garros. Winning a career grand slam. Even when those goals are completed, I will keep playing until I am fifty, if I can.” He frowned in thought. “Without tennis, I do not know who I am. Do you find yourself worrying about such things, Miranda?”

“I used to, before retiring,” I replied. “But I’m happy. I’m loving the slower pace of life that comes with retirement. I’m sure I’ll get bored of it, and will need to find other hobbies. And when that time comes, I can’t wait to see where my life will take me.”

Gabriel smiled. “You are an intelligent woman. You could do anything you desire.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but I don’t think you really know me.”

“I have followed your career since we were teenagers,” he said softly. “I feel like I know you quite well, Miranda. And if I am mistaken, I am hoping perhaps we could be friends again.”

He gazed deeply into my eyes, and I found myself pulled toward him, much in the way the Mona Lisa had pulled me earlier. Gabriel had a soft charisma about him that was totally unlike his public persona. This wasn’t the same man who

boasted and bragged in front of the cameras. This felt like the *real* Gabriel. The one I had kissed all those years ago.

“Do you remember that night at the party?” I asked.

He furrowed his brow. “What party?”

“Come on. I know you remember.”

Gabriel looked down at his wine. “How could I forget?” he said softly.

“That was the first time I had ever kissed a boy,” I revealed. “The first *real* kiss, I mean. More than just a quick peck.”

Gabriel smiled broadly, then flinched. He gulped down his wine and began refilling his glass. “Your first real kiss was with Tristan Carfrae. I was second.”

I held out my cup so he could refill it. “You kissed me with tongue. A real French kiss. Tristan didn’t do that.”

Spots of red appeared on Gabriel’s cheeks. He tried covering it by sipping his wine, then said, “Was it a good kiss?”

Before I could answer him, the door down the hall burst open and someone came running. It was the same night guard who had let us into the museum. He barked something in French to Gabriel; I recognized *partir*, the French word meaning *to leave*.

“We have to go,” Gabriel said, hastily throwing the food back into the bag. “Someone is coming.”

“I thought you said you knew a guy!”

“I know *a* guy. I do not know *all* of the guys.” Gabriel grabbed my wrist and led me away at a jog. Shouts sounded in the distance behind us, echoing strangely off the walls, but I didn’t dare look back. It was all I could do to keep up with Gabriel’s pace while wearing two inch heels.

The hallways twisted and turned through the museum. Once again, Gabriel seemed to know the way, though I was hopelessly lost. Eventually we came to a restricted door, which Gabriel flung open. We were in a back hallway again, with crates of unused paintings littered everywhere. The shouts

were getting closer, but then we rounded another corner and Gabriel threw open a door. Suddenly, we were out in the open air of an alleyway. He continued leading me onward, never slowing. We reached an intersection with another alley, and he yanked me to the left, hidden around the edge of a wall.

“Shh,” he said, finger held to his lips. I held my breath, straining to listen into the night. A door banged open, and we heard insistent whispers. I was terrified that they would come this way and discover us, but then the door banged shut again. Only silence remained.

I twisted toward Gabriel, who was standing very close to me. His eyes were dark pools in the night, drinking in the light as he stared at me. I put my palm against his chest, feeling him rather than pushing him away. He cupped my cheek, his thumb rough from the callous that came from years holding a tennis racket, and then he kissed me.

I closed my eyes and surrendered to how amazing his lips felt, especially as his body pushed me up against the alley wall. The scooter ride, the Louvre picnic, and even the getaway had endeared me to Gabriel in a way I hadn't expected; the kiss felt like the inevitable conclusion to the evening, rather than an unexpected surprise. He grabbed a handful of my hair, holding my head against his as I slid my tongue into his mouth. Gabriel moaned and accepted it eagerly, sliding his tongue against mine just like that night long ago.

“The kiss,” I said breathlessly when he pulled away, “was very good.”

“This one?” he whispered. “Or the kiss at the party?”

“Both.”

He chuckled softly, caressing my cheek with his thumb. “I would very much like to continue kissing you, but we should be away from here.”

“What about the scooter?” I asked as we emerged out onto a main road.

“It belongs to my friend,” he replied. “I will buy him a new one!”

I laughed and smiled at the Frenchman. I wanted to go back to his place. I wanted to see where Gabriel Moreau lived, and to explore where *this* would go. I was a retired woman, which meant being free to do what I wanted. I didn’t know what that really meant until this very moment.

But then he asked, “Do you like to dance?”

The change of subject caught me by surprise. “I *love* to dance.”

“Come, then. The club where I was going with my friends is only a kilometer away. As long as you do not mind walking. I know you Americans drive everywhere...”

I gave him a playful shove. “Some Americans. But not me. I could use the exercise—even in heels.”

We walked arm-in-arm down the streets of Paris, enjoying the night air. I felt vaguely guilty for snuggling up to Gabriel, especially considering the evening was originally supposed to end with me and a *different* tennis player. But Dominic and I weren’t really together, and based on the text messages we had shared over the past few months, we were both on the same page in that regard. Maybe it would turn into something more serious, but that time wasn’t now.

“Do you usually stay up this late before a tournament?” I asked.

Gabriel waved a hand. “My first match is in five days. This is the last night I will go out, and then I will be a good boy until the tournament.” He glanced over at me. “Sometimes I consider training more strictly, as you so famously did. No alcohol, no sugar. In bed before the sun goes down, even when there is no tournament in sight.”

“Your way is more fun,” I said.

“More fun, yes. But more successful? I am not so sure. If I win Roland Garros and become the number one ranked player in the world... perhaps I will need to make a change in order to maintain my spot.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “I think you have a good chance of winning the French Open this year. You’re the favorite.”

He smiled politely. “On paper, yes. But I feel the pressure of the tournament already. The pressure of an entire city, an entire *nation*. No French player has won here since 1983. My people are expecting me to win. Anything less would be a complete failure. That expectation...” He walked in silence for a few steps. “I wake up at night shivering, sometimes. It has been a long three months since I won in Melbourne.”

I rubbed his back. “I know how you feel. Try not to think about winning the entire thing. Just take it one match at a time. The only thing you should think about is playing Brandon Nakashima next Monday.”

He let out a long sigh. “This is good advice. Thank you, Miranda. I will try to focus on that.”

As we continued walking arm-in-arm, I marveled at how different Gabriel was. He was so cocky and arrogant on the court, as quick to anger as John McEnroe used to be. But being with him tonight, around the people he knew and by ourselves, I was seeing a completely different man. It changed everything I felt about him.

We rounded a corner and saw the club up ahead, with a bright neon sign showing the way. Yet as we approached, I realized there was a cluster of photographers across the street. Paparazzi waiting for him.

*Or for us.*

A flash of anger ran through me. Had Gabriel set this all up? Had he insisted we go to the club so that photographers would snap pictures of us together? I’d had dates take advantage of my fame in that regard before, but never someone like Gabriel who was famous in his own right.

“Merde,” Gabriel cursed. “My friend must have bragged that I was going to be here. We do not wish to create any rumors, yes?”

“I would like to avoid that,” I agreed.

He nodded. “See that alley? Hide there while I go talk to the paparazzi. I will make them happy, then when they are gone, I will let you into the club from the side door. Nobody will see you. Go, now. Hurry!”

We split up, me heading off to the alley on the right while Gabriel strode directly toward the paparazzi on the left. Once I was safely concealed, I peered around the corner to watch Gabriel go to work.

The cameras began flashing rapidly as he approached. He gave a little bow for them, then spoke in French. They conversed back and forth in their native language, and then one photographer shouted at him in English.

“Gabriel! Are you worried about potentially facing Tristan Carfrae in the third round?” he asked in an Australian accent.

“Tristan who?” Gabriel retorted in English. “The washed up Australian? He has not made it to the semifinals in three years. He will likely stub a toe in his hotel room and need to withdraw. But if he manages to avoid injury long enough to meet me, I will happily send him home.”

I winced at the comment. Tristan’s frustration with his oblique injury in Melbourne was still fresh in my mind.

“Are you worried about a rematch with Dominic deGrom?” a reporter with an English accent asked.

“Worried? I am hoping for it,” Gabriel shot back with a mocking laugh. “That American does not belong here, and he is aware of this fact. Paris is my city, and I will defend it. But I do not expect deGrom to make it to the finals, if I am to be quite honest with you. I saw his photographs in Sports Illustrated. He is in no shape to challenge anyone at tennis. The only thing he has been challenging since Melbourne is a plate of cheeseburgers.”

The reporters all laughed, but the joke hit a nerve with me. Seconds ago, Gabriel had been quiet and humble. He had shown a vulnerable side of himself, concerned about the tournament and the hopes of the entire nation. And in the blink of an eye he was back to being that arrogant asshole, mocking

his opponents and boasting about how good he was. His taunts weren't even accurate; Dominic had looked *amazing* in his Sports Illustrated shoot. Chiseled with almost zero body fat.

*I don't want to dance with Gabriel*, I decided, my stomach souring on the idea. *Or any other activity the night might lead to.*

I slipped away without saying goodbye.

# 19



## Tristan

“To the last night before sobriety,” I toasted at the hotel bar.

My best mate, Andrew, slammed his pint glass against mine so hard it almost shattered the glass. “To your health.”

“I’ll drink to that.” The two of us laughed and downed our beers. It was a long-standing tradition with Andrew, a former pro from Australia who retired two years ago. One final night out drinking, usually a week before the tournament started, before we switched to strict diets and stringent rules. I still planned on having a beer at the welcome dinner, as I always did, but tonight was the last *real* night of drinking. Even if it was at the hotel bar rather than a proper pub somewhere deeper in Paris.

I was on my fourth beer, and Andrew was on his sixth. Enough that I had a good buzz—and he had some slur to his words and sway to his step.

“Good to see you healthy,” Andrew reiterated with a clap on my back. “Shame when someone so talented doesn’t have a body that can keep up with them.”

“My body is just fine,” I said, “and I have many more years of success ahead of me.” I didn’t really believe that, but it felt good to be confident now. My oblique injury had healed since the Australian Open, and I felt stronger than ever. Poised to make a deep run here in Paris, which was by far my worst tournament.

“Look who it is,” Andrew said, gesturing at the TV. Gabriel Moreau was there, wearing civilian clothes outside of a bar or



club. It was a French news channel, but Gabriel was being interviewed in English.

“Tristan who?” he said with a mocking laugh. “The washed up Australian? He has not made it past the semis in three years.”

“He’s a real cunt,” Andrew said.

“Do you hear that?” I cupped my ear. “That’s the sound of nobody disagreeing with you.”

The two of us roared with laughter and took long pulls from our drinks. Moreau rubbed me the wrong way, and I wasn’t the only one. Cockiness only worked in moderation, but Moreau seemed to wield it like a sword. I couldn’t remember the last player who was as cocky as him. Agassi or McEnroe, but then again, they had the skill to back it up. More recently, Federer and Nadal were both confident players—but they were never assholes about it.

“It’s nice having a bad guy to root against,” Andrew went on. “Like a heel in wrestling.”

“Except wrestling is fake,” I pointed out. “It’s scripted. But Gabriel Moreau is real.”

“A real cunt,” Andrew said with a chuckle.

There was a tap on my shoulder. “Excuse me. Are you Tristan Carfrae? Can we get a selfie with you?”

“Of course you can,” I said, turning to the two little girls standing behind me. They had English accents. “But only if you tell me what you think of him.” I pointed at the TV.

“Moreau?” they asked. “He’s... he’s okay.”

“He’s not your favorite player?” I pressed.

One girl shook her head. “No. He’s not even in my top five.”

“That is the correct answer. Here, give me the phone—I’ve got longer arms. Right, on the count of three say Roland Garros. One, two three, Roland Garros!”

We posed and snapped the photo. For the first time in a while, my smile was genuine. I *liked* interacting with fans,

usually.

“You’re like your old self again,” Andrew gestured with his pint glass. “It’s good to see, innit?”

“I’m healthy,” I said simply. “When there aren’t any injuries nagging me, I feel like myself.”

My buddy knocked on the wood of the bar. “Don’t jinx it, mate.”

“I don’t believe in superstition. I just believe in myself.”

“There are worse things to believe in.” His eyes darted to something behind me. “I’ll believe in *her*. She looks familiar, though.”

I turned and gave a start. The woman that had walked into the hotel lobby was quite familiar. “That’s Miranda Jacobs,” I said.

Andrew squinted. “Indeed it is. Didn’t recognize her with her hair down like that.”

Miranda was in a hurry, walking through the hotel lobby with long strides. She looked annoyed by something. But she was beautiful in her dress, and I was totally transfixed by the sight of her.

And then she glanced over at the bar.

I whirled around on my barstool and cupped my pint with both hands. Seeing Miranda for the first time in four months brought forth a complex storm of emotions. I was just trying to enjoy my last few pints before the tournament. I wasn’t expecting to have to deal with *this*.

“Stop staring at her,” I hissed at Andrew. “I don’t want her to know I’m here.”

“Too late, mate,” he replied. “She’s coming this way.”

*Oh for fuck’s sake.*

“Andrew Flemming?” Miranda asked, extending her hand. “I don’t think we’ve formally met, but I’ve followed your career over the years.”

“That’s kind of you to say, seeing as I never won a grand slam,” he replied while shaking her hand. “Do you know my best mate, Tristan?”

“I do, actually.”

I turned to face her. She was wearing a half-smile, but still looked flustered or annoyed by something.

“Good to see you again,” she said coyly.

“You too. It’s been a while.”

Andrew cleared his throat. “I’m, uh, going to use the toilet.” He slunk away like a mouse trying to avoid a fight between two cats.

Miranda waved to the bartender and asked, “Do you know how to make a lemon vodka spritz?”

He furrowed his brow. “No, madam, I am sorry. But if you could tell me how...”

She pointed at my beer glass. “I’ll have what he’s having. Plus a refill for him.”

“I should be the one buying you a drink,” I said. “You should be more frugal with your money in retirement.”

“I’m broadcasting many of the televised games next week,” she replied, sitting on the stool Andrew had occupied. Her raven hair swayed as she twisted to face me. “No rest for the wicked.”

“Is that why you’re dressed nice?” I asked, gesturing at her body. “Some lead-up events before the tournament? Or did you have a date?”

The fire in her eyes flared. “It was a date.”

“And it went poorly?”

“Why do you think it went poorly?”

“Because,” I said, “you came storming into the hotel like you were going to punch the first person who got in your way. And you’re still clenching your jaw so tight I can hear your teeth grinding.”

Miranda visibly forced herself to relax. “My date canceled on me. Then I sort of had another date, but it... ended poorly, too.”

“Ahh.” I raised my glass. “To bad dates.”

She touched her beer to mine. “So, is it true?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Are you healthy?”

“As healthy as I’m going to be.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Come on. Anything minor or major? Nagging muscle soreness? A tendon that’s not at a hundred percent?”

“Zero issues, for the first time since I can remember,” I replied. “Shame the French is my weakest tournament.”

“If you’re healthy, you have a fighting chance,” she said. “The clay surface should help your game, if you can rely on your serve. Get to the net quickly. Don’t give your opponents a chance to draw out long points.”

“I’ve received the exact same advice from my coach, whose opinion I pay for.”

“Well, my advice is free. This time.” Our beers arrived, and she downed half of it without a word. “What happened last time, Tristan?”

“Again, you’ll have to be more specific.”

“I’m talking about Australia.”

“Oh. Well then. It’s a big island. British penal colony where they sent all their criminals. That’s why we’re so ornery.”

She pursed her lips in annoyance, but I could tell she wanted to laugh. “You know what I’m asking, Tristan. Why didn’t you take my advice on your backhand?”

“I didn’t think it would work.”

“Bullshit,” she said, turning to face me directly. She jabbed a finger into my chest. “I still remember that morning like it was yesterday. You were receptive to the changes I wanted to

make. You were *trying*. But as soon as someone walked in and saw us, you changed. And I think I know why.”

I froze, remembering that same morning clearly. “Why is that?”

“You were embarrassed to be coached by a woman.”

The answer was so unexpected, and so *wrong*, that I couldn’t help but laugh. Miranda’s expression darkened, but I only laughed harder.

“I don’t see how this is funny,” she said curtly.

“I wasn’t embarrassed about being coached by a woman. You were the best in the world. There’s no shame in that.”

“Then what?” she demanded.

“I was embarrassed because you stood me up.”

She flinched. “Stood you up? I was... running late that morning, sure, but...”

“I don’t mean that morning,” I snapped. I took a deep breath to calm myself, then continued. “It’s stupid. But fourteen years ago I gave you my phone number. And you never called me.”

Miranda blinked at me with those big eyes of hers. “*That’s* what you’re upset about? The *party* at the Academy?”

“Yes,” I said defensively.

“The day after that party,” she explained slowly, “I jumped on a plane and flew to Abu Dhabi. There was no point in calling you because I spent the next three months beginning my professional career.”

“You could have texted,” I insisted, the pain fresh and bright like a wound that had been reopened. “You could have confided in me how the tournament was going. You had my number, and I didn’t have yours. You left me hanging. So I assumed you didn’t like me.”

“I...” Miranda shook her head and chuckled. “I never expected you to feel that way.”

I downed the rest of my beer and waved for another round. “Yeah, well, I did.”

She leaned on the bar, examining me. Thinking about what I had said. She was a tight little thing, strong but significantly smaller than me, yet her gaze bore into me like an interrogation. I couldn’t even look up and meet her eyes.

“I don’t buy it,” she said. “You seemed totally fine while we practiced your two-handed backhand. Then you abruptly became uncooperative and told me to leave. What happened?”

I didn’t want to have this conversation tonight. I was supposed to be sharing some light-hearted pints with my best mate before hunkering down for the tournament. He came out of the bathroom on the other side of the bar, flashed me a thumbs-up, then left.

*If not now, I thought, then when? I don’t want this looming over me during the tournament.*

“Dominic happened,” I said in an exhale. “He showed up to practice on one of the other courts, and I overheard you two. You left something at his hotel room.”

“Oh,” Miranda said, eyes widening. “Ohh.”

“That night at the party,” I revealed, “after we kissed, I gave you my number. And then Dominic strode into the kitchen and asked you out. You barely looked at me again after he showed up. That stung. And then when he showed up during my practice, all those insecurities bubbled to the surface again.” I shrugged. “It’s childish, I know.”

She sat in silence for a bit, finishing her beer and then accepting the new round as the bartender brought it. The silence stretched on, with the bar noise surrounding us. I was beginning to wonder if she would say anything at all.

“You were the first boy I ever kissed,” she finally admitted.

“Really?”

“I was a sheltered tennis student back then,” she explained. “I’d kissed two boys on the cheek, but that’s it. Yours was a *real* kiss. It stirred up a lot of emotions inside of me. I still

think about it.” She looked down into her beer, then glanced over at me. “When you gave me your phone number, I was flabbergasted. You were so popular. Everyone at the tennis Academy liked you. Why would you ask *me* out? I was shy and ugly.”

“You were shy,” I said, “but you were *not* ugly.”

“Sixteen year old girls aren’t known for having the healthiest body image issues,” she muttered. “And there were prettier girls at that party. I’m sorry for not calling or texting you.”

“You were busy,” I replied. “I get it.”

Miranda gently shook her head. “It’s more than that. I think I was afraid that it was some sort of prank, that I would text you and you would show it to all the other students.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“At the time, it seemed more likely than Tristan Carfrae actually asking me out.” She put a hand on my arm. “Seriously, I’m sorry. For what happened at the party... and for talking to Dominic that morning in Melbourne.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said. Now that I had gotten all of it out, the whole picture seemed clear to me. “I shouldn’t have been angry. I’m better than that.”

She smiled. “You were dealing with an injury.”

“It’s no excuse.”

“Can we start over?” she asked. “Forget about all the assumptions we’ve made?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think we can.”

She tilted her pint toward me, and we touched glasses.

“This date you had tonight,” I said casually. “Was it with Dominic?”

She glared at me.

“Last question,” I said, showing her my palms. “I promise.”

“It was,” she confirmed. “Until the cologne commercial he was filming ran long.”

“Cologne commercial?” I laughed. “You know what, good for him. He should cash in on his fame while he can. It doesn’t last.”

“No, it does not,” Miranda agreed.

“So you two are serious?” I asked. It felt like admitting defeat.

“Actually, not really.” She took a long pull of beer before going on. “We had a little fling in Melbourne, but couldn’t get our schedules to line up since then.”

It felt like my body was suddenly lighter than before. *Not serious. They’re not serious.*

“I heard a rumor you’re on the next season of Survivor.”

“*That* was an experience,” she said. “I...”

“Don’t spoil it for me. I want to watch it myself.”

“I made it to week...”

I pressed my palm over her mouth and held the back of her head, muffling her voice. She continued speaking behind my palm, but I couldn’t understand her. Then her tongue began licking my palm.

“Gross,” I said, pulling away.

“We’ve kissed before,” she said. “I wouldn’t think you’re grossed out by some spit on your hand.”

“That was fourteen years ago. A lifetime.”

“Okay, your turn,” she said, sliding her barstool closer to mine. “That night at the party. Was I your first kiss?”

It was a good thing I wasn’t taking a sip of beer, or I would have spit it out from laughing so hard. “My first... seriously? God, no!”

She leaned back. “Wow.”

“You asked. I’m answering.”



“So you *were* a player back then,” Miranda said.

“It’s not my fault. American women love an accent.”

“It’s true. We do.” She got a faraway look, like she was thinking of someone else. Then her eyes snapped back to me. “What happened to Andrew?”

“He went off to flirt with someone,” I said. “He and I always celebrate a week before a tournament. My last night of *proper* drinking before becoming a good, sober boy.”

“Then we’d better make it count. I’m buying another round.”

I smiled at Miranda while she flagged down the bartender again. *This wasn’t how I expected my night to go.*

## 20



### Miranda

As we stumbled into his hotel room, lips locked together, I thought to myself: *This isn't how I expected my night to go.*

I had spent the last four months *hating* Tristan Carfrae. I had assumed he was embarrassed to be coached by a woman. But it had nothing to do with that. My assumptions were wrong. And once that was out of the way, I was enjoying hanging out with him.

We'd had a strange relationship for the past decade. Like coworkers who worked in different departments, our paths crossing infrequently, yet close enough to each other's orbits to be aware of the other person. We got another round and talked about tennis. Tristan discussed his strategy against everyone on his side of the French Open bracket. We compared notes on sponsors; his three-year contract with Nike compared to my deal with Adidas.

We were vibing off each other. I got a good buzz and only remember snippets. My hand on his arm; his fingers lightly touching my bare leg where the dress was riding up on the stool. Tristan was an incredibly handsome man, especially dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt, sitting at the bar like any other guy. At one point, a boy walked up and asked for his autograph. His response was sweet and caring. The whole thing was in stark contrast to the way I had left Gabriel earlier in the night.

Still kissing, Tristan kicked the hotel door closed behind us. Now that we were in the privacy of his room, I pulled his shirt over his head and ran my fingers over his chiseled chest. A

chest I had seen from afar when he ripped it off after matches and tossed it into the crowd. He was taller than me, but I fit perfectly into his embrace as he pulled me into another, deeper kiss.

As we stumbled further into the hotel room, I caught glimpses of the surroundings. Bouquets of flowers covered the dresser and nightstand. I knew from experience they were gifts from sponsors and fans. I was trying to guide us toward the bed, but our legs became tangled and we went down together in a heap, thumping against the floor loud enough to wake whoever was in the room beneath us.

“You okay?” I asked.

“What? Why?” he asked. What he had said earlier was right: American women *loved* an accent. And I was no exception.

“Just making sure I didn’t injure you.” I pressed my body against his, feeling the warmth of his exposed skin. For a moment that lasted an eternity we stared at one another, our faces only inches apart.

He leaned up to kiss me with lips that were warm and soft. I felt strong arms wrap around me, holding me close, pulling me against his broad chest. I sighed against his body and kissed him harder, and the smell of his musk mixed wonderfully with the flowers in the room.

He stiffened underneath me, and I sighed at the heat coming off his cock, my own sex pulsing with desire.

His hands ran along my back, caressing me, learning what I felt like under the dress. Every curve of my spine, and lower back, and hip. And then his hands were sliding under the dress and along my ass, squeezing the cheeks gently.

“You taste so good,” he said, and I shoved my tongue into his mouth to taste what he tasted, our tongues dancing together wonderfully. His desire was a physical thing, so real I could almost feel it in the air. His cock rubbed against the inside of my thigh, and he made a deep noise in his throat. I sensed his urge to take me, his frantic *need* for me.

And then he took over, rolling me sideways until I was on my back, the soft hotel rug pressing into my legs and neck. He covered me with his body, kissing the side of my neck and along my shoulder. I arched my back to press my body into his, my thighs against his hips, my wet sex so close to his belly, aching to feel his touch.

Suddenly my clothes were an unacceptable hindrance, but Tristan seemed to sense the same thing. His hands rolled my dress up and pulled it over my head. As he tossed it aside, I unclasped my bra, giving my breasts to him.

He kissed me with deeper frenzy, hands pawing along my belly up to my nipples. He savored my feel with masculine lust, squeezing and testing, the first touch always the most precious. And then his lips left mine, and he pushed my head back to expose my neck, kissing underneath my jaw and at my throat and then down to my breast bone.

I gyrated against him, tortured by his lips and the panties that separated us.

His mouth found my left nipple, brushing against it in passing which made me sigh, then returning with shocking fervency. His lips wrapped around it and his tongue flicked out, sudden and intense and *wonderful* all at the same time. I squirmed beneath his muscular body on the rug and moaned a desperate moan.

“I love how your body feels,” he breathed.

“Don’t stop!”

He moved to the other nipple, nibbling with his lips, and his hand moved along my side to my thigh. I closed my eyes and reached between us, eager to find him, to touch him the way he was touching me. One button and a zipper relented, and then he was there in my hand. His cock was on fire, hotter than the rest of him, and he moaned into my nipple as I wrapped my fingers around it.

“Ohh...” he said.

I wrapped my other hand around his neck and pulled him to me, demanding he continue his caressing kisses. I stroked his

cock harder, and in return he licked my nipple faster. His touch was incredible, something I'd needed without knowing until then, my instincts surrendering to the feeling.

And then it wasn't enough.

I opened my mouth to tell him what I needed, but somehow he knew. Because he desperately wanted the same thing. His hands moved to my waist, curling underneath the band of my panties. I raised my butt off the ground in surrender, allowing him to slide them all the way off, and then I was open to him, legs spread wide and wet and *ready*.

"I need you," Tristan whispered, the same thought I'd been about to say.

I kissed him in response, and closed my eyes as he squirmed out of his jeans on the floor. I felt him guide the tip of his cock into my dripping slit. I moaned into his kiss while I felt the head push me open, taking me, forcing the walls of my sex open with his strength. That's what I felt then: the strength of this man who had given me my first kiss, a wall of muscle covering me like a blanket and keeping me safe.

He moved gently, a slow inch at a time. And it wasn't enough, it wasn't what I *needed*, so I gyrated my hips against him, taking his cock faster, demanding every inch of it while he groaned. He obliged my demand, and thrust forward roughly, and I felt that familiar ache laced with a flicker of pain, but only for an instant, and then he was filling me to the brim with every inch of his hard length.

"Oh my *God*," he moaned, breaking the kiss to look into my eyes.

I could feel his heartbeat like it was a drum, pulsing through our joined parts. It dimmed as he pulled back slowly, every grain of his shaft rubbing against every nerve of my pussy. And the pulsing returned with his thrust, filling me.

I sighed and rocked my hips against him, urging him faster, not caring about the burn of the rug against my thighs.

Tristan reached a strong arm underneath my head and grabbed a fistful of my hair. He squeezed it tight and pulled

back on my head so he could nuzzle my neck again, and I let him, because I was his, my *body* was his to do whatever he pleased.

“Give it to me,” I moaned.

His legs pumped harder with exactly the right amount of force I needed, sending jolts of pleasure through my body while he kissed my neck. Oh my God it felt so good, and I raked my fingernails across his muscled chest, down his navel and into my pubic hair, rubbing at my clit like I did when I was alone, rough circles that left me breathless.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered into the skin of my neck.

Faster and faster we went, my body and mind surrendering to the climactic cliff I was hurtling towards, being pulled over, thrown into the open air of ecstasy, and I welcomed it because I knew Tristan would be there to catch me. He wasn’t kissing my neck anymore; he was groaning into me, his breath hot and quick against my skin.

I wrapped my legs around his back and pulled him close, because it ached where we *didn’t* touch. “Come with me,” I begged, not wanting to reach my climax without him. “Hurry. *Please.*”

His hips moved chaotically then, wild thrusts that were more animal than man, ruled by his desire. He kissed me once more but then the kiss turned into a moan, and his eyes widened, and mine opened wide with him to drink his pleasure as he drove into me.

“*Oh God, Miranda,*” he said, surprise and shock on his face.

I screamed my wordless scream, and clenched my eyes shut at the explosion of pleasure coming from between my legs. It gushed out of me, and inside me, and all around me like a tide, wave after wave rocking my body. Tristan roared too, and I felt his hard length bottom out inside of me, spasming as he came with me, and I clenched the lips of my sex around him as tightly as I could.

His fingers squeezed inside my hair and along my thigh, and my own fingers clung to his arms like he was the only thing keeping me from drowning, while our desperate voices filled the hotel room.



## Miranda

“Do you subscribe to the Rocky school of thought?” I asked.

We were nude in bed, cuddled together with a corner of the sheet draped across our legs. Our combined body heat was too high for the full sheet covering us; sweat glistened on Tristan’s chest, and I felt a trickle on my back. Evidence of the workout we’d just had.

“Rocky? What school?” Tristan murmured underneath me.

“Rocky. Like, the movie.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Rocky’s coach tells him not to have sex before a big fight,” I explained. “He says women weaken a man’s legs. You don’t remember that part?”

“I’ve never seen it, actually.”

I sat up. “You’ve never seen Rocky?”

“I don’t like boxing.”

“It’s a love story!” I argued.

“Still though. I don’t care. And I definitely don’t think women weaken legs.” He curled an arm around my waist. “Especially not a week before my first match.”

“Good. As long as this doesn’t affect your performance.”

He gave me a crooked grin, then brushed a lock of blond hair away from his eyes. “Why do you ask? Does Dominic think women weaken legs?”



“No.”

“So you’re admitting you two have engaged in physical activity before a tournament?”

“You know we have,” I pointed out. “At the Australian Open.”

“Oh. Right.” He chuckled. “Doing this the *night* before a match... that might be a mistake. I’m surprised a guy like Dominic would do that.”

“What do you mean, a guy like Dominic?”

“Someone focused, driven,” he replied.

“Well, it wasn’t planned. It just sort of happened at the welcome dinner.”

Tristan gasped. “You guys did it *at the welcome dinner?*”

I gave him a playful shove. “I’m surprised you’re not more jealous. Especially considering the grudge you held for so long.”

The tall Aussie shrugged. “I’m a little jealous. But fourteen years is a long time to forget.”

“That didn’t stop you from getting all butt-hurt about it in Melbourne,” I pointed out.

“I was injured there. I wasn’t myself.” He sat up with me and caressed my cheek. “Sorry. That’s no excuse. But I can promise I won’t be jealous now. As long as I get to keep doing *this* with you.” He punctuated the statement with a long kiss.

“I don’t want this to be a one-time thing either,” I agreed. “But Dominic...”

“I don’t care what you do with him,” Tristan insisted. “Something casual makes sense for me right now. Life is too busy with tennis to devote to a full relationship. So I’ll have fun with you as long as you’re willing.”

I nodded along, but I knew this might be a problem long-term. I had felt the same way as Tristan when I was playing tennis, but now that I was retired? I *wanted* something more serious. Something with the potential to become long-term. I

wanted to find my soul mate, the person I would spend the rest of my life with. For the first time since I was a teenager, that felt like a realistic desire rather than a fantasy.

*We slept together once*, I told myself. *There's no need to overthink it. Not yet.*

"You're pretty buzzed right now," I said. "How do I know you won't change your mind about all of this in the morning?"

"First of all, I'm proper drunk," he replied, slurring his words for good measure. "And you'll just have to trust me."

"Fair enough."

"There's just one problem," Tristan said.

I frowned. "What?"

"Who are you going to root for in the semifinals? Dominic, or the far more handsome man you're presently in bed with?"

"You're assuming you'll both make it to the semis? Wow, way to jinx it."

"I'm not superstitious."

"Well, maybe you should be a *little* stitious," I replied. "Wouldn't want to upset the tennis gods."

He tilted his head to one side while watching me. "You're avoiding the question."

"I am, because the truth is: I don't know who I would root for if you two face off."

He nodded slowly. "I can respect an honest answer. But when we *do* meet, you'd better root for me."

"I do typically like an underdog. We'll see." I glanced at the time. "I'm going to let you get your beauty sleep."

"I'm this pretty with or without sleep," he teased. "And you don't have to go if you don't want to."

"I've got a broadcaster meeting first thing in the morning. And the last time I slept with a tennis player, I was late for my obligations the next day."

“I don’t mind it when I’m on the other side of it,” Tristan said with a wink. “Although I was hoping you would stick around for more... fun.”

It was getting late, but I was intrigued. “I’m listening.”

“Well, it’s hard to explain... maybe I should just *show you*.”

I yelped as he pulled me down onto the bed, rolled on top of me, and made me forget all about my obligations the next morning.

\*

Most of the next day was spent with the broadcast crews at the Roland Garros facility. It was all straightforward information, but it was still good to get a feel for everything. At the Australian Open, I sat in on a couple of matches to give commentary, but at the French I would be broadcasting games every single day of the tournament. I needed to be sharp.

When I got out that afternoon, I had a few texts.

**Gabriel:** Where did you disappear to last night? I thought we were having fun.

**Me:** I was having fun too, until you gave an interview to that reporter. You suddenly became an asshole. I don’t like that side of you.

**Gabriel:** How was I an asshole? I do not even remember this.

**Me:** You made fun of Tristan Carfrae and Dominic deGrom. Insulting your potential opponents isn’t attractive. I like a man who is more humble.

**Gabriel:** I am the #2 player in the world. If you want humble, you should go out with one of them.

*Funny you should mention that*, I thought while responding.

**Me:** Dominic is extremely humble, and he's the #1 ranked man in the world.

**Gabriel:** For now.

We didn't text any more after that, which frustrated me. I was hoping Gabriel would apologize for his behavior, give me *some* sort of excuse. If he had told me his publicist or someone wanted him to be cocky, then I could accept that—to some degree. But if he was just an asshole for the sake of being an asshole...

That wasn't the only text I had, though.

**Dominic:** Can I cash in that rain check for dinner tonight?

**Me:** That sounds wonderful. I should be back by 6. Meet me at my hotel?

I was only halfway done getting ready when a knock came at my door. Dominic was on the other side of the peep-hole.

"You're early," I said. "How did you know what room I was in?"

"Being the top ranked player in the world has its benefits. The guy at the front desk is a fan. I told him I wanted to surprise you."

"Consider me surprised." I gestured down at myself. "I still need to change and get ready, but you're welcome to wait here while..."

I cut off as he threw me up against the wall and kissed me.

I never got a chance to finish getting ready. In fact, we never went out for dinner at all. After a sweaty hour in bed, we ordered room service—steak frites and wine for me, and a chicken breast with rice and vegetables for Dominic.

“I’m officially eating healthy before the tournament,” he explained while we ate our food in bed.

“So you don’t want any of this wine?”

“I actually stopped drinking a month ago. I feel like it’s really good for my body.”

“Selfishly, I want you to have wine with me. But the former tennis player in me understands,” I replied.

“Sorry again for last night. I was afraid you would be upset.”

“I get it. Believe me—I do. That was my life up until last year.”

Dominic scratched his square jawline. “Did you find a nice Frenchman to go out with instead, like you joked about?”

“Actually, I did,” I said slowly. How honest should I be with him? I didn’t like keeping secrets, and there was a big one looming over us right now: my evening with Tristan. Maybe if I told him about part of last night...

Before I could elaborate, Dominic waved a hand. “It’s fine, you don’t have to tell me about it.”

“Really?”

“We both have our own lives,” he explained around a bite of chicken. “We’ve agreed that this isn’t serious because of my schedule. So we don’t need to get all hung up about labels or what each of us does in our own time.”

“We’re not serious right now,” I clarified. “But do you want us to be? In the future?”

He shrugged casually and stirred his veggies with a fork. “Honestly, I don’t know what I want.” His emerald eyes bore into me, warm and open. “But I know you’re an incredible

woman. I love being with you, as infrequent as it has been so far. I could see this turning into something more serious.”

“But not until you’re done sleeping with lots of random women,” I clarified.

Dominic let out a deep laugh. “I actually did go on a date with a woman in March.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

“Nothing came of it. We didn’t really vibe, I guess you could say. I don’t want to elaborate more than that. She’s a tennis player.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Is it Kvitova?”

“I won’t tell.”

“What about Jabeur? Or Vondrousova? Or that Brazilian girl... Haddad Maia?”

“Miranda...”

“Just tell me it’s not Ludmila Samsonova,” I insisted. “Then I’ll stop hounding you.”

“I promise it wasn’t Samsonova,” he said with a chuckle. “I wouldn’t do that to you. Or, at the very least, I would run it by you first.”

“So we’re not serious, but you would still run your date by me?” I asked.

Dominic shrugged. “I know you two are rivals. Or, *were* rivals when you were playing. That complicates things. But it’s not her, so it doesn’t matter.”

His comments did little to reassure me though, because my concern was more about *my* actions lately. Tristan wasn’t really Dominic’s rival, but the two of them had played each other plenty of times. And Gabriel *was* his rival...

“Hey,” I said before I could change my mind. “The guy I went out with last night? It was... Moreau.”

Dominic froze with a piece of chicken halfway to his mouth. He lowered the fork slowly. “*Gabriel* Moreau?”

“He happened to be walking by the restaurant where I was waiting for you. He knew the owner. Then he showed me the Louvre, and invited me out to a dance club or something...”

“You don’t have to tell me all of this,” Dominic said gently.

“He seemed so *nice*,” I explained. “He was normal. Not like his usual arrogant self. But when we got to the club, he spoke to a reporter and went right to being an asshole again. Saying awful things about you. So I left him there.”

Dominic nodded along. “Seriously, you didn’t need to tell me all of that. But I’m glad you ditched him. That guy is a real piece of work.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered. Now for the rest. “I do have a confession to make, though. Since the Australian Open, I *have* had a sexual, err, relationship with someone. It has only happened once...”

“I don’t want to talk about your love life,” Dominic interrupted, leaning his nude form back against the pillows. “I don’t want to think about the past. I’m enjoying the *right now*, here with you, and with the French Open looming. I need to devote all of my emotional energy toward that.”

“Okay,” I said. “I respect that.”

“And with that in mind... in two or three days, I’m going to be focusing entirely on the tournament. If that’s okay.”

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. “Wait. I thought you said you didn’t believe in the Rocky school of thought.”

“The what now? When did I say that?”

“Back in Melbourne,” I replied. “I asked if you were afraid about women weakening legs, and you said you didn’t believe in that. You also said it didn’t matter because Rocky still lost to Apollo Creed.”

“Wow, spoilers,” he said with a grin.

I pointed at him. “That’s exactly what I said! And you told me the statute of limitations has expired because the movie came out forty years ago.”

“I’m starting to remember bits and pieces of the conversation,” he admitted. “But seriously. Are you all right if I can’t make time for you?”

I crawled across the bed, taking care not to knock over the plates of food, and kissed him on the cheek. “I understand better than anyone. Also, I survived the last four months without your dick. I can go right back to surviving without it again.”

He gasped and put a hand on his chest. “You’re implying that my penis isn’t as critical as food, water, and shelter?”

“As wonderful as it is,” I said, trailing a fingernail along his thigh, “it’s pretty low in my hierarchy of needs. Sorry.”

“My ego will never recover from this.”

“Now you sound like Gabriel Moreau.”

He tossed a pillow at me. “Take it back!”

“Never!”

We knocked over the plates as we play-wrestled, but we were too happy to care.





## Miranda

The start of the French Open brought up a lot of memories for me. It was so strange being on the broadcasting team this year, rather than down on the court playing for a championship. In a way, it was more relaxing. There wasn't any pressure.

But in another way, I hated sitting on the metaphorical sideline. Watching other professionals playing tennis gave me an *itch* to go down to the court and pick up a racket. I had known I would get this itch when I retired, but now that it was here? It was hard to ignore.

I was scheduled to broadcast two matches on the first day of the tournament—a women's singles match in the morning, and Gabriel Moreau's match in the afternoon. The first game went smoothly, and helped me get into a groove in the broadcaster's booth.

When I arrived at Court Philippe Chatrier (the primary stadium) I was greeted with a surprise. A massive bouquet of flowers was waiting in my chair in the booth. It was too large for any one person to carry, and was filled with arrangements of red, yellow, and orange.

"You've got a fan," one of the broadcast techies said.

"Those are for me?" I asked.

"Wait until you see *who* they're from."

It took me several seconds to search the flowers for the tag. I chuckled when I read it:

**To:** Miranda Jacobs

**From:** Your cocky, arrogant, asshole French admirer

“That’s Gabriel, right?” the techie asked.

“Maybe,” I replied, though there wasn’t any doubt in my mind. “Help me move these so I can sit down?”

As Gabriel took the court to a bombardment of cheers, I thought about the flowers. A man like him couldn’t act the way he did and then make it all better with a small gift. This was a broadcast booth, not a confessional, and he couldn’t wipe away his sins with a cheeky confession.

Yet despite that, I felt drawn to the man down on the court. He scrambled back and forth, racket flashing with powerful speed, guiding his shots like a surgeon wielding a scalpel. There was something incredibly attractive about a man who knew what he wanted—whether that was on a tennis court, or in life in general.

*I have enough complexities in my life, I reminded myself while adjusting my headset. I’m already juggling Dominic and Tristan.*

While calling Gabriel’s game, I kept an eye on the other scores. Dominic won his first round match in straight sets, which was a relief—even though it wasn’t a surprise. Tristan struggled out of the gate against his unranked opponent, but then turned it around and won the match handily.

After working the broadcast booth for Gabriel’s game, I had a meeting with the NBC production team. Then I went back to my hotel to decide what to do for dinner.

Tristan was waiting outside my hotel room.

“What’s all this?” I asked, gesturing at him. “You’re wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up. Trying to be stealthy?”

“Wouldn’t want anyone catching us together,” he replied, lowering the hood to reveal his grinning face. “I already hate talking to the media. I’ll hate it even more if I have to talk about my love life.”

“Should you even have a love life right now?” I asked while unlocking my room. “You played a match what, two hours ago? And you have another in two days?”

“I don’t see the problem here.”

“I don’t want to be a distraction for you,” I explained.

“You’re a *welcome* distraction,” he replied, following me inside. “It’s keeping my mind off all the stresses in my life.”

“As long as I’m not *too* much of a distraction,” I said.

“I’ll worry about that if it happens.” He took me into his arms. “Besides, I want your help with my two-handed backhand.”

I blinked. “Really?”

He slid both hands down to squeeze my ass cheeks. “Yep. I definitely think two hands is better for me.”

I rolled my eyes, but I was laughing, too. “You’re cheesy.”

Tristan kissed me softly on the neck. “You’re laughing.”

“Because of how *bad* that joke was.”

“You aren’t busy tonight, right?” he asked while kissing lower on my neck. “No plans with that other guy, what’s-his-face?”

“I’m not seeing Dominic all week,” I said. “Because *he* wants to focus on the tournament, which is a very good decision.”

“Good for me. It means I get you all to myself.”

As he continued kissing me, I stopped caring how this would affect Tristan’s game.

\*

The French Open was a flurry of excitement. Broadcasting multiple games per day took up a lot more time than I expected—an hour preparing before each match, several hours of broadcasting the game itself, and then a production meeting immediately after. And that was just for the morning match; I had to turn around and do it again in the afternoon.

Tristan and I continued hooking up after each of his matches. He called me his good luck charm, and insisted he didn't want to jinx things by breaking the tradition he had started after his first match. And, to his credit, it seemed to be working; he was dominant on the court, scrambling for every point, and overpowering opponents with his massive serve.

But he wasn't the only one. Gabriel looked even stronger, cruising to easy victories in the early rounds without losing a single set. He kept sending me bouquets of flowers, each more elaborate and expensive than the last. Dominic struggled against his opponent in the fourth round, but otherwise looked like he deserved to hold the #1 rank in the world.

All in all, my three favorite male tennis players appeared to be on a collision course at Roland Garros.



### Miranda

The day of the semifinals arrived, where Dominic and Tristan were matched up against each other. The winner would play Gabriel, who had already won his semifinal game earlier that day. I was tempted to go down to the locker room and wish them both good luck, but I was afraid to mess with either man's mojo. The last thing I wanted to do was get in their heads. Instead, I settled for text messages, wishing each of them good luck. Dominic didn't reply (he had probably already put his phone away) but Tristan responded within seconds:

**Tristan:** Thanks for the luck. Have a feeling I'll need it against Dommy. Who are you rooting for, by the way?

**Me:** I'm rooting for both of you to play your best.

**Tristan:** That's not a real answer.

**Me:** It's the truth! I'm Switzerland: totally neutral. Not just because of personal reasons. I'm in the broadcast booth for the game, so my professional integrity requires that I don't play favorites.

**Tristan:** What's that? You say you're rooting for me? Aw, I really appreciate that.

**Me:** Believe whatever you want to believe :-)  
Seriously though, good luck! You're playing your best

tennis right now.

**Tristan:** Thanks, love <3

I was putting away my phone when I got another message.

**Gabriel:** Who is texting you?

**Me:** Uh, what do you mean?

**Gabriel:** You have been staring down at your phone. I have been waiting for you to look up for several minutes.

I looked out the window of the booth, which faced the main court. The stands were nearly full for the match that was about to start, but Gabriel Moreau stood out among them all. His seat was down close to the court in the front row, and he was standing and facing directly at me. As soon as we locked eyes, he grinned and began texting again.

**Gabriel:** Hello. Have you enjoyed the gifts I have sent?

**Me:** The flowers are nice, but excessive.

**Gabriel:** When it comes to a woman's love, there is no such thing as excessive.

**Me:** I'm flattered. I really am. But I'm not interested, Gabriel.

**Gabriel:** You say this thing, but I do not believe you. May I take you out to dinner after I win on Sunday?

**Me:** There's that arrogance again. Assuming you'll win on Sunday.

**Gabriel:** I am confident I can beat either of these men. Especially if their match lasts four or five sets. The winner will be too exhausted to defeat me.

**Me:** Is that the way you want to become the world #1 player? Letting these two wear each other out and then beating whoever is left?

Gabriel started to reply, but then a cluster of fans intercepted him by his seat and demanded autographs. While he signed them, Gabriel continued staring up at me with a vulpine smile. I couldn't look away; his gaze transfixed me.

*His confidence is definitely attractive, I thought. If only it didn't come with his arrogance.*

Then a cheer went up in the crowd, growing rapidly, as the two players for the match entered the arena. Dominic strode inside first, nodding politely to the crowd. Tristan was right behind him, grinning and waving to the fans like it was his first time playing professionally. His carefree attitude was totally different than the way he had acted in Melbourne; he really was more like himself these days. I knew better than most that it was easy to get down on yourself when you had nagging injuries holding you back.

“Welcome to Roland Garros,” my broadcast partner said into his microphone, “home of the French Open. It's the men's semifinals today, with a top-tier matchup between the world #1 player Dominic deGrom, challenged by the Australian Tristan Carfrae. With me in the booth is former top-ranked player Miranda Jacobs...”

I put my personal feelings aside as we began to call the match, but it was difficult to hide my emotions. It was true that I wasn't rooting for either of them over the other, but I still wanted to see both men succeed. So when Dominic broke Tristan's serve in the first set, I was simultaneously elated and gutted.

Dominic went on to win that first set, but Tristan rallied in the second to even the score. Dominic was strong in the third, then Tristan won the fourth again.

“The momentum keeps shifting like a yo-yo,” I said as the two players rested before the start of the fifth and final set. “Every time deGrom breaks a serve, Carfrae storms right back to stay in the match. I’m excited to see what these two players have left in the tank for the final set.”

“If there’s anything left in the tank at all,” my broadcast partner said. “We’ve had some long points today, and both players look exhausted. The winner might be the man who can dig deep and find another well of energy.”

Despite the drama of the first four sets, the fifth did not disappoint. Tristan won his own serve, then broke Dominic’s serve immediately. After winning his serve again, he took a decisive 3 - 0 lead.

But Dominic refused to give up. He tracked down every ball, fighting for every single point. He won his serve twice and broke Tristan in the middle to tie it up 3 - 3. After breaking Tristan’s serve a second time, and holding his own serve once again, Dominic found himself up 5 - 3, just a game away from winning the match.

Now it was Tristan’s turn to fight. He scrambled across the court, sliding on the clay surface. On a drop shot that barely made it over the net, he ran forward and dove for the ball. He didn’t get the point, but he was covered in dirt from the play and endeared the crowd to him for the effort. He grinned and gave a little shrug, which made the fans cheer even louder.

Overall, the fifth set took longer than any of the others. But it wasn’t enough, and Dominic defeated Tristan, 6 - 4.

I was a confusing jumble of emotions as I watched the end. I was happy for Dominic of course, but my heart went out to Tristan.

“A satisfying battle from two of the greats,” I said in the booth as they shook hands. “Dominic deGrom advances to the finals where he will face Gabriel Moreau.”



“A rematch of the Australian Open final earlier this year,” my partner said. “But this time on a surface where Moreau has the clear advantage.”

“It will be an exciting match for sure.”

After all of my broadcast work was done, I went down to the tunnels underneath the stadium. Dominic was in the press room, answering questions from the media. I watched him for a bit until Tristan emerged from his locker room.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He gave me a puzzled look. “Why?”

“Well,” I said, “I hate being the one to tell you this, but you lost the match.”

Tristan laughed genuinely. “Clay isn’t my best surface. I’m really happy that I took Dominic to five sets.” He shook his head and glanced at one of the security guards standing in the hallway. “I really thought I had him when I was up three games in the fifth. But your boyfriend shifted into another gear. He deserves it.”

“Don’t say that,” I hissed, looking around. The security guards didn’t seem to have heard. “He’s not my boyfriend, any more than you are. But I’m happy you’re happy.”

“I’m happy just to be healthy,” he said, and I could tell he meant it. “I lost because Dominic was the better player today, not because I was injured. The crowd was rooting for me at the end, too. That felt good. I needed that.” He let out a happy sigh. “I *really* needed that.”

“You’re poised for a deep run at Wimbledon next month,” I said. “You’ve always been strong on grass.”

“I’m not thinking about Wimbledon just yet.” He lowered his voice. “I’m thinking about tonight. Now that I’m eliminated, we can have some fun.”

We were just two professionals chatting. Nobody around us knew what we were saying based off our body language. “We’ve been having plenty of fun throughout the tournament.”

“Yeah,” Tristan said with a glimmer in his eyes. “But now that I’ve lost? I don’t have to hold back anymore. See you tonight, love.”

He winked at me and left me standing there as he went into the press room.



### Dominic

“It’s all right,” I said to Manuel on the phone. “It’s not your fault. These things happen.”

“Yes, but I am feeling quite guilty,” my doubles partner replied. “I thought I would be healthy enough to play with you at Wimbledon, but my knee has not healed the way I expected...”

“Again, it’s not your fault,” I insisted. “This will be good. Maybe I’ll drop doubles entirely and focus on singles. I appreciate you calling to let me know, but it’s all right.”

We chatted for a few more minutes before I hung up. A lot of players didn’t play doubles matches at all. Especially as their careers progressed; most wanted to focus on their singles career. But I preferred to stay sharp. I didn’t play doubles at *every* tournament, but I usually did at Wimbledon and the US Open, my two strongest tournaments. I had won two doubles championships with my partner Manuel, and felt like I had a few more in me before I retired.

But Manuel was still injured. So much for that plan. Hopefully he would be healthy enough when the US Open rolled around.

I laid back in bed, but I couldn’t sleep. My mind was racing now—with the Manuel news, and because of the French Open final tomorrow. After tossing and turning, I texted one of the few people who knew what I was going through.

**Me:** You up?

Her response came ten minutes later.

**Miranda:** Yeah. Sorry, I was in the other room and missed the text. Can't sleep?

**Me:** Nope. I'm wired

**Miranda:** I know the feeling. Have you tried the 4-7-8 technique?

**Me:** I have no idea what that is.

**Miranda:** It's a breathing technique to calm your mind and body. Breathe in your mouth for four seconds. Hold your breath for seven seconds. Then breathe out your nose for eight seconds. Repeat as many times as you need until you're asleep.

**Me:** Does it work?

**Miranda:** Probably not! But it always takes my mind off things, which is just as good.

**Me:** I'll try that. Got any plans once the tournament is over?

**Miranda:** Flying back to New Jersey, actually.

**Me:** What a coincidence. I'm doing the same. I'll be there for 10 days before flying to London for Wimbledon.

**Miranda:** We should get dinner when we're both back.

**Me:** I'd like that. You can help me celebrate my win, or console me after a terrible loss.

**Miranda:** Hopefully the former, not the latter :-)

## **Miranda:** Sweet dreams

I did have sweet dreams, ones with Miranda featured prominently in them. I found myself thinking about her a lot these days. If I didn't have such a grueling tennis schedule, I would have made her my primary focus. A woman like Miranda wasn't someone you could pursue half-heartedly.

*There will be time for that later,* I told myself while eating breakfast the next morning. *For now, I have a match to win.*

I had played in plenty of grand slam finals before, but today felt like it held extra significance. I didn't really understand why. But as I took a cab to the arena and prepared in the locker room, there was a nervous energy in my feet.

When the locker room attendant retrieved me, I followed him out to the court. The crowd cheered when I was announced, and I waved politely... but it was quickly drowned out by the enormous roar for the hometown boy. Gabriel Moreau blew kisses to the crowd and walked to his bench like he was ten feet tall.

In general, I was a well-liked player in the tennis world. I got along with most of my competitors, and the fans seemed to like me. Everywhere I went, most of the crowd was on my side.

But not here. Not today. I was facing Gabriel Moreau in his home city, home tournament, and home surface. Roland Garros was the only one of the grand slam tournaments to be played on soft clay, and Moreau was flawless on the surface. On top of all of that, a lot was on the line. It was a rematch of our Australian Open final, except this time the winner would become the #1 ranked player in the world. The stakes were higher. I knew the crowd would be against me.

I glanced over to Gabriel's bench. He opened his tennis bag and removed a racket, testing the strings against his palm. He put the racket down and took a sip of his sports drink, then stared at the ground in front of him. For a few seconds, he

looked like a normal guy. Quiet, pensive, worried. Like he felt the pressure of the entire city on his shoulders.

Then he got up and the cocky guy I knew took over. He smirked at me like a cat grinning at a mouse.

*I want to wipe that smile off his face.*

We did some quick warm-ups and began the match. Gabriel got to serve first, which I didn't mind. I took my position at the baseline as the crowd noise diminished to complete silence. I glanced up at the broadcaster booth, where I knew Miranda was watching.

Moreau tossed the ball into the air and struck his first serve. It was a blur of a shot right down the center line, and I couldn't get my racket on it.

"Fifteen love, Moreau," the chair umpire announced to a roar from the crowd.

The next serve was in the same spot, but this time I was ready for it. I took a step to my left and crushed a backhanded return to Moreau's weak side, catching him off guard. The best he could do was hit a weak return that barely made it across, but I was already rushing to the net to hit a volley to win the point.

The crowd cheered, though nowhere near as loud as they had for Moreau's ace. I glanced up at the broadcast booth and imagined that Miranda was smiling down at me.

That first set was like a heavyweight boxing match. Every time Moreau punched, I punched harder. I was feeling him out, and could tell he was doing the same to me. Neither of us wanted to crank things up to an intense level, yet. Nobody wanted to make the first mistake.

Somehow, I ended up leading the set 6 - 5. And after a double-fault on Moreau's serve, and two *really* great returns, I managed to break him and win the set, 7 - 5.

There was a nervous buzz in the crowd as we took a short rest before the second set. The crowd was wondering if their favorite player would be defeated at home. *Hopefully I'll make that happen.*

But Moreau came out swinging in the second set. It was like he was holding back in the first, and was *now* playing to his skill level. Every time I made a perfect shot that should have been a winner, Moreau managed to track it down and return it. Meanwhile, the clay surface was giving me trouble; I slipped once while trying to chase down a forehand winner, and my confidence was shaken after that.

Moreau won the second set 6 - 4, and then won the third set by the same score.

By the fourth set, I could tell I was outmatched on this surface. To make matters worse, Moreau was playing the best game of his life; he wasn't making any mistakes. Every serve was perfect, every return flawlessly placed. And then a realization came to me.

*I'm going to lose.*

Being the top tennis player in the world required confidence. An unflappable attitude. But my confidence was shaken, and I knew I couldn't win.

As we played out the fourth set, I could feel my career slipping away. I was going to lose this match, and with it drop down to #2 in the rankings. Moreau would gloat about it in his interviews. Maybe we would meet in Wimbledon next month and I would have a chance to retake my spot.

These thoughts were a distraction, and eventually I found myself defending against match point. I held on for three points, drawing out the tension in the crowd that wanted to go crazy for Moreau. And then it happened. My opponent made a perfect serve to my forehand side, and I barely had enough time to flick my racket out at the ball. Somehow I returned it over the net, but Moreau was already charging the net and volleying, hitting the ball into the vast expanse of court that I couldn't reach quickly enough. Before the point was over, Moreau had dropped to his knees to cover his face with his hands in victory.

I let the roar of the crowd wash over me, like a mudslide destroying everything in its path.

I was numb as I smiled and approached the net. I shook Moreau's hand graciously. That's what you did, unless you were intentionally an asshole like Moreau. He shook my hand back and muttered something complimentary, then turned and preened for the crowd that was going wild.

It was just one loss, but it felt like so much more. I could sense my window of success beginning to close. Had my career peaked? Was I doomed to slide into obsolescence, like so many champions before me? The smile didn't leave my face, but a deep sense of dread filled my chest.

I was still numb during the trophy ceremony. The second place trophy looked like a silver baking sheet. Five years ago, when I came in second place to Rafael Nadal, I was *ecstatic* to receive the trophy. Today, I wanted to hurl it into the crowd.

They handed the microphone to me. I gave a short speech, but didn't remember what I said. I was a zombie as I spoke to the press after the match too, and when I took a shower.

Before I knew it, I was back at my hotel. My coach clapped me on the shoulder, said some words of encouragement, and told me to be ready to fly home that evening. I nodded along and got in the elevator to go up to my room.

But before the door closed, a woman came jogging up and slipped inside with me.

Seeing Miranda instantly lifted my spirits. Neither of us spoke as we took the elevator to the fourth floor, then walked to my hotel room.

"I thought you were flying out this afternoon," I said.

"I changed my flight."

I winced. "You didn't have to do that."

"You have two options," she said, ignoring me. "I can tell you a pertinent anecdote about my career to cheer you up. Or I can give you a massage and help you relax."

"I'll take the massage."

"Pertinent anecdote it is!" she replied.



“No, I said—”

“I first became the number one ranked woman in the world when I was twenty-four,” she explained, sitting on the bed behind me and beginning to massage my shoulders. “I had just won Wimbledon for the second time, which put me ahead of Serena Williams in the rankings. I was on top of the world.”

“I remember that. I had a hamstring injury and had to drop out of Wimbledon. I watched every match of that run. You were dominant that year.”

“I was dominant,” she agreed, fingers digging into the muscles of my shoulder. “And then Serena bounced back and defeated me at the US Open, and I lost in the fourth round of the Australian Open. Just like that, I wasn’t the top player in the world anymore. I remember thinking my career was over. That I might have to retire.

“It took over two years, but I bounced back. I made it to the finals at the French Open, and then won Wimbledon again. Just like that, I was back in the top spot, which I held until I retired.”

“But you were only twenty-four,” I said. “You had so much of your career left.”

“And you’re only thirty,” she replied. “Athletes are playing in this sport longer, especially men. Roger Federer retired at age forty-one. Nadal says he won’t retire until thirty-seven. Andre Agassi played until thirty-six.” Miranda stopped massaging my shoulders and came around to sit next to me on the bed. “You have *so much* of your career left. Especially considering how healthy you are. I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but this isn’t the end. It’s not even close.”

It was the kind of cliché story I expected her to tell, or for someone like my coach to use. Usually, I wasn’t so easily motivated. The passion that was inside of me burned intensely, and mere words couldn’t affect it very much in either direction.

But for some reason, it was exactly what I needed to hear. Miranda had been in this exact situation—or at least so similar

of a situation that it didn't matter. That gave her opinion more weight.

*Maybe it will be the same for me. Maybe I'll retake my number one spot.*

"I lost my doubles partner today, too," I said. "Manuel is out for Wimbledon, and might not be healthy in time for the US Open."

"I'm sorry. That sucks."

"I guess it will allow me to focus on my singles game," I said.

Miranda shook her head and climbed behind me to resume the massage. "You don't need to focus on anything right now. Just relax and let me make you feel better."

"I'm not in the mood for sex," I found myself saying.

Miranda chuckled behind me. "I'm not here to fuck you. I'm just here to be supportive. We're going to order room service and binge-watch *The Office* on TV. Now seriously, shut up and relax."

"It's especially easy to relax while you yell at me," I said, smiling.

"I'm glad you see it my way."

I closed my eyes and tried not to think about my loss.

# 25



## Tristan

I watched the Roland Garros men's final from my hotel in London. I had flown here immediately after my loss to Dominic in the semifinals, and would stay here until Wimbledon began in three weeks. That was much easier than flying home to Australia and then turning around and flying right back. Traveling halfway around the world sucked.

I was interested in the match because it involved two of my biggest competitors. This was basically like scouting my opposition, even though I already knew everything about their styles of play. Even if two no-names were competing in the final, I still would have watched it. I genuinely *loved* tennis, even when I wasn't playing.

But what made this even more exciting was listening to the commentary.

"Dominic deGrom is holding strong after three match points," Miranda Jacobs said on the television. "Is this the start of an incredible comeback, or is he merely delaying the inevitable?"

"I think Moreau ends it right here," her broadcast partner said. "The Frenchman can taste victory. He doesn't want to have to wait until the next game. He wants to win it now, on his serve."

"I'm putting feelers out about playing doubles at Wimbledon," my coach said in the chair next to my bed. He was on his phone, not paying attention to the match on TV. "The odds are against you this late in the season, but we'll see what shakes out."

“And you’re sure it will be good for me?” I asked absently. Miranda was still talking, her voice filling the room. Making it seem brighter.

“You were rusty at Roland Garros,” my coach replied. “Doubles will help you stay sharp.”

“You don’t think it will hurt my singles chances?”

“Sure, it might,” he replied bluntly. “But the point is to be sharp in time for the Australian Open next year. You said that was your top priority, right? Well, this is how you get there.”

On the screen, Moreau rushed to the net and hit a volley that deGrom couldn’t reach. The Frenchman tossed aside his racket and dropped to his knees, exulting in victory as the crowd lost its mind.

I shook my head. I was actually rooting for Dominic in spite of our... personal complications. Sure, he was a rival of mine. Both in tennis, and when it came to Miranda Jacobs. But I would have rooted for Lucifer himself if he was playing against Gabriel Moreau.

It was such a strange situation. Both of us were sort of seeing the same woman—one of the most famous women in our profession. And she was a commentator for his match. Weirdly, I didn’t feel jealous. Or at least, not *that* jealous. Maybe it was because I knew Dominic. He wasn’t some faceless man stealing Miranda’s time away from me. He was, most people agreed, a good guy. Better than if she were dating, say, Gabriel Moreau.

But deep down, I knew I wanted more from Miranda. Long-term, I wanted to date her. To spend more time with her. To call her my girlfriend, and maybe more than that. To have her on my arm while we attended tennis events around the world.

I was terrified to say that to her, though. It might push her away. If I made her choose, she might choose Dominic instead. In the face of such a possibility, I didn’t mind sharing her.

For now.

“Glad that’s over,” coach said, grabbing the remote and turning the TV off. “Time to work on drills.”

Coach had me doing three-a-days in preparation for Wimbledon. That meant waking up and jogging ten miles before breakfast. Then a bombardment of specific tennis drills in the morning. After lunch, I played actual singles matches—usually against him, but sometimes against one of my other practice partners, most of whom were players on the tour themselves.

I liked being busy. It helped keep my mind off Miranda, who I was trying not to bombard with texts. Fortunately, she wasn’t shy about texting me.

**Miranda:** What are you up to on this gorgeous Friday night?

**Me:** Isn’t it like noon in New Jersey?

**Miranda:** Yes, but I leave for London next week and I’m trying to acclimate my brain.

**Miranda:** Are you avoiding the question because you’re going out with a hot tennis player tonight?

**Me:** As a matter of fact, I am. But he’s not really my type. He’s a man.

**Me:** The joke is that it’s my coach. We’re getting a curry in an hour.

**Miranda:** Jokes are always funniest when you have to explain them ;-)

**Me:** What about you? Got any plans with your French Open runner-up boyfriend?

**Miranda:** First of all, ouch.

**Miranda:** Secondly, he left for England two days ago.

**Miranda:** Thirdly, he's not my boyfriend. He's a guy I'm seeing on and off.

**Me:** Like me?

**Miranda:** Like you, yes. But you have a better accent :-)

**Miranda:** You're not jealous, are you?

**Me:** Weirdly, no. I was thinking about it the other day, actually.

**Miranda:** You were thinking about me and Dominic? That sounds a lot like jealousy.

**Me:** I was thinking about how normal it all feels. Maybe it's because he's already my tennis rival. Competing for one woman's affection isn't as high-stakes as competing for a grand slam championship.

**Miranda:** So the trophy at Wimbledon is more important than my love?

**Me:** The trophy at the Australian Open is what I have in mind. But either way, the answer is yes.

**Miranda:** Wow.

**Miranda:** This is going in your file.

**Me:** My file?

**Miranda:** Of course. The files I keep on you and Dominic to decide who I like more.

**Me:** Who's winning?

**Miranda:** That information is confidential.

**Me:** When are you coming to London? I heard you're doing the NBC broadcast with Tim Henman.

**Miranda:** I land next Friday, three days before the tournament begins.

**Miranda:** Any chance you would be available for dinner?

**Me:** I might be able to swing that. But my coach will get jealous.

**Miranda:** I'm sure I look better naked than he does.

**Me:** Ehh. That's debatable. It's also been a very long time (four weeks) since I've seen you naked. My memory is terrible these days.

There was a long stretch where Miranda didn't respond. When she finally did, it was to send a photo of herself in the mirror. She was in her bra and panties, turned sideways to show off her ass. My cock pulsed at the sight of her.

**Miranda:** I hope this settles the debate about whether your coach is hotter than me.

**Me:** You have better knockers, that's for sure. But my coach has an ass that doesn't quit. He does squats every day.

**Miranda:** I'm glad you're joking, otherwise I would be extremely offended right now. I have a GREAT ass!

**Me:** Yes, you do :-D

**Me:** On a more serious topic, I have some bad news. I might be playing doubles at Wimbledon. I'm waiting to hear from my coach.

**Miranda:** That's great! I always regret not playing more doubles. How is that bad news?

**Me:** It's going to take up a lot of my time during the tournament. I'm going to be too exhausted to do anything... sexy.

**Miranda:** Oh.

**Miranda:** Well, that's probably for the best. I don't want to sap your energy.

**Me:** I like it when you sap my energy!

**Miranda:** I'm getting mixed signals here.

**Me:** I want to fool around with you while you're here, but I know I shouldn't. It's better for my career. I'm trying to be more like Miranda Jacobs when she was still playing.

**Miranda:** Ugh, Miranda Jacobs was stuck up. She never had any fun.

**Me:** She has plenty of fun now that she's retired ;-)

**Miranda:** I KNOW! WHICH IS WHY I WANT TO KEEP HAVING FUN WITH YOU!

**Miranda:** But seriously, I get it. We can still hang out. I'll find other activities for us to do together.

**Miranda:** Like sleeping. And napping.

**Miranda:** And laying in bed watching movies.

**Miranda:** Specifically, 1970s sports movies with training montages in them.

**Me:** I'm not watching Rocky.

**Miranda:** Oh come on! It's a classic! It will help motivate you!



**Me:** I've got to go meet my coach for dinner. Chat with you tomorrow?

**Miranda:** Fine. I hope he puts out.

Coach had me doing drills that afternoon. Tennis was all about adjustments. Being in tune with your body, and tweaking lots of little things to be as efficient as possible. Something as small as turning my left foot inward half an inch could lead to huge changes in the way I hit the ball, and my coach was adept at noticing these things and helping me fix them.

I was getting some Gatorade between drills when my coach stepped away to take a call. "Yes, absolutely. Tristan accepts. We'll hook up tomorrow and start training. See you then."

"What was that about?" I asked.

Coach turned and grinned at me. "It was the best news you could have received. I found a doubles partner for you. And the Wimbledon schedule makers accepted the change."

I smiled too... until he told me who it was.



## Miranda

For the past fourteen years, the schedule of my life was dictated by the four big grand slam tournaments. The Australian Open in January; Roland Garros at the end of May; Wimbledon in July; and finally, the US Open at the end of August. The framework of those tournaments dictated my play schedule, and the time between them was spent resting and recovering. Even though I was retired, my job as a broadcaster meant I was still shackled by this schedule.

I didn't mind the big gap earlier in the year between the Australian and French Open. Filming *Survivor* kept me plenty busy. But now that the French Open was over, and I had a month until Wimbledon, I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself.

I reveled in the little things. I stayed up later, and slept in. I drank way too much coffee, hoping it would give me the motivation to find something more productive to do with my time. I sat out by my pool, soaking in the sun while listening to podcasts. But after a few days of this, I started getting bored.

My friends had plenty of suggestions for me. Go on vacation. Hike in the Rockies, or the Alps. Get a dog. One friend even told me to write a book. What kind of a suggestion was that? I didn't even like to read!

Hammy, my agent, said he had lots of gigs for me. Commercials, ad spots, interviews. But I wasn't motivated by any of that. I had earned enough money during my career to live comfortably for the rest of my life. I would continue broadcasting tennis matches, but because I *enjoyed* doing it. It

gave me a connection to the sport rather than making a clean break.

And, of course, it also gave me an excuse to be around Tristan and Dominic.

After several weeks of boredom, I hopped on a flight to London. It was strange flying back to Europe; it felt like I was just here for the French Open. When I was still playing tennis, I would usually go straight from France to England to avoid flying across the Atlantic too many times. That might be a good plan in the future if I continued commentating tennis matches.

I was staying in an Airbnb down in the Wimbledon area, just south of London. It was a cute little stone cottage with a moss-covered roof and lush gardens all over the grounds. It was within walking distance to a market, and I could even bike to Wimbledon if I was so inclined. When it wasn't raining, of course. The sky was a threatening shade of grey as I walked up to the front door.

“Here we are,” Hammy said while unlocking the door. “Our home for the next few weeks.”

I didn't have a chance to appreciate the interior of the cottage, because I was distracted by bouquets of flowers that were spread throughout the living room. Vases full of every color of rose, and dozens of other flowers I didn't recognize. Every surface within sight—the kitchen counter, dining table, couch, coffee table—were covered with them.

“You didn't do this, did you?” I asked. “I don't like flowers.”

Hammy pursed his lips while inspecting the room. “This wasn't me. I would assume they're welcome gifts from the person we're renting from, but I didn't tell them the great Miranda Jacobs was staying here.” He lifted the card on the nearest bouquet. “Oh.”

“Oh what?” I asked.

He handed me the card.

**A room full of flowers cannot compete with your beauty.  
But perhaps they come close.**

**-Gabriel**

I stared around the room. There must have been a thousand dollars—or pounds—worth of flowers. Maybe two thousand. Nobody had ever made such a grand gesture to me before. It was a lot, *too much* even... but it struck a chord in my heart.

*You can't win me over that easily, I thought. Not if you're going to continue acting like a jerk whenever the camera is on you.*

Hammy groaned. "Please do not tell me this is Gabriel Moreau waterboarding you with flowers."

I sighed. "I'm afraid so. He's been persistent since we ran into each other in Melbourne." I pulled out my phone and sent a quick text:

**Me:** Do you think this many flowers is going to work?

"I could spin this into some positive marketing for you," Hammy suggested. "The more your name is in the news, the higher your asking price for commentating gigs and commercials."

"Pass," I replied, moving flowers off the couch so I could sit down. "I don't want that kind of attention."

"I thought so, but figured I would ask." He cleared his throat. "Speaking of that, NBC is happy with your performance as a color commentator. They've started floating the idea of signing you to a long-term contract."

"Define long-term."

"I don't know for certain, but they usually give out three-year contracts. I might be able to talk them into four."

*Four years doing the same thing?* “I’ll think about it.”

Hammy gave a start. “What’s there to think about? You said you loved broadcasting.”

“I do... for now. That doesn’t mean I want to do it for the next four years.”

“What *do* you want to do, then?”

“I don’t know,” I answered curtly. “That’s the point. I want to spend the first year of my retirement figuring that out.”

Hammy moved two bouquets of lilies off the coffee table and sat down on the edge, facing me. “These opportunities are available to you right now because your name still carries a lot of weight in the tennis world. But the longer you wait, the more that name fades away. I know that’s a harsh thing to say, but I’m your agent, and it means telling you the truth. You need to take advantage of these opportunities while you can. A four-year broadcasting contract would help cement your place in the NBC booth.”

“I know. I’m just not ready to make big commitments in my life.” I reached out and patted his knee. “You’re working hard as my advocate, and I appreciate that.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Fine. But as soon as you *do* know what you want, be sure to tell me.”

“You’ll be the first person I call.”

“The network sent over the Wimbledon brackets,” Hammy said, reaching into his bag and handing me a stapled stack of papers. “They’re not public until tomorrow. The matches you’re broadcasting are highlighted in yellow.”

“Why didn’t you give these to me at the airport!” I said, flipping to the first page. “I could have read this during the drive over, instead of listening to the cabby drone on about cricket.”

I checked my broadcast schedule first. A good mix of men’s singles and women’s singles matches. Then I checked the bracket arrangement. Gabriel and Dominic were the top two seeds, at opposite ends of the bracket. Dominic had an easier

route to the final, in my opinion. Tristan was ranked fifth, and had a difficult road ahead of him based on some of his potential matches. Even the early matches in the first three rounds. And Wimbledon was played on grass, which was one of Tristan's weaker surfaces.

Then I turned to the bracket showing Women's Doubles. I wasn't broadcasting any of them, but I still had professional curiosity. Caroline Dolehide and Shuai Zhang were paired together this tournament. That was interesting; one was American and the other was Chinese, and as far as I knew, Shuai didn't speak any English. Of course, Su-Wei Hsieh and Barbora Strycova were the top seed. I would have bet my career winnings on them breezing through to the final without much resistance.

I flipped back a page to the Men's Doubles section. Like a magnet, my eyes were drawn to two names... which happened to be right next to each other.

**T Carfrae, D deGrom**

**vs.**

**D Altmaier, A Karatsev**

“What?” Hammy asked. “You look like you've seen a ghost. A *naked* ghost.”

“Tristan Carfrae and Dominic deGrom are playing doubles together.”

“Oh yeah. I heard about that from Tristan's coach. Why does that surprise you?”

“No reason,” I said. “I'm going to change and think about getting some food.”

I met Tristan at a little cafe that sold sandwiches and tea. He was seated at one of the tables outside, and smiled when he saw me.

“I know those clouds look ominous, but all the tables inside are full. We can move if it starts raining.” He stood, and his smile faded away. “I can tell by the look on your face that you know.”

“You and Dominic are playing doubles together?” I said without hugging him. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I was waiting until it became official from Wimbledon,” he replied as I sat down. He took his seat again, folding his long legs under the table. “They notified us two hours ago that Dominic’s partner switch was approved. That’s when you texted me asking to meet. I figured I would tell you in person.”

“How could you do this?” I hissed. “You and Dominic are... you’re both...” I couldn’t say the words.

“It wasn’t my idea,” he said defensively. “I had to take whoever I could get. What was I supposed to say? Sorry, mate, but I can’t be your partner because we’re shagging the same woman.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are you so upset?” he demanded. “You said we weren’t exclusive. Same for you and Dominic.”

“That doesn’t mean I want you two to get all buddy-buddy.” The waitress arrived, and I ordered a tea. When she was gone, I said, “Do you think we should tell him?”

“Tell him what?” Tristan lowered his voice. “That we’re sleeping together?”

“No, that it’s going to rain tonight,” I said sarcastically.

Tristan gave me an even stare.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m grumpy when I travel overseas. I know this isn’t your fault.”

“I’ve already given this a lot of thought, and I don’t think we should tell him,” Tristan said. “Not yet. We’ve been practicing together the past two days. He’s a good fella. We mesh well together. Telling him now would throw everything out of whack.”

“I get it. But I don’t like keeping secrets.” My tea arrived, and I paused to add sugar and cream.

“You’ve kept it from him this far,” Tristan said carefully.

“Actually, I told Dominic about you already. But I didn’t tell him it was you. I started to, but he told me it doesn’t matter, and that he doesn’t care.”

Tristan nodded. “There you go, then. He doesn’t care.”

“But he would care if he knew it was *you*,” I insisted. “When the tournament is over, I would like to tell him.”

“How about after the US Open?” Tristan suggested. “We’re planning on playing doubles there, too.”

I stared at him.

“Fine,” he said. “We’ll tell Dominic about us after Wimbledon. And I’m sorry for not telling you about our doubles partnership sooner. I really was waiting to see if it would be official. And I wanted to tell you in person.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’ll stop being mad by tomorrow. Or the day after.”

“How about I make it up to you with a quickie in the bathroom?” He jerked a thumb in the direction of the cafe. “It’s small, and everyone will hear us. But that can be fun, too.”

I laughed, and squeezed his hand under the table. “Let’s get dinner together first. I want to hear all about your doubles strategy.”





## Gabriel

With a week until the first round of Wimbledon, I had a light schedule. Cardio in the mornings, followed by a short practice with my coach. My afternoons were completely free. Today, I went to see a *matinée* of the Barbie movie. I did not understand many of the jokes, but Margot Robbie was a pleasure to watch.

She looked nothing like Miranda Jacobs, but I found myself thinking of the former tennis star while I watched the movie. This was not unusual. Miranda was on my mind quite often lately.

*She is more beautiful than Margot Robbie*, I thought as I left the theater with the other patrons. *She is also quite real.*

When I un-silenced my phone, I saw—with delight—that I had a text from the woman. I replied to her while walking back to the tube station.

**Miranda:** Do you think this many flowers is going to work?

**Me:** You are quite right. I do not know what I was thinking. I am sorry for the unforced error.

**Miranda:** Good.

**Me:** Next time, I will send twice as many flowers. And chocolates as well.

**Miranda:** That isn't what I meant.

**Me:** What is it that you meant, my dear Miranda?

**Miranda:** I'm not your dear. And I don't want ANY flowers. My agent spent the entire afternoon getting rid of all of them. It's so wasteful!

**Me:** I would waste a lifetime of flowers if it meant even the smallest chance at gaining your heart.

**Miranda:** You can start by not acting like a huge asshole any time there's a camera pointed at you. Why not act normal? Like the charming man who snuck me into the Louvre?

**Me:** I act the way I do because it is required of me.

**Miranda:** Then you've made your choice. Nothing else you do will make me like you, Gabriel.

I typed and then deleted ten different replies. Nothing felt adequate to explain how I felt. How could she not understand that this was how the world *wanted* me to be? Tennis was a boring sport. The presence of someone like me, who acted arrogant and drew the scorn of millions of fans, was a great asset to the game. Everything I had—my fame, my endorsements, my on-court success—was due to the carefully-crafted persona that my agent and I had created.

Today was my mother's birthday, so I called her. It went to voicemail after three rings. A few seconds later, I received a text from her in French.

**Mère:** I am out with friends and cannot answer the phone. May I call you back tomorrow?

**Me:** That is fine. I was only wishing you a happy birthday.

**Mère:** Thank you.

My good mood was soured, so I retrieved my tennis bag and went to the practice facility. I used a ball machine to hit shots to my forehand side, and smashed my returns as hard as I could. After an hour of this, my elbow was sore, but I was in no better mood than before.

For the last decade, my path had been clear: make a name for myself in the sport of tennis, whatever the cost. All of my work had finally paid off this year. I was the top male player in the world. I would be on the cover of Sports Illustrated next month. All of this was due to my cocky persona. My agent told me to fake it until I made it, so to speak, and I had finally made it!

But when I re-read Miranda's messages, I wondered if I had made the right choice after all.

There was a phrase I had heard in many American romantic comedies: *the one who got away*.

Miranda Jacobs was the one who had gotten away from me. And I was determined not to let it happen again.

No matter what it cost me.



## Miranda

“Dimitrova is one point away from breaking her opponent’s serve for the third game in a row,” I said into my booth headset, speaking at a whisper as the stadium fell silent. “If she succeeds here, I don’t see how Weng can possibly come back.”

It was the third day of Wimbledon, and the match I was commentating was an exciting upset of one of the top seeds. But I kept glancing up at the array of televisions in the booth, which showed every single match currently in progress. Tristan and Dominic were on one of those screens, sharing a fist-bump as they switched sides between games. They had already won the first set of their match, and were winning the second set 4 - 1.

“And there it is!” said Tim Henman, the former tennis player who was now my broadcast partner. “Dimitrova takes a commanding lead in the second set.”

“Her backhand looks unstoppable,” I said. “If she can keep up this accuracy with it, I see her giving the top seeds a lot of headache.”

The voice of my producer suddenly manifested in my headset. “She won that point on a forehand winner. Not a backhand.”

I winced; I had been looking at the doubles match when the point happened. I pressed the button to switch to the private channel with my producer. “Sorry, I know. I meant in general, not for that specific point.”

“That’s fine, but we don’t want to confuse the viewers.”

“Of course,” I replied, switching back to the broadcast channel. We were on a commercial break while Demotrova and Weng switched sides, so I let my gaze drift up to the doubles match on the TV above me.

I didn’t like keeping secrets. When I was a little girl in school, I struggled to make friends because I didn’t like to gossip. If another girl told me a secret, it would eat me up inside until I eventually blurted it out. Any therapist who spent more than five minutes talking to me would immediately identify that as a coping mechanism formed when my parents got divorced when I was six, but I thought it was a good policy to have in general. Lies and secrets were bad. Honesty was always a better, if sometimes uncomfortable, policy.

But Tristan and Dominic were playing extremely well as doubles partners. Their first game two days ago was a little rusty, but since then they had fallen into a groove together. The biggest thing working in their favor was that their play styles meshed well. Tristan had an explosive serve, which was complemented by Dominic’s dominant volley skills at the net. The more they played together, the more unstoppable they seemed.

*We’ll tell Dominic after Wimbledon is over, I reminded myself. That’s the best plan. Nobody wants to be distracted in the middle of a tournament.*

Meanwhile, Gabriel Moreau was relentless—both on *and* off the court. I had to commentate his fourth round match against an aging Rafael Nadal, and the Frenchman was at the top of his game. Nadal was a famous scrambler, chasing down shots that most players couldn’t reach and drawing out points. Gabriel scrambled right with him, causing some extremely long points that had the crowd roaring after each one. When the players switched sides every other game, Gabriel glanced up at my booth and smiled.

“What’s that about?” my broadcast partner Tim Henman asked, muting his microphone.

“Moreau asked me out,” I revealed. “He’s been sending me flowers.”

Henman closed his eyes and chuckled. “Good luck dealing with that. I don’t think he’s going to stop.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Does he have a reputation for pursuing women like that?”

“No, but he has a reputation for never giving up—in *anything*. I’ve covered him for a decade, and I don’t think he’s going to stop unless you agree to go out with him. Or if you kill him.”

“That second option is starting to sound appealing,” I said, which made him laugh. I unmuted my microphone and said, “We’re back on Centre Court, where Moreau is up two breaks against a struggling Nadal...”

Off the court, Gabriel was every bit as persistent.

**Gabriel:** Did you see my match today?

**Me:** You know I did. I was in the booth.

**Gabriel:** I was thinking of you after every ace I hit. Your smile. The way you roll your eyes when someone compliments you.

**Me:** You hit 20 aces today. I would advise you to spend more time thinking about tennis, and less about me.

**Gabriel:** Nadal is one of the greats, and I defeated him in straight sets. I believe my strategy is working quite well.

**Gabriel:** Let me take you on a proper date when Wimbledon is over.

**Me:** A colleague told me you were relentless today. I guess he’s right.

**Gabriel:** Ah! So you were talking about me, no?

**Me:** We were commentating your match on NBC Sports. Yes, we were talking about you.

**Gabriel:** Let me make a proposition to you. If I win Wimbledon without losing a single set, you have to go out with me.

**Me:** Bragging that you won't lose a single set the rest of the tournament? You haven't been listening to me at all. I don't like this side of you.

**Gabriel:** Allow me to make a clarification. I do not believe I can complete Wimbledon without losing a set. Especially if I must play Dominic deGrom again, who is the best grass player in the world.

**Me:** Then why make that wager with me?

**Gabriel:** Because I wish to leave it up to fate. And perhaps to give myself some extra motivation.

**Me:** I would think winning Wimbledon would be motivation enough for a professional tennis player.

**Gabriel:** Such is a measure of your effect on my heart, Miranda.

I didn't respond, but I doubted he could finish Wimbledon without losing a set. Grass was his weakest playing surface, and he had already almost lost several sets in his first few rounds.

I was commentating a women's singles match when I heard my producer talking with someone else behind me. We were in a commercial break, so I removed my headset and turned around. "Did you just say something about Tristan Carfrae?"

My producer pointed to the array of TV screens above me. "He just lost in straight sets to Juncheng."



## Miranda

*Tristan lost? Oh no!*

“I whirled back around to the TV in the booth and winced. Tristan was shaking hands with his opponent, an unranked Chinese player who was only 18 years old. The camera zoomed in on his face as he packed away his tennis rackets, slung his bag over a shoulder, and waved goodbye to the crowd.

“Shame,” Tim Henman said next to me. “He looked strong before today.”

I invited Tristan over to my cottage that evening. I gave him a long, passionate kiss as soon as I opened the door. “I’m sharing this place with Hammy, but he’s out to dinner with a young player he’s trying to sign.”

“It’s not Juncheng, is it?” Tristan asked.

I grimaced while closing the door. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

We hugged, and I could feel him leaning on me for support. Losing was always difficult, especially when it was an upset to an unranked player. I knew *exactly* what Tristan was going through right now. And it was worse for him since he was trying to bounce back from an injury. But when we pulled apart, he was smiling.

“Honestly, I’m not upset about the loss,” he explained. “I played well today. Juncheng is a rising star, and he had my number. I hope he can give Moreau a proper fight.”



“I’m glad you have a good attitude about it. I was always in a *terrible* mood after a loss.”

Tristan shrugged it off. “It helps that I still have doubles to look forward to. I’m not going home just yet.”

“I know!” I said excitedly. “You guys are playing in the finals tomorrow afternoon! I wish I could watch it, but I’m assigned to the women’s semifinals match.”

“There will be less pressure if I know you’re not watching,” he said. “I’m sure Dominic feels the same way.”

“Still, I’m sorry you lost,” I said, guiding him over to the couch. “And I know just the way to make you feel better.”

“You’re not going to make me watch Rocky, are you?” he asked. “Because I don’t need any motivation before my doubles final tomorrow.”

“I was thinking of something more... personal.” I went to my knees before him and unzipped his jeans. “Just relax.”

Tristan had long legs, and I felt them tense as I took his cock out and began stroking it. But then all the tension went out of him as I wrapped my lips around his tip and began sucking him off.

“I honestly wasn’t expecting this when I came over,” he said in one long exhale. “I thought you wouldn’t want me to get worn out before tomorrow’s final.”

“You’re not getting worn out,” I said, taking my mouth off his hard length so I could answer. “You’re relaxing on the couch while I do all the work. Now shut up and *relax*.”

“It’s hard to relax when you’re yelling at—ohh.” He trailed off with a moan.

I liked giving blowjobs. More specifically, I liked doing whatever turned a guy on. Feeling them squirm and groan as I worked made me feel *powerful*, in the same way that hitting a perfect ace did. And although I didn’t consider myself an *expert* at sex, I was no slouch. I was confident in my skills. Yet I had been giving Tristan a blowjob for only a minute or two

when I felt his powerful thigh muscles tense again, and his breathing quickened.

“Miranda,” he practically cursed. “I’m close. I’m going to come...”

It was music to my ears, and I kept my lips wrapped tightly around his crown while stroking him faster. When he realized I wasn’t going to pull away, he laced his fingers into my hair and squeezed them into a fist, holding me on his cock as he exploded. I moaned and savored every spurt of his salty seed, his hard length pulsing like a heartbeat with every rope.

“Christ,” Tristan said, his accent more pronounced in my ears than normal. “You’re incredible.”

“I’m surprised I got you off that quickly,” I said, running my fingernails over his thighs. “Not to doubt my own skills or anything, but that was what? A minute?”

With his hand still in my hair, he pulled me up into a long kiss. “At the risk of denigrating your skills...”

“Careful what you say next,” I warned.

“...it probably has a lot to do with the fact that I haven’t come since before the tournament.”

“Ah hah!” I said. “So you *do* believe in abstaining from sex during tournaments, despite our previous fun at the French Open.”

“I believe in no such thing,” he said, casually tucking his dick back into his jeans and then resting an arm across the back of the couch. “Usually, I have no qualms about giving myself a proper wank every day or two. But I’ve been too tired this year. Most nights I go back to my hotel room, get a sports massage, and then pass out.”

“Understandable.” I glanced at my watch. “Speaking of passing out, I’d understand if you want to go do that. But if not, we could relax on the couch and watch a movie or something.” He started to open his mouth to protest, so I quickly added, “*Not* Rocky. Unless you really want to.”

“I’m not ready to go to bed just yet.”

I reached for the remote. “Okay! Let’s see what streaming services they have connected. I know I saw Netflix...”

Tristan took the remote from me and tossed it aside. “I had another idea.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he was rising off the couch and lifting me into the air with easy strength. “What are you doing!”

“Taking you into the bedroom, in case your agent gets home.”

“There’s no television in there.”

“That is wholly unrelated to what I plan on doing for the next twenty minutes.”

I squirmed in his arms, but it was like fighting a giant. A *strong* giant. “The point of me giving you a blowjob was to avoid wearing you out!”

“I appreciate the thought,” he replied, “but I consider myself a gentleman. And I won’t be able to sleep tonight until you’ve had seven or eight orgasms.”

“Seven or eight! Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

He deposited me onto the bed and smiled down at me. “Then let’s start with one.”

I sighed as Tristan bent down to kiss my neck, his lips moving along my collarbone and down to my chest. I sat up so he could peel my shirt over my head, and his fingers slipped around to my back and deftly unclasped my bra. The air was cool on my bare breasts, but only until Tristan nuzzled his face into them, kissing and licking his way around my nipple. I gasped as lightning bolts of pleasure shot from his tongue, spreading through my torso as he sucked and swirled around my right nipple, then across to my left. He sank between my legs, grinding up and down against my crotch in a way that promised *more*.

His kisses ventured lower. Fingers moved along my waist and unbuttoned my jeans, and then they were sliding down

over my legs along with my panties. Bare and vulnerable, I spread my legs for my tall Australian tennis pro.

Tristan took a moment to gaze at my sex, taking in the sight of it. I hadn't expected to have sex since the tournament began; it had been close to two weeks since I had shaved. Was he surprised? Was he expecting something else? A million questions ran through my head in that vulnerable moment, the way they always did with a lover...

Tristan dove his face into my pussy, kissing my lips tenderly. "You taste amazing," he moaned into me, his voice vibrating through my pelvis and into my clit. I groaned, and all self-doubt disappeared as he went down on me. He ate me out with focused attention, beginning with my outer lips and then moving inward. One finger slid into my drenched slit, then two, and he twisted them back and forth while his tongue circled my clit expertly.

Soon I was coming against his face like there was no tomorrow. My cries of pleasure filled the little Wimbledon cottage as I arched my back and held his head against my sopping entrance, my fingers digging into his scalp. As he finished, I could feel his lips curl into a smile against my sex.

"Those are the sounds I like to hear," he purred. "You make even more noise than you do on the court."

I panted. "I don't make noise while playing tennis!"

"You grunt a *little*," he replied, kissing my bare belly.

I sat up in bed. "I'm not Maria Sharapova. I don't scream like a banshee."

"I didn't say that."

"You implied it."

"I did not."

"I've always tried to sound graceful on the court," I insisted.

Tristan leaned on one elbow and smiled up at me. "You're graceful. Quite ladylike, I might say."

"Next time lead with that," I said, pulling him up into a kiss.

“I’m an expert at tennis, not romance,” he whispered, his face so close to mine that our noses brushed together.

I bit my lip. “I can think of a few more things you’re an expert in. Even if I didn’t come as quickly as you did.”

He let out an offended gasp. “I’m pleased with how quickly I got you off!”

“You should be!” I smiled sweetly. “Even if it wasn’t as fast as I got *you* off.”

“You know I like a challenge, right?” he said, planting his fists on either side of me and covering me with his body. His scent overwhelmed me, masculine and sweet.

“If I were you, I would conserve my energy for tomorrow’s doubles match,” I said between kisses. “If you lose, I don’t want to be the reason. Or the excuse.”

“Only losers make excuses. And Dominic and I intend to win tomorrow.”

He kissed me again, but the mention of my other tennis lover caught me off guard. After a few seconds, Tristan sensed my mood and pulled back to look at me.

“Was that weird? Mentioning him?”

“It’s not weird for me. I’m just surprised hearing *you* bring him up while you and I are together.”

He shrugged. “I told you the truth. I’m not jealous. As long as you don’t dump me for him.” He quickly held up a palm. “I know we’re not technically *together*, so there’s nothing to dump.”

“I know what you meant.” I cupped his cheek in my hand. His skin was bristly from a day of beard growth. “I’m glad you’re not insecure about it.”

Tristan grinned. “I’ll show you just how secure I am about it all.”

I squealed as he dove into me again.



## Miranda

The Men's Semifinals were the next day; Dominic was matched up against a Serbian in the morning, and then Gabriel was playing Juncheng in the afternoon. I was assigned to the broadcasting team for both matches—which meant I would miss the Men's Doubles Final that afternoon.

It would be a long day for Dominic, playing singles in the morning and then doubles after lunch. Usually the schedule makers tried to avoid a situation like that, but two days of rain earlier in the week meant the schedule was crunched up.

After grabbing a breakfast of strawberries and cream—a Wimbledon favorite—I headed to the broadcast booth on Centre Court, signing a few autographs and taking several selfies with fans on the way there. It was a warm, cloudless day, as good as one could hope for in England.

I was in a *fantastic* mood. Since retiring, I had felt like a ship without a rudder, drifting along in random currents. I never thought I would want to be a broadcaster, but calling games for NBC was the perfect way to segue into retirement. A way to ween myself off the drug of professional tennis, rather than quitting cold turkey. Not to mention things seemed to be going well with both of my boyfriends.

*Boyfriends.* Was that what they were? No matter what we said about keeping things casual, I realized I was developing feelings for both Dominic and Tristan. When I thought of either of them, my heart soared. How was that possible? Wasn't a woman supposed to fall in love with just one man?

*Falling in love.* I shook off the thought. That was going too far. I just liked both of them, a lot.

But deep down, I wondered if I was only lying to myself.

Despite the internal confusion this caused, it didn't dampen my mood one bit. I practically skipped through the tunnels at Centre Court and up into the booth, where the rest of the broadcast team was already waiting.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, shedding my coat and purse. "I started signing autographs on the way here, and more and more people came up to take selfies. I didn't want to tell them no!"

"I know the feeling," Tim Henman said with a forced smile.

"Doesn't matter—you're right on time," our producer said quickly. "We're live in three minutes, and I'm assuming you read all the prep-work we sent over?"

"Front to back, twice," I replied.

Henman cleared his throat. "Miranda. There's something you should know."

"Oh, fuck off," our producer said. "We don't have time for this."

"She deserves to know," Henman insisted.

"Know what?" I asked. Was it something to do with Gabriel? Had he taken things a step too far in his pursuit of me? I didn't know what that might entail, but my imagination conjured up images of extravagant gifts like lingerie.

Our producer threw up his hands and walked away. I turned to Henman and waited for him to explain.

"The Daily Mail called us this morning," he said. "Did they call you?"

"They've called me a thousand times since I went pro," I replied. "My agent fields all of their BS tabloid nonsense. Why?"

He pulled out his phone, swiped a few times, then handed it to me. "This story broke ten minutes ago."

It was an article from the *Daily Mail* with the headline, *Reality Star Relishes Ravishing Racquet Relationship*. Below the headline were photos of Tristan and me together: the first one was at the cafe where we had gotten tea together, showing us holding hands under the table. The second photo was at the cottage where I was staying, showing Tristan and I kissing in the doorway.

I barely skimmed the article. I didn't need to read it.

"Oh."

"This story is going to spread fast," Henman said, shooting a glare over at our producer in the corner of the booth. "You deserve to have a heads-up."

"Thanks." Before I could say more, Dominic and his opponent came walking out of the tunnel down at court level, evoking a cheer from the crowd. We grabbed our headsets and quickly prepared for the match.

*I wonder if Dominic knows*, I thought while going through the pre-match information. I squinted down at the court, analyzing his movements. The way he sat on the bench, unzipping his bulky tennis bag and choosing a racket. He didn't wave to the crowd or smile like normal—he frowned, staring down at his feet, avoiding looking at anybody. And I was certain it had nothing to do with the pressure of the looming match. My heart sank.

*Yeah. He knows.*





## Tristan

I was sitting up in the nosebleed seats at Centre Court, my feet stretched out onto the seat in front of me and a hat pulled low over my eyes to shield the warm sun. I liked sitting up here because I could blend in a little more. Enjoy taking in a match without being bombarded with selfies and autograph requests. Dominic, my doubles partner, was serving to begin the match. The sound of racket meeting ball echoed through the stadium, but the first serve sailed long. His second serve was more accurate, and his opponent—Juncheng, the Chinese player I had lost to—wasn't able to return it.

“Fifteen love,” the chair umpire announced to a smattering of claps.

I had several reasons for being interested in the match. The first one was selfish: I was hoping Dominic would win in straight sets, finishing early and preserving his energy for our doubles final in the afternoon. But more than that, I genuinely wanted to see Dominic win. The two of us had always been polite opponents over the years, but we had grown closer in the two weeks playing doubles together. I wouldn't say we were best mates... but we were quickly becoming friends. When he won the first point of the match, I had to stop myself from pumping my fist and shouting encouragement down at him.

*We could play the US Open together, too, I thought. If his other doubles partner isn't healed by then.*

My phone buzzed with a text message. It was from my coach.

**Coach:** I don't care how you spend your free time, but I do care that you warn me about things that affect your game. This news is going to make things complicated.

**Me:** What are you talking about?

He responded with a link to a *Daily Mail* article. An article about me and Miranda, with photos backing it up.

"Fucking hell," I cursed.

A little boy sitting two seats over whipped his head over to me, then whispered to his mom, "He said a naughty word."

"Yes, he did," she replied, glaring at me.

I held up a hand in apology, then skimmed the article on my phone. How long had the paparazzi been watching us? Long enough, it seemed. I had never had any of my other relationships posted in the tabloids, though.

*My other relationships weren't this noteworthy.*

Suddenly aware that I was out in public surrounded by thousands of tennis-aware fans, I pulled my cap down lower. Did anyone recognize me? As I gazed around, I saw lots of people looking at their phones. I wondered how many people were reading the article.

Down on the court, Dominic made another serve—once again, he hit it long. Then, on his second serve, he missed again. "Double fault. Fifteen all," the chair umpire announced. I frowned. Usually, Dominic hit his second serve slower and with a lot more topspin, but he had crushed that one.

I didn't realize what was up until the next point, when Dominic smashed several hard forehand shots in a row. It was like he was hitting the ball as hard as he could to work off some energy.

*He must have read the article before the match.*

No longer interested in the match, I got up and left the stadium when the players switched sides after the first game. I tried to appear like I was any other casual fan walking around the Wimbledon grounds, but this became impossible as I approached the player's section. A cluster of reporters were standing by the gate, waiting for something.

Waiting for *me*.

As soon as I drew near, they turned and began bombarding me with questions. Asking about Miranda, how long we had been together, if it was serious. One reporter asked if it was a conflict of interest for Miranda to commentate games that I was playing in. I ignored them, flashed my player badge, and hurried inside. Then I found a secluded chair near a television and texted Miranda.

**Me:** I don't know how they found out, but it wasn't me. I didn't tell them anything, I swear.

**Miranda:** I know you didn't. The paparazzi are just ruthless. UGH, this is a nightmare.

**Me:** At least they don't know that you and Dominic are sort of seeing each other, too. Then things would get really complicated.

**Miranda:** True. I think Dominic knows, though. He's playing stiff.

**Me:** I agree. Someone must have sent him the article before the match.

**Miranda:** Sorry I'm taking so long to respond between texts. I'm still technically calling this match on NBC.

**Me:** Don't apologize. Are you okay? How are you dealing with your love life being broadcast to the world?

**Miranda:** Fine, I guess? We'll see when I leave this booth later.

**Miranda:** Try to focus on your doubles match.

**Me:** I'll try. Easier said than done. Good luck focusing on the broadcast.

**Me:** Also easier said than done!

As I watched Dominic struggle on TV, I thought about the complications of the whole situation. He now knew that Miranda and I had been seeing each other, but he didn't know that I knew *he* was also seeing her. How would I handle that can of worms? This was a disaster—the worst possible way this could have come out. Especially since Miranda and I had planned on telling him everything once Wimbledon was over.

The match went as poorly as I feared: Dominic lost in straight sets, 2 - 6, 4 - 6, 5 - 7. By the end I could barely watch. We still had three hours until our doubles match, so I changed into my tennis gear and met my coach at the private indoor practice court. Coach and I worked on some drills for an hour, then I showered, changed a second time, received a sports massage, and then went to the locker room beneath Centre Court for the doubles final. To my surprise, Dominic was already seated on a bench inside, bent down to tie his shoes. I froze in the doorway, searching for the right thing to say.

"Miranda texted me after my match," he said, not looking in my direction. "She came clean about everything. I know you know about me and her."

"Oh," I said, clearing my throat. "Listen, Dominic..."

"I don't want to talk about it," he interrupted. "Not right now. I just want to focus on tennis. Today is a challenging enough day for me without adding personal drama to the mix."

"Right," I said. "Okay."

He finally finished tying his shoes and looked up at me with cold eyes. “Are you going to be able to focus on the match?”

“I wouldn’t have gotten to this level if I wasn’t able to tune out all the other noise,” I replied curtly.

Dominic nodded, then put on a pair of headphones and turned to face the other direction.

Half an hour later, we were leaving the locker room and walking out onto Centre Court. Doubles wasn’t as popular as singles, but the crowd still roared when we appeared. When the cheers died down, an excited buzz still filled the stadium. It probably had to do with all the drama surrounding me today.

*Tune it out. None of that matters right now. All I should think about are my two opponents.*

We came out strong, winning my serve and then immediately breaking our opponents to go up 2 - 0. On Dominic’s serve, I went up to the net to prepare to volley. His first serve hissed past my ear, so close I thought I could feel loose strands of felt brush against my skin. The ball was out, though, so he prepared to serve again.

I heard his racket connect with the ball, and about a millisecond later I felt a sharp pain in my lower back. I winced and whirled around; Dominic had hit me with his serve. He raised a hand in apology, then switched sides for the next serve.

“Love fifteen,” the chair umpire called.

*Just an accident, I told myself. He wouldn’t hit me and lose the point on purpose.*

We lost Dominic’s serve, and lost the game after that. Eventually we reached a 6 - 6 tie, forcing us to play a 10-point tiebreaker—which we lost. Miranda was right: Dominic looked stiff, and I didn’t think it had anything to do with the fact that he had already played three sets this morning.

Somehow, we managed to crawl back and win the second set. We were winning 3 - 2 in the final set, but then disaster struck. I was running to my left to chase down a backhand shot. Both of our opponents were at the net, so I had a narrow

window of space down the line to hit the ball. And I had to *crush* it. Time seemed to slow down as I reached back for some extra energy, uncoiling my body like a spring and smashing the ball in the perfect spot and winning the point.

But I didn't see where the ball ended up, because it suddenly felt like a sharp knife had stabbed into my side.



### Tristan

An intense—and familiar—sensation ripped through my abdomen. It was as if a taut rubber band had snapped within me, leaving me momentarily breathless and stunned. I immediately cried out, clutching my side as the intensity of the pain washed over me in waves. Each attempt to move only seemed to exacerbate the discomfort, making it clear that something was seriously amiss.

The crowd noise fell to a hush.

Fear and frustration gripped me as I realized that I might have re-torn my oblique muscle. The pain was sharp and persistent, throbbing with each heartbeat as I tried to process what had just happened. Simple actions like twisting or bending became nearly impossible tasks, and even taking a deep breath felt like a calculated risk. My body, once a well-tuned machine, now felt like an intricate puzzle with a critical piece missing.

Dominic was at my side in an instant, putting a tender arm around my shoulder and leading me to the sideline. A trainer came jogging out to meet me with a bag of medical supplies just as I collapsed to the grass, rolling over onto my back until all I saw was blue sky.

“My oblique,” I said through gritted teeth. “Same one I’ve injured before. Fuck, I’m in heaps of pain.”

“What’s all this, then?” the chair umpire asked. He was suddenly standing over me with the others.

“Oblique injury,” Dominic answered for me.

“Can he go on?”

Dominic looked down at me.

“Only need a medical time-out,” I replied. “Then I’ll be right as rain.”

“Three minutes,” the umpire said, examining his watch. “Any longer and I’ll have to penalize you a point.”

“We know the rules, thanks,” Dominic replied.

“Piss off,” I muttered as soon as the umpire was out of earshot.

The trainer applied some kinesiology tape to help isolate and support the oblique injury, then sprayed my entire side down with a medical spray. A freezing sensation oozed through my skin, and within seconds the pain was replaced with numbness. Dominic helped me to my feet, and I twisted my torso to the left and right, testing how it felt.

“Can you play?” Dominic asked.

“I don’t have as much motion to my left,” I whispered. “Right side is okay.”

A dark expression fell over my partner’s face. “Probably didn’t get enough rest last night, huh?”

It took me a few seconds to realize what he meant. *I was with Miranda last night. The photos prove it.*

“Just cover more of the court so I can use my forehand,” I snapped.

“Whatever you say.” Dominic turned away, flashed a thumbs-up to the chair umpire, and retook the court.

The fans applauded as I followed him over to the baseline. It was my turn to receive our opponents’ serve. The pain was still there, but buried under the numbing spray. It made me feel stiff.

*I can do this, I told myself. Doubles means my partner can help cover my injured side.*



But the rest of the match didn't go the way I hoped. We lost the third set, 4 - 6. In fact, we were lucky to win even one more game after my injury.

In another context, I would have been ecstatic to get second place in doubles. Trophies were hard to come by, and I was thrilled to receive another piece of hardware. But I knew we could have won if not for my injury, so the only taste in my mouth was failure.

Dominic and I didn't say anything to each other as we walked back to the locker room. Only when the door was closed, and we were alone, did I finally open my mouth. "Thanks for covering my weak side," I said sarcastically.

"I covered plenty. It's not my fault they saw your weakness and exploited it."

"You barely shifted your position!" I argued, tossing down my bag. The numbing agent had worn off and the injury in my side throbbed with pain. "We still had a chance if we played like a team."

"Team," Dominic said, as if the word was a curse. "We're a sorry excuse for a team."

I laughed bitterly. "I knew you were jealous about Miranda."

"Jealous?" He rounded on me, fury painted on his face. "I'm not jealous. I'm mad Miranda didn't tell me that the other man she was involved with was *you*, one of my competitors. Fuck, I'm mad you didn't tell me yourself!"

"We were going to," I said. "After the tournament."

"That plan worked out great. It really did." Dominic turned, fingers rolling into a fist, and for a moment I thought he might punch one of the lockers. Then he relaxed his hand. "I trusted you, Tristan."

"Mate..."

"Doubles partners are supposed to be able to trust each other. Manuel and I, we're close friends. We tell each other *everything*. I expected the same from you. I guess I was a fool to think so."

“How could I have told you?” I argued. “You would have reacted exactly like this.”

Dominic shook his head. “You don’t know that. And you never will, because you didn’t try. Are you and Miranda serious?”

The change of topic caught me off guard. “I don’t know what we are.”

“What do you *want* it to be?”

I hesitated before answering. “I don’t know. It’s complicated, mate.”

Dominic stared at me for several heartbeats, then pointed at my chest. “I know exactly what you want it to be. I can see it in your eyes. I recognize it because it’s the exact same thing I want from her.”

I clenched my jaw. He didn’t know what I wanted. He didn’t know anything about me. We had only been doubles partners for two weeks.

“And what about you?” I demanded, going on the offensive. “You were seeing Miranda all this time too, and you never brought it up.”

“That’s different.”

“Don’t think it is.”

“You knew about Miranda and me,” Dominic said. “I had no idea you and Miranda were fooling around. If I did, I would have told you about us.” He took a step forward, eyes full of fire. “I wouldn’t have hid it from you.”

“I don’t believe you,” I replied.

“Believe whatever you want. I don’t care.” He shoved his clothes into his tennis bag and slammed the locker. “See you in Queens next month.”

“What about the media room?” I asked. “We’re required to answer questions...”

“Fuck the media,” Dominic said, leaving the room without even showering.



## Miranda

My producer sent me home at lunch.

“I’m not blaming you for the story breaking,” he explained. “You didn’t do anything wrong. But you were distracted in the deGrom-Juncheng match, and it made you sloppy. We’re bringing in Erica to cover for you in the afternoon match.”

I wanted to argue, but I knew he was right. I exited out of the stadium through the loading dock and took a car back to my cottage so I wouldn’t have to deal with any reporters hounding me about my love life.

I turned on the TV and watched the Men’s Doubles final. It was obvious that things were strained between Dominic and Tristan; not only did the American hit his partner with a serve—accidentally or not—but the two of them rarely spoke during the match. Things got worse when Tristan re-injured his oblique muscle. After that, their opponents tore them apart.

Part of me didn’t want to watch the post-game ceremonies on the court, but I couldn’t bring myself to turn off the TV. The winners were making speeches in front of the crowd when the door to my cottage opened and Hammy strode inside.

“I’ve had a hell of a day,” he said.

“*You* have?” I asked.

“Because of your drama,” he clarified. “I spent an hour convincing an NBC executive that it’s not a conflict of interest for a broadcaster to be in a relationship with a player.” He sat down on the couch next to me. “You didn’t have sex right here, did you?”

“Well...”

He groaned and moved to the nearby chair. “This is an Airbnb, not a hotel! Some old British woman who survived the Blitz is going to drink tea while sitting on that couch.”

“Technically, we didn’t have *sex* right there,” I clarified.

Hammy waved a hand. “Don’t want to know, don’t need to know.”

“Are you mad at me?”

He gave a start. “What? Of course not. You’re an adult; you’re free to do whatever you want. And all the people judging you for it can go to hell.”

I felt myself relax. “Thanks, Hammy.”

“Having said that... the network has some requests. They want you to make a statement about the relationship.”

“A statement? Tell them no.”

Flashing a smile, he said, “I already told them no, because I knew that would be your answer.” The smile twisted into a grimace. “But they insisted. And they implied that your professional relationship with the network might be damaged if you *don’t* make a statement. You don’t have to decide right now. Think it over.”

I groaned. I didn’t want to talk about my personal life. I wanted to focus on tennis. I doubted they would be making such a big deal if this happened to a *male* commentator.

“Although I’m not mad at you, I do need to remind you to give me as much information as possible in the future,” Hammy explained. “I’m not just your agent—I’m sort of your publicist, too. I could have prepared statements in case this information ever came out. Now we’re playing defense.”

“Okay,” I said. “I promise to tell you everything. Starting now. I’m also seeing Dominic deGrom.”

Hammy stared at me without blinking. “You’re doing what now?”

“I’ve been in a casual relationship with Dominic since the Australian Open,” I admitted. “Just like with Tristan, it’s not serious. We get together whenever our schedules line up, which is rare. Tristan knew about Dominic, but not the other way around. Although Dominic *did* know I was seeing other men.”

“And how long have you and Tristan been involved?”

“Since the French Open. Well, a little *before* the French Open. But it happened the first time in Paris.” I started to tell him that I had also gone on a date with Gabriel Moreau that night, but then held back. Nothing had happened, so it didn’t matter.

Hammy slowly raised a palm toward me as if to give me a high five.

“What’s that for?”

“I’m treating you like a man,” he explained. “Because if one of my male clients told me he was sleeping with two extremely attractive female tennis players, I would give him a high five.”

I laughed and slapped my palm against his. “It doesn’t feel like something I should brag about.”

“You’re seeing the number two and number seven ranked men in the world. Brag away.” He rose from the chair. “I’m going to work on a few options for us. Don’t post anything on social media. Let’s wait and test the waters before we make any moves. But I expect this to blow over. As far as tabloids go, it’s a juicy story, but you didn’t do anything *wrong*. Especially if they only know about Tristan and not Dominic.”

“Thanks, Hammy. I’m glad you’re here to help me feel better about everything.”

He hugged me tight for a few seconds, which only reinforced how much I appreciated my agent. Then he gave me an awkward smile and went into his room, closing the door as he began another phone conversation.

I retired to my room and spent the afternoon watching more tennis on my phone. After the doubles final, coverage

switched over to Gabriel Moreau's semifinal match. He won the first two sets easily, and was up 4 - 3 in the third set when I heard a weird noise outside. I muted the TV and froze, listening. Yes, there was definitely a rustling sound right outside my window. I slid off the bed and tip-toed over there, pulling back the curtain.

*If it's some paparazzi trying to get photos of me...*

I nearly jumped when a familiar face suddenly appeared on the other side of the glass. Tristan blinked in surprise when he saw me, then gave a pathetic little wave.

"What are you doing?!" I hissed after opening the window.

"Avoiding the reporters watching your front door like hawks," he said while stepping through the window. "I parked a few blocks over and had to sneak through two backyards like Ferris Bueller."

"You've seen Ferris Bueller, but not Rocky?" I laughed. "I'm surprised you can get around so easily with an oblique tear."

"Not a full tear, according to the doctors," he answered. "Just a sprain. And they've got me on the good pain meds right now. I feel like I could swim across the English Channel."

"Okay, but *why* did you sneak through those backyards to reach me?"

"I wanted to say goodbye in person. I'm flying back to Australia tonight. I'm going to get a second opinion on my oblique. My doc in Melbourne is familiar with my injury. Miranda, I'm so sorry all of this went public."

"Not your fault," I replied. "It's worse for you. I saw the media hounding you at the post-match conference. And I'm sorry you lost today."

He shrugged. "I never thought we would get this far. Once the sting of losing wears off, I think I'll be happy. Besides, doubles was just to help me stay sharp so I could do well in singles." He touched his side. "Fat lot of good that did."

“Did you and Dominic... talk about it at all?”

Tristan nodded. “We had a go of it. Not a scrap, but close to it. I think he’s more mad at you than me.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” I said with a sigh.

“He flies out tomorrow. I figured you’d want to know that.” He glanced at his watch. “My driver’s waiting. I’m heading to the airport now. Will I see you when I’m in the States?”

I smiled. “You’d better.”

We hugged, then shared a long kiss. There was a noise behind me, in the doorway.

“For fuck’s sake,” Hammy said, bending down to pick up the phone he had dropped in surprise. “Keep it in your pants, Miranda! Or at least close the door!”

The two of us laughed as my grumpy agent walked away.



### Miranda

After Tristan snuck out of my cottage, I tried calling Dominic. It went to voicemail on the second ring, so I texted him instead.

**Me:** Hi. Can we talk?

**Dominic:** I'm busy, but I can text.

**Me:** I'm really sorry how the Tristan news came out. I wanted to tell you when we were together in France, but you interrupted me and said you didn't want to know.

**Dominic:** So it's my fault? Is that what you're saying?

**Me:** No! That's not what I meant. I should have just blurted it out. And then I found out you two were playing doubles together here at Wimbledon, and I was afraid it was too late to tell you without messing with your head. Which ended up not mattering since you found out at the worst possible moment.

**Dominic:** Thanks for the apology. How long have you two been together?

**Me:** We're not really together. It's casual, the same way you and I are. But it started at the French Open.



**Dominic:** The night I stood you up because of the commercial shoot?

**Me:** Yeah, it was that night. But I didn't do it out of spite. I wasn't mad at you for having to bail on our dinner. It just sort of happened with Tristan.

**Me:** While I'm coming clean, I have something else to tell you: I sort of went on a date with Gabriel that night.

**Dominic:** Gabriel Moreau?

**Me:** He saw me sitting alone at the table after you canceled. Apparently, he knew the owner, so he stopped and hung out with me a little bit. Then he showed me around Paris. Nothing happened, not even a kiss, but it was definitely a date.

**Dominic:** You already told me this. But I appreciate you coming clean a second time.

**Dominic:** It's actually kind of funny. You remember that party back at the Academy, before you went pro? You kissed all three of us during spin-the-bottle. Me, Gabriel, and Tristan.

**Me:** Trust me, I remember.

**Me:** Does this mean you're not upset? You forgive me?

**Dominic:** I forgive you. But I'm still processing how I feel.

**Me:** That's fair. I hope you don't blame Tristan for any of this, either.

**Dominic:** Like I said: I'm still processing. But that's between Tristan and me.

**Dominic:** I think we should put things on hold between us. Not because you did something wrong, but because I need to focus on tennis. My window is closing; I only have a few more years left before I'm too old to compete. I need to devote 100% of my time to this sport. I can't allow distractions to torpedo my game. I hope you understand.

"I do understand," I typed back to him, but tears still filled my vision. Even though we were never *officially* together, it felt like a breakup.

After giving me the afternoon off, the network allowed me to cover the rest of the tournament—which really only involved two more matches: the Women's Final and Men's Final. As I walked across Wimbledon to Centre Court, signing autographs and taking selfies, I prepared to be bombarded by the media. I was ready to repeat the line Hammy had recommended: "I don't comment on my personal life. I'm just here to watch the sport I love."

But none of the reporters came running up for a quote.

Everyone in the booth was supportive when I arrived. Tim Henman nodded and gave me a friendly fist-bump. My producer put an arm around me and took me aside.

"I went to bat for you with the network," he whispered. "They're not going to press you for a statement. None of their bloody business, you ask me. Now, let's prepare for the match."

"Thanks," I said, strangely touched by the gesture.

"You okay?" Henman asked as I put on my headset.

"Actually, yeah. I was expecting to be swarmed by reporters when I arrived today, but none of them bothered me. It's like their memories were wiped and they forgot all about the story."

Henman removed his headset and rolled his chair closer to me, lowering his voice. “I heard a rumor about that. A player—a *current* player, highly-ranked—threatened the writers assigned to the tournament. He said he would never give another interview unless they left you and Tristan alone.”

I blinked. “Who would do that for me?”

“I’m sure you can figure it out,” he replied, putting his headset back on.

I smiled to myself. *Would Dominic really do that?* It was such a selfless act.

Gabriel was masterful in the final against Juncheng. He flew across the grass like a man possessed, fighting as if every single shot was for match point. Not only did Gabriel not lose a single set, but he absolutely dominated in the final, winning 6 - 2, 6 - 0, 6 - 1.

“How important is this win for you today?” the on-court reporter asked him during the award ceremony, voice booming through the stadium.

“It is a big win, yes of course,” Gabriel replied. He stood proud, hands on his hips, tousled hair framing a chiseled face that still glistened with sweat. “Now I just need the US Open to complete my Grand Slam.”

“How did you feel about your opponent today?”

“I knew I could wear Juncheng out over time, so I battled on every single point. Rather than thinking about *games* and *sets*, I focused only on collecting points. Juncheng is a very good player. He is young, but I expect to see him deep in tournaments for many years to come.”

*That was strangely diplomatic*, I thought. Gabriel rarely complimented his opponents.

“Be honest, Gabriel. Are you disappointed you didn’t get to face Dominic deGrom in the final?”

“Here it comes,” Henman muttered next to me. “The real Gabriel is about to come out.”

I winced and listened to his response, hoping it wasn't too biting.

"Part of me is disappointed, yes," Gabriel told the reporter, voice booming in the stadium. "We have had quite the year together, deGrom and myself. It would have been three finals in a row together. Three strikes and you are out, my American friends say."

There was a scattering of chuckles among the London crowd.

"But no," Gabriel went on, in a conversational voice rather than his usual bombastic tone. "To be quite honest, I was relieved to not have to face deGrom this time. He is remarkably strong on grass, and I consider it my weakest surface. I do not know if I could have defeated him. Many players want a challenge, and I understand this thinking, yes, but I would also like to win! Even if the win is easier.

"Of course, let me be very clear that I do not wish to minimize the skills of Juncheng here," he quickly added. "The score rarely tells the full story, and this match could have gone quite differently if I had not come out strong." He turned to face Juncheng directly. "And I am *very* certain of what I said earlier: that you are a very talented young man who will be in many more finals to come. I look forward to our future battles."

The crowd roared at that, showering them with praise. I cocked my head while gazing down at the Frenchman. It was like his body was suddenly hijacked by a different man.

*Or this has been the real Gabriel all along, hidden beneath the public persona we all know.*

"Now Gabriel," the on-court reporter said, "I have to ask you this next question. So apologies if I'm jinxing things."

"Apology not accepted," Gabriel quipped, pretending to storm off, which drew more laughs from the fans. He turned back around and said, "No, please, continue. I am not superstitious."

“Only two men have won a Grand Slam in a calendar year, and just one of them in the modern era. You have already had an incredible year, but you are now *one win away* from completing such a prestigious feat. Tell me: have you thought about the possibility of accomplishing this at the US Open next month?”

Gabriel flashed a cunning smile. “I would like to pretend as if I had not thought of this, but no. Of course I have thought about doing this at the US Open! How could I not? I try to focus only on the next match in front of me, but this is impossible. The US Open will be the most important thing I think about for the next month.” He glanced up in the direction of the booth. “Or perhaps the second most important thing.”

Henman grunted next to me. “He doesn’t quit, does he?”

“There’s a reason he’s number one,” I muttered. “Persistence.”

The reporter chuckled. “What could possibly top the US Open, Gabriel?”

I cringed, waiting to see how he would answer. It was bad enough my love life with Tristan had been exposed to the world. But if Gabriel said something about me right now...

He glanced up in my direction again, then turned back to the reporter. “The new season of *Survivor* begins next week. I am a huge fan! But our episodes air later in France, so please, no spoilers.” He held up a finger to his lips.

“Cheeky fucker,” Henman said.

“You have no idea.”



### Miranda

Once all the post-game ceremonies were over, I went back to my cottage and packed my bags. We were flying out of Heathrow first thing in the morning, and I had brought two full suitcases with me to Wimbledon. That was something that would take some getting used to: needing to bring two dozen different outfits with me for the broadcasts. Hammy said he could negotiate for an on-site wardrobe if I signed a long-term contract with the network, but for now I had to bring it all myself.

*Things were a lot easier when I was a player. My sponsors supplied all my clothes and rackets. All I had to do was show up.*

My suitcase was half packed when I got the text that I had been anticipating.

**Gabriel:** Did you see the match today?

**Me:** I think we both know that I was watching. It's literally my job right now.

**Gabriel:** What did you think?

**Me:** You played very well. Dominant, even.

**Gabriel:** I match well against Juncheng. He will be a formidable opponent in one or perhaps two years.

**Me:** Okay, that's the part that's confusing me. You're being really nice about it all.

**Gabriel:** Why is this confusing to you, Miranda?

**Me:** You're playing a game right now! Pretending to be friendly and gracious, instead of cocky and arrogant.

**Gabriel:** I am not pretending to do anything. I am merely being myself rather than trying to place my face.

**Me:** Place your face?

**Gabriel:** Place my face. Is this not the correct saying?

**Me:** You mean putting on a face?

**Gabriel:** Yes, this is what I mean. I am usually putting on a face. Today, I was myself. This has been what you have wanted from me, yes?

I stared at my phone for a while without answering. I didn't know what to say.

**Me:** I think you're acting this way to convince me to go out with you.

**Gabriel:** Ah, but I do not need to convince you of such a thing!

**Me:** Why not?

**Gabriel:** Because you have already agreed to go out with me. We made a wager. I won all of Wimbledon without losing a single set, and so you now owe a date to me.

**Me:** I never agreed to that.

**Gabriel:** You never said no. That is acceptance by omission. I learned this term watching your famous American crime show, Law and Order.

**Me:** That's not how this works.

**Gabriel:** Very well. Miranda, would you do me the tremendous honor of going on a date?

I imagined Gabriel the way I had last seen him, standing on the court with his hands on his hips, tousled hair swaying with the wind while he smiled at the woman giving the post-game interview. There was a pull to this man that I couldn't ignore, couldn't deny. I wasn't just attracted to him—I felt *connected* to him. Maybe it was because, back at the Academy, he had reminded me of myself. We were both smaller than the competition, unappreciated among our peers. We were both underdogs, lacking the confidence and charisma of all the other athletes who *knew* they were going to be the next big tennis stars—and acted like it. Gabriel and I weren't born with that self-assurance. Ever since we were young, we had to fight for every ounce of respect we deserved in this cut-throat sport. Even now, after so many years had passed, I felt closer to him than anyone else in my profession.

*Even more than the two men I'm seeing.*

It pained me to think of the situation like that, but it was true. I was close to Dominic and Tristan. I cared about them both deeply, and knew that I had tremendous potential for long-term relationships with both of them. But even though I had a more impressive career, it still felt like they were in another league above me. No matter how much time had passed, no matter how many championships I had won, deep down I was still that same insecure little girl with a tennis racket in her hand, pretending like she belonged.



**Me:** Okay. I will go on a date with you. But I'm leaving early tomorrow morning, so it will have to wait until the next time we are both in the same city.

**Gabriel:** Wonderful! Our date will be in August, before the US Open. Is this acceptable to you?

**Me:** I would agree to this, yes.

**Gabriel:** I will see you then. Have a safe flight :-)

I sighed with relief. Even though we had already been on an impromptu date, the idea of another one—planned out this time—made me anxious. The fact that it was a long way away, over a month, helped soothe my nerves.

\*

I flew back to New Jersey the next day. Although I didn't have a private plane, NBC had paid for business class. The special pod-shaped seats that folded flat into a bed were a luxury I didn't think I would continue to enjoy after retiring. When I walked into my condo, I let out a deep sigh.

"It's good to be home," I said to the empty foyer.

I liked being alone. Or more accurately, I enjoyed solitude. I knew people who always wanted to be around others, hanging out at bars or watching TV with friends. I preferred being alone with my thoughts. I considered it the ultimate sign of self-confidence to be able to be alone with yourself.

My email inbox was, to use one of Tristan's phrases, a shit-show. I had hundreds of emails from reporters from every sports column in the country—and plenty outside the United States, too. Everyone wanted an interview with me about my relationship with Tristan. One reporter from a newspaper in Columbus, Ohio had sent me four increasingly-desperate requests for a comment, practically begging me by the end.

To make matters worse, a few New York reporters paid visits to my house at random times. Ringing the doorbell, disturbing my peace. I gave each of them the line Hammy had recommended: *I don't comment on my personal life*. But that didn't seem to work, unless it was paired with slamming the door in their faces.

I was used to being under scrutiny when I was a player. I didn't mind it then, since I was able to tune it all out and focus on the next match. But now that I was retired, I thought I was free from all of that.

*Maybe I never will be.*

The avalanche of emails abruptly cut off two days prior, on Saturday afternoon. That lined up with when the highly-ranked player—Dominic—had threatened the press if they didn't leave me alone. There were still a few straggler emails that came in from lesser-known publications, but the difference was night and day.

I pulled out my phone to thank him, then stopped myself. He said he wanted to put things on hold. And sure, a text message wasn't a big deal, but the core problem was that our relationship was a distraction. The best way to thank him would be to leave him alone, at least for now.

Not being able to text him stung. It was like we really *had* broken up, even though we were never really together to begin with.

I distracted myself by calling an old friend and inviting her out to play tennis the next day. It was good to move around, hitting the ball and getting my blood flowing. The volume on all the other worries in my life seemed to dim when I was between the lines. It was also nice to play for *fun*, rather than competitively. Doing anything as a job seemed to suck the enjoyment out of it. I needed to get out here more often now that I could actually have fun.

We ended up playing every day for a full week. She was a former pro, and could hold her own against me, but I still held back my best shots to allow us to get some long rallies in. It was like a palette cleanser for my mind, erasing all the

troubles I had dealt with and leaving me feeling calmer than before.

One afternoon after playing tennis, I texted Tristan.

**Me:** How's your injury? Have you gotten that second opinion yet?

**Me:** Also, I had to Google the time difference three times to make sure I wasn't texting you in the middle of the night. Being across the international date line is confusing. Australia is dumb.

**Tristan:** LOL. Insulting my entire home country? You sure know how to woo a man.

**Me:** What can I say? I know what men like.

**Tristan:** I got back from the doctor yesterday. It's only a sprain, not a full tear.

**Me:** That's great news!

**Tristan:** Coach wants me to rest and see how it heals in the next week. Then we can make some decisions about the US Open. Right now I'm scheduled to get to the States two weeks before the tournament, to get over jet lag and spend some time practicing doubles.

**Me:** Doubles? Does this mean you and Dominic are okay?

**Tristan:** Fuck if I know. Haven't talked to him since the match. I guess I'll find out when I get there, unless he calls me sooner.

**Me:** Maybe he's planning on murdering you.

**Tristan:** That would seriously hurt my chances of winning the Australian Open next year.

**Me:** Australian? What about the US Open?

It took Tristan a long time to text back. I went to the kitchen, made myself a smoothie, and returned to the living room before he responded.

**Tristan:** My primary goal is to win the Australian Open. I don't care about any other tournaments. To me, they only exist to prepare for the one in Melbourne.

**Me:** I can understand wanting to win your home tournament. But saying that you don't care about the US Open, or Wimbledon? Come on. That can't be how you feel.

**Tristan:** It's true. I would give up ever winning another match if it meant taking home the trophy in Melbourne next year.

**Tristan:** Or the year after that. I'll take it whenever I can get it.

**Tristan:** But I'm starting to lose hope that it will ever happen. My body refuses to cooperate. Every time I feel like I'm the best version of myself, I get injured again. Oblique, elbow, shoulder... it's always something. I just don't know anymore.

**Me:** I think you have many more healthy years ahead of you. I bet you come back strong at the US Open and make a deep run that sets you up for the Australian.

**Tristan:** I hope you're right. We'll see if my oblique cooperates.

My doorbell abruptly rang, causing me to flinch and spill smoothie down the front of my shirt. Cursing, I grabbed a paper towel and dabbed myself. The UPS guy always rang the doorbell when dropping off a package, and it caught me off guard every time. I needed to hire someone to turn down the volume. It sounded like a gong going off in a Buddhist temple.

But then the doorbell rang a second time.

I had a Ring camera attached to my door, but I didn't feel like opening the app to see who was there. I strode to the door, preparing to yell at whatever reporter had decided to hound me today.

When I threw open the door, it wasn't a reporter waiting on my front porch, after all.

It was Gabriel Moreau.



## Miranda

I stared at the Frenchman for a very long time. The longer I stood there, the wider his smile became.

Finally, I blurted out, “Gabriel! How do you know where I live?”

He chuckled and said in that smooth accent, “This is a silly question.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I am here for our date,” he replied simply.

I gawked at him. “I said I would go on a date with you close to the US Open. Which is still four weeks away.”

He raised a finger. “Ah, but that is not what you said. You agreed to a date when I was in the United States. Those were your exact words. And as you can see, I am presently in the United States.” He gestured down at himself with both hands.

My mind raced. I didn’t have plans tonight. I had intended to stay in and relax in front of the TV. I was not mentally or physically prepared to go out on a date.

“I am seeing what you are thinking,” Gabriel said, “and you need not worry. This date is not fancy. You will not require significant time to prepare. You can go as you are.”

“I played tennis earlier,” I said. “I haven’t showered or washed my hair.”

“Your hair is perfect.” He smiled. “But if you wish to shower, I am content to wait.”

“The paparazzi,” I said. “They will go crazy if they see us together. I don’t want my name in the tabloids again.”

“Nobody will bother us,” Gabriel insisted. “I am quite sure.”

I could tell he wouldn’t be talked out of this. And he *was* in the country. It was ridiculous for him to fly all the way here just for a date... but it would be even more ridiculous for me to turn him away after he had gone to so much trouble.

“What am I supposed to wear for this date?” I asked.

“Dress comfortably. Nothing fancy, as I said.”

“So yoga pants and a tank top?” I asked.

He nodded. “This is acceptable to me.”

“I was joking.”

“I am not,” he replied.

Finally, I sighed and held open the door. “Come in. You can wait downstairs while I get ready. There’s wine in the fridge if you want a drink.”

Without waiting for an answer, I went upstairs to take a shower. It was strange preparing for a date while the man was in my own house, separated from my nudity by a single floor. But weirdly enough, I wasn’t bothered by it. I knew he wouldn’t do anything intrusive. I trusted him.

Instead of yoga pants, I wore a comfortable pair of jeans and a nice crop top. Getting ready for a date without knowing where we were going was pretty much my nightmare, but at least this outfit would fit in at most places. When I returned downstairs, I found Gabriel in my trophy room just off the main foyer.

“That was the first one,” I said, gesturing to the silver plate he was examining. “Second place at Wimbledon when I was still a teenager. Somehow, that one still means the most to me, even though I lost.”

He stood up straight. “It was your best run. Nobody was expecting you, an unranked girl, to go so far.” He smiled.

“You impressed the world. We all watched your games from the Academy.”

I felt myself blush at the thought of everyone watching me. “Do you have a trophy room in your home?”

“I do,” he admitted. “Though it is still quite sparse. I hope to make it as full as this room someday. Come, the car is waiting.”

I was expecting a private town car, or even a limousine, but the car in the driveway was neither of these. It was a white Honda Civic. And not a newer model—one of the older ones from the nineties.

“This is what you’re driving?” I asked.

“I am trying to fly under the radar, so to speak,” he replied while opening the passenger door for me. “Madam.”

Beneath the velvet curtain of night, we drove out of New Jersey and into New York’s urban sprawl. The George Washington Bridge guided our passage, its lights painting ripples on the Hudson below while the twinkling Manhattan skyscrapers loomed over us like a hundred steel gods.

A detour onto the Grand Central Parkway led the car past Flushing Meadows, where the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center lay silent under the stars. The area would be bustling with fans and cheers in only a month, but for now empty courts whispered of epic matches and cheering crowds that existed only in the night’s embrace.

“I thought we were going to dinner,” I asked.

“I never said this,” Gabriel replied.

“So we’re not eating?” I teased. “Because I have to warn you that I’m starving, and will get very grumpy if I don’t get food soon.”

“Food is on the itinerary,” he said, pronouncing every syllable in the word slowly, “but first I have another activity.”

He pulled up to the player’s entrance at the tennis facility, and I realized what he intended.



“Are you taking me on a tour of the US Open grounds, the way you did at the Louvre?” I asked. “Because this place I’ve actually seen plenty of times.”

He drove a short distance and pulled to a stop. “Actually, my plan was for us to play tennis.”

I blinked. “Seriously? You don’t get enough tennis already?”

“I wanted to play a fun match against the most dominant woman from the last decade,” Gabriel explained, his blue eyes twinkling in the light of a nearby street light. “Unfortunately Serena was busy, so it must be you.”

I burst out laughing. “Okay, that was so funny I’m not even offended.”

We got out of the car and walked to the entrance of Arthur Ashe Stadium, the largest in the facility. “There’s just one problem. I don’t have any of my clothes or rackets.”

He shifted the bag on his shoulder. “I acquired everything we need from the trophy room. You kept all of your old uniforms and rackets in the drawers there.”

“Those were the clothes I wore when I won each of my championships,” I protested. “They’re sentimental.”

He glanced at me. “Do you honestly intend to do anything important with them?”

Gabriel was right, so I changed the subject. “Going through my clothes. Some women would say that’s really creepy.”

“But not you?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Not me,” I agreed. “Not *this* time. But if I find out you raided my panty drawer, this date will end *very* quickly.”

“Mon dieu,” he said, aghast. “I am a gentleman!” He tossed the bag to me. “I will see you on the court shortly.”

I went into the locker room and changed into the clothes. He had brought along the outfit I’d worn at the French Open two years ago, a black top and matching skirt with compression shorts underneath. I was wearing the wrong underwear for this, but the compression shorts were good enough, so I went

commando underneath to preserve my panties for dinner later. The Nike shoes were still crisply white, except for a few reddish clay stains on the soles.

It was strange walking out onto the court tonight. I had played in this stadium countless times, and knew every detail and feature that separated it from the other great tennis arenas. But tonight, it was totally empty. My steps echoed on the hard surface like we were in an enormous cave, although there was only open sky above us.

Gabriel had changed into his French Open uniform as well: black shorts and matching shoes, with a red, blue, and white shirt that evoked images of the French flag. He idly twirled his racket in a hand while watching me approach the net.

“You are stunning, as always,” he said with awe in his voice.

I felt myself blushing again. “You’re looking sharp yourself. What’s the plan?”

Gabriel picked up a can of tennis balls, which hissed as he popped the lid. “Let’s warm up first, then play a full set.” He then walked around to the other side of the net, stuffing yellow balls in his pocket until he only had one left in his hand.

The sound of a tennis racket striking a brand new tennis ball was music to my ears, evoking memories and emotions that went back decades. For the next ten minutes we lightly hit the ball back and forth, warming up rather than playing competitively.

“There is a court at my condo,” I said after hitting a backhand. “We could have played there.”

“This is more fun,” he replied from the other side of the net. “I have become accustomed to playing in a certain environment. Much like I have grown accustomed to Premier Cru wine.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I replied.

“One day, I will show you,” Gabriel said. “I will take you to Chamonix, in the Alps, and we will drink Premier Cru wine while Mont Blanc watches over us like an ancient god.”

I moved to my right to hit a forehand. The ball exploded off my racket. “So that means it’s *good* wine?”

“Yes,” Gabriel replied, laughter echoing in the empty stadium. “It is very good wine. Now, let us play a set. You may have the first serve.”

I caught his return in my hand. “Why, you *are* a gentleman. Love, love.”

I had already played tennis earlier today, but I wasn’t sore. If anything, it had properly warmed me up for this match. My first serve was an ace, hitting the line down the center key before Gabriel could react.

“Okay,” Gabriel said. “*Now* I am prepared for the great Miranda Jacobs.”

We stopped talking and focused on the match. I won my serve, and then he won his—although I could tell he wasn’t hitting his serve as hard as he could. Still, his “easy” serves were about as fast as my strongest serves, so I had my work cut out for me.

Back and forth we went, each winning our own serves and keeping pace with the other. Gabriel may not have been hitting his shots with the same velocity he used in a normal match, but I could tell he was *not* going easy on me. And in a way, I could sense that it was because he respected me as a player.

We took a break to switch sides after a few games. He pulled out a Gatorade from his bag and tossed it to me. “Have you decided what to do in retirement?”

I cracked open the top and took a long gulp. “I’m enjoying broadcasting for NBC. They’ve actually offered me a long-term contract.”

“But you do not want to do this,” he observed.

I frowned at him. “I’ve been torn about what to do, yeah. How did you know that?”

“Because I can see it in your eyes,” he replied, pointing with his racket. “You do not wish to broadcast forever.”

“And what do I want to do, then?”

He took the Gatorade from me and sipped. “You want to play.”

I laughed at his guess. “No, I don’t. I’m happily retired.”

Gabriel gazed at me, then took another sip. He went on as if reciting an encyclopedic fact rather than an opinion. “Most players, in tennis or any other athletic sport, retire when their bodies can no longer compete at an elite level. Miranda Jacobs retired on top, with many more years of success ahead. Surely a part of you wonders how many more trophies could fill your room at home, and this is a cause for great internal strife.”

I immediately shook my head. “I don’t need to be Serena or Steffi. I’m content with eight career grand slam wins.”

“I do not believe you. The girl I kissed at the Academy was hungry.”

“That was fourteen years ago,” I replied. “That girl is dead. I don’t need more championship wins, because I have something much better.”

“And that is?”

“Enough,” I said, twirling my racket. “I have *enough*.”

Gabriel frowned as we resumed play.



### Miranda

The rest of our match finished quickly; I immediately broke his serve, then won my own to finish the set. We met at the net and shook hands, a rueful expression on Gabriel's vulpine face.

"You let me win, didn't you?" I teased.

"I gave precisely the same amount of effort I always give when playing for fun."

I gave a start. "You still play for fun?"

"Of course. Do you not?"

"Not while I was still a professional," I replied. "It stopped being fun when it became my life, four hours of practice a day and even more constraints on the rest of my lifestyle."

Gabriel wiped his face with a towel. "Perhaps retirement will revive that."

"It actually has. I've been playing this week with an old friend." I grinned. "And I had a *lot* of fun beating you just now."

"Do not allow it to go to your head."

"The former number one female defeating the current number one male," I mused. "Too bad the paparazzi *aren't* here watching us..."

I trailed off as I saw a man standing over by the player's entrance, watching while trying to remain hidden. My body tensed.

“Gabriel,” I asked, “who is that? If a reporter sees us together...”

“I told you they will not bother us. I have made arrangements for you to be left alone.” He put a comforting hand on my arm. “This man is in my employ. Wait one moment, please.”

I watched him jog over to the man and speak quietly for a few seconds. Then the stranger turned and disappeared down the tunnel into the depths of the stadium.

*I have made arrangements for you.* What did that even mean? Maybe Gabriel had some weight to throw around at the French Open, but not here in the United States...

And then a memory tickled in my mind. A conversation I’d had with Tim Henman in the NBC booth at Wimbledon. He had said that a top-ranked player threatened to boycott all media questions unless my personal life was left alone. At the time, I assumed it was Dominic. That was the only thing that made sense.

But now...

“That man is responsible for our dinner,” Gabriel said, returning to me. He paused when he saw my face. “Miranda, what is wrong?”

“It was you,” I said. “You were the one who bullied the press into leaving me alone at Wimbledon, weren’t you?”

He blinked. “But of course, I did this thing, yes.”

I stood very still. “Why would you do that?”

Gabriel cocked his head and gave me a confused smirk. “Why would I not? You did not deserve that treatment for having a relationship with another player. You did not deserve such spotlight of negativity. You deserve so much more, Miranda.”

As I stared deep into his eyes, I didn’t see the cocky French player who had risen all the way to the top of the tennis world. I saw that same little boy from the Academy who had been treated unfairly himself.

“Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes,” Gabriel said cheerfully. “I will meet you here.”

There were fresh towels in the women’s locker room underneath the stadium, still warm from the dryer. It was strange being here by myself, without any attendants or other athletes preparing for their own matches. It was eerie in a way; a reminder that the world still existed outside of tournaments and tennis matches, hibernating until coming alive each year. I stripped my clothes, then stepped under the hot water to rinse the sweat off me.

As I showered, I thought about Gabriel Moreau. Even though he was arguably the least popular and charismatic of the three boys I kissed at the Academy party fourteen years ago, I felt the most attraction to him. An attraction that was every bit as strong today as it was back then, if not more so. Even when he was cocky, even when he was insulting his American opponents and sneering at the camera, I couldn’t get him out of my head.

*I can’t shake this feeling, I thought. So why am I fighting it?*

I left the shower and toweled off, but I didn’t get dressed. Instead, I pawed along on my bare feet out into the hallway, then into the men’s locker room. Only some of the lights were on, giving the room an intimate feel. Like I was intruding on a private moment. I heard a shower running, and steam drifted through the air. I followed it until reaching the stall where Gabriel Moreau stood.

In the soft diffusion of light, the contours of Gabriel’s form moved gracefully behind the cloudy shower door. As rivulets of water cascaded down his skin, the play of shadows highlighted the gentle slopes of his shoulders and the defined lines of his back. The glass acted as a canvas, revealing just enough to stir my curiosity, leaving the rest to the imagination. I had seen him shirtless on TV, but this felt different. He was raw, vulnerable. One of the world’s most powerful men—in his most unguarded state.

“Gabriel.”

His blurry shape froze in the shower. For a long moment, the only sound was the rush of the water.

“Miranda.”

“Back in Paris,” I said slowly. “When you showed me the city and the Louvre and we kissed. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that night.”

His silhouette turned to face me through the glass. “And yet you left.”

“You were an asshole to the reporter outside the club.”

“I was,” he admitted, swinging open the shower door to reveal his nude form. “Will you leave me tonight?”

His cock hung between his legs, soft but growing harder, yet I managed to maintain eye contact. “I don’t intend to. I don’t want to go anywhere.”

I let the towel drop to the floor.

“I wanted you back in Paris,” I breathed. “I wanted you badly.”

“Your desire is a candle compared to the flame that was my burning *need* for you,” he replied.

A silence stretched in the empty locker room. I held my breath with anticipation. Even though I was nude, I didn’t feel self-conscious under his sharp gaze. His eyes bore into mine, and his words poured directly into my soul.

“I have thought of nothing else since that night in Paris. You have invaded my mind, Miranda Jacobs.”

And then he gathered my head in his hands and kissed me.

Explosions went off at the feel of his lips against mine, a meal I’d been craving all this time and was finally getting to taste. We were too desperate for each other for words as we kissed, Gabriel pulling me into the stall until the water ran over my skin again. He dropped to his knees, tongue immediately finding my lower lips. I groaned and widened my stance for him so he could taste more of me. He seemed so hungry as he devoured me with his mouth, his long tongue



rolling like a wave against my pussy. I had to grip the shower head for stability as he sucked my clit into his mouth and gently nuzzled it, the intensity almost too much for me to bear. My back arched as he continued eating me out, expertly sliding two fingers inside of me and twisting them in a corkscrew motion. If not for my grip on the shower head, I might have collapsed to the ground as my body shook and shivered with a quick, unexpected release.

But I wanted so much more than that.

I pulled him up by his dark curls and kissed him, tasting myself on his lips, before bending over. Gabriel needed no other invitation; he guided his cock in between my lips from behind. I was drenched, allowing him to thrust forward and fill me with every inch that he had.

“Mon dieu,” he moaned while gripping my waist with both hands. “Miranda, you have the most wonderful ass. C’est merveilleux.”

I’d never heard him speak French in this context before. Right then, it turned me on more than anything else in the world. All the years of thinking about him, fantasizing about our kiss and wondering what might have been, had led to this point. Fourteen years of foreplay culminating in this shower.

Gabriel fucked me hard from behind in the shower stall of the locker room while the steaming hot water ran over our bodies. He bent over me, wrapping his arms around my chest and squeezing my breasts together while kissing the back of my neck and mumbling in incomprehensible French. It was music to my ears, and I moaned louder with him, a duet in two languages.

And when his fingers curled down around my hip, pressing roughly into my clit, my world exploded once again. This orgasm was so much stronger than the first one, an eruption of pleasure that made my knees tremble and my eyes clench shut. I might have screamed in ecstasy, but I couldn’t tell because the noise of the world was rushing in my ears, drowning everything else out.

As I came down, his fingers dug into the flesh of my ass, and his thrusts grew more frenzied, his breathing intensifying. He moaned something in French, a warning and a promise.

I pulled away from him and dropped to my knees. I wanted to see his face as he came. “Come on my chest,” I begged, pressing them together for him. “Come for me, Gabriel.”

He used his free hand to cup my cheek, thumb stroking my skin and his angular French face twisting with ecstasy as he stroked himself to completion. The sight of Gabriel, a lean man with rippling cords of muscle all over his body, clutching his cock in his fist was a beautiful sight. I drank in his echoed cries of pleasure as his warm, sticky seed splashed on my cleavage, rope after rope of it, eventually carried away by the water running down my chest.

I giggled when he was done, and he laughed with me. We kissed, softer this time, enjoying the moment rather than the previous rush to be together as quickly as possible.

We spent a few minutes showering together. Gabriel rubbed soap on my body—over my breasts, down my belly, in between my legs and ass. While he did that I grabbed the shampoo bottle and washed his hair. He had such thick, vibrant curls. I didn’t want to take my hands out of it.

“I hope this doesn’t delay dinner,” I said as we got out and dried off.

Gabriel’s laugh was even richer than before. “Dinner is the last thing on my mind, ma caille.”



### Gabriel

Fourteen years.

Fourteen long, intolerable years.

This woman, this angel Miranda Jacobs, had occupied my mind for fourteen years since our kiss. I had thought about her. Dreamed about her. *Fantasized* about her. Other women had come and left in my life, yet Miranda remained a constant inside of me that was as powerful as my drive to win on the court.

And yet those fantasies were incomparable to the real thing. Feeling her lips churn against mine, her soft cunt tightening around my cock as she screamed with pleasure. Every nerve in my body, from the tips of my toes to my fingers digging into her skin, came alive as we were joined in perfect ecstasy. Our love burned fast and quick, like a sprint to the net to return a drop shot.

It was not how I expected this night to go. Never in my most ambitious of dreams.

Once clothed, we returned to the court hand-in-hand, like new lovers. The man I had hired, Anton, was waiting with a large paper bag full of food.

“Ah, dinner is here,” I said.

Miranda grunted. “I assumed you were taking me out somewhere.”

“This is out somewhere,” I replied, gesturing all around us.

“I meant a restaurant.”

“Restaurants contain people, and people have eyes and mouths, which they use to see and talk,” I explained. “Here, we have privacy.”

“Unless someone shows up and kicks us out, like at the Louvre.”

“I can assure you that will not happen this time.” I took the bag from Anton. “Thank you. If you would be so kind as to turn the lights off, and then we will have no other need of you this evening.”

He dipped his head and hurried away.

“So what fancy dinner have you prepared for me?” Miranda asked excitedly. “I said I was starving earlier, but now I’m *legitimately* starving. Like, I might need a fainting couch if I don’t get some food soon.”

“I have chosen my favorite meal for this evening.”

“Ohh, a favorite meal. Was it something your mom used to make?”

The mention of my mom made my body go tense. I forced myself to relax as I put the bag down on the bench by the umpire’s chair and pulled out two to-go containers. “My mother could not make something this delicious. Bacon cheeseburgers and fries.”

Miranda’s eyes widened. “Are you kidding me right now?”

My heart sank. “I thought...”

“This is *exactly* what I was craving!” she said, snatching the first container out of my hand. She let out a high-pitched squeak when she popped it open and saw the contents. “It’s the thin crispy fries too!”

“There is a restaurant I visit every year when I am here for the tournament. I am quite fond of their food.”

I spread a blanket out on the ground next to the net and we sat down for a picnic. After the first bite, the massive stadium lights shut off with a loud *KA-CHUNK*, bathing us in darkness. But after a few seconds, our eyes began to adjust.

“I was afraid you were going to take me somewhere fancy, where they bring ten servings of tiny portions out,” Miranda said with her mouth full. “I never ate cheeseburgers when I was on the tour, but I’ve fallen in love with them since retiring.”

“I know. You said so when you were on Good Morning America after retiring.”

She shot me an accusatory glare. “Stalker.”

“I am guilty of being a Miranda Jacobs fan, this is true.” I bit into my burger, which was comprised of two thin patties, American cheese, bacon, and a sauce that was a mixture of mustard and ketchup. “America has the best food in the world. But you must never tell anyone I said this. My people would send me to the guillotine for such blasphemy.”

“Or burn you at the stake like Joan of Arc.”

“Both,” I said around a mouthful of beef. “They would burn me at the stake, and *then* cut the head off my charred body.”

“Normally that kind of talk would ruin my appetite, but this burger is too good for that.” She picked up a handful of fries in her fingertips and bit into them. “So a Frenchman admits that America has the best food.”

“A fact which you must never repeat.”

“I’m glad I have leverage over you,” she teased. “You’re mine, now.”

“J’ai toujours été,” I said softly. *I always was.*

Miranda’s hair shifted as she cocked her head. “What’s that mean?”

“It means please do not abuse this power,” I replied.

“I promise not to. Maybe.” She wiped mustard away with the back of her hand. “If you behave.”

“What an insulting thing to say!” I declared. “All of my professional career, I have never said anything rude or inflammatory.”

Both of us chuckled at that.

Miranda gazed up, and gasped. “You can see the stars! How can you see them? The New York skyline is so close, there’s usually so much light pollution!”

“It is an effect with the stadium,” I explained. “I do not understand it, but an astronomer once explained it to me. It helps negate some of the light pollution. Not all, but some.” I gestured and looked at her. “This is better than a restaurant, no?”

She leaned over and pressed her lips to mine, tasting of mustard. “Much better.”

We finished our meals and then laid on our backs, gazing up at the sky. “Gabriel, I have to tell you something.”

“Does it involve my footwork while playing on grass?” I asked. “Because I am aware of my inefficiency.”

“It’s about my personal life. I want to be totally open and honest with you.”

“I know you have been seeing him,” I said gently.

Miranda rolled over to face me. She was beautiful in the darkness, so beautiful it nearly brought tears to my eyes. “This isn’t about Tristan. It’s actually about...”

“I did not mean Tristan,” I said, cutting her off. “I meant Dominic deGrom. I know you have been seeing him.”

She flinched as if a gunshot had gone off. “How do you know that?”

“It was obvious to me. The way you look at each other when you think nobody else is watching. I saw it that night at the Australian Open welcome dinner, and it has remained ever since.” I rolled over to face her directly. “I am many things, but one truth is that I am a very observant man. It is what gives me an advantage on the court, noticing subtle clues about my opponent’s intentions.”

“So you’ve known since January...” She shook her head in confusion. “It doesn’t bother you? About Dominic *or* Tristan?”

“It does not.”

When I didn't say more, Miranda added, "Can you elaborate on that? I'm actually shocked you're not upset."

"I have been competing with Tristan and Dominic since I was a teenager," I explained. "Mostly, we have competed on the court. It is fitting that now I am competing with them for the heart of the most beautiful woman in the world."

Even in the darkness, I could see Miranda's cheeks turn red.

"And as on the court," I finished, "I intend to win in the end. No matter how long such a victory takes."

Miranda smiled sadly at me. "I like both of them, Gabriel."

"I am quite sure you do. For now."

She hesitated, then said, "I like both of them a lot. I like *you* a lot, too. But I don't think my feelings for them will disappear."

I cupped her cheek. Her skin was so smooth, smoother than I had ever dreamed. "I am not concerned about this. So long as you give me a chance, I am happy."

"Even if it means I continue seeing each of them?" she asked.

"Even if you pulled out a knife and stabbed me in the stomach right now," I said confidently. "It would not so much as diminish my affection for you by a single gram."

She put her hand over mine and smiled back at me. "Grams? What are those?"

I snorted a laugh.

"Can you please convert those into freedom units?" she insisted. "I don't understand the metaphor because of my American education."

"Ounces," I said. "My affection would not be diminished by a single ounce."

"Aww, that's sweet." She leaned in and kissed me again, with the barest flick of tongue. I rolled onto my back once again, and she rolled with me so she could cuddle. I savored

the way her bare leg felt against mine, smooth and warm and intimate.

“Can I ask you a question?” she whispered in the night.

“You can ask anything of me,” I said, meaning every word.

“Why do you put on your arrogant persona? And don’t tell me your agent convinced you to do it in order to get media attention. I don’t believe that. I am also an observant person, and I can tell nobody is forcing you to act that way.”

This topic had been on my mind quite often. A personal battle raging inside of me at all times—even when I was on the court. Having Miranda ask me about it again felt like a crossroads of sorts, in my own life and my infatuation with this woman.

“When I was a boy, perhaps seven or eight, my father took me to the Louvre,” I explained. “There was so much to see! I could have lived there for two weeks and not seen everything. I enjoyed the paintings, and tapestries. The Mona Lisa was fine, if overrated. But do you know what fascinated me the most?”

“The gift shop?” Miranda asked.

“My father did not take me to the gift shop, because we could not afford to buy anything,” I replied.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “My favorite section of the museum contained the medieval armor. All kinds of armor and weaponry! Some were ancient and rusted, and others were polished so finely you could use them as a mirror. Pieces from the Hundred Years War. Thick plate mail that knights would wear to battle, making them nearly invulnerable against their enemies.

“My father explained how swords could not pierce this armor. Enemies had to aim for the weak parts. The joints where the armor met and overlapped. Then the English developed the longbow, which could fire arrows with such power that they punched through the armor as if it was paper. So the French made thicker armor. The English countered this



with advanced arrow tips. And so the armor became even *more* thick, my father explained.

“I began playing tennis around the same age. I was a scared little boy, smaller than everyone else. I was teased. I was bullied. Their taunts were like arrows, piercing my heart. So I built up my armor in the form of arrogance and bravado. When I was a teenager, and everyone grew faster than me, I made this armor thicker. And thicker. Eventually, when I became a professional tennis player, the armor was so thick that nobody could hurt me.”

I paused to collect my thoughts. Miranda said nothing; she simply caressed my arm with her fingertips, waiting.

“But what my father did not tell me,” I went on, “was the thicker the armor, the heavier it is. An obvious fact, of course, but I did not realize the magnitude. My armor protects me, but it weighs me down. Each step is slower, more cumbersome. I know that I cannot continue like this forever. And yet I have worn the armor for so long that I know of no other way to *be*.”

“Your skill on the court is all you need now,” Miranda said softly, eyes flashing up to meet mine. “You have reached the top, Gabriel. You can take the armor off.”

I turned and smiled at her sadly. “That is the other lesson I have learned. The more complex the armor, the longer it takes to remove. But I am trying. Mon dieu, I am trying.”



## Miranda

Gabriel stayed in town for a long weekend—three days and three nights. He had a hotel in downtown Manhattan, but after the first night he came back to my place and stayed there. He was only in town to see me, it turned out, and everything was easier when he wasn't driving in and out of the city.

My schedule was empty, but even if it wasn't, I would have cleared everything for Gabriel. We filled our time with only three things: tennis, sex, and food. And usually in that order. Gabriel seemed to know all the good restaurants in the New York area, and had food delivered directly to my house. Even Michelin star restaurants that didn't deliver somehow made exceptions for him. When I asked him about it, he simply shrugged and said, "I have friends."

All of the meals were divine, but my favorite was the dessert on Saturday night: a vanilla ice cream with a powerful chartreuse sauce. The specific reason it was my favorite was because I got to lick it off Gabriel's bare chest. His bronze skin, and the taut muscle underneath, somehow made it taste even better than out of a bowl.

My retirement had been kind of listless up to this point, which was a strange way to live. Aside from working the broadcast team at tennis tournaments, I wasn't sure what to do with myself on a day-to-day basis. But with Gabriel here, it was nice to have nothing on my schedule. We could actually enjoy our time together.

One evening, Gabriel and I took a shower to clean all the sticky ice cream off our bodies. We ran our hands over each

other, cleaning the other person with soapy suds. Showering with another person was remarkably intimate, even more than sex.

Cleaning led to teasing, and teasing led to kissing. Soon his fingers were rubbing me in a way that had nothing to do with cleanliness, sliding up and down my slit while his tongue writhed inside my mouth. I expected him to bend me over, as that was the best position in the shower. But instead, he lifted my leg up until my foot was resting on the soap dispenser.

“Don’t let me slip!” I said.

He gave me a mischievous grin and grabbed a handful of my ass. “I will hold you steady.”

“Such a gentleman...”

I moaned as he slid his cock into me, not wasting time with any more teasing. The angle was different, but in a good way. *A really* good way. He pumped into me slowly, still squeezing my ass to hold me in position.

I closed my eyes and lost myself in the rhythms of his body. Gabriel nuzzled at my neck, sighing with every thrust. Faster and faster he began to move, driven by his lust for me, a desire I could sense with every nerve in my body. I reached down and rubbed at my clit, burning a fire into my sex in time with his motions.

“Do you trust me?” he suddenly asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

He gazed into my eyes. “Tell me if I should stop.”

“I don’t want you to ever sto—ohhhh.”

I gasped as the hand clutching my ass moved deeper, until his soapy fingers were pushing against my tight backdoor. One finger circled my entrance slowly, coating it, before the tip slid inside.

I had never done anything like that before. The idea didn’t turn me on, and I was self-conscious enough that I didn’t think I would ever want to try it. But I was totally clean in the

shower, and I *did* trust Gabriel, and with the way his cock was pumping into me at the same time...

His finger felt *good*.

“Yes?” he breathed. “Or no?”

I bobbed my head quickly, not trusting myself for words.

Gabriel didn’t push too fast; he kept just the tip of his finger there, allowing me to get used to it while he fucked me. And just when I wanted more, he slid the finger deeper—another knuckle. It was so strange, because I could *feel* it inside of me, his finger rubbing against his thick shaft from two different holes. The sensation quickly built like a wildfire, spreading pleasure everywhere until I was gasping and moaning.

“Where is it?” Gabriel asked. “Where is my finger?”

“My ass,” I breathed while rubbing my clit faster.

“Tell me again,” he demanded, his forehead pressed against mine and our lips almost touching. “I love to hear you say it.”

“It’s in my ass. You’re fingering my *ass*.”

As the word left my lips, a powerful orgasm shook my body. It overwhelmed all of my senses—deafening like the rush of the ocean, and blinding like the sun. A ragged scream escaped my throat, pushing all the air out of my lungs as wave after wave of pleasure destroyed me. The dual stimulating from Gabriel’s cock and finger kept it going, over and over, a never-ending bliss that I couldn’t withstand.

And then he was crying out with me, his hard length pulsing inside of me. I clamped my internal muscles around him and forced my eyes open so I could see the pleasure on his beautiful face, a pleasure so intense it almost looked like pain in his wide eyes. The other fingers of his hand clutched my ass and held me against him as he bottomed out inside of me, pushing as deep as he could while filling me with his seed.

“Have you fantasized about this?” Gabriel asked me as we got out of the shower and toweled off.

“No!” I replied. “Never. That’s never turned me on at all.”

His face paled. “If I had known...”

I quickly kissed him. “I was surprised. But in a good way. I never thought it would feel so *good*.”

And I meant it, too. There was something ridiculously forbidden about that kind of thing, and now that I had done it once, I wanted to try it again.

“I bet it feels better with the real thing,” I said.

He grinned. “It feels better for me. But for you, I think you need to be warmed up. It takes time.”

“I want to try!” I said excitedly. “Over time, I mean. How do you do that? With... toys? Bigger ones each time?”

Gabriel’s smile widened. “I have never seen this side of you.”

“I never knew this side of me existed! You woke something.” I tapped him on the chest. “And it’s not going back to sleep.”

“Perhaps we will have some fun tomorrow,” he said. “Before I leave.”

We ended up *not* trying it the next day because Gabriel had to leave early after getting a call from his agent. “Apparently he booked a charity event at Versailles without telling me,” he explained while quickly packing his bag. “He did not know I was in New York.”

“Technically, we are in New Jersey,” I replied. “You didn’t tell him you were coming?”

“I told him to clear my schedule this weekend. He does not need to know *every* detail of my life. Although, in this specific situation, it would have been ideal for him to know.”

“We’ll just have to have fun when you come back for the US Open,” I replied. “If you can make room for me between practices and matches.”

He set down his bag by the front door and took me into his arms. “Nothing could stop me.”

“Even though this is an important tournament? It’s your chance at winning a calendar grand slam, something only two other men have done.”

“I am trying not to think about this thing,” he replied. “As opposed to you, Miranda Jacobs, who I am trying to think about very much.”

We kissed in front of my door, a kiss that went on and on because neither of us wanted it to end. But like all good things, eventually it *did* end, and Gabriel picked up his bag.

“Au revoir, Miranda,” he said sadly.

“Goodbye, Gabriel.”

And then he was gone.



## Miranda

I was even more bored with retirement life after Gabriel left. I tried to fall into a routine, going for a jog every morning, but that barely bought me enough time until lunch. I played tennis with my friend again, but then she was flying out west to visit her family in Colorado.

Hamilton, my agent, came over a few days later. He had a publishing agent with him from Random House; they wanted me to write an autobiography. “We will hire a ghost writer to assist, of course,” she said.

“Of course,” I replied, although I didn’t know how these things worked.

Once she was gone, I told Hammy, “I don’t want to write a book.”

He scratched at his prosthetic eye and grimaced. “You won’t have to. The ghost writer will do all the work. That’s how these things happen.”

“But I don’t have much of a story to tell. I hate how every athlete or celebrity has to put out a book now. My story isn’t very exciting. Like most tennis players, I came up at a prestigious academy, broke into the professional circuit, and then had a solid career.”

“You’re better than most players,” he pointed out.

“But not to the point that I have an interesting story.”

“There are plenty of angles we could take with the book. Going out on top is rare; we can lean into that. And it’s good

money. *Very* good money.”

“Yeah, but...”

“You don’t have to make a decision now. Just think it over.” He sat on the couch across from me. “I have some other housekeeping items to discuss. I’ve been contacted by the Loyola Marymount Tennis Academy in Los Angeles. They’re interested in hiring you.”

“As an instructor? Pass.”

“I think you would be quite good at it.”

“I’m also quite good at knitting because my grandma taught me when I was six, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy it.”

Hammy grumbled something under his breath and scrolled onto the next item on his tablet. “The Survivor executives want to know how you feel about an all-star season. Either next year, or the year after that.”

“I’m not an all-star. I was voted off five days before the end.”

“Yes, but you’re a bigger name than those who lasted longer, and apparently your ratings were higher.”

I had enjoyed my experience with Survivor, but I had always considered it a one-time thing. Now that I had done it, I had no interest in going back. “Tell them I’ll think about it.”

Hammy grunted something. “Next is NBC. They’re asking again about a long-term contract.”

“I still haven’t decided.”

“Yes, which is why they’re prodding you. Except they’re not prodding *you*, they’re prodding *me*. And I’m running out of excuses to give them. They want an answer.”

“I’ll make a decision after the US Open.”

“That might not be a good idea,” Hammy said slowly. “There are six more women who may retire after the tournament. Seven if the rumors about Navarro are true. NBC may get sick of waiting around for you and decide to test one of them out in the booth.”



“I don’t care,” I said. “They’re welcome to the job.”

Hammy put down his tablet and leaned back on the couch, studying me for a moment. “What’s gotten into you, Miranda?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t seem interested in doing anything. Even broadcasting, which you were quite enthusiastic about a year ago, seems like a bore to you. Do you even want to do anything?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s time I *actually* retired. Not just from tennis, but from everything else surrounding it. I have enough money tucked away to live comfortably.”

Hammy sighed. “If you’re retired, you don’t need an agent.”

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. “Oh, Hammy...”

“I enjoy your company, Miranda, but if you aren’t interested in working then I need to focus my efforts elsewhere.” He smiled. “I’ve made quite a bit of money as your agent over the last decade, but not enough to retire comfortably, I’m afraid.”

Hammy had been with me longer than anyone else—even my coach. The weight of the moment overwhelmed me, and I quickly moved over to sit next to him on the other couch. “I’m not ready to make a decision yet. I’m still thinking about things. But you’re right, I need to decide *something* soon. I promise I won’t leave you on the hook.”

He squeezed my hand and said, “If there’s anyone’s hook I’d like to be on, it’s yours. But seriously, love. Is everything all right?”

“I just feel... I don’t know.”

“You feel like a sailboat without any wind.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“Happens to everyone who retires. Totally normal. It’ll pass once you figure out what you want to do.”

“Who says I want to do something at all?”

“Everyone does. Professional athletes like yourself are too driven to do *nothing* all day.” He stood up. “Now, I need to meet with some clients who *aren't* lazy wankers.”

“Hey!”

“Just kidding. Love you tons, kiddo.”

Seeing Hammy brightened my mood, but not as much as the text I got later that night from a different Australian.

**Tristan:** Hello, gorgeous. Miss me?

**Me:** Actually, I just had a different Australian gentleman leave my house. He helped scratch the Aussie itch.

**Tristan:** It was Hamilton, wasn't it?

**Me:** Boo. Okay, yeah, I've missed you :-)

**Tristan:** That's the right answer, because it turns out I'm coming to America for the US Open earlier than expected.

**Me:** Oh! How much earlier?

**Tristan:** I can see you tomorrow, if you're free.

**Me:** TOMORROW?

**Tristan:** Are those good capital letters, or bad capital letters?

**Me:** VERY GOOD CAPITAL LETTERS

**Me:** What time can I see you?

**Tristan:** How about 8:00 in the evening?

**Me:** That's perfect. I'll get us a bottle of wine.

**Tristan:** Make it a six pack of lager and you've got a deal ;-)

**Tristan:** Oh, and I've got a proposition for you. Something I think you'll be keen on.

**Me:** Intriguing.

The next twenty-four hours passed by slower than a toddler's second serve. I cleaned my condo, then stocked the fridge with beer and stronger alcohol since Gabriel and I had cleaned out my liquor cabinet.

Gabriel. That was a topic I would need to discuss with Tristan. I wouldn't make the same mistake as before; I needed to be totally honest with him. Full disclosure. The same with Dominic, too, if he and I were still a thing. Thinking about the American player caused a twisting pain in my stomach. I missed him every bit as much as I missed Tristan. He lived less than an hour away from me but I hadn't seen or spoken to him since Wimbledon. The urge to text him was powerful.

*He said he needs space. So I'm giving him space.*

It was crazy to think about. A month ago, I was juggling both Dominic and Tristan. Now I had added a *third* lover into my life. And it was another tennis player who was rivals with the others.

Was there something wrong with me? Most women spent their entire lives searching for *the one*. And here I was juggling three men, unable to choose between them.

As the hours ticked down to Tristan's arrival, my nervousness grew. He was fine with me dating him and Dominic at the same time, but would he feel the same way about Gabriel? I was never one to lean on alcohol as a crutch, but I decided to open a bottle of wine to settle my nerves. After a glass and a half, I started to relax.

The doorbell rang, and I almost knocked my glass over. My heart raced as I tried not to sprint to the door, walking slowly—but fast enough that he wouldn't wait long. I smoothed out my sun dress and threw open the door. There he was, Tristan Carfrae, standing tall on my porch with a huge smile on his face.

“Missed that face, love,” he said.

“I know it’s only been a few weeks, but it feels like forever.”  
I stepped forward, prepared to throw myself into his arms...

And then Dominic deGrom stepped out from the side of the porch.



## Miranda

I wasn't mentally—or emotionally—prepared to have Dominic standing in front of me. The last time I'd seen him, it was *bad*. And the silence since then had me wondering if we were through.

But there he was, wearing jeans and a snug-fitting New York Jets T-shirt over his muscular frame. He gave me half a smile as if he were just as surprised to see me.

“Hi, Miranda.”

“Uh oh,” I said, looking between the two of them. “This is bad, isn't it?”

“It's not bad,” Tristan said. “Can we come inside?”

I held the door open to let them in. I didn't believe him. Whatever was happening here, it was bad. They were probably going to make me choose between them. How could I possibly do that? Both men were *incredible* in different ways. Not to mention I now had Gabriel in the mix.

I picked up my glass of wine and finished it in one long gulp. “I bought beer, like you asked. It might not be enough for three of us, but...”

When I turned around, Dominic was standing very close to me. He took a step forward, pushing me against the wall and then kissing me roughly. The taste of his lips, a sensation I hadn't felt in almost a month, banished all other thoughts from my mind.

When the kiss finally ended and he turned aside, I was out of breath. But I didn't have any time to recover because Tristan took his place, crushing his lips against mine and shoving me up against the wall with his body. A moan escaped my lips at the roughness of his desire, powerful after our time apart.

"What... is this about?" I asked when I finally had a chance to catch my breath.

"We wanted to show you," Dominic said.

"Show me what?"

"That we can share you," Tristan replied. "That we're not jealous of each other."

Dominic's green eyes cut over to Tristan. "Well, only a little jealous."

"A manageable amount of jealousy?" Tristan asked.

Dominic nodded. "I would agree to that description."

"Because, like, everyone gets a *little* jealous sometimes," Tristan said to him. "But it's how you handle it that matters the most."

"Totally."

I cleared my throat. "So you're not mad at me?"

"I was at first," Dominic said. "But I realized I was mostly angry that you didn't tell me about it. I hated finding out from the press. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense to wait until after Wimbledon to tell me. Otherwise it would have distracted me. And then Tristan called and told me that you wanted to tell me, and felt bad about keeping it from me..."

Tristan shrugged. "It's the truth, mate."

*They're not mad? Am I dreaming?*

"I'm glad neither of you are jealous," I began.

"Jealous a manageable amount," Dominic corrected.

I waved a hand. “Yes, yes. I’m glad. But why are you both here at the same time? You could have told me without flying here.”

The two of them shared a look.

“We didn’t want to just *tell* you,” Dominic answered. “We wanted to *show* you.”

“To make sure you believe us,” Tristan added.

Dominic pulled his shirt off, revealing the tapestry of muscle underneath. Tristan leaned in and kissed the place where my neck met my shoulders, his hand sliding along my hip possessively.

“I want to tell you something,” I whispered.

“It can wait,” Tristan murmured into my neck.

“I started seeing another man,” I forced myself to say. “We aren’t exclusive, but...”

Dominic cupped my jaw and looked deeply into my eyes. “I don’t want to hear a word you say until after I’m done having my way with you.”

“After *we’re* done having *our* way with her,” Tristan corrected.

Dominic kissed me, and suddenly I forgot all about everything I wanted to say. Two pairs of lips and four hands began worshiping my body, groans from two throats filling my ears, and nothing else in the world mattered.

I was already buzzed on wine, but soon I was drunk on the two of them.



### Tristan

Miranda was strangely hesitant at first. We had expected her to be fully on-board with this, especially when paired with the knowledge that Dominic had forgiven her. But she held back as if she didn't believe this was really happening. Like we would abruptly stop and yell "Gotcha!" at any moment.

But once she gave in to our kisses, she surrendered completely. She pushed into my kiss, wrapping a leg around my torso and pressing her breasts against my chest. My cock leaped at the way she felt, eager to feel her from the inside.

"I'll grab those beers," Dominic said, darting into the kitchen. He returned with three bottles, and handed them out. I was grateful for the liquid; my mouth was dry out of nervousness. As Miranda tossed back her beer, I shared a glance with Dominic.

*Are we really going to do this?*

It was one thing to be partners on the court. That required a tremendous amount of teamwork and trust. Yet this was something else entirely. I'd had a threesome once before, when I was new on the tour and tennis groupies were throwing themselves at me. But that was two women. I wasn't sure if I was comfortable having another guy in bed with me. It was a great big unknown, like playing on a clay surface for the first time.

Miranda put her beer down and kept her wide eyes locked on mine as she drew near. She reached out and touched my chest with her fingers, letting them slide across the fabric of my shirt. And then she tilted her head up, plump lips out and



waiting, and there was no way that I couldn't kiss her. Her mouth fit perfectly with mine, sliding and sucking and begging for tongue. Before I could, she pulled away and looked up at me.

"You're *positive* this doesn't bother you?" she asked, turning toward Dominic. She kissed him harder than she'd kissed me, which ignited a tiny flame of jealousy in my chest. But there was a deeper fire roaring within me as I watched this beautiful woman kiss my doubles partner.

Lust.

Watching her make out with Dominic turned me on more than I ever could have expected. My cock was rock-hard within seconds, more from seeing them kiss than from kissing her myself. She opened her mouth for him, and their tongues danced together while she pressed her body against his broad chest. One of his massive hands swung around and cupped her round ass through her sun dress, fingers pushing through the soft fabric and into her flesh.

Miranda pulled back then, and regarded both of us with a serious expression. "This isn't going to make either of you uncomfortable? You're sure you can do this and not be awkward about it?"

"Yeah, we can," I managed to say. I could barely breathe, from nervousness and excitement. Dominic only bobbed his head in a nod.

And then Miranda dropped to her knees in front of me, fingers working quickly on the zipper of my jeans. "That's the answer I was hoping to hear. Because once we start, I don't want to have to stop."

I gasped as her fingers tightened around my cock expertly, sliding it out through the hole in my jeans. She paused to get a good look at it, admiring it even, or maybe that was just wishful thinking as she batted her eyelashes and looked up at me.

Her mouth devoured me, lips wrapping tight around my shaft as she took half of it in her mouth in one swift motion. I

groaned with surprise and ecstasy, totally unprepared to have my dick in this beautiful woman's mouth tonight. *We* were supposed to be the ones worshiping *her*. She held her head there, as if trying to squeeze as much of my hard length inside as she could. Then she gasped and pulled back, her chest heaving as she caught her breath.

"You know what I love?" she asked, a grin flashing on her pretty mouth. "When a guy takes what he wants. Can you take what you want, Tristan?"

And then she was sucking on my cock again, lips widening as she tried to accept as much as possible.

*Take what you want.*

I ran my fingers through her raven hair, smooth like silk, until I was palming her scalp. I gripped her head firmly, pushing her head farther down on my shaft. An extra inch. She wrapped her lips obediently, vibrating with a moan as she took as much of my cock as she could. When she could handle no more I released the pressure and she pulled back, gasping again and panting as she gazed up at me with hunger in her eyes. A spiderweb of saliva connected the tip of my cock to her gorgeous lips.

"Well?" she asked, turning to Dominic. "I thought you were proving that you two could share me. What are you waiting for?"

Dominic was like a ball boy rushing to retrieve a stray tennis ball. His jeans dropped to the floor, revealing his own manhood. Surprisingly, it wasn't weird seeing another guy naked. I'd seen plenty of men nude in other contexts. And it wasn't weird as Miranda grabbed his hips with both of her hands and pulled him into her mouth, quickly moving up and down his shaft like time was of the essence.

"Holy fucking shit," he said, mouth hanging open. His green eyes glanced in my direction.

"I know," I said, gently stroking myself.

Miranda grinned around his shaft, then pulled back slowly, making a soft popping sound as she left his tip. "I know, too."

She reached over and grabbed me by the shaft, pulling me toward her so she could take me in her mouth again. One long stroke, as far as she could go and back again, then shifting her attention again to Dominic. She went like that for several strokes, sucking me off and then Dominic, alternating cocks in her mouth while kneeling on the floor.

It was the hottest thing I'd ever experienced. It took all of my willpower not to pick her up and pin her against the wall, hike up that little sun dress, and pound her like there was no tomorrow. I resisted the urge to close my eyes, and instead watched her work, this incredible woman who I was sharing with my doubles partner.

"I don't mean to interrupt," Dominic said after several minutes of Miranda on her knees, "But this isn't what we came here for."

She made eye contact with him while her lips were sucking on the tip of my cock. She pulled back and said, "Oh?"

"We were supposed to show that we could share you."

"Right now you're sharing my mouth." She punctuated the statement by licking the underside of my shaft, then doing the same to Dominic.

"We wanted to share you in a way that *you* would enjoy," I said.

She grinned up at us. "Who says I'm not enjoying this as much as you are?"

Miranda bent back over Dominic, grabbing his ass with both hands and giving him the deepest blowjob she could. Finally she gasped and pulled back and said, "You know what I really want?"

"What?" Dominic and I said at the same time.

"I want to fuck both of you at the same time." She rose and looked me in the eyes. "If you can make it worth my while."

I grinned an animalistic smile at her. "I can try."

"Don't just try," she said, a fire glimmering in her eyes.

*Don't have to tell me twice.*

I picked her up by the thighs. Instantly she wrapped her firm legs around my body in a vice grip. I pushed her against the wall for leverage, holding her in the air while she hiked her cocktail dress up past her waist. Her panties were pink with black lace, sexy as hell. What was even sexier was the way she quickly pulled them aside, revealing her glistening pussy.

“You like this?” I whispered while our faces were close. That simple question pulled a moan from her full lips.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, yes, *yes*.”

I thrust my hips forward, the tip of my cock wedging apart her lips and sliding in like it belonged there. It was a miracle I didn't blow my load then and there; she was tight and warm and felt like home. Like I'd been waiting to be there for all these years.

“Tristan,” she gasped with wide eyes. My name on her lips drove me to a higher level of ecstasy, and again I had to tell myself to hold back. To last longer, that it would be a tragedy to come so early in the night, when we had such wonderful plans for her.

“Miranda,” I breathed, eager to say her name. Every nerve in my cock was aflame with pleasure inside of her. Even though it had only been a few weeks, it felt like a lifetime since I'd held her in my arms and listened to her moan. I gripped her ass more tightly as I fucked her against the wall.

She tilted her head back and shoved her hips against me, urging me on. I held her upright with ease, both hands gripping her ass, and pounded her in long, steady strokes, driven more by animal lust than by conscious thought. The picture frame on the wall thudded in time with my thrusts.

“You,” she said, nodding at Dominic. “Are you enjoying watching this?”

“I am,” he replied. “More than I expected.”

“Touch yourself,” she gasped while I fucked her deeply. Dominic needed no other encouragement, and began stroking himself to the sight of us.

It still wasn't weird. It was just the two of us worshipping this incredible woman, this goddess of flesh moaning underneath my grasp.

"Don't come yet," she said, eyes closed and head back against the wall. "I need more."

"I'll give you whatever you need tonight," I promised. I meant it. I would give Miranda *anything* she wanted.

She moaned louder and louder, then put a hand on my chest. Pushing me back. I lessened my grip on her thighs and lowered her to the ground, my cock sliding out of her. The sudden normalcy made everything feel less vibrant, like the world had changed to black and white. The urge to take her again, to not go another second without being inside of her, almost drove me mad with lust.

I cupped her chin and said, "What do you want? I'll give you anything."

"Anything?" she asked.

"Name it."

She kissed me, tongue flicking against my own. The taste of beer lingered there.

Miranda's eyes flashed open. "I want both of you," she said. Her hand shot out and cradled Dominic's jaw. "I want both of you... inside me at the same time."



### Miranda

Based on the looks on their faces, it was a wonder they didn't blow their loads right then and there.

I had never considered myself a dirty girl. I masturbated, but typically preferred watching boring, vanilla porn—the kind where the couple is slow and passionate with each other. Occasionally I watched something more exotic, like a threesome scene, but it was rare.

I had never fantasized about having my own threesome. I wasn't sure why; maybe because I never expected to meet two men who would want to. Guys were rarely comfortable seeing each other naked, much less having sex with the same girl at the same time. What if their legs touched? The horror!

But Tristan and Dominic were comfortable with everything so far, and their comfort turned *me* on. It made me want to try it. It made me want to try other things, too. Things Gabriel had turned me onto.

“You want both of us inside you at the same time?” Dominic said as he stroked himself, still hesitant. “Like, giving me a blowjob while he fucks you?”

I shook my head. “That would be hot. But it's not what I meant.”

The two of them looked at each other. “Tell me what you mean,” Dominic asked, the tiniest ghost of a smile touching his lips.

He wanted me to say it out loud. To make sure it was okay, that it was really what I wanted before he took the plunge. But

where was the fun in that? I wanted them to *take* what they wanted. Tonight I was theirs to do with as they saw fit.

I approached Dominic and let my fingers drag along the underside of his cock. He shivered. I leaned in close for a kiss and whispered, “You can stick it wherever you want.”

He grinned with surprise, then lust. “You sure?”

“Have you done that before?” Tristan asked.

“No,” I replied. “But I want to try with the two of you.”

They looked at each other again. Thinking about it. Rolling it around in their minds. Dominic picked up his beer and downed the rest of it, then bit his lip and watched me.

“Unless you two can’t share me properly,” I teased.

Dominic braced me by the arms, whirled me around, and pushed me down on the couch. I spread my legs for him, and his fingers pushed inside my wet pussy, making me moan and tremble. His fingers curled up in a come hither motion, rubbing against my forward wall. I took hold of his cock, stroking it because I needed to touch him, to make him feel as good as I did.

Then Dominic’s fingers left my sex and slid lower, down to my puckered little rosebud. My lips parted in a sigh as he rubbed my juices around, lubricating me in preparation for what would come next.

Now that I was prepared for it, I was excited. More excited than when Gabriel had done this with me.

“I know what you want,” he said.

“Mmm, do you?”

“Fuck yeah I do.”

He grabbed hold of my legs and tilted me back, lifting my butt off the edge of the couch and into the air. Dominic devoured the sight of me, and I took a moment to do the same with him. His arms flexed and bulged as he held my legs up. The vein in his neck pulsed as he prepared to take me.

“Give it to her,” Tristan urged, stroking himself gently to the side. “Fuck her.”

“Fuck me,” I asked in a nervous voice.

He let go of one of my legs and took hold of his beautiful cock. He slid it into my pussy, coating himself with my natural lubricant, before pulling out and aiming lower. The tip pressed against my tight rear entrance, and as I relaxed it slid right inside. I moaned with intense pleasure, which urged Dominic to push more of his cock inside me, which made me moan louder, and on and on. It was a feedback loop resulting in him plunging almost half of his cock deep into my ass.

“God damn,” he said, sweat beading at his temple. “You’re so tight.”

His cock filled me totally, a sensation that made me feel complete. I let my fingers drift down to my clit and rubbed myself as the pleasure spread throughout my body, like a warm blanket covering me from head to toe.

*I can't believe I'm doing this, I thought. I'm letting Dominic fuck my ass.*

Dominic gripped my legs harder and began moving, a few inches in and out of me at a time. Each stroke was deeper than before. He was coming unraveled, losing the willpower to go slowly. I could see it on his face.

Which was good, because I didn’t want him to go slowly. I moaned louder and raked my fingers over the muscles that could have been sculpted by a master, and my moans urged him on, fucking me deeper and deeper into my forbidden hole.

“I love the way your ass grips my cock,” Dominic said with a lusty grin. “Like a firm handshake.”

“My ass was made for you,” I purred. “It’s yours.”

“Goddamn right it is.”

I rubbed myself faster. The indirect stimulation of his hard length inside my behind brought me to a quick, but intense, climax. I shuddered on the couch, closing my eyes and curling my toes so hard they almost cramped.



“You,” I breathed, reaching a hand out in Tristan’s direction. “I need you inside of me too.”

Tristan glided toward me on his long legs, dark eyes glistening. He pushed Dominic away, and I sighed as his manhood left me feeling empty and incomplete. Tristan sat on the edge of the couch and pulled me on top until I was straddling him, cowgirl style.

His cock was only semi-hard as it slid back into my pussy, but within seconds it was rock-hard as I ground my hips into him, gyrating in a circle. He reached a hand around and smacked my ass so hard it stung, sending a jolt of excitement up my spine.

“Think you can handle both of us?” Tristan looked up at me and asked.

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “But I want to try. I need both of you. I’ve needed you these past weeks.”

Tristan grabbed both of my ass cheeks and spread them wide for his friend. Before I could take a breath, Dominic plunged the tip of his cock inside. Any more than that and I *wouldn’t* have been able to handle it, but it was fine with just the tip. Tristan’s eyes widened as we both felt the second dick enter me.

“Oh God,” I moaned.

“Holy fuck,” Tristan agreed, eyes glistening.

“Relax,” Dominic said, leaning forward until his lips were right next to my ear. He gave it a playful bite and said, “Just relax like this for a minute. Get used to both of us.”

Then he pushed my head down, forcing me to kiss Tristan. Not that I needed any encouraging as I slid my tongue into his mouth. Slowly, I felt myself relaxing with the two cocks inside of me. It wasn’t painful, but it was... a lot. More pressure than I expected. But as I relaxed, I felt my desire growing inside of me.

*Both of them...*

Dominic grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me back, arching my back on their twin cocks until I was twisted, facing him. He kissed me hard, sucking on my tongue and pulling it into his mouth as he began to fuck me.

“I didn’t think that ass could get any tighter,” he growled. He planted his palm between my shoulder blades and pushed me back down on Tristan, then began fucking me like he really meant it. Long, slow strokes that filled my ass from behind.

*Oh my God. I’m being double-penetrated.*

Somehow, Tristan’s cock became even stiffer inside of me. Like he was propelled into a more intense arousal that challenged everything he knew. The look he gave me told me he wanted all of me, every way he could, as much as he could get.

He began to drive his hips up into me, ramping up my pleasure another degree. Feeling the two cocks pumping inside different holes flipped every erogenous switch in my body. Nerve endings I didn’t realize I possessed were filled with ecstasy, intense and extraordinary. I craned my head and cried out with a pleasure I’d never known.

Dominic’s strokes were long and powerful as they crashed into my back door again and again. The two men, two of the most talented tennis players alive, fucked me like they were trying to earn a trophy. Tristan grabbed my ass, and Dominic wrapped his arms under my chest to palm both breasts; the sensation of four hands clinging to me brought me to another orgasm that shook my body and made me wonder if I had died and gone to heaven. Sexy, sinful heaven.

*It’s so intense,* the thought flickered across my consciousness. *I almost can’t handle it. Almost.*

“I want to fill your ass with my come,” Dominic growled. A declaration and a question all at once.

“Fill it,” I begged as my climax raged on, and on, and on. “Fill my ass. Come for me!”

Tristan grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me into a hungry kiss as Dominic moaned louder behind me. Tristan’s

chest heaved with frantic breaths as he neared his own shuddering finish, thrusting up into me from beneath with equal fervor.

Their simultaneous roars of pleasure were pure, extracted bliss. A duet of lust and love as they double-penetrated me, filling my separate holes with their milky seed, still pumping even as they came, unable to stop themselves until their sweaty bodies were completely drained.

Dominic hunched over and kissed the back of my neck. A trickle of his sweat landed between my shoulders and rolled down my back. “That was fucking amazing,” he groaned.

“Mmm hmm,” I managed to say.

He pulled out and went to the bathroom first, which was fine because I didn’t want to leave Tristan. With him still inside of me, I rested on his chest as if he were a big, muscular pillow. He stroked my hair and planted soft kisses on my head.

“I bet you didn’t expect *that* when we came over,” he whispered.

I shook my head without opening my eyes. “Not even close. But it was everything I didn’t know I needed.”



## Dominic

It was good.

It was all so *good*.

When I found out Tristan and Miranda were romantically involved, I was devastated. I remember getting the text message notification while in the locker room at Wimbledon, preparing to go out for my semifinals match. I felt like the biggest fool in the world.

Only over time did I realize it wasn't because of their relationship itself. Miranda and I had agreed that we weren't exclusive, so it's not like she was cheating on me. No, I was upset because of the circumstances of how I found out. At the exact same time as the rest of the world, learning about their tryst as a juicy piece of tennis gossip rather than something that personally affected me. Nobody knew that I was also involved with her. It wasn't humiliating in *that* regard.

But my humiliation still ran deep.

Only after going home and processing everything did it all make sense to me. I didn't mind that Miranda was seeing other people. I knew that already, and I genuinely didn't mind it. But for it to be Tristan Carfrae, my doubles partner, stung. They kept it from me, a secret they didn't think I could bear. The clandestine nature of their relationship, hidden from my knowledge, made it feel like something different.

Tristan helped me see how wrong I was. They wanted to tell me, but didn't want it to distract from my Wimbledon performance. Because I was certain of it, now: if I'd known

about them ahead of time, it would have distracted me during the tournament. Waiting until *after* Wimbledon was the right decision.

It just sucked that the tabloids broke the story first.

Now here we were, in Miranda's condo in New Jersey, having a threesome. I had been nervous about the whole thing. Tristan and I had agreed beforehand that if either of us were uncomfortable, we could leave at any time. But he didn't leave, and neither did I. We stayed for the whole thing.

It wasn't uncomfortable. It was *insanely hot*.

Watching Miranda and Tristan together increased my own lust, like watching foreplay of what I was about to do. Her eagerness and enthusiasm for both of us definitely added to that. And when I drove into her from behind while she rode Tristan, double-penetrating her with my doubles partner...

*Yeah, I thought while cleaning up in the bathroom. I can definitely share her. As long as it means having a piece of her heart.*

I left the bathroom and the others cleaned up, then we got dressed and collapsed onto the couch together with three fresh beers. Miranda sat between the two of us, idly caressing our legs with her fingertips.

"So, are you glad I came along?" I asked.

She flashed a huge smile at me. "*So* glad. I've spent a lot of time these past weeks worrying about what you think of me."

"You really enjoyed... what we just did," Tristan commented. "I'll be honest. I didn't know you were into anything like that."

"Honestly, I didn't know either until recently." Miranda took a long sip of beer and then cleared her throat. "Which brings me to the thing I wanted to tell you earlier. I've started seeing Gabriel. Moreau."

The news washed over me. For some reason, it didn't sting. Maybe that was because I knew she had already gone on a

date with him back in Paris. Or maybe it was because I had come to terms with not having Miranda all to myself.

“Gabriel Moreau? The tennis player? *That* Gabriel Moreau?” Tristan asked.

“Is there any other one?” Miranda replied nervously.

Tristan leaned over to look at me. “You seem to be taking this well.”

I shrugged. “I don’t mind Miranda being with other men. I’ve come to terms with it. The honesty is what matters to me, so I appreciate you telling us now.”

“I *tried* to tell you when you first got here, but you wouldn’t hear it,” she added.

“He’s so... ugh,” Tristan groaned. “Did it have to be him? Billions of other men on the planet and you picked the biggest cunt asshole...”

“His arrogant attitude is all a front,” she insisted. “He’s really quite sweet when he acts like himself.”

“He shouldn’t have to *act* at all,” I muttered. “Some of us try to be genuine most of the time.”

“Yeah, what he said,” Tristan agreed.

“There are complicated reasons for the way Gabriel behaves,” Miranda said defensively. “I know it’s hard to put yourselves in his shoes, but trust me, he’s dealing with his own issues.”

I shared another look with Tristan. He shrugged. “Yeah, but... did it have to be him?”

“It is him,” she replied. “If this is a problem... then I understand.”

Her voice cracked at the end, and I realized just how nervous she was. Miranda was being very vulnerable with us right now—maybe even more vulnerable than she’d been during sex just twenty minutes ago. She was being honest with us, and giving us the chance to walk away.

*There’s no way I’m walking away from this girl.*

“I don’t like Gabriel, but that’s not a deal breaker for me,” I said. “Not even close.”

“Damn right,” Tristan agreed. “I’m not gonna have a cry about it.”

She let out a long sigh of relief. “I’m *really* happy to hear that.”

“I just have one question.”

She turned to me and cocked her head.

“Is he a better lover than us?”

“Oh!” Tristan said. “That’s a good one. I need to know that, too.”

Miranda’s cheeks were red. As if *talking* about sex were somehow more naughty than the filthy act we had just done. “Gabriel is quite good in bed. But after what the two of you just did with me, I can honestly say Gabriel is not better.”

Tristan held up his palm, and we high-fived above Miranda’s head. “Fuckin’ nice.”

Miranda laughed. “You two really are teammates now, aren’t you?”

“We’ve had plenty of time to mesh together,” I said. “Tristan got in a week ago, and we’ve been practicing.”

Miranda’s eyes widened and she whirled around to face him. “You got in a *week ago* and didn’t text me about it until last night?”

“I was busy!” he said. “We’ve been practicing twice a day. Plus I wanted to work everything out with Dominic, first.”

“Well, I’m glad you worked it all out,” she said. “And you were right about your proposition. I was very keen on it.”

“Oh, the threesome wasn’t the proposition,” Tristan said.

“It wasn’t?”

“You’d better tell her,” I said. “I think she’ll like it.”

“You think I’ll like it *more* than getting double-teamed by two gorgeous tennis players?” she asked.

“Maybe not more than that. But yeah, you’ll like it.” Tristan twisted sideways on the couch to face her. “There’s three weeks until the US Open. I’ve begun switching to a two-handed backhand swing.”

“I thought your oblique had healed.”

“It did, mostly, but it’s not at a hundred percent. And I want to avoid injuring it again before the Australian Open. Which is why I want to hire you to coach me.”

“You want me to be your coach,” she replied, deadpan.

“Just for the three weeks leading into the tournament. And in between matches, if you notice things that can help me. You’ve got a good eye for that sort of thing.”

“I’m on the broadcast team at NBC,” she said. “I’ll be doing a lot of prep-work the week before the tournament.”

“That’s fine. We can coordinate schedules so you can do both. Only if you *want* to, I mean, since—”

She threw herself into his arms. “Of course I’ll coach you. As long as you’re not a stubborn ass about it this time.”

Tristan held up a palm as if he were taking an oath. “I solemnly swear to be a regular arse, and not a stubborn one.”

Miranda let out a happy little noise. “I’m excited! I want to help you be the best player you can be.”

“Ehh,” I said, “don’t make him *too* good. I might have to face him this tournament.”

“We might have to face your *other* boyfriend during the tournament, too,” Tristan said.

“Woah, hey, boyfriend is a strong word,” Miranda said. “I prefer the term *lover*.”

“Okay then, lover,” I said. “What do you want to do tonight? Order some food, watch a movie?”

“We could watch Rocky,” Miranda suggested. “Since Tristan has never seen it.”



I leaned over to look him in the eyes. “You’ve never seen Rocky? Seriously?”

“Poor fella works hard and wins at boxing,” Tristan said. “Not a story I’m interested in.”

“He doesn’t win, actually,” I said.

“Wow, spoilers.”

Miranda cleared her throat. “I definitely want to order some food. But I don’t think I’m down for a movie. I was hoping we could... have some more fun.”

Tristan and I looked at her.

“*Not* the same kind of fun,” she quickly clarified. “My booty is actually a little sore. But some regular fun.”

“Regular threesome fun,” I said.

“Right.”

I looked at my beer and then got up. “I’m going to need some Gatorade first, then. You two go start without me.”



## Miranda

Was this my life now? Was I the kind of woman who had threesomes with two hot male tennis players?

The whole thing still didn't feel real, even after we did it a second time. I was barely buzzed this time, totally aware of everything that was going on, and yet it still seemed like a dream. Wedged between two god-like bodies, their chiseled muscles in my view no matter which way I looked. Endless kisses and caresses and moans.

Soon we settled into a nice routine. I started training with Tristan every morning at a facility near me in New Jersey. Unlike the first time I tried coaching him, he was receptive to everything I said. Like a perfect student, he stood where I told him to stand and completed every single drill, even the extremely basic ones that were usually reserved for beginner players. And he didn't complain once.

He was rough at first. It was difficult to try something new, after all. But he steadily improved, each shot having more accuracy and confidence. I could see that he still had the old muscle memory from when he used a two-handed grip years ago, before switching to one-handed. I just needed to help him bring that muscle memory to the forefront.

Not only was it going well for Tristan, but it was incredibly fulfilling for me as a coach! Watching his improvement every day was more satisfying than I could have expected. Far more satisfying than broadcasting a match on TV.

"You've made quite the impression on him," Tristan's full-time coach told me one day while we watched him run through

footwork drills.

“It helps that he’s eager to improve,” I replied.

The coach shook his head without looking at me. “Not on the court. I meant everything else. He’s smitten.”

I felt my cheeks grow hot. “I don’t know about that.”

Now he turned to look at me. “I do.”

Tristan finished his drill and smiled at me from across the court. “How was that?”

“Do it again,” I called. “Push off quicker with your left foot this time.”

The coach was still staring at me, but I ignored him while focusing on Tristan.

Dominic came by in the afternoons to work on doubles practice. Their two coaches played doubles against them for practice, with me subbing in every now and then. Despite only being doubles partners for a month, they were a good team. Doubles was all about anticipating what your partner would do, matching their footwork to cover areas when they moved. It was like a dance, pushing and pulling each other around the court on invisible strings.

Back when I played doubles earlier in my career, it took *years* to get to a comfortable level with my partner. Yet Dominic and Tristan fell into it naturally.

*Maybe that’s why they’re so good together in the bedroom,* I thought.

We continued having threesomes regularly. It wasn’t always as intense as that first time when they double-penetrated me; most times we didn’t do anything involving my ass at all. But it was always really, *really* hot.

It was like I had learned a new tennis serve. Now that it was in my repertoire, I wanted to use it as often as possible.

*Is this what I’ve been missing out on while focusing on my tennis career?* I wondered one night while sandwiched between my two lovers, Dominic snoring softly while

Tristan's eyes moved rapidly behind his eyelids. *No, I doubt most women live like this. What I have is special.*

And like all things special, it might not last forever. For now, it was divine. I finally felt like I was living my best life in retirement.

A week before the US Open, Gabriel flew into town. I met him for dinner in downtown Manhattan, at a Michelin star restaurant that was fancier than anything I had ever been to before. Gabriel had a table in a private room, sequestered from the other patrons.

"I am friends with the sommelier," he said, greeting me with a warm hug. "Mon dieu, Miranda. You are more magnificent than I remember."

"You're looking sharp yourself," I said, admiring his grey suit. It fit his slim body perfectly, like every outfit I had seen him wear.

Gabriel ordered the chef's tasting menu with wine pairings, and we nibbled on each course while catching up. This was the only night Gabriel could meet with me this week; as the world number one, his schedule was completely full leading into the tournament.

"It was a struggle to meet with you tonight," he admitted. "I had to cancel an appearance on a late night show."

"Oh! Which one?"

"One of the Jimmys." He waved a hand. "Fallon, or Kimmel, or Hendrix. I cannot remember which. But I would rather be with you."

"The media coverage surrounding the tournament is higher than I've ever seen," I said. "Are you nervous?"

He took a sip of wine and then carefully put down the glass. "I am more than nervous. I am scared."

I blinked. "Really?"

A thoughtful expression passed across his face as he stared at his plate. "There has always been a tremendous amount of pressure on me. All professional athletes feel it, yes?" He

waited for me to nod. “I have always thrived under such pressure. It allows me to focus. Yet this time...”

He paused as the servers brought out the next course: venison loin in a red wine truffle sauce.

“This time?” I asked gently.

“This time the pressure is... I cannot think of the word for it. Too much. It is affecting every interview I give, every smile I make in public.” He looked at me with worry in his eyes. “I am terrified that I will not be able to overcome it.”

I reached across the table and held his hand. “I felt that way before the Australian Open two years ago. When I was trying to accomplish a *career* grand slam. I cannot imagine how much more pressure is on you to do it in one year.”

“How did you survive it?” he asked while cutting a tiny sliver off his venison.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I guess I stopped fighting it. Before every match, my coach told me to open myself up and allow the pressure inside, to let it overwhelm me. I trembled. I cried. I punched the air. And then, after a few minutes, I pushed it all out. After that, it was easier to focus without thinking about it.”

“Perhaps I will try this,” he said. “If it worked for the great Miranda Jacobs, surely it will work for a lowly player such as myself.”

I snorted. “Lowly player? You’re the highest ranked man in the world. You deserve more credit.”

“Perhaps. Yet I do not feel like it.” He bit into the meat. “Sometimes I think I am that same little boy at the Academy, fighting for an equal chance as all the others.”

I watched Gabriel cut into another portion. He was gentle tonight. Humble. He was trying to take the armor off.

It made me hopeful for the future.



## Miranda

After weeks of training and fun, it was time for the US Open to begin—but first there was the US Open welcome dinner the night before the first set of matches were scheduled. It was a fancier event than at the Australian Open, with elaborate dresses for the women and tuxedos for the men.

“I’m close to signing that new Chilean star,” Hammy told me as we exited the car and walked inside. “I hate to ask, but I might need your help closing the deal out.”

“I’ll gladly talk her into signing with you,” I said, taking Hammy’s arm while photographers snapped away.

“Thank you, Miranda.” We paused for photos, then walked inside, where we were both handed glasses of champagne. “I hate to bring up work while we’re here, but I got an email from one of the suits at NBC. They’re not happy about you coaching Tristan Carfrae.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why would they care?”

“Something about a conflict of interest. They wanted to make sure you won’t be coaching him during the tournament.”

“I can’t promise that,” I said. “If I notice things he can improve on, I need to tell him.”

Hammy sighed. “Just make sure you do so discreetly.”

“I can do that.”

He sipped his champagne and glanced at me. “And the other things we discussed? Are you any closer to making a decision?”

“I’m close, I really am. Give me two more weeks of patience?”

“For you? Anything.”

I kissed him on the cheek. “Now I’ll *definitely* talk you up to that Chilean star. And I won’t even need to lie!”

“Lucky me. I’m going to find some food. Hopefully they have portions larger than a thumbnail.”

After he was gone, I wandered around the event, mingling and making small talk. One of the downsides to being a former champion was that *everyone* wanted to talk to me, if only long enough to get a photo taken. Players, coaches, agents, reporters. Roger Federer’s wife came up to me and spent ten minutes gushing about how much she loved my dress. I even had a journalist ask me if I had chosen a ghost writer for my autobiography. When I told him I wasn’t sure if I would even write one, he quickly gave me his card and said he would do it for half the cost of anyone else, because he was such a big fan.

“You look exhausted,” a posh English voice said when the journalist was gone.

“Tim!” Tim Henman, my partner in the booth at Wimbledon, gave me a big hug. “Didn’t expect to see you here. You’re not broadcasting with me, are you?”

“Afraid not. I’m with the radio team for Sky Sports. You’re paired with McEnroe. Say, I heard you’re doing a little coaching on the side. It has the NBC executives all in a stir.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t worry, I’m not coaching him now. I was just consulting on a specific part of his game leading up to the tournament.”

“And how has the paparazzi treated you?”

“Surprisingly good! There were a few articles written about our relationship, but overall it has not been bad at all.” I thought about Gabriel stepping in and making the reporters stop.

“Well, I hope you don’t turn to coaching full-time. I’ve never had a better partner in the booth, and I want to see you at

Wimbledon next year.”

After he left, I still felt thrilled by the compliment. It was nice knowing I was appreciated for what I was doing, even if I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a commentator long-term.

For the first time since I had arrived, nobody was running up to accost me. I gazed around the room and saw the person I was looking for by the bar.

“Has anyone ever said you look like James Bond in a tuxedo?” I said to Dominic.

“Bond is English, so no, nobody has ever said that to me.”

I lowered my voice. “You have no idea how much I want to squeeze your tushy.”

“That would *really* set the papers talking.” He accepted two drinks from the bartender. “You're right on time. Vodka lemon spritz. It's the closest thing to a Mike's Hard Lemonade I could get them to make.”

“I just had a major case of *déjà vu*.” I took the glass and touched it against his. “It feels like ages ago since you brought me one of these at the Australian Open.”

Dominic laughed heartily. “It does feel like that. So much has changed since then. For the better, I might add.”

“Really? You were number one then, and now you've dropped down to number two.”

He shrugged. “There are more important things than tennis rankings. Overall, I'm in a much better place now than I was in January.”

Tristan came sauntering up with a pint in his hand. “There's my favorite bedroom partner.” He smiled. “And Miranda.”

“You're really going to get the tabloids talking if they overhear you,” I said, hiding my own smile.

“Good. Then I'll *really* enjoy my last pint before the tournament.” He took a long pull from it. “Cheers.”

“To a successful US Open,” I toasted, and we all touched glasses.



“How do you feel about being the number four seed?” I asked. “It’s higher seeding than anyone expected of you.”

Tristan shrugged. “Not worried about it.”

“It means you’ll have to face Gabriel in the semifinals, if you both get that far.”

“Not worried about it. Just happy to be here. My eyes are on Melbourne. This is just a warm-up. Of course, I’d be happy to win. Even if it means going through him, then you.” He playfully elbowed Dominic.

“Has a team of doubles partners ever had to face each other in singles before?” Dominic wondered out loud.

“Pretty sure Venus and Serena did a few times.”

“Let’s not go counting chickens and whatnot,” Tristan said, clapping Dominic on the back. “One match at a time. Right, Miranda?”

“I like your attitude,” I said with a nod.

“Moreau has a stacked half of the bracket,” Dominic said. “Probably the toughest road any top seed has had in years. If he completes the calendar grand slam, he’ll have earned it.”

“I will have earned it either way,” Gabriel suddenly said, approaching from behind Tristan. He had a glass of red wine in his hand, the color of which matched the pocket square in his jacket.

“There he is,” Dominic said cautiously. “We were just talking about your end of the bracket. And how strong it is.”

Gabriel smiled smugly. “This is funny to me. I looked at my bracket and was disappointed with how easy it appeared.” His accent was crisp tonight.

Tristan stiffened, but his words were still kind. “You’ve made every match this year look easy. Quite a run.”

“Hate to see it end here,” Dominic added.

Gabriel’s smile broadened. “I hope the two of you will try your best. I do not want anyone claiming my opponents were suffering oblique injuries when I lift the trophy in two weeks.”

A dark expression fell over Tristan's face, but he said nothing.

"You've come a long way since we were all at the Academy," Dominic said.

*Careful*, I thought, shooting him a warning look.

"You were the smallest one there," Dominic continued. "We all thought you were three or four years younger. You could barely see above the net when volleying."

The tension in the air was thick. It was like watching two trains speeding toward each other on the same track, and not being able to do anything about it. Tristan met my gaze across from them, a worried look in his eyes.

"But you proved us all wrong," Dominic finally said. "You were the hardest worker at the Academy. I've never seen someone scramble around the court so much. You hated losing points. Even when it didn't matter, you refused to give up. I respect that." He raised his glass. "To a good tournament, Moreau."

Gabriel had fire in his eyes, but he raised his glass. "To a good tournament, deGrom. And Carfrae."

We all took a sip of our drinks. To the side, a photographer was circling us, getting photos of the three men and me together.

Gabriel let out a happy sigh. "It is funny, all three of us being here now."

"The three of us from the same Academy?" Dominic asked.

"Miranda's three lovers," Gabriel said, so soft that nobody outside our circle could hear. "It is good that we can all compete for her affection without malice. We can be calm and social about it, yes?"

Dominic was still smiling, but his jaw clenched. *This is close to getting out of hand.*

Tristan put an arm around Dominic's neck. "We're best mates, now. On *and* off the court." He cut his eyes over to me to show what he meant. "You're the odd boy out."

I winced. “Let’s all just relax...”

“Ah, so you two have become doubles partners in the bedroom? I did not think you possessed the ability, deGrom.”

“You’re not going to bait me,” Dominic said calmly.

“It is not baiting to point out that you are such an inferior lover that you require help to satisfy—”

“Another word,” Dominic growled, “and you’ll be wearing that wine all over your tuxedo.”

Gabriel laughed richly, turning to smile at the photographer as if it were all a joke. “I have a friendly wager to propose.”

Dominic shrugged off Tristan’s arm. “You’ve got a deal.”

Gabriel blinked. “But you have not heard my terms.”

“Don’t care,” Dominic replied.

“Very well. Whoever wins the US Open wins Miranda’s heart. And the losers will bow out politely.”

Both of them recoiled in surprise. So did I.

“This is dumb,” Tristan said.

“I would also think it is dumb if I were the *four* seed,” Gabriel hissed.

Before anyone could say anything else, I stepped forward. “I’m not a trophy to win and put in a display case. I have agency in all of this, and you are absolutely *not* making this wager. Or *none* of you will ever have a chance with me.”

“Very well.” Gabriel raised his glass again. “To a challenging tournament. Perhaps more challenging for some.”

He smiled at me and then walked away.

“He’s a real cunt,” Tristan muttered.

I turned and watched him go. *We were so close to all getting along.*



## Gabriel

I was in a tremendously good mood at the welcome dinner. As the top player in the world, how could I not be? Everyone wished to shake my hand and take my photograph. It was a party, and I was the star.

Until I saw the three of them standing together.

I watched them for a short while, Miranda and her two other lovers. Smiling. Laughing together. It did not bother me that she was with them, but when I saw her smiling at Dominic deGrom... it twisted a knife inside my heart. I could not help but approach and throw a few knives of my own into the conversation.

And they treated me like an outsider interrupting their little party. I was number one in the world. *They* were the outsiders, not me!

I knew Miranda was not happy with the things I said, but I could not help it. A man could only restrain himself to a point—and I was no ordinary man.

I walked away feeling victorious about the interaction with my two rivals for Miranda's love. I finished my wine, then walked outside to signal for my driver to take me back to my hotel.

Someone caught my arm and spun me around before I could. "What the hell was that?"

I smiled at Miranda. "Friendly sportsmanship."

“That wasn’t friendly,” she scolded. “That was... I don’t know what it was.”

“I have said worse to those who deserved more,” I replied calmly. “Carfrae and deGrom understand that there are no hard feelings. I merely wished to light a fire under them so they will play to their full potential.”

“Don’t do that,” she snapped, face full of rage. “Don’t lie to me, or make excuses. You were an asshole.”

“And what of deGrom?” I shot back. “Bringing up the Academy. Reminding everyone that I was smaller than the rest.”

“He only brought that up so he could compliment you,” she said. “Pointing out how much harder you worked than everyone else. He was trying to be nice.”

I leaned in close enough to smell the vodka on her breath. “Now who is lying, Miranda?”

“I don’t want to be with this version of you,” she whispered. “You have a decision to make, and you have until the end of the tournament. Cast aside all your armor and be the *real* Gabriel... or I’ll never believe you can take it off.”

She stormed back inside, heels clicking on the marble entranceway. All the victory I felt from the previous interaction turned sour in my mouth.

“Sir?” my driver said, opening the passenger door a few feet away. “Sir, we’re ready to go.”

I got into the car and hardened my resolve. I would win the US Open, complete my calendar grand slam, and prove all of them wrong.

Even if it meant losing Miranda in the process.



## Miranda

The atmosphere at the US Open was electric as I arrived for the first day of matches. They were calling for rain later in the week, but today the sky was a vibrant shade of blue in every direction. I was an even bigger celebrity here than at the other tournaments, and made sure to arrive an hour early to account for all the selfies and autographs along the way.

“I never get sick of the fans here,” I said when I reached the NBC broadcast booth in Arthur Ashe Stadium. “You would think I’d reach my limit after fifty or sixty selfies, but no! I can’t get enough. I would stay out there signing autographs all day if it paid well.”

My producer came over to me. “Miranda. I wanted to discuss the rumors of you coaching one of the players...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” I muttered. “I consulted with Tristan Carfrae for the three weeks leading up to the US Open. It’s over now. I don’t understand why everyone keeps harping on this.”

“Because it’s important. You have to be a neutral commentator.”

“This is a tennis tournament, not a political debate,” I argued. “Are you sure this isn’t about the *personal* relationship between Tristan and myself?”

“I went to bat for you during that fiasco,” he replied. “I don’t care about your personal life, Miranda. But coaching is different. It means you’re less impartial in the booth. You

might not point out certain weaknesses, and you might act too favorably toward him.”

“I promise you I can be professional. And if it’s such a problem, you can remove me from any matches involving Tristan himself.”

“That shouldn’t be necessary.” He pointed a finger at me. “As long as you aren’t coaching him during the tournament.”

“I already said I wasn’t. Can we get on with it, now?”

He returned to his little section of the booth, so I went to my spot down by the window and put on my headset. My partner was already in his seat, and glanced over at me when I sat down.

“Hi, I’m John,” he said, extending his hand.

“I know who you are,” I replied. This was John freaking McEnroe! “You’re famous.”

“I should say the same about you. The great Miranda Jacobs has more grand slam wins than I do.” He lowered his voice. “You’re a popular face in the sport right now, even in retirement. They need you more than you need them. Don’t let the fuckers push you around.”

“I’ll try not to,” I said with a smile.

The first match we were broadcasting was Gabriel Moreau versus Alexander Provenkin, an unranked player from Belarus. I couldn’t help but wonder what my producer would think about my impartiality if he knew I was sleeping with the French player.

As the match began, I couldn’t put aside my annoyance at Gabriel’s behavior last night. I had hoped he could find a way to get along with Tristan and Dominic, but that was increasingly looking impossible. And if he couldn’t do something that simple, then what were the odds he could change his overall attitude?

What was I going to do long-term if they hated each other?

I knew I couldn’t think about that right now, so I tried focusing on the match. But it wasn’t easy.

Gabriel won his first round match in straight sets, and was just as dominant in his second game two days later. Dominic looked equally strong on his side of the bracket, dispatching his opponents in the first three rounds without losing a set.

Tristan had a rougher start as he got used to his two-handed backhand. His shots were fine; he was hitting the ball strong, with better accuracy than I could have hoped for after less than a month of practicing. But his footwork was still off, and he was leaving his *forehand* side more vulnerable.

Coaching of *any* kind was forbidden during a match—that was a USTA rule and had nothing to do with NBC. Tristan’s own coach, sitting in a front-row seat, wasn’t allowed to so much as *gesture* at Tristan during the match without the potential for disqualification. But in between sets, I sent him a text.

**Me:** Tristan’s leaving his forehand side too open

**Coach:** I know. I’ll have him work on it after this match. But he looks good otherwise, right?

**Me:** He looks SO GOOD! Like he was born to use this swing!

**Coach:** You have yourself to thank. You’ve worked hard this past month.

I wasn’t covering Tristan’s second match, but I saw the highlights. He was making the same mistakes as the first round, over-adjusting to his left side and leaving the rest of the court open.

I texted his coach again, who assured me he was working on it. But by the third match, Tristan looked no different.

When my own match was finished, I left the NBC booth and went down to the practice court. There I found Tristan and his coach, working with a ball machine and hitting returns.

“We’re working on what we discussed,” the coach said.



“The swing isn’t the issue,” I replied. “It’s your footwork. Make the shot, then do a quick split-step to move closer to the middle.” I snatched the racket out of Tristan’s hand and stepped up to the court. The ball machine fired a tennis ball toward me. I twisted left, hit a strong two-handed backhand, and then immediately slid to my right to cover more of the court.

“Do I have to do it in heels,” Tristan asked with a hand on his hip, “or are regular trainers fine?”

I tossed the racket back to him. “Shut up and show me you can do it.”

“So demanding today.”

“Because I watched your match this afternoon.”

“The match I won?”

“In four sets,” I replied. “You could have beaten him in three.”

“Your contract with us ended last week,” the coach told me.

“Consider this pro-bono work.” I gestured impatiently. “Come on. Show me the drill four times in a row.”

Tristan gave me a grateful smile, then turned and focused on his work.



## Tristan

Miranda was a knowledgeable coach. The three weeks leading up to the US Open were filled with practices, exercises, and drills. She left me feeling more prepared than I had in a long time.

Then she started coaching me between matches, too. She was a lot stricter now, snapping her fingers and urging me along if I took too long to respond to her commands. There was more urgency; my next match was tomorrow, and I still needed to go home, get my post-match sports massage, and then rest up.

“John mentioned one other thing, if we have time to work on it,” Miranda said from the sideline of the practice court. We were indoors, away from watching eyes. Which was a shame, because she looked stunning today in a white tennis skirt, pristine white Air Force Ones, and a blue tennis top.

“John?” I asked.

“McEnroe.” She waved a hand. “Don’t let it get to your head. But he thinks you have a tell on your first serve. When you bounce the ball twice, you’re aiming for the outside of the box. But when you bounce it three times, you hit your shot right down the key.”

I was glad to have Miranda in my corner. Beyond the coaching help, her presence was like a warm beacon from a lighthouse, helping me avoid crashing on the rocks. I knew she cared about me as much as I cared about her, which was saying something because my feelings were strong and had only grown stronger over the past few months. I loved

everything about her. Having her in my life was a constant I was beginning to rely on.

I knew I was falling in love with her. There were no other words for the way I felt about Miranda when I gazed at her; *love* was the only word that came close. But that feeling terrified me, especially since I didn't know how she felt about me. Sure, she cared about me. That was obvious. But was it possible for her to love me with as much ferocity... considering she had two other men in her life?

*Focus on tennis*, I told myself while walking out onto the court for my quarterfinals match. *This is my career. Personal feelings can wait until later.*

The drills Miranda had hammered into me helped during my match; my footwork was seamless, without me needing to think about it. I won my match in straight sets: 6 - 4, 7 - 5, 6 - 3.

But I didn't have much time to celebrate. Because the next player on my schedule was Gabriel Moreau.

"Don't overthink this," my coach told me down in the locker room before the match. "You're a good match for Moreau. If you can overpower him with your serves and volleys, you can keep him on the defensive."

"He's going to hammer your backhand," Miranda suddenly said, walking into the locker room unexpectedly. I got up and embraced her; she clung to me fiercely.

"I wasn't expecting to see you down here. Aren't you broadcasting the match?"

"Which is why it was easy for me to sneak away," she replied. "Now, focus. Gabriel is going to try to take advantage of what he thinks is your weakness: your backhand. Be prepared for it. Don't let it get in your head. Just return your shots, preferably to his backhand. Keep pounding him on that side, and wait for an opening to hit a winner."

"Got it."

She wrapped her arms around me again, this time stepping up on her tip-toes to kiss me. For several heartbeats, I forgot

all about the match.

“Does this mean you’re rooting for me?” I asked.

“I’m rooting for a good match between you two,” she said diplomatically. “Remind them who Tristan Carfrae is.”

Miranda’s visit and pep talk succeeded in firing me up. I walked out into the exit tunnel with my tennis bag ready to fight.

Gabriel came out of his locker room and stopped next to me. “To a good match,” he said, extending his hand.

It felt like a trap, but I accepted it. “To a good match.”

Something mischievous sparkled in Gabriel’s eyes, but he didn’t say anything more. The lack of a taunt surprised me more than I expected as we walked out onto the court, but I forgot all about it as the roar of the crowd washed over me.

We did some quick warm-ups, and then it was time to play. I tried not to glance up at the booth where Miranda was watching—and commentating. It must have been killing her to have to watch while also appearing totally calm and collected. Compared to that, I had an easy job.

*Right, just an easy job, I thought while stepping up to the baseline. Knock off Gabriel Moreau, the world number one. And then advance to the finals, where I’ll probably face my doubles partner, Dominic.*

I knew I was outmatched against Gabriel. The entire world knew it. But I had a good strategy, and that allowed me to focus.

On the other side of the net, Gabriel tossed the ball over his head. His body contorted, then exploded like a spring. His serve whizzed across the net and landed inside the box. It was to my left, my backhand side, but I couldn’t get my racket around in time to return it.

“Fifteen love,” the chair umpire announced while the fans clapped.

I held my own in the first set. Miranda was right: Gabriel pounded my backhand side, probing for weaknesses. It even

looked like he was becoming frustrated that my returns were all solid. He must have expected me to be weaker on that side than I was.

Yet despite my efforts, he broke my serve and won the first set, 7 - 5.

The wheels began falling off in the second set. He broke me early, and then I held on for a while before he broke me a second time to win the set, 6 - 2.

The third set started off poorly. Gabriel won his serve, then immediately broke my serve to go up 2 - 0. I could feel my US Open hopes slipping away with every point. As we switched sides, I began rationalizing it in my mind. I never expected to win this tournament; it was only supposed to be a stepping stone for the Australian Open. I was lucky to have gotten all the way to the semifinals. It was just a shame to lose to Gabriel.

*It doesn't matter who I lose to, I thought. This was a good run regardless.*

Now that we had switched sides, I was closer to the booth where Miranda was broadcasting. I wasn't expecting to see anything when I glanced up, but there she was, her raven hair flowing around her head as she leaned forward to look down at me.

She didn't make any gestures. Coaching was illegal in the middle of a match, and the slightest gestures could be construed as help. But she gave me a long look. The kind of look that said: *harden the fuck up*.

It was what I needed to hear at that moment, and ignited something deep within my chest. "It's not over," I whispered to myself while turning to face my opponent. "Don't have a fucking cry about it 'til it's over."

Gabriel hit an ace to start the next game. But the next serve I absolutely teed off on, stepping into the swing and crushing a winner down the line. I did the same on the next point, then won two scrambling points in a row that left us both sweaty and exhausted.

But I had broken his serve. Now I was only down 2 - 1.

In tennis, a player had two chances to serve per point. The first serve was the big gun, hitting the ball as hard as possible to try and get an ace. If that serve didn't land in-bounds, there was the *second serve*, which was far more conservative. There were no do-overs after a second serve, which meant most players hit the ball lighter with a lot more spin to make sure it went in.

I had one of the best first serves in the sport, averaging around 150 miles per hour. But my second serve wasn't anything special. As I received a few tennis balls from the ball girl, an idea came to me. An idea that was risky, but worth it.

I hit my first serve; it sailed out of bounds, long. I prepared for my weaker second serve, bouncing the ball a few times before tossing it into the air. Across the net, Gabriel took a step forward, preparing to attack my weaker serve.

But instead, I crushed another first serve as hard as I could. It landed smack on the line, shooting past Gabriel before he could touch it.

Fifteen love," the chair umpire announced.

I placed my next serve perfectly. Thirty love. Gabriel returned the serve after that, but it was a weak defensive shot, and it allowed me to charge the net and hit a winner on the next shot. Then, on the very next point, I hit another ace.

"Game, Carfrae," the chair umpire called to a smattering of cheers. Across the net, Gabriel was walking over to his serve position slowly, while gazing across at me. I could see the wheels turning in his mind, wondering if I was still in this or not.

*I'm still in this*, I promised myself.

I was in the groove for the next few games, flawlessly aiming my serve and predicting all of Gabriel's shots. Hitting my first serve every single time was a bold strategy, and it cost me a few double-faults (when you missed both of your serves.) But it was worth it, and I somehow won the set, 6 - 4.

The fourth set was evenly matched, with both of us holding our serves until late in the set. My tenacity seemed to be wearing on Gabriel, who had probably expected to finish the match an hour earlier. This culminated with Gabriel double-faulting two straight serves in a row to give me a late break, and the set.

The crowd was really roaring now, smelling the potential for the number one player in the world to be upset. Gabriel looked frazzled during the quick break, eating a banana and staring off at nothing.

The fifth—and final—set was a knock-down, drag-out battle. Every time I hit a winner, Gabriel came back and hit one of his own the next point. He broke my serve early, and then I broke his in the very next game. The fans cheered loudly after every point, hanging on the match as if it were the final round rather than semifinals.

Eventually we reached a tie in the set, 6 - 6. In past tournaments, we would have continued playing until someone won by 2 games, whether that was a final score of 8 - 6 or 20 - 18. But now there was a tiebreaker procedure. The first player to reach 10 points wins, with players alternating serves every other point. Since I had just served, Gabriel got to serve first, and then I would get two serves in a row, followed by two from Gabriel, until one of us reached 10 points.

Gabriel hit an ace to start it off, which prompted a roar from the crowd. I answered with an ace of my own, and then a serve-and-volley that allowed me to hit a winner at the net.

Back and forth we went like this, each of us winning our own serve. We were both in the zone, two masters of their sport battling on the court. The fans cheered louder with every point, and eventually it was difficult to tell *who* they were rooting for.

Eventually, we were tied 8 - 8. Gabriel served the next point. He had continued hammering my backhand side, but a little tingle of intuition told me that he was going to serve to my forehand side this time. I pretended like I was returning any normal serve, and just before his racket made contact with the

ball, I darted to my right. Sure enough, that's where the serve came. I twisted my torso back, and then crushed a vicious forehand winner down the line.

Except the ball clipped the net, sending it shooting off to the side and out of bounds.

It was now my serve, and I was down 8 - 9. If Gabriel won this point, he won the match. I accepted two tennis balls from the ball girl, tested their bounce, and shoved one in my pocket. All the distractions in the world faded away as I tossed the ball into the air and made my serve.

"Fault!" one of the line judges shouted. That meant my ball was out.

"Second serve," the chair umpire announced.

I readied my next ball. I had been hitting only first serves for the last three sets, and it had worked out for me. But there was a lot on the line now. If I missed this serve, I lost the match. I had the overwhelming urge to hit a second serve, softer and with more spin, to make sure I got it in.

*Fuck that, I thought. I got here with this strategy, and I'll die by it.*

I bounced the ball twice, tossed it into the air, and then served.

I was totally at peace with the world as the ball sailed into the net. I had fought the best player in the world to a fifth set tiebreaker. And I had done so while using the two-handed backhand that Miranda had taught me. The crowd went berserk as they realized the match was over, cheering for Gabriel as he tilted his head back and sighed to the sky. But a lot of those cheers were for me. I had gained something I had been desperately lacking these past few years.

Respect.

I steeled myself for Gabriel's taunts as I approached the net. The Frenchman was grinning widely at me, adding some sting to the loss that I didn't yet feel. He shook my hand, and then pulled me in close for a hug.



“That was well fought. It’s good to see you healthy. You’re going to dominate in Melbourne.” He pulled back and patted my chest, then turned and clapped for the crowd.

I continued staring at his back. Had that really just happened? Gabriel seemed so genuine with his compliments. And since nobody could hear what he said, he wasn’t just being nice for show.

As I gathered my equipment into my bag, I realized the crowd was cheering louder and louder. I looked up to see a standing ovation from the Flushing, New York crowd. Gabriel was over by his bench, making a motion with his hands to urge the crowd on. Soon a chant went up, ringing around the stadium in surround sound.

“Tris-tan! Tris-tan! Tris-tan!”

I gave a final wave to the fans and exited into the tunnel, feeling like a winner rather than someone who had just punched his ticket home.

The TV was on in the locker room, showing the last bits of coverage from the match. And Miranda’s voice, the voice of a woman with whom I was falling in love, filled the space.

“Tristan Carfrae may have hoped to advance further than the semifinals, but he just made a huge statement here at the US Open. He’s nowhere close to being done.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said John McEnroe, her broadcast partner. “I’d hate to be the players who have to face him at the Australian Open in a few months.”

I sat on the bench in the locker room and smiled up at the TV. All things considered, this felt like a victory. And I still had a doubles match to play tomorrow.

“All in all, not a bad trip,” I said to myself.

Then the TV coverage changed.

“As exciting as that match was in Arthur Ashe, the real fireworks were over at Louis Armstrong Stadium, where Dominic deGrom and Novak Djokovic were battling to face

Gabriel in the finals. The controversial disqualification came in the third set...”

I gasped when I saw what happened.



## Miranda

“What happened?” as soon as we were off the air.

“He was disqualified,” one of the sound engineers said. “Look, they’re showing the replay now.”

Dominic had won the first two sets, and was winning 3 - 2 in the third. His opponent hit a winner that barely clipped the line, and Dominic was showing some frustration. When the ball rolled across the court by his feet, he flicked it up into the air with his racket, then smashed it into the wall behind him.

But it didn’t hit the wall. It hit the line judge standing in front of the wall.

“Dominic clearly didn’t mean to do it,” I said. The camera was zoomed in on his face, and he immediately winced and struck out his hand toward the line judge, then jogged over and made sure she was okay.

“Doesn’t matter,” McEnroe said with a groan. “The chair umpire has to disqualify him for that. You can’t get away with anything like that nowadays. Unlike when I was playing.”

The television switched to the post-game interview with Dominic. “It’s disappointing, but it’s my own fault. Everyone who watches me play knows I would never intentionally hit a ball at a line judge, but I still allowed my emotions to get the best of me. I need to be more careful in the future. But for now, my US Open is over, so it’s time to focus on the Australian Open.”

“You still have the doubles final tomorrow,” the interviewer gently reminded him.

“Oh, yeah.” He cracked a smile. “Tristan and I are going to take home the big trophy. Just wait.”

Even though he was smiling, my heart went out to him. Getting disqualified was never easy to stomach, and it had just happened to him when he was cruising to an easy victory in the semifinals of the US Open. I was eager to finish up our post-game briefing in the booth so I could go down and comfort him.

“Jacobs?” someone called. “The producer wants to see you.”

As I walked over to his office, I saw Sloane Stephens walking out. She gave me a big smile on her way out. We were competitors while I was an active player, but since retirement she had been incredibly sweet to me.

*What’s she doing here?*

“I just saw the replays,” I said while walking into the office. “Brutal way to go home. What are the talking points you want us to use in the finals match between Moreau and Djokovic? We have to bring it up, right?”

“I didn’t call you in here to talk about the deGrom match,” my producer replied. “Sit down.”

I frowned at the seat across from his desk. “I’m fine standing.”

“Fine.” He sighed. “Miranda, we know you met with Tristan Carfrae before today’s match.”

My heart sank. *Shit.*

“I was wishing him good luck before the match,” I said. “He’s my friend, and we’re sort of more than friends, so I don’t understand what’s suspicious about that.”

My producer’s face remained an unreadable mask. “There were other people in the practice facility. They saw you coaching Carfrae on his footwork.”

“You should have led with that,” I grumbled.

“We *discussed* this,” he said. “You stood here in this office and promised me...”

“It won’t happen again,” I quickly said.

He barked a laugh. “Of course it won’t; Carfrae lost. He’s going home after the doubles final. But it doesn’t matter. We have to take you off the broadcast team.”

“Oh, come on,” I replied, gripping the back of the chair with both hands. I wanted to rip a chunk of cushion out. “It’s not a conflict of interest. I think my performance during the match proved that. McEnroe and I are a good team. You can’t remove me.”

“It’s already been done, so you might as well save your breath. Your replacement is prepping as we speak.”

I glanced over my shoulder. *Sloane. Of course.*

I should have been embarrassed. I had done something I promised I wouldn’t do. Worse, I had been caught in a lie about it. My professional reputation had taken a huge hit with a baseball bat, and was showing cracks.

But all I felt was annoyance. With this job, with the dumb restrictions they put on me, and with the rumors that were soon going to fly once people realized I had been removed from the broadcast. Without another word, I walked out of the office and out of the booth.

\*

I met Dominic at his Airbnb a few hours later. He greeted me at the door with a surprised smile.

“Careful. If you’re seen visiting me, it will start all sorts of rumors. Or worse: it will make NBC think you’re coaching me.”

“I’m not worried about either of those things right now,” I said while slipping inside. I gave him a quick kiss. “How are you doing?”

“I’m pissed off.”

“I don’t blame you. That chair umpire should have known you didn’t mean to do it...”

I trailed off as Dominic waved a hand. “I’m not mad at the umpire. He made the right decision by disqualifying me. I’m pissed off at myself. I shouldn’t have done that. I usually don’t let my emotions get the better of me, especially on the court.”

“Oh, honey.” I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my cheek against his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve already accepted it.” He pulled me down onto his couch. “I just hope this doesn’t ruin my image.”

I chuckled at that. “You’re the all-American boy next door. You’re pretty much a Boy Scout. You’ve never had problems before. You don’t even have any tattoos.”

“Tattoos are overrated.” He shook his head. “And that’s my reputation *previously*. This incident might change how people think about me.”

“Maybe, but probably not,” I replied. “As long as you don’t do it again in your doubles final tomorrow. *Then* it will become a trend.”

Dominic let out a dramatic sigh. “Well, damn. I was planning on hitting *two* line judges tomorrow, but I guess now I’ll rethink my strategy.”

I rubbed his leg supportively. “Anything I can do to make you feel better?”

Curiosity sparkled in his eyes, but only for a moment. “Tempting, but I’d better not.”

I kissed him on the cheek. “I can wait until after the doubles final, then.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket:

**Gabriel:** I heard the news. I have contacts at NBC. Say the word and I will make this right.

**Me:** That's sweet, but I'm not mad about it. I think it's for the best.

**Gabriel:** I am so sorry, Miranda. It is still unfortunate.

**Gabriel:** If you want anything from me, you need only ask.

**Me:** I appreciate it :-)

**Me:** The good news is that now I get to watch your match tomorrow without commentating! I'll be able to actually enjoy it.

**Gabriel:** I certainly hope you enjoy it!

Dominic watched me texting, but said nothing. "Does it bother you that I'm texting Gabriel?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not really. I've accepted that he's currently sharing one third of your affection."

"Each of you is sharing *all* of my affection," I said, caressing his cheek.

A knock came at the door, and then Tristan let himself in. He looked at the two of us and then said, "Well, we've all had a day, haven't we?"

He and Dominic shared a bro-hug, and then he gave me a hug and a kiss. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Even though you got fired because of me?"

"Fired?" Dominic asked. "What's he talking about, Miranda?"

"NBC saw me coaching Tristan," I explained. "Or someone else saw and notified NBC. Either way, I've been removed from the broadcast for the men's final tomorrow."

Dominic strode toward me and put a comforting hand on my back. “Miranda, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to comfort you first.”

“This is so much worse than my thing.”

I laughed. “It’s not even close! You were one set away from facing Gabriel in the finals. I’ve been temporarily suspended from NBC.”

“I feel real guilty about it,” Tristan chimed in. “I shouldn’t have let you into the practice area.”

“Oh, you couldn’t have stopped me. And I’m glad I helped. You almost beat Gabriel! Besides, I wasn’t happy broadcasting.”

“You weren’t?” Dominic asked.

“It was fine. *Just* fine. They’ve been trying to sign me to a multi-year contract, but I’ve been balking at it. So honestly, this is a blessing in disguise.”

“What are you going to do now, then?” Tristan asked.

I shrugged. “Right now, all I care about is watching the rest of the tournament. Even if only *one* of my lovers is in the final.”

“Forget about the final. You have our doubles match to watch now,” Dominic said. “And if you’re not in the broadcast booth, you can sit courtside and cheer us on.”

I grinned at him. “I plan on doing exactly that. Now, should we watch *Rocky* to get pumped up before your match tomorrow?”

“Pass,” Tristan said. “My match against Gabriel wore me out. I’m going to pass out in the next hour.”

“Where are you going to watch Gabriel’s match tomorrow?” Dominic asked. “Our doubles final isn’t until the afternoon, so I was going to hang out here and watch it.”

“Actually, I’ve got a box courtside at Arthur Ashe,” I replied.



“Oh right, in the player’s box,” Tristan said. “We have standing invitations there, too.”

“I was hoping the two of you would accompany me,” I said. “To watch the final.”

Dominic chuckled. “So we can taunt him from up close?”

“I’ll go for that,” Tristan said.

I gave both of them a look. “I know you don’t get along with Gabriel. But he’s on the cusp of accomplishing a feat we haven’t seen in the sport since 1969. You will want to be there to witness it.”

Tristan chewed on his lip. “Gabriel was real nice to me after our match. Like, sneaky nice.”

“Maybe he was being sarcastic?” Dominic asked.

Tristan shook his head. “Naw, it wasn’t like that. He was genuine. Been thinking about it all afternoon.”

“Come watch the match,” I insisted. “You’ll have a front row seat for potential history. And if Gabriel loses, well, then you’ll get to bask in it.”

Tristan glanced at Dominic. “She makes a compelling point.”

“All right,” Dominic said. “I’ll be there.”

I smiled to myself. Hopefully this plan didn’t backfire on me.

# 51



## Gabriel

The sport of professional tennis had been around since 1877—over 145 years. In that time, only five players had ever completed a calendar grand slam, the feat of winning all four major tournaments in the same year:

Don Budge, 1938

Maureen Connolly, 1953

Rod Laver, 1962 and 1969

Margaret Court, 1970

Steffi Graf, 1988

Six instances in 145 years. That made this feat rarer than pitching a no-hitter in baseball, or winning the triple crown in horse racing, or hitting an albatross in golf. Some of the greatest names in tennis had never accomplished the feat—not Serena Williams, or Pete Sampras, or Roger Federer, or Rafael Nadal.

I woke up Sunday morning with a chance to accomplish this impossible feat. Yet it felt like any other morning. My alarm went off. I ate breakfast while listening to The Daily podcast from the New York Times. I took a shower, and shaved my face with an electric razor.

I texted my parents on the way to the match.

**Me:** I am scheduled for 8:00 this morning. That should be 2:00 in the afternoon where you are.

**Mère:** Of course I saw the schedule. I will be watching from the salon.

**Père:** I will miss the beginning due to a prior engagement, but I will see the later sets.

**Père:** Good luck.

**Me:** Thank you.

I didn't expect more from my parents. They had never been warm or affectionate. I was used to it. At this point in my life, it no longer bothered me.

But that did not stop me from wishing for more.

When I arrived at the US Open facility, I thought about how much was on the line today. The chance at a calendar grand slam. The opportunity to solidify my number one ranking. The possibility of cementing my name as the most successful French tennis player in history.

And there was Miranda. Winning today would catapult myself ahead of her other two lovers. How could they compete with a man who had completed a calendar grand slam?

My pre-match routine flew by in a blur. Suddenly I blinked, and I was walking out onto the court at Arthur Ashe Stadium to a roar of applause.

*This is it. Everything I have worked for my entire life.*

As I walked to the baseline to prepare to serve to begin the match, I saw Miranda sitting in the front row along the side. The sight of her made me smile... until I realized Dominic deGrom and Tristan Carfrae were sitting next to her, one on either side. I quickly looked away. Why was she doing this? Were they playing mind games with me?

*I will not allow it to get into my head, I thought stubbornly. Their presence means they will have a front-row seat to the*

*greatest day of my life.*

I turned my attention to my opponent on the other end of the court. Novak Djokovic was one of the all-time greats, if not *the* all-time greatest, with 23 championships to his name—more than Rafael Nadal or Roger Federer. He was seven years older than me, but he moved with as much agility and spryness as a man ten years younger. Today's match would *not* be an easy one.

*One point at a time*, I told myself as I made my first serve. I hit my location perfectly, and although it wasn't an ace, Djokovic wasn't able to return it.

"Fifteen love," the chair umpire announced.

I fell into a groove for that first set, tuning out all the other noises and distractions while focusing on the ball. Djokovic looked rusty, and I won the first set 6 - 3.

But he came out strong in the next set, reacting faster and hitting the ball harder with every point. He broke my serve late in the set to win it, 7 - 5.

The third was very evenly matched. Both of us were at the top of our game, like two heavyweight boxers who could not be knocked out. We tied 6 - 6, and went into a ten-point tiebreaker. And when I was switching sides, I glanced at the booth.

Tristan and Dominic were watching me with unflappable gazes. Why were they here? They had to play in the men's doubles final this afternoon; they should have been resting. There was no reason for their presence here. Seeing them with Miranda annoyed me.

They must have gotten to me, because I lost the first six points of the tiebreaker. And despite a late rally, I lost the tiebreaker, 10 - 8.

Now I was down 2 sets to 1.

The fourth set started poorly. Djokovic won his serve, and then it was my turn. I placed a perfect serve down the middle, but Djokovic stepped into it and crushed a backhand winner

down the line against me. The next point, he hit another winner off my second serve.

“Let’s go, Gabriel!” Dominic suddenly shouted.

His teasing comment stung, but I ignored it. All of the momentum of the match had swung in Djokovic’s favor. He was playing clean, with no unforced errors. I needed to win this set to force a fifth set. In fact, I needed to win this *game* to maintain any chance of defeating him. If my serve was broken early, I could not recover.

My next serve missed. I hit a second serve, and we had a very long rally, hitting the ball back and forth. Djokovic chased down every shot I made, no matter how perfectly placed. I alternated my targets, hitting to his backhand, then forehand, then backhand again, forcing him to sprint around the court. I expected to wear him down, to see him slow with every shot, but he showed no signs of exhaustion.

Eventually, he changed directions on me, and I wasn’t ready for it. His shot landed on the line to my backhand, just out of reach of my racket.

“Love forty,” the chair umpire announced.

I felt my chances falling apart. Was this my fate, to come so close to tennis immortality only to crumble under the pressure at the last moment? I was going to lose my serve, and then I would need a miracle to come back. On the other side of the court, Djokovic stood tall and confident, ready to drive the dagger into my heart.

I glanced at Miranda. She was smiling hopefully at me, trying to give me unspoken encouragement. It would have worked if not for the two men sitting next to her. Their mere existence turned her smile into a sneer.

“Come on, Gabriel!” Dominic said, clapping his hands. “Get back in it!”

I frowned at the man. He wasn’t teasing or taunting me. His cheer sounded... *genuine*.

“Let’s go!” Tristan shouted. “One point at a time!”

*They're cheering me on? My two biggest rivals?*

Was this some sort of mind game? It had to be. I accepted two tennis balls from the ball boy, stepped up to the line, and made my serve.

It was an ace that Djokovic didn't come close to returning. "Fifteen forty," the chair umpire said over a rush of crowd noise. Miranda, Tristan, and Gabriel were clapping loudly, now. Miranda cupped her hands over her mouth and yelled something, but I couldn't hear it over the rest of the fans cheering.

*If this is a mind game, it is a complex one.*

I felt vulnerable in that moment, as if I were standing in the middle of the court naked. I was not used to having such support in my life—if it was, in fact, true support rather than sarcasm. I took a moment to gaze up at the stadium seats towering over me, filled with fans who were cheering. And for a few heartbeats, without even thinking about it, I allowed my armor to come off. The walls I had kept up around me all my life, tall and strong, were gone. There was only my open soul, exposed before twenty thousand fans.

And it *invigorated* me.

I stepped up to the line to serve. My body moved automatically and without thought, my muscles passing through the perfect lines in space to complete the motion of my serve. Without looking at the result, I knew it was an ace.

"Thirty forty," the chair umpire announced.

I won the next point, and then the point after that to hold my serve and keep the fourth set even at 1 - 1. The roar from the crowd increased with every point, culminating in a huge cheer when I won the game.

I had always felt an immense amount of pressure in my life. Some was self-imposed, but so much of it was external. Pressure from my family and friends. Pressure from the Academy instructors. Pressure from my agent, my publicist, my coach. I had spent my career trying to live up to their impossible expectations, and to prove them wrong.

But now, as I prepared to receive Djokovic's serve and heard Miranda, Dominic, and Tristan cheering loudly, I realized I was playing with something better: support. My driving emotion wasn't fear of failure. It was eagerness to succeed for Miranda. Excitement to accomplish something extraordinary. With that in my mind, allowing me to focus, I was no longer afraid of losing.

And the sensation was more freeing than anything I had ever experienced in my life.

I felt light on my feet as I chased down every shot, fighting for each point. All other distractions faded away. The only things in the world, in the *universe*, were me, and the yellow ball, and the racket in my hand. I barely even saw my opponent; his presence didn't matter. I was hitting my shots by feeling, rather than trying to logically decide where to aim.

I wasn't sure if I was wearing Djokovic down, or if it was the fact that he was older than me, but he seemed to grow sluggish on the court as we battled for every point. I won the fourth set in dominant fashion, 6 - 2, which sent the crowd into a frenzy of excitement.

As the fifth set began, I did not slow down. I maintained this pace, safe in a cocoon of warmth and love provided by Miranda's presence. My opponent found a second wind and fought me with everything he had, scrambling around the court and hitting incredible winning shots that would have destroyed my motivation in another time. But I was a different Gabriel Moreau today, a stronger one, and the only thing that mattered was the ball and my racket.

I sprinted. I dove. I grunted with every shot, and gritted my teeth between points.

Then, without warning, I glanced up at the scoreboard. I was winning 5 - 3. It was Djokovic's serve, and I was winning, forty - fifteen. I was one point away from winning the game.

And the set.

And the *match*.

I didn't allow the moment to overwhelm me, although it came close. The crowd was whipped up into a chaotic fervor, sensing that we were on the edge of something incredible. Dominic and Tristan were on their feet in the booth, high-fiving and pumping their fists. The cheers went on so long that the chair umpire had to ask for quiet, and only then did my two rivals sit back down.

*Match point*, I thought while taking my place at the baseline to receive the serve. A sense of peace fell over me as silence descended on the crowd. I realized that I didn't need to win. If I lost, everything was still going to be okay. That's what Miranda's presence meant—and the presence of Dominic and Tristan.

Djokovic served the ball. It landed on my forehand side, and I made two quick steps and hit a weak return. Djokovic charged forward, striking his own return as he prepared to volley.

But his return shot hit the net and landed on his side.

It took my brain a few seconds to comprehend what had happened. It finally clicked as the crowd screamed as one, and Djokovic hung his head in defeat.

I had won the match.

I had won the US Open.

I had won all four major tournaments in the same year.

The peace that had fallen over me dimmed enough to allow me to celebrate. I fell to my knees. Tears poured out of my eyes against my will, and I didn't try to stop them. I got up and met Djokovic at the net, who was smiling and congratulating me on the accomplishment.

Then I was jogging away from the net, over to the front row seats where my support was sitting. They were all smiling from ear to ear, their happiness for me too pure to fake. I kissed them all on the cheeks—even Dominic and Tristan, who laughed and clapped me on the back.

"I'm so proud of you," Miranda said. "You did it, Gabriel. You did it!"



*I've done it.*

Yet as sweet as this victory was, it felt like I had gained something far more valuable today.



### Miranda

I didn't need to convince Tristan and Dominic to root for Gabriel. All I had to do was put them in the right position and let it happen naturally.

It began slowly. The two of them watched me cheering Gabriel on, but sat quietly in the seats. When he made an ace in the second set, Tristan gave a little clap. Not really a cheer, but an appreciation of a well-hit serve.

In the third set, Dominic began nodding his head whenever Gabriel won a point. Tristan pumped his fist after Gabriel won a long rally.

When Gabriel was losing, and his frustration and sadness was obvious, they became more vocal. "Let's go!" Dominic shouted. Tristan cheered after the next point.

Maybe they were merely empathizing with my own emotions for Gabriel. I was in pain watching him lose, so *they* were in pain on my behalf. An infectious emotion that quickly spread like a virus.

Or maybe they genuinely realized that Gabriel was close to accomplishing something truly *great*, and despite their history and rivalry with the man, they wanted to watch it happen.

Regardless of the reason, they became Gabriel's biggest cheerleaders in the fourth and fifth sets. Their shouts and cheers even drowned out my own voice. Their enthusiasm made my heart happy.

*Maybe we can get along after all.*

Gabriel's comeback was a sight to behold. It may have been my imagination, but our cries of encouragement seemed to lift him up to a level of competitiveness I had never seen before. By the time Gabriel won match point, my voice was hoarse from screaming so much in the fifth set.

He came running over, hugging me and kissing me on the cheek. *That* would definitely give the tabloids something to gossip about. Then I laughed when he hugged Tristan and Dominic, giving them kisses on the cheeks, too.

Tears ran down my cheeks as I watched the award ceremony. Gabriel's victory speech was very gracious, although that didn't come as a surprise to me by this point.

"I want to thank Tristan Carfrae and Dominic deGrom," he said to the packed stadium. "They have helped push me more than they will ever know. And I want to thank a very special woman in my life who is out there somewhere. You know who you are. For fifteen years, you have been on my mind, and in my soul. Without you, I would not be standing here holding this trophy. That is not an empty compliment! I truly mean that without your existence, I would not have accomplished all of this. Thank you for everything."

"Who do you reckon he's talking about?" Tristan whispered. "The virgin Mary?"

I busted out laughing, adding a different set of tears to those already pouring out of my eyes.

We met him in the locker room afterward, and shared some long hugs. He also shared a long kiss with me, one that was *not* on the cheek.

"Everything I said out there was true," Gabriel told us, his blue eyes watering with emotion. "I have you to thank for so much. For giving me passion throughout my career. For inspiring me to be the best I can be. Your encouragement today is the only reason I was able to rally in the fourth and fifth sets."

"I expected you to win in straight sets," Tristan admitted. "When Djokovic took the lead, and came close to beating you,

I realized that I really *did* want to see you do it.” He shook his head. “A calendar slam. You accomplished something incredible today.”

“I just wish I was on the court trying to stop you,” Dominic said with a laugh. “But I’m glad Djokovic gave you a fight. You earned it.”

Gabriel ran a hand through his curly hair. “I would have liked to have had a match against you as well. Alas, I am happy with how it happened. And regarding Miranda...”

“We don’t need to talk about this right now,” I said.

“I would be honored to share her love with a man such as you.” He turned to Tristan. “And you as well.”

He held out his fists, one toward each man. Slowly, Tristan bumped it with his own fist. But Dominic stood there for a long moment, not moving.

“Fuck that,” he said, and then wrapped Gabriel in a big bro-hug.

“Now I feel like a cunt for not hugging him too,” Tristan said, joining in the group hug.

I almost cried at the sight. All three men were getting along. How could I have ever deserved this?

“So, this is awkward,” I said while their hug went on and on. “I actually don’t want to be with any of you. I was happier when I was single.”

“Mind your own business,” Tristan said as their hug continued. “We’re trying to bond.”

\*

The meeting didn’t last long, because Tristan and Dominic needed to prepare for their doubles match. Gabriel headed off to the media room to get bombarded with questions and interviews, while I returned to my seat in Arthur Ashe.

I'd kept my phone on mute during the match, and blinked in surprise when I realized I had about a hundred new text messages. Friends, family, and people I knew in the tennis world were all asking if I was the mystery woman Gabriel had mentioned in his victory speech. The funniest texts came from Hammy:

**Hamilton:** Oh god, you've collected another one, haven't you?

**Hamilton:** No judgment. I might even be able to pitch a reality TV show to one of the streaming networks. Think *The Bachelorette*, but with tennis players all vying for your hand.

I wasn't sure how to handle this much attention, so I ignored all of the texts and settled in to watch the doubles final. Dominic and Tristan received a huge cheer when they walked out onto the court, a home-field advantage since one of them was an American, while their opponents were from India and Russia.

Dominic and Tristan jumped out to a quick 3 - 0 lead. As the players switched sides and took a short break, Gabriel came walking down the stairs and sat in the seat next to me.

"I didn't expect you to watch this match," I said.

"It was either this, or continue talking to the media. Besides, I would like to return the favor by cheering for them."

Tristan noticed him as he walked by our seats, and flashed a thumbs-up. He whispered something to Dominic, who glanced over and broke out in a huge smile.

"I hope this does not put too much pressure on them," Gabriel said.

Dominic began the next game with an ace, putting that concern to rest. They ended up winning the set, 6 - 2.

Before the next set began, Gabriel leaned over to me and whispered, “You were joking when you said you wanted to be single again, yes?”

I tried not to laugh. “Yes, Gabriel. I was only making a joke.”

“Because I very much do not want you to be a single woman.”

I grinned at him. “I feel the exact same way.”

Both of us cheered fervently in the second set. The rest of the crowd was just as enthusiastic in their support. At one point, Dominic turned to one of the line judges and pretended like he was going to hit a tennis ball at him. The line judge laughed and pointed at Dominic, and the two of them shared a funny little moment and a fist bump before play resumed. The crowd ate it up.

*Yeah. His image will be just fine.*

Compared to Gabriel’s match earlier this morning, the doubles final was free from drama. Dominic and Tristan were dominant on the court, moving around as a team rather than two individual people, anticipating each other’s motions and strategies. It was all perfectly seamless. The outcome was never really in doubt, and they won the second set 6 - 1, completing their victory.

My voice was already hoarse, but I still screamed loudly when they won. Dominic and Tristan embraced for a long time on the court before shaking hands with their opponents. Then they made a slow victory lap, walking around the edge of the arena while waving and throwing autographed tennis balls up into the crowd. Dominic removed his shirt and tossed it to some fans, and after some teasing and encouragement, Tristan did the same.

“I’d like to thank Miranda Jacobs,” Tristan said during the award ceremony that followed. “My coach hired her as a consultant to tweak my backhand, and I owe my success in this tournament to her help. If I had reached out to her sooner,

maybe I would have been able to beat Gabriel Moreau in the semifinals.”

The camera cut to Gabriel in the crowd. He rolled his eyes, and shook his head doubtfully. The fans laughed at the whole scene.

“On that note,” Dominic said when it was his turn, “I want to thank Gabriel Moreau himself. It’s good to have a rival pushing you to be better.”

He paused for another round of cheers.

“And,” he added, smiling over at our seats, “it’s even more incredible when that rival ends up becoming a friend.”

# Epilogue



**Miranda**

**Four Months Later**

“Let’s go Tristan!” I shouted.

Next to me, Dominic yelled, “Come on, Gabriel!”

“Both of you!” I added.

We had front row seats in Rod Laver Arena, at the Australian Open in Melbourne. I was not in a smiling mood. It was the men’s singles final round, and Gabriel and Tristan had been locked in a back-and-forth battle that was fraying my nerves. Dominic, who had lost to Tristan in the semifinals, was equally stressed. His method of dealing with it involved rooting for a different player on alternating points.

The match had huge swings of momentum. Gabriel came out strong and won the first set 6 - 2, but Tristan battled back to take the second and third sets, 7 - 5 and 6 - 4. The fourth set went to a tiebreaker, which Gabriel won, and now the two men were tied 5 - 5 in the final set.

Dominic and I spent the next two games tightly holding hands down between our seats where the cameras wouldn’t see us. There was plenty of speculation among the tennis tabloids about my relationships with Dominic, Tristan, and Gabriel, but for the most part we hadn’t garnered much attention. That was good, because I doubted the world would understand what kind of relationship the four of us had.

*Sometimes I don’t even understand it.*



Tristan won his serve, and then Gabriel won his, bringing the set to a 6 - 6 tie. The men began another tiebreaker, this time to decide the match—and the entire Australian Open.

Back and forth they battled, with the crowd on the edge of its collective seat. The Australian fans were obviously rooting for their hometown hero Tristan, but there were plenty of Gabriel Moreau fans in attendance as well. In modern tennis history, the record for most grand slams won in a row was only four, and Gabriel had a chance to break that record today.

The two players had been fighting for nearly four hours, and both were clearly exhausted. Tristan's long arms and legs glistened with sweat, and Gabriel's curly brown hair was nearly black from dampness. Yet neither of them slowed down, still giving it their all in a final push toward victory.

The swing in momentum happened in the blink of an eye. Gabriel lost one of his serve points, and then Tristan hit an ace to go up 9 - 7. A nervous buzz went up in the crowd as they realized the Australian would get two match points in a row, but Tristan didn't waste any time dwelling on that fact. Without waiting for the noise to fall to complete silence, he made his serve. Gabriel hit a return, grunting with effort, and Tristan tracked it down to his backhand side. He turned sideways, then hit a violent backhand shot down the line. Gabriel had been expecting it to be hit to the other side, and hesitated a split second too long. The shot landed right on the line, zooming past his outstretched racket.

The eruption of cheers and screams was deafening. Tristan fell to his knees, prostrate on the ground like he was praying to an omnipotent tennis god. Gabriel didn't take any time to wallow in his defeat; he came charging to the net, leaping like a hurdler, before falling to the ground next to Tristan, wrapping his arms around him like he was sharing in the Aussie's victory.

"Tristan and I have become close friends over the past year," Gabriel said during the award ceremony. "I was hoping to win here and extend my streak. But if I had to lose to anyone, I am glad it is to my friend."

“Gracious words from the world number one,” the interviewer said. “But tell me, how have two fierce rivals who always butted heads suddenly become such good friends?”

The two of them looked at each other.

“We found common ground to bond over,” Gabriel said.

Tristan grinned. “And you stopped being such an insufferable cu...” he trailed off. “Curmudgeon. An insufferable *curmudgeon*. But yes, mostly it’s the common ground we’ve bonded over.”

Next to me, Dominic whispered, “More like common ground to *bone* over.”

I elbowed him. “You’re ruining a sweet moment.”

Tristan took the microphone from the interviewer. “This win means so much to me. To be the first Australian to win the tournament since the seventies...”

He had to pause to wait for the roar of the crowd to dim.

“I’ve dreamed about this day since I was six years old and my dad put a racket in my hands,” he went on. “I’ve wanted to win here more than any other tournament. My family is in the crowd—all thirty of them.”

“Thirty?” the interviewer asked.

“I have a lot of cousins,” Tristan replied, which drew more laughter. “I’m glad they’re all here to see this win. And to hear my next announcement. That I’m retiring from the sport of tennis.”

The entire stadium gasped as one. Dominic’s eyes widened, and he turned to look at me. But I was focused entirely on Tristan out on the court.

“Mon ami, non!” Gabriel blurted out. “You cannot...”

“This sport has been good to me for over a decade,” Tristan said. I couldn’t be certain, but it looked like he had tears in his eyes. “But I have struggled with injuries for the past few years. I have the soul of a competitor, but my body will not cooperate. I was lucky that the stars aligned long enough for

me to win this trophy, accomplishing the goal I never thought was possible. It's sweeter than I have ever dreamed. But it's time for me to take a page out of Miranda Jacobs' book and retire on top."

The crowd reaction was mixed. Some fans cheered, others booed. Many more stood in confused silence.

The interviewer took back the microphone, and appeared at a loss for words. "Tristan... I think I speak for most fans when I say I'm speechless. What are you going to do next without the French Open to look forward to?"

"Well," Tristan said, "I'm going to do a whole lot of nothing. Then I'm going to do *more* nothing. Once I've completed those two very important items, I will figure it out as I go. Maybe I'll give broadcasting a try. But not on NBC. Maybe Fox Sports Australia."

We had a big party at Tristan's house that evening. At least a hundred people were there, half of whom seemed to be related to Tristan in some way. I met cousins, and nephews, and aunts, and uncles. Tristan introduced me to everyone as his girlfriend, so I received a lot of hugs and kisses on the cheek.

"Don't try to keep up with my brother Liam," Tristan warned me, pointing out a man that looked like a taller version of him. "He's a skinny wanker, but he'll drink anyone under the table."

It was nice meeting his family. Everyone seemed to love me, and credited my coaching as the reason Tristan had remained healthy enough to win. And when I explained that I hadn't coached him since last August, they all shrugged and insisted I was steering him in the right direction.

"Okay, tell me the truth," Dominic said after everyone else had left. It was just the four of us, sitting around a fire pit in Tristan's back yard while finishing off a bottle of wine. "You knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?" I asked.

"About the retirement announcement!" Gabriel chimed in. "Surely you were aware, yes?"

Tristan waited for my answer with a smile.

“I’ll admit, I saw it coming,” I said. “But I wasn’t certain. And I didn’t want to jinx it by asking.”

“And if you lost?” Dominic asked. “Would you have tried again next year?”

“Probably. I don’t know. And thankfully, I never have to think about it.”

“You didn’t let him win, did you?” Dominic asked.

Gabriel’s eyes widened. He put down the wine bottle and sat up a little straighter before giving a curt answer. “I would never let an opponent win.”

“Even a friend?”

“Especially a friend!” Gabriel said fiercely. “It would do Tristan a great dishonor. He earned his victory today.”

“Okay, okay,” Dominic said, patting the air in a placating manner.

Gabriel stared him down a few seconds longer before turning to Tristan. “It is not too late. You do not have to do this.”

“I already made the announcement. It was a whole public thing. You were there.”

“You can change your mind, like Tom Brady.”

Tristan chuckled. “I’m happy with my decision. I have no regrets.”

“Of course you have no regrets. It has only been nine hours.”

“I know myself,” Tristan said, patting Gabriel on the thigh. “I won’t have any regrets in a week, or a month, or a year. Honestly, I’m relieved. I accomplished the one thing I wanted to in my career. For a while, I was terrified that failing to win the Australian Open would haunt me forever. No, I’m definitely retired now. It feels right.”

“I’m proud of you, bud.” Dominic hesitated. “So, does this mean you’re retired from doubles, too?”

Tristan smiled sadly. “Afraid so, mate.”

“Damn.”

I cleared my throat. “I know of another player who may be interested in playing doubles.”

The three of us turned to look at Gabriel.

“I have not played doubles in five years,” Gabriel said.

“That just means you’re fresh!” Tristan replied.

“I’ll do all the work,” Dominic added. “You just have to stand there. Maybe hit a serve every now and then.”

Gabriel bristled at that. “I will do more than simply stand there. If I play doubles, I will be playing to win.”

“Okay, okay, I didn’t want to start an argument.” I pulled out my phone. “I wanted to try something. Check this out.”

I opened an app and placed my phone on the ground. The screen showed an image of a bottle, viewed from above. When I tapped the screen, the bottle began to spin.

“Oh, absolutely fucking not,” Tristan said.

I blinked in surprise. “I thought it might be fun to play spin the bottle. Like we did back...”

Tristan picked up my phone and tossed it to me. Then he guzzled the rest of our wine from the bottle and placed it on the ground by the fire. “I’m not allowing technology to replace this. We’ll use a *real* bottle.”

“I agree with the current Australian Open champion,” Dominic said. “Technology rules too much of our lives. Let’s use a physical bottle.”

I smiled. “I’m open to that.”

“So, uh, how do we do this?” Dominic asked me. “I’ve done a lot of things to you *with* these two guys, but I’m not sure I want to kiss either of them.”

Gabriel leaned back on his camping stool and smirked. “Dominic, you surprise me. You never experimented when you were a boy?”

“I, uh...” Dominic scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

“I’ll be the only one spinning,” I interrupted. “I’ll kiss whoever it lands on. And each person has to try to one-up the kiss before them.”

“You’re on,” Tristan said.

Dominic came around to this side of the fire pit so that we were all closer together. I bent down to grip the empty wine bottle, then gave it a spin. I wasn’t very good at this, and it wobbled and spun off sideways before coming to a stop facing Dominic.

“All right,” he said, leaning toward me. The two of us shared a slow, but relatively innocent, kiss before leaning back on our seats.

“Quite tame,” Gabriel observed.

“I wanted to leave room for improvement.”

“Okay, here we go again,” I said, retrieving the bottle. This time my spin was better, and the bottle made eight or nine rotations before coming to a stop.

And again, it pointed almost directly at Dominic.

“Repeats count,” he insisted. “Just like when we played sixteen years ago at the Academy.”

This time, Dominic cupped my cheek and pulled my lips to his. Our mouths churned together softly, the only noise the crackling of the fire. The heat from the flames, the smoke curling up to the night sky, and the chill evening air all felt more *real* while I was kissing Dominic. As if the world itself were a more vibrant place.

“Better?” Dominic asked Gabriel.

The Frenchman nodded approvingly.

I picked up the bottle and spun it again. Around and around it rolled, the label flashing white in contrast with the green glass. It came to a stop in the exact same place as before, with the neck aimed toward Dominic.

“Oh for fuck’s sake...” Tristan muttered.

Dominic slid his hand along my cheek and gripped the back of my neck, then *crushed* his lips against mine. I let out a satisfied noise in my throat as his tongue slid into my mouth, dancing wetly with my own. I was dimly aware of Tristan grabbing the bottle and giving it a spin; after four rotations, it came to a stop facing Dominic’s stool.

“Okay, we’re switching spots,” Tristan said, sitting down where Dominic had just been. “Come on, enough already. You’re supposed to *share* Miranda with us.”

Dominic grinned. “Don’t blame me. The bottle is in charge.”

My body buzzed with life after the last kiss. Dominic had a satisfied smile on his face as he watched me collect the bottle again. I gave it a strong spin, and the four of us followed it with our eyes.

When it landed on Dominic again, in his new seat, both Gabriel and Tristan groaned.

“This is the best bottle of wine I’ve ever drank,” Dominic said as he leaned toward me.

Before he could complete the kiss, Tristan grabbed the bottle and adjusted it so that it was facing him. “My turn, mate,” he said, shouldering his doubles partner out of the way and kissing me. I opened my mouth for his probing tongue, leaning forward so that my chest was pressed against his. He wrapped an arm around my body, holding me close while the fire crackled and popped.

“I like it when you take charge,” I whispered when the kiss finally ended.

“In that case,” he purred back at me, “let’s take this party inside.”

“I did not get to play,” Gabriel complained as we left the fire pit.

“You’ll get plenty of attention momentarily,” I promised him.

“It’s because you lost today,” Dominic joked. “You have to wait your turn behind your betters.”

“But you were eliminated in the semifinals! I advanced farther than you!”

“Sorry, but the bottle has spoken.”

“There’s plenty of me to go around,” I said. “I swear, sometimes it feels like having three boyfriends means having three *boys* to manage.”

“He is the one who started it,” Gabriel said.

We barely made it upstairs to Tristan’s bedroom before he was putting his hands around my waist. “You like it when I take charge, do ya?” he whispered in my ear.

“Mmm hmm.”

He spun me around and kissed me hard, biting my upper lip in his hurry to stick his tongue into my mouth. The forcefulness of it made me feel warm and tingly as he grabbed my thighs and lifted me into the air like I weighed nothing. I wrapped my legs around him tight like an anaconda, not letting go.

He stepped backwards until he hit the wall next to the bed, then lowered me to the ground. In one smooth motion he dropped to his knees and raised my dress over my hips, revealing my nude lower half.

Tristan looked up at me with hunger in his eyes. “No panties?”

“They just get in the way.”

“Mon dieu,” Gabriel whispered to himself as they joined us in the room, catching sight of my bare skin.



Tristan buried his face between my legs, devouring me like the first meal after a fast. I moaned and put my hand on the back of his head while leaning my hips into him, pressing his head against the wall.

Gabriel was behind me in short order, nibbling up my thighs until he reached my bare cheeks. Then he spread them wide and invaded my rear with his tongue, jamming it straight inside as deep as it would go. Gabriel was the king of rimjobs, and I'd grown to love them almost as much as having my pussy eaten.

But when I had both at the same time?

The way their tongues twirled and undulated, pinching me, had me groaning and shuddering within minutes. Four hands held me upright while I let the pleasure wash over me until I could barely stand.

"Here," Dominic breathed in my ear, adding a third pair of hands to my skin. "Let's get you horizontal."

I let him carry me to the bed, lowering me with gentle grace. He covered me with his body, hard and smooth and smelling like faded cologne.

"How about we cuddle?" Dominic said, laying next to me and spooning me.

"What if I don't want to just cuddle?" I asked.

He arched an eyebrow.

Tristan and Gabriel knelt on the foot of the bed. "We don't need to get off," Tristan said.

"Pleasing you is fun enough," Gabriel agreed.

"Don't you dare tease me," I said, pulling Dominic back on top of me. "I want all three of you at once. We have some celebrating to do tonight."

"Are you sure?"

I answered Dominic by wedging his lips apart with my tongue and French kissing him, spreading my legs until he lowered his body into mine. Within seconds I had his belt off

and his pants unzipped, and then he did that awkward little shimmy to kick them off.

“Roll over,” I said, pushing him in the chest until he was laying on his back. I mounted him, lowering my dripping sex over his cock until I felt its warmth brushing against mine. He slid inside easily, each inch of his hard length pushing deeper with that wonderful ache of lovemaking.

I arched my back on top of him and raked my hands over his chest, hastily ripping open the buttons of his shirt so I could touch skin. I rode him slowly, savoring the gazes of my other two lovers who were watching from the side with hungry eyes.

“More,” I eventually said, twisting my head to look at the observers. “I need more.”

“Think you can handle it?” Gabriel said, nude and stroking himself.

“I always do...” The final syllable extended into a long moan.

I felt him crouch behind me, guiding the tip of his cock up and down my cheeks. I was still wonderfully lubricated from his tongue, and his cock pushed inside without hesitation.

We’d done this enough that I was no longer an amateur. In fact, double penetration was the way I preferred it now. There was something about two men at the same time, taking me in different ways, that was incredibly taboo and erotic. It felt *amazing* having their dicks inside me at the same time, rubbing against each other inside my body. By comparison I always felt so hollow when I was only with one of them. Empty, in need of completion.

Before Gabriel could push as deep as he could, Tristan was up on the bed in front of me, his own stiff length standing erect before him. “I don’t take charge enough, do I?” he asked with a mischievous look sparkling in those eyes.

I batted my eyelashes at him. “Not nearly enough.”

He grabbed my head and forced it down on his cock with a little bit of strength, making my lips go halfway down on the

shaft. He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me back, squeezing it so that I had to tilt my head up to him.

“How’s that?”

I sneered. “You’re the current Australian Open champion. Is that really the best you can do?”

He growled a sexy growl and pushed me back down on him, moving my head with his strong hand. Gabriel was deeper and deeper into my ass with every second, our quadruple joining finally complete.

Slowly they fucked me: Gabriel in my ass, Dominic in my pussy, and Tristan going to town on my throat like there was no tomorrow. When I was a professional tennis player, I was strong and confident and powerful. But in the bedroom? I was their fuck doll. Their toy to be used however they saw fit.

And I loved every second of it.

The sounds I let out were animal-like as they triple fucked me. My body wasn’t my own—it belonged to the pleasure, a captive to the waves of bliss that rolled over me. Every nerve in my body tingled with ecstasy as my first orgasm pummeled me, and then was followed by a second one. On and on they went, in such quick succession that it was difficult to tell where one ended and another began. Faster and faster they moved, pistoning into me from every angle.

They didn’t last long. They never did; a fact that always filled me with tremendous satisfaction. Tristan gripped my head with both hands and pushed me all the way down to his base as he roared and filled my throat with his come. I moaned around him, relishing the way his cock spasmed again and again. Gabriel and Dominic were close behind, their strokes longer and more frenzied. I didn’t know which of them came first but their voices rose together, a chorus of manly pleasure caused by me and my body as they filled me to the brim with their seed.

\*

The thing I loved most about being with my three men were the intimate moments after lovemaking, when we were all quiet and spent and vulnerable. The four of us were spread out on Tristan's bed, a jumble of legs and arms and tangled sheets.

"Okay, it is time," Gabriel said after a while. "You must choose one of us."

I giggled. "I would never be able to do that."

"For the sake of curiosity, let us suppose you had to," Gabriel continued. "A thought experiment."

"In that case, I choose whichever one of you *isn't* putting me on the spot," I replied.

Dominic and Tristan glanced at each other. "Nice," they both said at the same time.

"Very well. I will continue to share you," Gabriel said.

I rolled my head over to look at him. "Are you sure you don't mind? You don't need to have me all to yourself?"

He frowned in thought before answering. "If it were two different men, perhaps it would be different. But I am quite happy with our situation."

"Cheers to that," Tristan agreed.

"We should probably discuss the future," Dominic said slowly. "Do you want children?"

"Way to bring the mood down, mate," Tristan said.

"It's been on my mind a while. I'm curious about how we all feel."

"I've thought about it," I admitted. "Honestly? I'm undecided. I've always liked the *idea* of being a mother, but I expected the desire to come as I got older. Yet here I am, almost thirty-one years old and I still don't think I'm ready."

"That's okay," Dominic said. "I'm still not sure myself."

"Then why did you ask?" Gabriel asked.

"I was hoping her feelings would be more clear!"

“The thing that scares me the most is pregnancy,” I explained. “A little human tearing its way out of my vagina like a bull charging through a tennis net? Ugh. I wish we had a better way of doing things by now.”

“A better way?” Tristan asked. “Like, a baby parachuting onto your front lawn while *Danger Zone* by Kenny Loggins plays?”

I laughed. “Sure. That’s better than the actual birthing process.”

“I bet we can brainstorm some better methods,” Tristan said.

“Fired out of a T-shirt cannon,” Dominic suggested.

Gabriel ran a hand through his curly hair. “Amazon Prime. Two day delivery.”

“Nice one.”

“How about grown in the garden, like cabbage patch dolls,” Tristan quipped. “No baby bump or cravings or morning sickness. Just watering the soil every morning for nine months.”

“*Every* morning?” I asked. “That’s a lot of work. Can I give it extra water so I only have to do it every other day?”

“Perhaps motherhood is not for you after all,” Dominic said with a laugh.

“I think you would be a wonderful mother,” Gabriel said, caressing my cheek. “If you choose to be.”

I smiled over at him. “I appreciate the sentiment.”

My phone rang. I was tempted to ignore it, but I could see the screen on the bedside table, and it was my agent calling. “Hi, Hammy,” I said. “Do you know what time it is?”

“I keep my phone on Melbourne time, even when I’m across the pond,” he replied with a little extra twang in his Australian accent. “Besides, I had a feeling you’d be up celebrating with your boyfriend.”

“Which one?” Tristan said loudly.

Hammy laughed on the other end. “I’ve got news. I heard back from that prospect in Trenton. The job is yours.”

I gasped. “Really?”

“And I negotiated a ten percent higher salary than they typically offer,” he went on. “It’s not every day they land a former number one ranked player.”

I let out a squeal of excitement that made all three of my men stand up. “I owe you, Hammy! You’re getting a bonus.”

“Make it a big one, and we’re even,” he replied. “I’ll forward you the details. Sleep well, love.”

“What was that about?” Dominic said. He was sitting upright now, a corner of the comforter barely maintaining his modesty.

“Is it a broadcasting job?” Tristan asked. “Did NBC get over the whole coaching fiasco?”

“It’s not, and I wouldn’t accept that job even if it was,” I said. “I enjoyed broadcasting for a few tournaments, but it’s not what I want to do long term.”

“Then what is?” Dominic asked.

“Tristan actually hinted at it by mentioning the coaching fiasco. I realized that I *loved* those three weeks where we were working together. That’s what I want to do. I’m certain of it, now.”

“Coaching?” Gabriel’s eyes widened. “For whom? I saw that Coco girl fired her coach...”

“Is it a male player?” Dominic asked. “Because I don’t think I can handle adding a *fourth* man to our little coffee table relationship.”

“Nothing as stressful as coaching someone on tour,” I explained. “And don’t worry—three men are plenty for me.”

Gabriel’s frown deepened. “I do not understand. If you are not coaching a player...”

“Three months ago, I got a call from a tennis academy in Los Angeles. They offered me a job.”

There was silence for five long seconds.

“You’re moving to California?” Dominic asked. He managed to keep the concern out of his voice, but his green eyes betrayed how worried he was.

“Their job offer sounded great to me. I realized coaching at an academy is what I want to do. But I *don’t* want to move to the west coast. I’m an Atlantic kind of girl. So I had Hammy put some feelers out closer to home. It’s taken three months, but I finally got a bite from the Lafayette Tennis Academy. I will be starting there in May.”

“The Lafayette Tennis Academy in Trenton?” Dominic asked.

“Where we all attended and met?” Tristan added.

“And,” Gabriel said, “where Miranda received her first real kiss from a young French boy?”

“I kissed her first,” Tristan argued.

“Yes, which is why I made sure to clarify her first *real* kiss,” Gabriel replied smugly.

“*Boys*,” I snapped. “Yes, that is the academy where I will be working. I signed a three-year contract.”

Dominic lurched forward and wrapped me in a big hug. “You terrified me for a few seconds there,” he whispered. “I didn’t realize how much I don’t want to lose you.”

“I never would have moved to California,” I whispered back. “I need all of you just as much as you need me.”

Gabriel joined the hug, and then Tristan wrapped his arms around all three of us. We knelt there on the bed, hugging for what felt like minutes.

“Think you can get me a job there?” Tristan finally asked.

“At the Academy? You would want to coach?”

“I’ve considered it,” he replied. “I want to find out. I’ve always been good with kids.”

“You would have to move to America,” Gabriel pointed out.

Tristan shrugged. "I was planning on that anyway."

Gabriel broke out into a huge smile. "Perhaps now is a good time to mention that I have been looking at real estate in the New Jersey area."

"Really?" I asked. "When were you two going to tell me?"

"Right now," Gabriel said. "I am telling you now."

"I guess I don't mind you two moving into my territory," Dominic said. "As long as you agree to be my doubles partner."

Gabriel's face drew serious. "We will discuss the terms of our partnership at a later time."

"That's not a no!"

"We should celebrate!" Tristan said. "I think I have a bottle of champagne left..."

"Actually, I have a better way for us to celebrate," I said, making eye contact with Gabriel, then Dominic. They both nodded. "We've all discussed it. Do you have them, Gabriel?"

Gabriel reached over to his bag beside the bed and pulled out two pairs of handcuffs. "Right here."

Tristan bit his lip. "I've never tied a girl up before, but I'm down if you are."

"Actually," I said, "the handcuffs are for *you*. Today is all about you, and I know just how to treat you right."

His eyes widened, but he grinned. "Well, all right then."

He leaned back in bed and we handcuffed each arm to a different bedpost. He looked nervous, but excited as I leaned over him, giving him a long kiss.

"We're going to put something on TV to set the mood," I said, reaching for the remote.

"Is it the tape we made at Christmas?" he asked. "I still haven't watched it yet."

"It's better than that," Dominic said while turning toward the TV.



The screen came on, and I hit play on the streaming service. The opening credits of the movie began to play. Tristan looked confused until the title screen flashed.

## ROCKY

“Oh, what the fuck!” Tristan said, jerking against his restraints. “This isn’t sexy at all!”

“Nobody said it would be sexual,” Dominic pointed out.

“It is a love story!” Gabriel said while leaning back on a pillow.

“I’m the Australian Open champion,” Tristan complained. “We should do what I want.”

“We’ll do what you want later. After Rocky meets Adrian,” I promised.

“Spoilers,” Dominic hissed, putting a finger to his lips.

“Aw, I had the movie spoiled for me,” Tristan groaned. “I guess we don’t need to watch it now.”

“Please be quiet. We are trying to watch the movie,” Gabriel said.

“Bunch of cunts,” Tristan muttered.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” I asked. “And remember, I hold the keys to those handcuffs.”

Tristan flashed me a toothy smile. “They’re a bunch of cunts. You’re a sweet angel who I’m madly in love with.”

I brushed my lips against his. “Love you too.”

The four of us laughed and settled in for the movie. We had almost two dozen grand slam victories between us, spread out over the past fourteen years. Enough hardware to keep anyone happy. But we had something that mattered so much more than tennis trophies.

We had each other.

# Bonus Scene



Interested in how our four tennis lovers are doing in the near future? Click the link below to read a special bonus chapter that was cut from the book. It's extra sweet, just the way we like it!

<https://tinyurl.com/vn6m6uzk>



If you enjoyed this book, you're going to love this other Reverse Harem Romance from Cassie Cole: *Roommates With Benefits*. You can [click here to buy it](#), or keep reading for a special sneak peek!



## Leslie

It was just supposed to be a fun night out. Blowing off some steam at a college party before the fall semester started on Monday. I certainly didn't intend to hook up with anyone.

But fate—or the randomness of the universe, or *whatever* you wanted to call it—had other ideas.

“Oh, I've missed you, Leslie!” my best friend Erin said, putting an arm around me as we walked to the party. “What

was the big disastrous news you wanted to tell me? Were you not able to enroll in all the classes you need?"

"It's my living situation," I told her. "The dorm office totally fucked me over."

"Oh no!"

"Back in March, I signed up for student housing," I explained. "Usually, it's reserved for underclassmen, but I was able to get a senior exemption. They assigned me to Franklin Dorm, third floor. Everything was great. Well, a week ago I emailed the office to ask about getting a parking pass. The asshole on the phone says I'm not registered at Franklin Dorm. I'm not in the system at all. Long story short, a month ago they took my room away and gave it to some freshman."

"Those motherfuckers!"

"They kicked me to the curb a week before classes start. And this asshole lectured me on the phone about dorms being reserved for freshmen and sophomores, as if I didn't already know that. If they had just denied my senior exemption back in March, I would have had time to get an apartment. But now I'm basically homeless."

Erin squeezed me into a sideways hug as we walked along. "I would let you stay with me, but it's already too crowded. I can talk to the other girls and see if they're cool with you crashing on the couch, but it would only be for a few days..."

"Hopefully, I won't need that," I replied. "I found a room for rent on Craigslist. It's a big house with three other girls living in it. I got lucky, I guess. It was the only option I could find." I paused. "Well, there was *one* other option. An older couple was offering a room to a college student. But their vibe was weird when I talked to them on the phone. They asked what I look like, if I had a boyfriend, weird stuff like that. I think they're swingers looking for a third." Even though the night was pleasant, I shivered.

"Hey," Erin said with a grin. "That doesn't sound too bad."

"They're in their sixties!" I shot back at her. "The man is retired! He said he would be around the house all day in case I

*needed help studying.*”

“Don’t kink-shame,” Erin teased. “Some of us are into freaky stuff.”

“I’m into plenty of *stuff*, freaky or otherwise. But I have zero interest in hooking up with a couple that is old enough to be my grandparents.”

“So you moved in with those three girls?”

“Dad’s driving up to help me move in tomorrow. I’m staying at a hotel tonight.”

“Do the girls seem nice?”

“I guess. I haven’t met any of them. But Harper, the girl who posted the ad, seems *really* sweet, based on her texts.”

Erin shot me a sideways glare. “You better not replace me as your bestie.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The party was in a residential neighborhood a few blocks from campus, close to all the sorority and fraternity houses. Thumping music drifted from most of the houses we passed; everyone was throwing a party tonight, the Saturday before classes began.

When we reached our party, we had to stand in line to get in. That was weird; most of these parties had the front door open and anyone could waltz right inside. But when we got to the front, we soon realized why.

“Let’s see some IDs,” a guy in a frat shirt said.

I blinked. “Seriously? You’re carding people?”

“Cops have been cracking down lately,” he replied simply. “If we get busted again, we’ll lose our charter.” He held out his palm.

Erin glanced at me. “What if she flashes her tits?”

The pseudo-bouncer flicked his eyes between us. “You serious?”

“She’s joking,” I said, reaching into my skirt pocket. “Here’s my ID.”

Erin’s eyes were wide and fearful as I handed it over. The guy scanned the ID. “Lauren Bloomfeld?”

“In the flesh,” I replied.

He paused a little longer to examine it, and I held my breath. I didn’t think a frat guy checking IDs at a house would make any trouble for me, but things hadn’t gone my way lately...

“Cool,” he said, handing it back to me. Then he checked Erin’s ID. “Keg’s in the back. Bottled beer is in the garage fridge.”

I hurried past him before he could change his mind.

“When did you get a fake ID?” Erin whispered as we walked inside.

“My brother’s friend got it for me this summer. I don’t turn twenty-one until November. I am *not* waiting that long to drink.”

“Atta girl. Speaking of which...” A guy was walking by with two red solo cups of beer in his hands. Erin took them from him and said, “That was so sweet of you!” She leaned closer to him. “Come find me later and maybe I’ll repay you.”

He gave a nervous laugh as we walked away with his beers.

“God, it feels good to be back on campus,” Erin said. “Even if it is our last year here.”

In my three years here, I had learned that most college parties were the same. Someone blasted music from too-loud speakers on the first floor, while people danced in a few of the nearby rooms. Beer pong tables were setup in the garage, while the backyard was reserved for cornhole and other drinking games.

Erin knew one of the guys who lived here, which was how we got invited. We’d been coming to parties here for the past year, and tonight was one of the biggest crowds we had ever seen. Everyone was back from summer break and ready to let loose.

I liked it here at Coastal California College, or The Three-C as everyone called it. And it felt good to be back after a summer spent slinging scoops at an ice cream shop in Flagstaff, where I was from. I didn't party as much as Erin, or even as much as your average college kid. But every now and again, it was nice to go wild. Especially before my life became overwhelmed with term papers and exams.

"So," Erin said as we finished our first beers and got a refill at the keg. "You looking to hook up tonight?"

"Not the first night back," I replied. "I just want to get a good buzz and enjoy the college vibe."

"Girl, you need to get *laid*," she said, handing me a refilled cup of beer.

"Why do you say that?" I asked as we moved away from the keg line.

"Your last boyfriend was way back in March. You only hooked up with three guys on Tinder this summer, and I suspect you're lying about the number and it was actually just one guy."

"Okay, I did lie," I admitted. "But it was *two* guys."

"You're a twenty-year-old woman, Leslie. According to internet pornography and creepy old swingers, you're the *ideal sexual age*. You should be getting stirred like a jar of natural peanut butter every day."

I laughed at the stupid metaphor. "I'm homeless. I don't even have a place to bring a guy back to."

"You have something better: a *hotel room*. Hotel room sex is the best sex, Leslie! That's where you can get as dirty as you want and then both of you walk away the next morning!"

"I'm good, Erin. Not everyone has the same libido as you."

"You're no fun." She glared at me. "But while we're on the topic, yes, I need some good dick tonight."

"In other words, it's a normal night for you."

She took a long gulp of beer and shook her head. “I want something different tonight. Not nice-guy dick. I want, like, cocky asshole dick. Fuck you so hard your toes curl, and then never call you again dick.”

“Good luck with that endeavor. I’ll spend tonight living vicariously through you.”

“Then I’m glad I brought my A-game.” She pushed her tits up in her bra. “I’m going to find Jason and say hi. I’ll be back in a few.”

I watched her maneuver through the crowd, then I returned to nursing my beer while swaying gently with the music. I was telling the truth when I told her I didn’t want to hook up tonight. It wasn’t that I disliked sex. On the contrary: I enjoyed it *very much*. But I didn’t need it as often as Erin did. She was twitchy like a meth addict if she went two days without her fix.

*My vibrator is good enough, I thought. Most of the time.*

I was nodding to myself at that thought when I saw him.

Over in the corner of the room, talking to another dude, was a tall guy who immediately drew my eye. He was a tall viking of a man, lanky and muscular at the same time. He had a strong jaw covered with a few days of a beard, and his thick blond hair hung down to his shoulders, swaying as he shook his head to his companion. Something primal stirred inside me at the sight of him.

*Okay, I thought. My vibrator can’t compete with a man like that.*

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Cassie Cole is a Reverse Harem Romance writer living in Branson, Missouri. A sappy lover at heart, she thinks romance is best with a kick-butt plot!

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