



SLAMMED



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CHAPTER ONE

FIFTEEN THOUSAND PEOPLE MADE A lot of noise.

The simple fact of their existence made it so: breathing, hearts beating, the soft-squashed gasp a person made when sitting down too heavily, or the squeak of their rubber-soled shoes against the concrete floor. Plastic chairs groaned on their hinges, throats were cleared, and that was before a single conversation, from the mutters between close friends to the shouts from one corner of the space to another.

But on Centre Court at Wimbledon, when the umpire called for, “Quiet, please,” that was exactly what they got.

That quiet closed in around me, serving in the semi-final as the clock ticked over from afternoon to evening. The match had already been delayed by warm summer rain, the kind that appeared out of a faintly grey sky and soaked people to the bone without them realising. At the first drop, we had been postponed. Covers rolled out over the grass so quickly it seemed they were protecting from something far more dangerous than a little rainwater.

Then the roof closed, slow and mechanical like a spaceship in some clunky sci-fi show I’d watched growing up. With it sealed, with the weather shut out, everything sounded different. Echoes bounced in strange ways, and suddenly all those people at a safe remove seemed to be right on top of me.

I shook my head. *Focus, Elin.* What did a little change or two matter? I took a steadying breath and reminded myself that the tennis stayed the same.

The previous point had been decided with a furious rally, and I’d won when a last desperate lunge was backhanded into the net. I’d waited politely for my opponent to pick herself up and dust herself off. Her once-pristine

white T-shirt, mostly sweated through like my own, bore green marks and sandy smears from where she'd hit the ground. I wiped at my own shirt in sympathy, ball for my next serve already in my hand.

I only had twenty-five seconds to make the serve, so I bounced the ball straight down at my feet. One. Two. The weight of it felt familiar against my palm, fresh from its precisely chilled can, in peak condition for being hammered against the ground just as hard as either one of us could hit it.

I closed my eyes for just a second and waited for the feeling to settle over me. Sure enough, it came rolling in just like the tide. I'd done this before, maybe a million times. I released the ball upwards, no blue sky above it that time, just the industrial surface of the closed roof. No matter, my other arm was already in motion, the movement as natural as breathing.

With the kiss of contact, my serve was unleashed. Not my hardest or fastest, but the women's game wasn't dominated by serve prowess in the same way as the men's. I could have risked serving an ace, effectively a shot that no mortal player should have been able to return. Aiming exclusively for those could lead to double faults though, and so it was a calculated choice each time.

I could barely feel my racquet in my hand. It was an extension of my arm by now, no matter how many different ones passed through my bag and my palm every day, every week. The custom grip I'd been using since I was fourteen and still playing in the juniors was moulded to the exact bends of my fingers, and the calluses I developed always fit within its grooves. Like a wedding ring worn for years but still felt after it had been removed, so too did I have my own phantom accessory, the slight heft of the graphite frame always with me even when I was far from the court or a kit bag.

We hit another long, hard rally, and I felt a twinge of complaint in my right calf as I stopped short to win the point. Damn, that would have to be looked at to make sure it didn't develop into a proper strain, or worse, an actual muscle tear.

For a moment, as I moved to serve again, I realised that I didn't actually have to. Somehow, in all the years I'd been playing, it never occurred to me that the entire act of playing in a match was voluntary. If I set my racquet down right then, in that moment, and walked off court, no one could have stopped me.

Fortunately for my wandering thoughts, I had been drilled too well by my coach over the seasons. Countless sessions with my therapist had

focused on moments like these. Now in that final stretch of a match, I knew I had the stamina and technique to win almost by default. How hard that was usually came down to my opponent, and that was when I realised my real advantage.

It was bad form to admit it, to even think it in the first place, but ask anyone who ever won a tennis match and they would nod in recognition. The two of you were out there, alone in effect despite the umpire and the line judges and the kids who chased the loose balls around. That was what the world shrunk down to: one person competing against another, with only one winner possible. What any winner could have admitted—confessed, really—was that at some point on the road to victory, they could see their opponent settle for defeat.

That moment? Seeing the loss in their eyes even as they stared defiantly back over the net? That was what kept me going, made me want to compete and bring home as many trophies as they could throw at me. Maybe I should have said something humble, about playing for the love of the game, but it would only have been a lie. That look, the one I saw radiating back at me in that moment, said that yet again I'd won. Now all that remained was to clinch those last two points and let the umpire confirm what we both already knew on court.

I had won, and on Saturday afternoon I would be playing in front of royalty, celebrities, and millions of people all around the world, for a chance at yet another Wimbledon Ladies' Singles title. Taking a moment, I smoothed down my white skirt and plucked the white T-shirt away from my skin where sweat was making it stick uncomfortably.

I unleashed the ball again, ready to finish the formalities and be declared the winner for all on Centre Court to hear. The crowd watched on in silence as I wore the woman on the other side of the net down, stroke by stroke, sliced backhand by sliced backhand.

By the time the umpire called it—"Game, set, match, Miss Larsson"—I was already at the net, arm extended for the handshake of congratulations and commiseration. Mostly I just wanted to get back under cover of the locker room, out of sight of the roaring crowd who somehow seemed closer than ever.

One more match, I told myself. Then I could rest, then some things would be optional again. I just had to behave myself for two more days. What could be easier than that?

CHAPTER TWO

ALL I WANTED TO DO was to have one drink in peace.

Not too much to ask, surely? But it certainly seemed to be an impossible quest that Friday night. I'd been careful in my choices, taking a cab into the centre of London, a bustling city where anyone could get lost without really trying. I picked a hotel with a famous bar but excellent security, frequented by people who ended up in the morning papers, but the paparazzi shots were always out on the street, never inside.

Like I said, careful.

I suppose I had to be, since technically my face was recognisable. So people liked to tell me, anyway. I had found that like most people in this world, a hood pulled low made people gloss over you when they looked. Much better than baseball caps and sunglasses. That passed for a disguise back in LA, which I mostly called home, but in London it was a neon sign screaming, *Look at me!*

Instead, I dressed like any other woman in her thirties hitting the town. Little black dress, killer heels—not the hoodie that I would have preferred at all. I could always hide my face behind my hair, just about. One of the few perks of letting all that blonde hair grow out, even though I'd been longing to cut it short since my teens.

The bar was everything I remembered from my previous, less-incognito trip there. Dark in all the right corners, the blueish glow from the bar enough to get you served, but the strange colours meant nobody really looked like themselves. That's why I thought I was safe to perch on a stool there, to stay in the thick of things instead of retreating to a lonely corner. After all, that was why I'd come out in the first place: to drown out the maddening quiet of my rented room.

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Of course, being in a bar meant men hit on me. Not because I was anything special, trust me. Blonde, female, with a pulse was basically a bat signal to a lot of guys who couldn't read the signs—like the fact that I had checked out more women than they had. Still, it was almost good practice to keep knocking them back. I backhanded their approaches like I returned serves over the net.

Which is to say, I did it really well. Just like I return serves really well. Because that recognisable face I mentioned? Might have something to do with the whole professional tennis player thing. Not that I bought into it, but London during Wimbledon fortnight was tuned into the world of racquets and balls in a particular way, making my trip out on the town particularly risky, since my goal was not to be noticed.

Still, I liked my odds. A city of eight million people, the blurring effects of alcohol, and the fact that nobody in their right mind would expect me to be out on the town the night before playing in the Ladies' Singles final.

The main event on the second-last day of the tournament, the final was one of the crown jewels of two weeks of tennis mania tucked into the Southwest corner of the city. A person, particularly an elite athlete with an impressive career behind her, would have to be in an especially strange mood to do something so foolish the night before such a major event.

Well, hello. I'm Elin Larsson and apparently I'm a fool.

It didn't take long for my entourage, by which I mostly meant my coach, Britta, to notice my absence. Instead of hotels, which weren't plentiful close to the Wimbledon courts, we rented huge luxurious houses for two weeks every year that I played this tournament. All the other players had been doing the same in recent years, preferring the illusion of home comforts over sterile, identikit hotel rooms. Which meant it hadn't taken Britta very long to discover I wasn't in fact having an early night with a face mask and some meditation exercises. At least in a hotel, my door would have locked.

Did I mention that Britta—for all her coaching awards, not to mention the books and videos—was also my mother? Some would say that job came first, but I also wouldn't have been shocked if she had drills for my backhand worked out while I was still in the womb. I just knew better than to ask questions like that anymore.

Anyway, there I was in the blissful semi-anonymity of being out in public and ignoring the messages lighting up my phone, when a tall

brunette took the last empty barstool, the one next to mine. I suppose I could have ignored her, but hey, only human. I took a long, careful look at her in profile, and I felt that half-click of recognition as I looked at her face. Maybe she was someone famous too.

And in a very cool, composed sort of way, I choked on the olive from my martini.

I really was having just the one drink to relax me a little. I planned to stick to sparkling water the rest of the night, a drink so bland and pointless that it felt more like a punishment than anything else. I envied the people around me ordering doubles, or cocktails full of different spirits and a ton of sugar. Even the guy yelling about his rum and Coke had me idly wondering when the last time I'd casually ordered a soft drink was.

During all that, she caught me staring, of course. Or maybe the choking caught her attention, but I was grateful for the thump between my shoulder blades all the same.

"Thank you," I managed to gasp, and her concerned look gave way to a tight smile. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Well, I think you just ruined martinis for me."

"Sorry."

"Just stay away from the nicer Scotches if you're planning to choke again. Those I would really miss."

Her accent was soft, wrapped around her consonants like syrup. I couldn't claim to know where it came from, though I'd have guessed Italy with a gun to my head.

"Then at least let me buy you one of those for saving my life. Or more like my dignity, I suppose."

"True, it wasn't very dignified." She flagged down the bartender. "I'll take your most expensive single malt. She's paying."

"Make it a double," I added, because I was not about to be outdone. "And a sparkling water for me."

"Scared yourself with the martinis too?" she asked, turning more towards me. There really was something familiar about her face.

"I'm not a big drinker," was answer enough. "I'm Elin, by the way." Offering a hand was awkward and a little hopeless, but she shook it anyway. It made that smile of hers a little bigger.

"So formal. Antonia, but please, everyone calls me Toni."

Something pinged at that too. A memory half-forgotten, itching at the back of my skull just to irritate me. Did she work for the All England club? Maybe one of the sponsors? They were all in town, having a great time on expenses. These past two weeks I had shaken more hands than ever, posed for more selfies than anyone could ever want to see. I signed giant novelty tennis balls on court and tried to show up for any charities that invited me, matches and training permitting.

“Have we met?” I’d learned over the years not to prolong the agony. Once, I’d have tried to hang in there and pick up a few clues, but if I didn’t get it from a first name then I knew the blank was never going to fill itself.

“Just once, in Paris. I don’t expect you’d remember, though.”

“Sorry, I’m bad with faces. Even worse with names.”

Our drinks came, and she took a large sip of her drink. “Not bad.”

I didn’t know one end of a whisky from another, but I knew when I was being teased. “So, Toni...”

She was saving me from myself by interrupting. “Listen, I was going to string it out a little longer, not let you know that I know who you are. I even had this whole joke about how they call you the Ice Princess and the ice in my drink...but you should know that the guy at the end of the bar is a gossip columnist for a big tabloid here. And he gave you a second glance like he knows you from somewhere.”

Shit. The last thing I expected was an actual journalist. Maybe a fan with a mobile phone, but everyone in the bar seemed far too cool for that sort of thing. Never mind that players went out before big matches all the time, but with my public reputation as the quiet one, the resident good girl of tennis, they’d have a field day.

And that was before you considered the reaction from my mother.

As the bartender passed, I fished some cash from my purse. Plucking another twenty on top of the bar bill and tip, I risked leaning in to ask, “Is there a back way out of here? Maybe a staff entrance I could use?”

He took the extra money and nodded to the opposite end of the bar from my unwelcome journalist. “That way. Anyone stops you, just say Jimmy sent you. Leads right out into the side street.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised that when I stepped down from the stool and headed that way, Toni followed right along. She actually

took me by the elbow and steered me towards the barely visible door on the far side of the bar, apparently concerned I wasn't moving fast enough. I could keep up with Olympic runners on sprints, but that evening I was sluggish, almost slow. I blamed the heels.

The door opened into a space with duller blue lights, like something out of a bad sci-fi movie. We jogged down the corridor, her hand never leaving my arm, and as we reached the first turn, normal fluorescent light greeted us at last.

We never got a chance to explain our presence, because nobody intercepted us between there and the door out into what was an alleyway at best. Calling it a side street suggested it was somewhere people might willingly walk down or that cars could drive down. This was a horrid place, full of industrial bins and cobbles shiny with rain. At least the wet pavement could be explained by the damp weather and not what it distinctly smelled like.

By that point I was definitely moving fast enough. I practically dragged Toni out of there, to the safety of the main street and the potential of flagging down one of those iconic black London taxis.

"Thank you," I said, trying not to be disappointed that she finally let go once we were on the pavement. "I hope I didn't interrupt your evening. I just have a big day tomorrow and thought a little time to myself might be nice..."

"I get it. I didn't get a chance to say back there, but I'm on the tour again this year." Oh. Implying that previously she hadn't been? I was caught completely off guard. Maybe that was why she looked so familiar at second glance. I hadn't just been staring because she was so damn pretty with those high cheekbones and expressive dark eyes that seemed to play a news ticker of her feelings as she silently worked through them. I envied her the transparency. Lately I only expressed emotion over missed points and bad line calls.

"So when we met in Paris...?" I asked, suspecting at least part of the answer.

"You put me out in the second round at Roland Garros. Straight sets, 6-1, 6-0. I suppose you do that so often that it's just a statistic, but it was a big day for me. Thanks for letting me win that first game, by the way. Saved a little bit of my pride."

“Let you?” I couldn’t help but scoff. “I never let anyone win anything. It’s possible it took me until the second game to be fully warmed up. But, uh, sorry about that. Also for not recognising you tonight. You must think I’m some arrogant bitch.”

“With a career like yours, I don’t think you’d have the storage space to remember every poor girl you ever sent crying back to the locker room. At least I got a kiss on the cheek at the net when you were done demolishing me. I’d have been even more bummed to just get a handshake.”

There was that sparkle in her eyes again. Maybe saving me from the press hadn’t been her only motivation. I hardly dared entertain the idea. Tennis I could do. Flirting? There wouldn’t be trophies for that any time soon.

“So since you know where I’ll be tomorrow,” I began, because once the idea had struck me, I had to speak up instantly or lose the nerve, “any chance you might be in the same place?”

Toni laughed. “You mean will I be on Centre Court at Wimbledon? It’s funny, but they don’t give out tickets to the people dumped out in the second round.”

“I have one to spare,” I said, because I did. Three, in fact. “As long as you don’t mind sitting in the box. The cameras can be...” I was going to say *too much*, but I didn’t want to sound spoiled about all the attention. “But the Royals will be in. My Swedish ones and the local ones. That will pull focus.”

“Well, I’d be an idiot to turn down a free ticket, right?” Toni stepped closer, and just when I began to think a kiss might be in my future, she stuck her hand out instead. She hailed a taxi, and miraculously for a Friday night, the first one with a light on actually stopped.

“Just go to the collection window at the ticket office, I’ll put one under your name.” It occurred to me then I had only a vague grasp of her surname. “Actually, could you just remind me...”

“Antonia Cortes Ruiz,” she said, close to my ear, and the soft *S* with the rolled *R*’s made for a very pleasant sensation. “Now get some rest. I don’t want to come all the way to watch you lose tomorrow because you were too tired from choking on martinis.”

“Deal.” I didn’t say that I felt more awake than I had all day. Instead, I got into the taxi, wondering what it might be like to be the kind of person who asked Toni to get in alongside me.

Turned out I wouldn’t get to know, because the door closed behind me and she simply waved from the pavement.

“Where to, love?” the driver asked.

“Bathgate Road, please. SW19.” I hoped that by not saying the *W* word he wouldn’t make the association. But there it was: the flickering glance back to the rear-view mirror as we pulled into traffic.

“Wimbledon?” he said, and I nodded without making eye contact. “Here, has anyone ever told you that you look a bit like—”

“I get it all the time,” I said, faking a laugh. “That would be nice, huh?”

He accepted the denial at face value; people always do. It’s easier to accept that the unlikely isn’t really happening. “Would be nice to have her money, that’s for sure.”

I rested my head against the inside of the cab, feeling the vibration of the tyres against the road rattling through my head, that strange tickling that seemed to go through my teeth. Traffic was slow as drunken revellers spilled into the street and buses competed with other taxis for places to stop. Soon, though, we were heading for the river and quieter roads.

When the orange lights started to blur, I let my eyes close for the rest of the journey. I hoped it would prevent any conversation, the awkward questions that I never knew how to answer. London sped by outside, but I didn’t see any of it.

CHAPTER THREE

I ALWAYS WOKE UP FAR too early on the day of a final, though these days it was just force of habit. Years ago it had been pure nerves; often I'd hardly been able to sleep at all. I'd been a jittery, jumpy wreck of a girl, barely able to hold my racquet right or answer a simple question.

That soon went, with practice. The regular, manageable amount of anxiety still fizzled and crackled in my veins, but I had learned how to seem completely cool on the outside, to seem like a major final was just any other three sets of tennis.

Sitting around the house all morning to quietly worry was not an option, especially once the interns had started packing up all the extra stuff I hadn't even asked for. Some would head to my home in Los Angeles, more still to my family home in Stockholm, but the staff would get their share too. Who else would do these crazy jobs with long hours and so much travel if they weren't getting some perks? All the sportswear, cool gadgets, and keychains a person could ask for.

The permanent staff I knew well by now. Most of them had been with "Team Larsson," as my mother infuriatingly called it, for more than five years. Some had come fresh from university, while others had been hanging in there for a professional tennis break that never came. They made my life pretty seamless, and most importantly, these people were my travelling family most of the year. We laughed, argued, played stupid games—anything to pass the time in a new country every other week. They made it fun to be in the gym or on court every day.

"When's the car?" I asked Parisa when she appeared bearing a smoothie and a bottle of water. Looking chic as ever in her tailored cream-coloured

dress and fitted navy blazer, she had her glossy dark hair down in loose waves for a change instead of the professional buns and twists I was used to.

I was dressed for the day ahead too, only in my case that meant a pair of crisp white shorts and a matching white T-shirt, temporarily covered by what the kit maker called a ‘presentation’ jacket, but really it was just a tracksuit top with a few more splashes of colour. Only my shoes were waiting to be put on, from force of habit and maybe a little bit of superstition: I preferred to wear slider sandals until I got to the court area. Tennis shoes went on only in the locker room, along with my actual match kit. That was just a replica of my current shorts and shirt, but with the date and our names embroidered on the chest. I was honestly just glad I didn’t have to do my own laundry with the amount I must have generated.

“Morning to you too, party animal. You know Britta is lying in wait to murder you for that, yes?”

Parisa’s accent still carried a strong current of her native Pakistan, and her darker skin next to mine as she handed over my necessary drinks made my year-round tan seem to fade in an instant.

“Oh, let her. I went out for one drink, and I’m all ready to go today. It’s not like I make a habit of it.”

“Apparently there was some social-media buzz about you, from people on the street. Nobody got a clear enough shot, though, so you got lucky.”

“If either of the men playing their final tomorrow went out tonight it would be ‘look, he’s just being a guy,’” I complained. “I don’t mind people judging, but I mind when it’s really about controlling what the little ladies are doing.”

Parisa rolled her eyes and made no attempt to hide that was exactly what she was doing. “Lots of good luck messages and gifts coming in. You want to look before we go?”

I shook my head. Did I ever? It wasn’t that I was ungrateful—quite the opposite. I just didn’t like to weigh the whole day down in the expectations of others. A final should be nerve-racking enough on its own, surely?

“You’re going to make me do social media from the grounds, aren’t you?”

“It’s nice that you’ve stopped fighting it. Most people will never get to experience this, so you’re shining a light on the sacred—”

I held my hand up to stop her. Parisa could wax poetic for hours if I set her off. I kept telling her she was wasted on my straightforward

life. She owed the world a book of all her wonderful stories. To that, she usually snorted and started talking to me about photoshoots or personal appearances, knowing how much I hated them. “Were you able to fix that ticket I asked you about?”

“Not like you to be sending midnight texts, but yes. Darren in the box office is a sweetheart, totally in love with me, you know how it is. It helps that this woman already has security clearance as a player.”

I don’t know why I was so invested in Toni being there, not when there was still a good chance she’d think I was joking and not even show. Who’d brave the crowds on the last weekend of Wimbledon unless they were sure of a ticket? I should have asked for her number. Or maybe I should have learned how to flirt at least ten years ago.

With carefully timed lingering over my smoothie and a cowardly dash to the front door, I managed to get in the first car with Parisa and avoid my mother until we reached the Wimbledon grounds. From the moment we stepped out of the cars after the short drive, it was controlled chaos. Designated press areas allowed for photographs of each player’s arrival, but there was also a gauntlet of VIPs and staff who all wanted to wish me luck, grab a quick picture, or generally say hello.

Although it didn’t help my icy reputation, I kept the smiles polite and my earbuds firmly in place. Parisa and my mother ran interference on all the requests, and as silly as it sounded, I specifically had to refuse handshakes. Four years ago an overly enthusiastic billionaire sponsor had tried to shake my hand with both of his massive ones. He’d practically crushed bones in the attempt, and I still grumbled sometimes that he was the reason I hadn’t won that particular US Open.

Lars, my fitness trainer, and Eziamaka, my physio, set to work getting my equipment and general area prepared once we entered the shared ladies’ locker rooms. At that point I could avoid my mother no longer, and she pounced.

“Elin.”

“Mamma? You know, Ezi looks almost ready to do some stretches with me...”

One glance from her shut that down fast. “Nice evening?” She switched to Swedish as soon as Lars left the room, a sure sign that she didn’t want to be overheard or understood. “I’m sure I heard wrong about you looking for silly distractions before a final.”

I rarely got to speak in my native tongue other than with my parents and the occasional meeting with old friends, but it was probably good to take a refresher. One way or another, I'd be meeting with the King and Queen of Sweden later today. They didn't always travel to my finals, but Wimbledon they had a soft spot for. Maybe they just liked the short flight.

"I was just stretching my legs," I said, finding a euphemism. "No harm, no pictures."

"There better not be. Just make sure you win today, then anything that might show up will only be a detail. They'll say it's impressive that you could be so irresponsible and still the best in the world."

"You know, Mamma, your compliments are a little hard to find sometimes."

She snorted, moving back to English effortlessly. "Elin, be serious. You're in touching distance of the all-time Slam record. Do you really want to lose your appetite for winning now?"

"Well, I'm thirty-two," I answered. "And some would say I've already won plenty. Maybe it's time to give someone else a chance."

"I don't think so. Even if it was, don't start today. I can't bear the thought of you losing to that woman."

That woman being Celeste Rutherford, ranked number three in the world and second seed for this tournament. Which, in case it wasn't obvious from those numbers, meant we spent a lot of time breathing down each other's necks. The reason for my mother's animosity wasn't rooted in that, though. No, we Larsson women respect a fellow competitor, and we understood that it wasn't personal when we were on court.

No, Celeste had the almost unique honour of being my ex-girlfriend, and though we'd never officially been outed or talked seriously about coming out as a couple, it had been a poorly kept secret for two years. Then she broke my heart, which turned out to be pretty easy to do, and we've been friendly rivals ever since. Which was a really short way of describing something that involved quite so much crying.

In our upcoming match, I was competing against her for what could be my twentieth Grand Slam title, or her fifth. A whole head taller than me, Celeste had a strength on top of her athleticism that my own frame would never be able to match. Our styles contrasted wildly, but it usually made for an entertaining spectacle.

Wimbledon crowds had claimed us both as their own at different points, even though I'm from Stockholm and Celeste is from Detroit. Maybe they just liked our attitude, but I was glad for both of us, especially after Celeste's first French Open win had been marred by a few racist shouts. She had risen above, classy as ever, but I had wanted to march into the stands and set about them with my racquet.

Like I said—wildly different styles.

Ezi approached with her exercise bands, ready to check on my now quite-recovered calf muscle that had bugged me through the Australian Open and almost until Paris. Despite my mother mellowing a little, physio was still preferable. I checked my kit was laid out and went over to start Ezi's exercises.

"What have you been up to?" she asked as soon as we were alone. "You know your mother blames us when you go off the rails."

"One drink is off the rails now? I was restless; I wanted to relax." It was hard to maintain dignified outrage with my legs in the air and my back pressed into a mat on the floor, but I attempted it anyway. "You're just mad I didn't invite you."

"I don't go drinking in fancy hotels, but thanks."

"I met someone." I blurted it out, not even sure what I meant. All I knew was that Ezi, who could inflict pain on me daily and still make me like her, was someone I could trust. "I mean, just socially. I don't know if it was..."

"This was the last-minute ticket? Smooth, Larsson."

"Hey, I might not have game, but I do get some cool freebies. Besides, she plays too."

Ezi pushed a little harder, making my hip grumble. "You mean she's a player?"

"No, literally. Plays tennis. Antonia Cortes...something."

"Ruiz. You might want to get better with names. Or she'll find out what a spoiled princess you are."

I laughed. She never was shy about calling me on my bullshit. "Come on, finish your torture session. I need to go play a warmup game after this."

* * *

All the routine and preparation didn't get me ready for that last stretch. Alone in the private dressing room with the screens all tuned to anything but tennis, it was always a little like what I thought a confessional would

feel like. Would the umpire pull back a little curtain on the wall and ask about my sins? Apparently not.

At least the sponsors had picked out some great outfits for this tournament. Unlike the other slams, Wimbledon still insisted on its all-white dress code, dating back to the foundation of the All England club. While we could have a splash of colour and pattern, we all looked quite immaculate in our tennis whites. They even requested all our medical equipment be white too, if possible. From Band-Aids to knee supports. And the underwear too, of course, just in case we sweated through the top layer, which we almost always did.

Some of the players grouched about it, but I liked looking so spotless. At least until the first lunge to return a low net shot, and then all bets were off. Grass stains didn't look good on anybody.

Even if I hadn't done this for a living, I'd probably still be into my trainers just as much. They've always been the biggest perk of the job, and these brand-new ones that I'd only worn for an hour or two to break in were practically moulded to my feet. I knew it was stupid to think they made me any lighter or faster, but it felt like they did. Sometimes silly little psychological edges like that made all the difference, like wings on my heels. I was Hermes or maybe Nike, but the shoes were all Adidas.

The wardrobe varied a lot over the season, but I relished being back in all white with the famous three lines down the side in black. It was a flattering look in the full-length mirrors. Moments like these, I actually got to confront my appearance. Most of the time, my body was more of a machine to me, something to push and prod at, to find out what more it could do. I knew I looked okay, even good sometimes. I just didn't let myself think about it once I was out in front of the crowd. I pushed the white sweatband into place on my forehead and snapped the matching wristbands. That and wearing sliders until changing into my match shoes was as close as I came to any kind of ritual.

After what seemed like an eternity, an usher came to knock on the door. "We're ready for you, Miss Larsson." Oh yeah, no *Ms* at Wimbledon. And the married women got changed to *Mrs* even if they hadn't changed their surnames. We'd only recently gotten them to stop calling married women by their husband's names on the scoreboards, and sometimes it really did feel like another century there.

Speaking of married women, I came face-to-face with Celeste who was waiting with her usher in the narrow hallway. I froze for a moment, unsure how to greet her. She took the lead, coming over to shake my hand and pulling me into a hug right after.

“It’s been a while,” she said, like we hadn’t done a bunch of events together this year. So many of the smaller tournaments like a pre-event shoot with all the top seeds, and we still had one of our favourite charities in common. Oh, and did I mention I’d dumped her out in the quarterfinals in the Australian Open? Well, that too. It still hadn’t evaporated the lingering awkwardness between us. If most groups of lesbian friends were incestuous, then double that for tennis.

“Best of luck out there,” I replied, as we followed the head usher who would lead us out onto the hallowed ground of Centre Court. Behind us another pair of ushers carried our kit bags, stuffed full of racquets and tape, spare shoes and socks and a spare replica of this outfit in case I tore anything. I would have had drinks and towels, but we had our own fridges stocked on court, and using the provided regulation towels was required. As revenge, all the players liked to steal them as souvenirs. I’d left tournaments with an entire bag of contraband towels in the past.

As we made our way through the cream-coloured corridors, lined with tennis-themed art and various dignitaries, I nodded to each of the armed services personnel who manned each new stretch of floor. It felt like the least we could all do, invite them for a nice day out and some tennis—another stark reminder of my privileged existence.

Down a small, open staircase and the line of umpires and officials stood waiting for us. I was top seed, so I got to go out first. That also meant I was first to shake the Chairman’s hand, and Celeste did the same right after me.

Even still, tucked in the belly of the building, I could feel the buzz of the crowd. It was more than a feeling, almost a tangible thing. The sheer presence of them seemed to resonate through the bricks and wood, though they were only restless and not even cheering yet.

Then the final stretch—which was apparently the right time to give us giant bouquets to carry out on court. Another tradition I’d never understood; they were taken off us moments later when we sat down, and most times I don’t think I ever saw the bouquet again.

Exiting the door into the last little tunnel created by screens that shielded us from public view, I felt a familiar spike of panic. Nothing obvious, just

my heart seemed to clench and I briefly tasted metal on my tongue. I glanced back at Celeste before we emerged into the crowd's hungry gaze, but she already had her game face on. I no longer existed to her as Elin the person, the one-time girlfriend. Now I was just The Opponent, that walking, talking obstacle between her and the prize she wanted.

Walking onto the grass brought a deafening roar from the first step, the dragon of anticipation yanked to life by the first person in thousands to react. Unlike after matches, I raised no hand in acknowledgement, and I didn't look around for familiar faces either. I did the required turn and curtsy to the Royal Box, populated by my own royal family as well as the younger members of the British one. Not a bad turnout, considering the men's final would pull a lot of focus the following day.

Just like Celeste had already done, I let my world shrink down to the challenge ahead. The grass felt springy beneath my feet, despite the dry sandy patches from two solid weeks of action. The sky above wasn't promising, a dull shade of grey that threatened rain before the afternoon was out. I hoped we'd be done before delays and the closing of the roof came into play.

I took my seat on the far side of the umpire's tower, nodding as my bags were set down, reaching for my first racquet as soon as someone whisked the flowers away. People liked to think we had a lucky one or some superstition like that. We didn't get the chance to get attached, not with how hard the modern game was on the kit. The strings were different almost every match, and when the strain started to show on a frame, it would be instantly and effortlessly replaced. I couldn't count how many I got through per season, but I wouldn't bet below fifty.

Finals were always slow to get started thanks to all the extra ceremony, so I got back on my feet and kept my weight shifting from one foot to the other, minimal activity so I didn't start to cool back down. The usual announcements rang out, and the crowd began to settle into their seats. Just the coin toss to come, a simple matter of which end to start and who would serve first. I'd long since stopped minding which of those I got. Winning meant starting strong regardless.

The umpire called us both to the net, where we earnestly shook hands again. The call was mine as the bronze coin flipped and twisted in the air.

Game on.

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