



Long Shot

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Description: Taylor Young was born a tennis prodigy, the daughter of one of the greatest players of all time. Her success was almost guaranteed. That is, until underdog Mackenzie Bennett started rising in the ranks and threatening her position as the number one player in Women's Tennis.

Mackenzie Bennett worked for everything she's ever had. Even the summer training camp she attended with prodigy Taylor Young. When their connection turned sour after being caught by Taylor's mom, Mac swore to get her revenge on Taylor – on and off the court. When these two former friends go head-to-head in the season's biggest Grand Slams, will they be able to stay professional or will their resentments bubble and reignite a fire they denied for decades?

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Mac

A thundering crackfilled the empty court as Mackenzie slammed the tennis ball over the net. She'd exerted every ounce of force she could muster into the play, tensing her abs and driving from her hips. It would be impossible for her opponent to return. But when it landed just outside the singles's line, Mac's head dropped. Using her free hand, she flicked sweat from her forehead.

"I'm guessing you already know what you did wrong?" A familiar voice and footsteps approached from behind her.

Nodding, Mac groaned. "Yeah. Not enough follow-through."

Barbara winked. "You gotta keep that arm up."

Mac swung the racket by her side listlessly, letting the graphite drag against the acrylic court of the John McEnroe Tennis Academy.

"Distracted?" Babs grabbed a sweat towel from the front pocket of her joggers, holding it out for Mac.

Meeting her gaze and taking the towel, Mackenzie shrugged. Barbara hadn't always been able to read her like a book, but a few years of coaching had made it nearly impossible for Mac to avoid her knowing eyes.

Babs patted her on the back. “Look, the first Open is coming up. Qualifying is still our first hurdle. Worrying about anything beyond that is useless until you’re actually in the tournament.”

“No pressure.” Mac rolled her eyes as she twirled the tennis racket in her hands. Her entire body tensed at the thought, but she tried to steady her breathing. With any luck, the French Open would be the first time Mac actually made it past the qualifying round.

“You know what BJK would say.” Babs eyed Mackenzie.

In unison, the player and the coach recited, “Pressure is a privilege.”

After giving Mac a pat on the back, Babs walked off the court and took her seat in the creaky bleachers. From across the court, Mac’s training partner got into position to serve a few practice shots. With a nod, Mac signaled her readiness. Milliseconds later, the ball was speeding toward her.

Turning her muscular, lean body, Mac sucked in as much air as her lungs would hold. Her strong, calloused fingers gripped the neck of her racket. With a tremendous grunt, Mac met the ball with the strings of her racket. A loud crack resounded through the indoor courts, drawing the eyes of other practicing players. When the ball landed inside the lines on the far back corner, Mac pumped her fists.

That’s more like it.

A few hours later, Babs finally dismissed Mackenzie to the locker room. Covered in sweat, Mac pushed open the women’s lockerroom door. Somehow it was more bustling inside than it was on the courts.

“Hey, Mackenzie,” One player nodded in Mac’s direction as she changed shirts.

Smiling back, Mac waved. “Lina, you looked good out there.” A Belgian player training in New York, Lina was preparing to make her debut in the U.S. Open in August. Luckily, that meant Mac didn’t have to worry about competition with her until the Summer.

Biting her lip, the TV playing Sports Central caught Mac’s eyes.

An anchor in a dark blue blazer laughed. “I mean, look at Taylor Young’s form here. No one, and I meanno one, is going to be able to take this prodigy out of the game this season.”

Mac watched the clip of Taylor’s training session. Her form was good. No... not just good: near perfect. There was hardly a hair out of place on her head. And it filled Mac with rage.

Ripping open her duffel bag, Mac gathered her shower caddy.

The anchor continued, “And we see no sign of a boyfriend in Taylor Young’s corner. So, gentlemen, keep your eyes out for this little lady.”

The entire locker room exploded with a collective retch.

“Grow up.” Lina rolled her eyes.

Mac laughed. “Seriously, these guys need to get a life.” Trying to hide her knowing smirk, Mac headed toward the showers. All the hosts on those shows tried to set up these professional women players with some random dude in a bar. It was always gross. But Mac knew something the rest of these players had only heard whispers of. That only matters if she ever feels like she can be herself without destroying her parents legacy, though.

Walking down the corridor toward the showers, Mac's eyes caught on a black and white shot of Kimberly Young smashing a ball across the grass courts at Wimbledon. Mac sighed as she shook her head.

From behind her, a familiar voice grumbled in her ears. "We can only dream of being half as good as Kim Parker."

Mac nodded as she turned to meet the gaze of her friend, Jazz. "You know, I think we might have it in us."

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Still fresh-faced, Jazz laughed at Mac. “Even after that clip of Taylor, you still think any of us stand a chance?”

“No one likes a nepo baby.” Mac gritted her teeth as she looked back to the screen. After just five minutes on women’s sports, the anchors had gone back to their nonstop coverage of men’s games.

Jazz rested her hand on Mac’s shoulder. “Still holding that grudge?”

Mac rolled her eyes. “Not a grudge. She’s just had everything handed to her, and I don’t think that builds a strong player.”

“Strong enough to win all the Opens last season.” Jazz shrugged. She looked down at her watch, realizing it was time to hit the courts. “I’ll catch you later. Try not to get too angsty while I’m gone.”

Before Mac could find a witty reply, Jazz was pushing open the locker room doors. Mac didn’t have long before she needed to be back in Manhattan. And given how inconsistent the buses out of Randall’s Island were, she needed to hustle.

I can’t be late.

2

Taylor

“Don’t you dare drop that racket.” Kimberly Young’s voice echoed off the stone

surrounding the clay court.

Taylor's head dropped at the sound of her mom's voice. Clenching her jaw and catching her breath, Taylor grumbled. "I won't."

Kimberly shook her head and walked closer. "Louder!"

"I won't drop my racket." Taylor gasped for air. Sweat dripped down her forehead, the baseball cap on her head too soaked to absorb any more. Careful to keep her racket from touching the ground, Taylor moved back to her starting position.

Her practice partner, a retired player from Belarus, stared at Taylor as she waited for Kimberly's signal. It had been clear to Taylor from a very young age that her practice partners were never there to help her. No, they were there for her mom and no one else. Even if Taylor begged for medical attention, another ball would be flying toward her at her mother's command.

But as another round of shots came zipping across the court, Taylor reminded herself not to be too hard on her mom. Everything Kimberly did was to ensure Taylor's success. Even the private courts that Taylor practiced on now were built long after Kim had retired.

Taylor stretched to hit the incoming ball with her forehand, just barely making contact in time. Her feet slid slightly on the orange clay, leaving a long trench where her foot dragged.

Resetting her position, Taylor walked to her baseline at the back of the court. As soon as her back was turned, a ball boy ran out onto the court with a wide broom and swept away the divot. Taylor nodded her appreciation to the young man.

Kim waved him off as soon as Taylor turned to face her opponent. "Again!"

The late spring sun beat down on Taylor's body as she played for another two hours. Eventually, Kim was satisfied with the session and dismissed Taylor's practice partner. Only then did Taylor collapse into the dust of the court.

I definitely just stained this skirt. Taylor shook her head as she tried to steady her heart rate.

A shadow eclipsed the harsh sun, protecting Taylor from its burning light. "This is what Roland Garros feels like. The sun is unrelenting that close to the equator. The humidity is even worse. You need to be ready."

"I am ready." Taylor shaded her eyes as she looked up at her mother's towering figure. She had won the last two French Opens she had competed in. "It's not my first time on the circuit."

Kimberly laughed as she turned toward the exit, the sun beating down on Taylor again. A wince escaped her lips as she tried to cover her eyes from what could only be described as a death ray.

From over her shoulder, Kim hollered. "Every time is your first time."

A moment later, Taylor was alone on the court... except for the court attendant who stood off to the side with a towel.

It took Taylor a few minutes to stand up from the clay. She clapped her hands together, a cloud of dust rising as she cleaned off her hands. As soon as she stood, the attendant – Kayla – jogged over and passed Taylor the towel.

"Thanks, Kayla." Taylor smiled, her hands barely strong enough to grip the fabric. Leaving the court, Taylor made her way toward the pool. There was no point in showering since Kim would just make her come back to the court in a few hours for

more practice.

But Taylor shivered as she felt the caked on sweat and dust covering her skin. Trying to recenter, she looked up at the massive evergreens that covered the property. If she listened hard enough, she could hear the sound of the waves lapping against the Long Island shore.

As she walked up the hill toward the house, Taylor felt her body starting to relax. Her shoulders dropped as she took in another breath of fresh air.

But all of her peace dissipated when she reached the crest and the towering mansion came into view. The marble exterior with black trim sent a jolt of anxiety through Taylor's being.

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Shaking her head, she looked away and turned her attention to the glimmering water instead. The glass front of the infinity pool overlooked a private beach. The view was completely unobstructed: just sand and ocean as far as the eye could see.

Tossing the towel onto the lounge chair, Taylor checked her phone. There were a few texts, almost all of them from her publicist.

Need to get you a man. Sports Central is starting to ask questions.

“Ughhh.” Taylor groaned as she lobbed her phone into a nearby pile of towels and fled toward the water. There were three people in the world who knew Taylor’s big secret: her dad, Kim, and her publicist.

As she perched at the edge of the diving board, her toes curling against the sturdy aluminum, Taylor sighed. And maybe one other... But Taylor couldn’t even bring herself to think her name, let alone say it.

Sucking in air, Taylor bent her knees and launched herself into the cold water of the in-ground pool. As her body sunk to the bottom, Taylor opened her eyes. It was the only place she was truly alone.

So, she opened her mouth and let out a blood curdling scream.

3

Mac

The last thing Mac wanted to do after practice and a hot shower was descend into the humid hellscape that was the New York City subway. But what other choice was there? As she walked down the steps toward the 6 train, Mac swiped her card and maneuvered her black duffel bag around the turnstile.

She'd make it to the office just in time. Hopefully, Tommy wouldn't mind that she was still in her gym clothes.

As the train doors slid open, Mac snagged a seat right by the exit. Luckily, it was the middle of a work day; most commuters had already made it into their offices, so the train was relatively empty. Mac's shoulders dropped as she settled into the seat.

A quick scan of social media showed far too many clips of Taylor Young. Mac's jaw clenched at the sight of her. Calling her an ex wouldn't be accurate... but she wasn't Mac's ex. Mac chuckled thinking of the connotation Taylor's PR team would have if she ever made that claim.

The rocking of the train hit a comforting rhythm just as the exhaustion of a grueling early morning practice started to hit Mac. With each sway of the train, Mac's eyes grew heavier. As her eyelids closed, the image of swaying trees flooded her mind.

Soon, the sound of rustling leaves filled her mind.

Mackenzie ran through the woods, sprinting toward the lake. Behind her, the patter of smaller footsteps closed in. A giggle rose from her chest.

"Tay, stop!" Mac laughed as she reached the edge of the lake. Wearing a pair of denim shorts, a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and a pair of beat up sneakers, Mac whipped around toward the incoming noise.

Tennis racket in hand, Taylor Young broke through the treeline and jumped toward

Mackenzie. “Got you!” Taylor lifted the racket and swooped Mac up in a hug.

Mac giggled as they rocked back and forth, the smell of Taylor’s sweet hair wafting into her nose. It somehow overpowered the smell of the lake.

“Wanna play water tennis?” Taylor asked, a giddy smile taking over her face as she squeezed Mac tighter.

Groaning, Mackenzie shook her head. “My mom will be pissed if I ruin this racket. It’s my only one.”

Taylor rubbed her chin, wearing a mischievous grin that would be etched into Mac’s brain for the next decade. “What if you use one of my old ones in the lake? I have too many anyway.”

Mac crossed her arms, breaking the hug the pair was locked in. “No, it’s okay. You should just ask one of the other girls.”

“No,” Taylor shook her head, placing her hands on Mac’s shoulders. A jolt of nervousness passed through Mac’s body, Taylor’s hands radiating warmth into her tired shoulders. “I want to go in the lake with you.”

“Please stand clear of the closing doors.” The jarring voice of the automated announcer ripped Mac from her memory.

Looking up at the map, Mac realized it was her stop. “Crap!” She jumped up from her seat and slipped through the sliding doors. The end of her duffel bag jostled on the closing door but just narrowly escaped the train car.

She made it just in time. She caught her breath while the train squealed along to its next stop. Once the platform quieted, Mac took one more deep breath and climbed up

the steps, pushing open the exit door before finally reaching the surface. Each step shook the memory of Taylor from Mac's mind a little more.

The loud bustle of Manhattan smacked her in the face. Taxis zipped by, sirens blared, and business people shoved past. She tried to fit into the crowd, to hide how flustered she felt, but the city was a far cry from the small town she grew up in. Mackenzie wondered if she'd ever feel like she fit in here.

After a few blocks, Mac arrived at the front SDO Management. With a deep breath, she pushed open the heavy, glass door and smiled at the security guard as she approached the front desk. "Hey, I'm here to see Tommy."

"Mac, I know." Jerry laughed from the desk. "I saw some clips of your training; you're looking good. Are you ready for Garros?"

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Mac's body tensed at the question. "I fucking hope so. Barbara has been pushing me pretty hard."

Jerry patted Mac on the shoulder. "Well, that's what she's there for. Got an extra ticket?" He asked with a wink.

Blowing a raspberry, Mac scoffed. "I could barely convince Babs that my mom should come, let alone my best friend."

Jerry clutched his heart. "Aw, I'm your best friend?"

With a roll of her eyes, Mac rushed toward the elevators. "Of course you are, Jer!"

Just as she was about to push the "up" button, the door swung open. A woman in killer pumps waltzed out of the elevator, her phone up to her ear. As Mac stumbled back, the woman scanned her figure, raising an eyebrow and nodding her praise at Mac's muscular physique.

Mac blushed slightly, enjoying the admiration as she slipped into the elevator and selected her floor. When the doors opened again, Mac was greeted by SDO's receptionist.

"Morning, Ms. Bennett." Agatha smiled.

"Hey, Agatha. Just here to see Tommy." Mac scanned the floor for her agent.

Her eyes landed on a towering businesswoman. Tommy beamed when she spotted

Mac, waving her into her private office. Mac thanked the receptionist and skillfully weaved through the field of cubicles, careful to keep her duffel pinned to her body. Her sneakers slid smoothly over the polished hardwood floors, their traction completely worn from training. I really need to buy a new pair...

Mac shook the thought as she stepped into Tommy's immaculate office. Glass walls surrounded a gorgeous walnut desk. Behind Tommy's chair was a view of Manhattan's uptown.

Tommy gestured for Mac to shut the door behind her with a wide grin. "So, how's the training? Are you going to win us the French Open?"

Mac swung the door shut a bit too quickly, underestimating its weight. The unexpected thud made her jump. "Why is everyone asking me that? I haven't even qualified for a Grand Slam yet."

"Because, you're my star."

Taking a seat at her leather desk chair, Tommy folded her hands together. "So, let's talk press. We've been slowly dripping out some training videos and some stuff about your background."

Mackenzie nodded as Tommy slid a folder across the table. "Got it, what kind of stuff?"

Tommy leaned back. "We're seeding you as the underdog. In a tour full of legacy players, seasoned pros, you're the fresh face from a small town. You learned on a cracked, cement court with your construction worker father before he passed. Then, you taught yourself until your mom could afford to send you to summer camp."

Catching the drift, Mac picked up. "Where I met all the nepotism babies and rich

kids. I had to work three times as hard just for scraps.”

“Ding, ding. That’s our story.” Tommy nodded.

“Well, that is actually my story. It’s not a lie.” Mac wrinkled her forehead.

Tommy cleared her throat. “Of course. And that’s why it works; we’re trying to frame you as the humble beginnings player that every brand and sponsor should want in on before your big break. Now, talk to me about training.”

Hesitating, Mac swallowed her anxiety. “My follow-through could be better. I just don’t know if I have the gear to make it happen.”

“What do you need?” Tommy let her elbows rest on the desk. It had been a risk to sign such a no-name player. In fact, Mac hadn’t earned her a single cent. But for some reason, Tommy had believed in her ever since she played Memphis International. It wasn’t a Grand Slam, but it was the first time Mac had qualified for anything beyond a local league.

Mac sighed, biting her lip as she debated asking for what she really needed. She caved, “A new pair of shoes. My arches are killing me, and I can’t get enough traction. The clay courts are too slippery.” As much as she hated what felt like a handout, Mac knew she couldn’t win the French Open in these rundown sneakers.

Without another word, Tommy grabbed her phone and dialed a number. A few silent seconds passed before Tommy spoke. “Hey, Danny. Look, I’ve got a new underdog going to compete in Garros. We want to see her sponsored. And I can’t imagine anyone wanting to miss out. Think we could get a gear set?”

Mac bit her lip as she tried to make out the muffled chatter on the other end of the line. There’s no way this is going to work out... Tommy didn’t even give my name.

“See, this is why I call you first. Look, she’s gonna be great. Give us something that pops; we want her to stand out. Think BJK’s blue suede. Thanks, Dan.” Tommy hung up the phone and scribbled a note. “Adidas is sending you a kit. It’ll be in your hotel room when you arrive. Break the shoes in immediately. Babs will know what to do.”

Mac tilted her head. “Do I owe them anything?”

Tommy shook her head. “Nah, just take a few pics of the outfit. But don’t tag them in any posts. They have to pay you for that, understood?”

With a nod, Mac stood from her chair and grabbed her duffel bag. “Thanks, Tommy.”

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“You got it, kid.” Tommy looked up from her notes. “You’re looking good, though. The sports sapphics are going to eat you up.”

Trying to hide her blush, Mac shook her head. “You’re ridiculous.” She made her way out of the office and back to the subway with a glance at her watch. She only had a few hours before she needed to be dressed for her date.

When she emerged from the train in Queens, Mac glanced at her phone to find seven messages from her boss. All of them were sent over an hour ago. “Crap.” Rushing to answer the emails, she typed as she walked, hardly looking up as she weaved down the street. She’d completely forgotten that she needed to finish up her latest transcription before heading out for the night.

After a few blocks, Mac reached her stoop. It was a classic Astoria street; all brick buildings hidden behind connected brick fences. Some were small residential homes with gaudy gold fences while others were towering apartment complexes. Despite its sticky lock, Mac made quick work of opening the front door of her own complex and bounded up the rickety stairs.

I can’t believe how much I pay for this shithole. Mac shook her head as she reached the fourth floor. Then again, the commute to Randall’s Island would be brutal from anywhere cheaper.

Her roommates’s boisterous chatter bled out into the hallway more the closer she got to the apartment. An explosion of giggles erupted as she swung open the door, its loud creak announcing her arrival.

Jazz whipped her head around to see Mac. “Hey! We were just talking about Taylor.”

“Oh god, why?” Mac rolled her eyes as she set her duffel bag on the coat rack.

As she kneeled down to untie her shoes, Beatriz shrugged. “We were talking about whether any of us stand a chance at Garros.”

Mac slipped off her sneakers and sat on the chair across from the couch, leaning back into its worn fabric. “That depends if her mommy buys off her opponents or not.” Everyone laughed, but Mac felt a wave of guilt wash over her.

There was no denying that Taylor was a spoiled, legacy player. But denying her hard work wasn’t entirely fair. Mac had seen firsthand just how hard she trained... and how brutal Kimberly Young really was. It couldn’t be easy having a woman like that as a mother. Unlike the other players in the room, Mac was the only one who really knew what Tay gave up to be the Taylor Young.

“Well, we’ll kick her ass.” Beatriz raised her protein shake in a cheers. Jazz met her cup, and they chugged down whatever remained.

Standing from the chair, Mac set her dirty bottles in the kitchen. She grabbed the dish towel from the oven and wiped at the counter, a puff of protein powder flying into the air.

Coughing as the fine dust flew into her nostrils, Mac shook her head. “Guys, you gotta wipe this shit up. It makes a mess, and management won’t send an exterminator again.”

Jazz stood on the couch and flexed, her lean muscles bulging against the fabric of her workout tee. “But we need to get these gains!”

“Get those gains... in a clean house.” Mac chuckled as she headed to her room. Living with other players was the best thing Mac could have done, even if they were a mess. Jazz and Beatriz were the only roommates Mac had ever had who truly understood the training schedule. Besides, it was motivating to know that your competitors were right next door making progress on their game.

Once in her room, Mac closed the door softly behind her and started to hunt through her closet for something to wear. She leaned against the doorframe, letting her head slam against the wood trim as she considered her options.

I have no idea why I’m doing this.

A few hours later, Mac was sitting on a bench outside of an ice cream shop just a few minutes from her apartment. After a few minutes hemming and hawing about what to wear, she had settled on a pair of fitted, dark wash jeans and a nice band tee. Next to her, a beautiful woman took a bite off her spoon.

“So, you wake up that early every day?” Gemma asked between spoonfuls.

Mac nodded. “Yeah, on weekdays I have to get my workout in before my day job. And then on weekends, I like to take advantage of the extra free time to do more training.”

Gemma raised her eyebrows. “That sounds like a lot of work.”

With a shrug, Mac looked down at her treat. “It definitely can be. But it’s been my dream for as long as I can remember.”

There was a pause as Gemma considered her next question. “Can I ask what might be a rude question?”

Mac chuckled. “Sure.”

“When do you give up?” Gemma quickly qualified her words. “I just mean I know most athletes retire kind of young. So at what age is it like... too late?”

Pushing air out of her lungs, Mac stared up at the scaffolding overhead. The last time she had come here, there wasn't any. It certainly made for an odd date to have scaffolding towering over the entire night.

Mac shook her head. “I guess I'm still asking myself the same thing.”

Gemma shrugged as she finished off her ice cream.

After a moment of silence, Mac cleared her throat. “So, you said you work in marketing?”

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Her eyes lighting up, Gemma jumped right into her diatribe about what a day in her life looked like. Mac listened carefully, as if an excess of attention might make up for a lack of passion.

At least we can be friends.

“Empty all bags of electronics. Place them into a tray and keep moving.” A TSA worker shouted out from behind a wall of scanners.

It shocked Mac out of her haze. She scrambled to grab her things from her bag. Laptop. Charger. Phone. Headphones. Fitness watch. Placing each delicately into the tray in front of her, Mac watched the items get taken onto the belt.

The date from the week before had long since left Mac’s memory. Gemma was sweet, but neither she nor Mac had reached out after. Maybe I’m chasing a dead dream. A tennis machine is probably not the most enticing romantic partner.

It wasn’t the first time she considered it. This would be her third attempt at Roland Garros. The French Open was the start of the Grand Slam season, and if Mac couldn’t pass qualifiers, she would probably be blocked out the rest of the summer.

But she tried not to let the thought get away from her as she passed through security. Walking through the metal detector, she followed the directions diligently.

After she moved through, the mad dash to collect all of her items began. Throwing on her sweatshirt, Mac grabbed her tray of electronics from the end of the conveyor belt. She looped the headphones over her neck and tossed the laptop and accessories into

her backpack. Wiggling the racket around in the main pocket, Mac tried to protect the strings.

The strings caught on the zipper, sending a cringe down Mac's spine. Crap. Normally, she wouldn't dare carry her racket around loose in a backpack. But Babs wasn't willing to splurge on another bag for her, so Mac had to leave her racket bag at home. She carefully rearranged the bag, keeping the racket strings far from the zipper, and prayed that it hadn't been a huge mistake.

Now that she was through security, Mac scanned the airport terminal for a place to grab some cheap food before sitting down to work.

With only an hour before boarding began, time was of the essence. She grabbed a mediocre, fast-food salad, sat down on the hard chairs in front of her gate, and pulled out her computer.

When she checked her inbox, there were a few emails. Most importantly, one titled:

COMPLETE BY END OF WEEK

Mac sighed. "Asshole." She had told her boss where she was heading, but she was a freelancer, unable to take any paid time off. If this was her assignment, she would have no choice but to squeeze work in between training sessions and matches.

Looking up at the screen above her gate, Mac bit her lip. LGA ? CDG. It would be a long flight to Paris followed by a train to Stade Roland Garros where the Open was hosted. Hopefully, Mac could get some WiFi along the way.

Before she knew it, her hour passed, and the flight attendant stepped up to the microphone to announce the boarding order. Mac grabbed her bags and made her way to the gate quickly, her backpack slung over one shoulder while she rolled her carry-

on suitcase with the other hand.

Mac passed her ticket to the attendant with a smile and could have sworn she saw a blush creep onto her cheeks as she scanned and returned the pass. Mac couldn't help but chuckle to herself. Maybe my chance at love isn't dead after all.

Stepping to the side, the woman gestured for Mac to proceed down the long, cramped hallway. As she got closer to the plane, the tight space closed in. Her heart pounded in her chest as the weight of the next week flooded over her.

Eventually, the tunnel ended where another flight attendant waited at the doors of the plane. Mac found her seat, set her bag in the overhead compartment, and settled in her window seat with her backpack.

Mac had been looking forward to kicking back and watching a movie on the flight – she barely ever had time to watch a movie anymore – but the transcription gods had other plans for her. She needed to take advantage of every spare second if she wanted to finish on time.

Mac opened up her computer begrudgingly. It was an odd job, listening to hours of documentary footage and creating an easy-to-read transcript for an editing team, but it paid the bills. Plus, she wasn't required to be in an office.

Once the plane was fully boarded and the doors sealed shut, a voice crackled over the speakers. “Thank you for flying National Airlines, the airline that brings you first class service at economy prices.”

The woman in the seat next to Mac nearly snorted at this. The announcer continued, “As we prepare for takeoff, we kindly ask that you turn off all electronic devices and keep them off for the remainder of the flight. Please feel free to enjoy a movie on the deluxe HD TV built in to each seat. Headphones are available for purchase from

any of our flight attendants.”

A passenger across the aisle tried clicking on the 4x5 inch “deluxe HD TV” in front of their seat, but it was completely nonfunctional. As they flagged down a flight attendant, the chipper voice crackled on. “Thank you again for choosing National Airlines. Have a worldly day!”

As an attendant zipped down the aisle to help Mac’s neighbor, Mac grabbed her attention. “Sorry to bother you. Is there any WiFi on this flight?”

The attendant offered a polite smile but shook her head. “Unfortunately, there’s only internet access for first class passengers.”

Mac leaned into the aisle, glaring down at the lounging passengers at the front of the plane. “Got it, thanks.”

As the attendant scurried off to field more complaints about broken TV screens, Mac sighed and leaned back in her seat.

It could be worse,she tried to convince herself.Just try to think of it as forced relaxation.

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Taylor

Taylor's fingertapped against the tinted window of the black SUV as the gates to the tarmac were opened. As soon as the chain link fence parted, her driver put his foot on the gas and headed toward the jet at the center of the runway.

The car came to a halt, and before Taylor could even unbuckle her seatbelt, another driver was opening her door.

"Thanks," Taylor cleared her throat, pulling her sunglasses down over her eyes as she stepped into the light. Her driver, Richard, handed her a brand new racket bag. With a smile, Taylor grabbed it from his hands and slung it over her shoulder.

Taylor strode toward the plane, whose engine was already running – making the entire tarmac basically a sound void. Behind her, drivers wheeled her other bags over to the ground crew loading the plane. It was a bit of a ridiculous charade, but her mom always insisted that Taylor carry her own rackets.

As she approached the plane, Kim waved her down and shouted over the roaring engine. "Hi, darling. There's an attendant inside the plane waiting for the rackets; hand them off, and they'll bring them to the cargo hold."

Taylor nodded, lingering to see if her mom would bother giving her a hug. But instead, Kim crossed her arms and pursed her lips. Just past the chain link fence at the edge of the tarmac stood a dozen paparazzi. The flashes of their cameras drew Taylor's attention.

Looking back at her mom, Taylor laughed dryly to herself. When she was younger, she thought carrying her own rackets had something to do with respecting her own tools. That was until the first photo of Taylor walking onto the plane with her racket bag over her shoulder appeared in a tabloid. Then it became very clear what the point was.

Shaking off her annoyance, Taylor climbed the steps of the plane. The engine drowned out any noise from the paparazzi at the fringes. But Taylor felt herself wince as if she could hear each click of their shutters.

Once she ascended the stairs, an impeccably dressed woman greeted her with a flirtatious smile. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Ms. Young.”

Taylor tried not to blush. “You too, Ruby.”

Ruby grabbed a glass of champagne from the tray in her left hand.

Raising her hand, Taylor denied the glass. “Rubes, you know I don’t drink before a tournament. But maybe after.”

Smoothing a few flyaways, Ruby nodded. “It’ll be ready for you when you win. And maybe you can have another treat if you do.”

Raising a finger, Taylor winked. “You mean, when.”

“My mistake, Ms. Young.” Ruby bit her lip.

Taylor chuckled, shaking her head at Ruby’s desperation. There were very few occasions when Kim wasn’t watching over Taylor’s shoulder. What choice did Taylor have but to take advantage of any spare moment she could get? Even if it complicated every flight ever since.

Letting the bag fall off her shoulder, Taylor handed her racket to another attendant who carefully disguised it under a jacket and brought it back to the ground crew.

Taylor took her seat, letting her sore body sink into the plush leather. After a moment, Kim waltzed onto the plane with Taylor's dad in tow.

She took the seat across from Taylor, wanting to keep an eye on her the entire trip. It was an eight-hour flight to Paris, and Kim would find a way to turn the flight into a training session, one way or another.

But as he plopped down next to his daughter, it was clear that Gerald didn't share that agenda. "Hey, sweetheart. You ready?"

"As ready as I can be." Taylor clenched her jaw.

He shrugged. "Well, once you win the French Open once, it's like riding a bike."

Taylor chuckled. "It doesn't feel that simple, Dad. If anything, I feel like now I have the pressure of maintaining some kind of streak."

"Because you do." Kim inserted from across the table, scrolling on her phone as she spoke. "You aren't just carrying your own legacy..."

"I'm carrying yours and Dad's too. I know." Taylor cut her off, leaning back into her chair. She pulled her feet up onto the leather and stared out the window as the doors of the plane were gently shut.

Ruby carried over a tray of drinks: champagne for Kim, a neat whiskey for Gerald, and a protein shake for Taylor. Passing each of them out, Ruby's hand lingered near Taylor's when she passed her the shake.

Taylor tried not to take notice of it. But her body was reacting. At this point, she hadn't been touched in months. She was getting desperate. But even if she caved, Ruby wasn't who she really wanted. None of the women she had rendezvoused with had been.

The one person she truly wanted was off limits, though.

Kim's eyes darted between Ruby and Taylor's hands. "That will be all, Ruby."

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With a nod, Ruby swallowed the lump in her throat and went back to the attendant's quarters.

Taylor glared at Kim, who simply turned her attention out the window as the plane began to taxi down the tarmac.

Jolted awake by the jet landing, Taylor's eyes flashed open. She managed to get some rest on the plane. But only after Kim insisted on watching the training videos of all of her likely competitors.

Taylor had studied their moves so closely that she felt like she was dreaming about how to defeat them. As soon as the plane landed at Charles De Gaulle Airport, the doors were opened. Taylor reluctantly accepted her racket bag back from an eager attendant.

"How long are we going to keep up this charade?" she asked her mom.

Kim's eyebrow raised as she processed the question. Even Gerald was taken aback by his daughter's bluntness.

With gritted teeth and pursed lips, Kim breezed past the question. "When Garros is over, I want you to go to dinner with Connor Garcia. He's in a... similar situation to yours."

Taylor crossed her arms. "I'll be too busy with training."

"That is training." Kim stood from her seat and strutted out of the plane.

Gerald stood, fixing his pants on his hips. “Don’t worry, hon. I’ll talk to her.” He placed a reassuring hand on Taylor’s shoulders and gave a squeeze. “Strong: good work.”

With a sigh, Taylor nodded. “Thanks, Dad.”

The rest of the afternoon was a blur: a few town cars, some Parisian boutiques. Taylor felt like she could breathe, a refreshing lack of paparazzi making it easier for her to move around freely. It was one of the best parts of Paris: incredibly strict regulations on the paps. Eventually, Taylor landed at her hotel. Most players stayed at the Four Seasons Hotel George V, and Taylor was no exception. Kim made sure to book out a block of three suites on the top floor.

Her bags trailing behind her on a gilded bellhop cart, Taylor strolled to the front desk.

Before she could even get to the receptionist, a manager appeared from behind the desk and spoke with a heavy, French accent. “Bonjour, Ms. Young. It’s a pleasure to have you. I shall escort you to your room.”

He came out from behind the counter and walked Taylor through the pristine lobby. Massive bouquets of flowers filled the hall, aligning with the towering, marble pillars. She rarely noticed the decor, having spent every May since childhood in this hotel. But something about this visit made the place feel... brighter.

Live music spilled out from the all-day lounge as they strolled by, and Taylor peeked inside. She rarely had time to explore the hotel when she was here – too busy with the Open to actually wander the halls, let alone Paris.

The elevator opened as if it had been waiting just for her, its grand doors hardly making a peep as they welcomed her. The manager, François, held it open for Taylor to enter. When she turned to look at the lobby, she saw the cart of her luggage being

wheeled to a separate elevator.

François clicked the “P” button, causing Taylor to raise her brows.

Sensing her confusion, François smiled. “Mrs. Young requested that you have the penthouse to yourself. She’ll be staying in the Eiffel Tower Suite, just one floor below you.”

“Did she leave a message?” Taylor asked, clenching her jaw.

François nodded as he pulled a piece of stationery from his pocket. “Indeed she did.”

On a small piece of Four Seasons letterhead, the note read:

Penthouse is for champions. Bring home another Lenglen Cup, and this will be your stay for the rest of the season. Love, Kimberly.

Taylor tried not to roll her eyes. Discretion was a priority for the staff here, but she wasn’t willing to risk a press leak that she was annoyed at her coach. Instead, she tucked the note into the pocket of her joggers.

The elevator opened to a small hallway with a single door. François pulled Taylor’s keycard from his suit jacket, sliding it over the black key reader.

With a gentle hum, the lock released, and François held the door open for Taylor to walk inside.

“Damn,” Taylor whistled as she looked around the room. “You guys redecorated.”

Taylor dropped her racket bag onto the sleek, epoxied wood floors as she made her way to the living room. Down the hallway – with a wall of windows overlooking

Paris to her right – she poked her head into the walk-in closet.

It was just slightly smaller than her closet at home, but it would certainly do for a couple weeks. François softly closed the front door behind himself as he trailed behind Taylor.

Punctuating the hall was a sprawling living room with stunning views of Paris's main streets and modern furnishings. The crisp, white sectional looked like the perfect place to dig into a burger. After Garros, she reminded herself.

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François marched past her and opened the balcony doors, the sounds of Paris flooding into the room. Following behind him, Taylor walked out on the private balcony. Straight ahead was an unobstructed view of the Eiffel Tower.

“Room service will bring up breakfast for you at your request. Mrs. Young sent ahead an order.” François checked his mental list for any details he may have missed. But after nearly three decades of attending to Taylor as she ran through the halls of the Hotel George V, he had it pretty down pat.

He leaned closer to Taylor, a conspiratorial smile creeping onto his face. “But as usual, if you’d like to order something that’s not on her preapproved menu, feel free to call me at any time.”

Taylor smirked at him, patting his shoulder more roughly than she meant to. “You’re the best, Frank.”

Taking his cue, François made his way out of the suite. Taylor let out the breath she’d been holding once the door closed. Pacing around the suite, she wandered toward the bedroom.

When she walked in, a massive, off-white package with a black, silk ribbon tied around it was set out on the king-sized mattress. She recognized it immediately: her kit for the open. Sliding her finger underneath the flaps of the clothing box, Taylor revealed a simple black outfit.

A short tennis skirt was accompanied by a matching, black tank top. The familiar check logo was front and center. They had been her sponsor for a long time, and her

commercials for them alone paid all of her bills.

Prize money had become a bonus.

Tossing the package on the floor, Taylor sauntered into the bathroom. Surrounded by mirrors and gold trim, a massive, standalone tub with a wood wrap sat in the center of the room. She ran her finger along the cold porcelain, looking out of the windows just a few feet away toward the Eiffel Tower. At least it's a nice view for a cold plunge.

Taylor stood in front of the double vanity, looking from her own reflection to the empty, second sink. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't tear her eyes from it. Memories of summer camp flashed in her mind – dirty outhouses and communal showers.

But one detail stuck out. Mackenzie's face. They had spent that summer attached to each other's hips.

Shaking her head, Taylor let her hand slam against the marble countertop. A light sting ran from the side of her hand up her arm. "Shit," she muttered. It was her racket hand. Kim would kill her if she ended up with an injury right before Roland Garros.

Taylor lifted her head and took a deep breath as she stared herself down in the perfectly buffed mirror.

Her gaze softened as her mind wandered. I wonder if she'll be here.

Taylor's alarm startled her awake at the same time as a loud banging came from the front door. The clock on her phone read 5:30 am. "Just a second, Mom," she hollered as she rolled out of bed.

She slipped on a pair of clean bikini briefs and an oversized hoodie as she stumbled

down the hallway. By the time she unlatched the lock, Kim was already pushing the door open. “You’re running late.” She whipped past Taylor and into the suite. As she walked down the hallway, Kim peeked through each doorway.

“Mom, what?” Taylor gawked. “Do you think I hired a sex worker or something?”

Kim turned on her heels and glared at her daughter. “This isn’t a joke, Taylor. You know how important the pretournament rules are.”

Taylor doubted any parent on the planet had a more detailed report of their child’s sex life. But Kim had made it her business ever since that summer. There was no room for Taylor to slip up — not without an army of lawyers and a few dozen NDAs.

Satisfied with the thoroughness of her search, Kim leaned against the French doors in the living room, looking out over Paris. “This room does have a better view.”

“I told you,” Taylor shrugged.

Kim laughed, her anxiety easing for a moment. But like a tsunami, it flooded back in as soon as she checked the time. “You need to watch the qualifiers today. I want you to see your competition. When you’re done, we’ll train.”

Taylor scoffed. “Mom, those players aren’t a threat. Anyone worth worrying about is already qualified.” The top 100 players were guaranteed a spot in the Grand Slams. Only players with lower rankings had to participate in qualifier rounds. If they could manage to win three matches in a row, they’d earn a spot in the first round bracket for the tournament proper.

Raising an eyebrow at her daughter’s dissent, Kim’s lips turned to a light snarl. “At one point, Serena Williams had to qualify. And so did Osaka. And so did you.”

Taylor sucked her teeth before relenting. “Fine. Who am I watching?” It wasn’t a hill worth dying on. Besides, Kim might be right; someone new might end up making it to the finals.

“Whoever you’d like.” Kim nodded before zipping past Taylor and heading out of the suite just as quickly as she came.

Once peace was restored to the room, Taylor made her way to the walk-in closet and selected an outfit. She’d be forced to wear short skirts for the next two weeks, so she selected an elegant pair of pleated trousers. Each pleat led straight to her waist.

On top, she decided on a cropped, cotton polo. The off-white paired perfectly with the beige of her trousers. As she checked her reflection in the mirror, the light outline of her toned abs peeked out just over the top of her pants.

Her chest tightened as she thought about the day to come. If she knew anything about Mackenzie Bennett, it was that she would be in these qualifiers. Her stomach twisted at the thought of Mac’s warm, hazel eyes training in on her.

A part of her wanted Mac to see her, to see just how far she’d come, to see that the sacrifice had been worth it. But as she looked around the penthouse suite, Taylor’s heart pounded. Was it?

5

Mac

Mac's alarm blared as she rolled over to turn it off.

"Jesus, that thing is loud," Babs groaned from the bed across the room. At two grand a night, all Babs could afford was a Deluxe Suite with two twin beds. Sunlight was also a luxury they couldn't afford; on the lower floors, the suites were almost as dark as they had been at eight the night before.

Lifting herself out of bed, Mac stretched her back. It might have been a small bed, but it was plenty comfortable. Last season, Babs booked a cheaper hotel. If anything, it felt like a vote of confidence that she was willing to splurge on the cheapest Four Seasons room this time around. Mackenzie swung her legs over the side of the bed as Babs stood and headed to the bathroom.

From the bathroom, Babs called out. "You've got to eat in the next thirty minutes, or you'll have to wait until after your match. Nothing too sugary!"

"Got it," Mac called back as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. As she scrounged for something other than pajamas to wear to the hotel breakfast, a knock came from the door. "Hello?"

"Delivery," a staff member called from the door.

Mac padded across the carpeted floors and flung open the door, her forehead

wrinkled.

Standing a few feet from the threshold, a bellhop dressed in an immaculate suit held a massive clothing box with a velvet, blue ribbon tied around it. “For Mackenzie Bennett.”

“That’s me,” Mac nodded as she held out her arms to take the box. Just above the ribbon was the familiar three bar symbol. Once the door was closed behind her, Mac set the box down on the mattress and delicately pulled at the bow. She’d never opened a box so carefully, but this was unlike any gift she’d ever opened.

With a light tug, the bow came undone, ribbon draping onto the duvet. Mac wiggled her fingers before sliding the lid off the box. Under blue tissue paper the same shade as the ribbon was a brand new, navy blue outfit. It was simple and sleek, much nicer than the worn out, polyester she’d gotten from Don’s Sporting Supplies three years ago that she’d planned to wear.

And at the very bottom of the box was the real prize: a new pair of tennis shoes. They were a stunning, shiny blue with higher tops to protect Mac’s ankles. She picked them up and twirled them in her hands. The rubber sole was stiff. Mac raised her eyebrows as the smell of new shoes wafted into her nose.

Babs walked out of the bathroom with her brows raised, fluffing her short hair. “Well, that’s a nice kit.”

“I know. I thought they’d send an old line.” Mac turned the shoes in her hand, examining the fresh soles.

“Alright,” Babs nodded, “wear your old shoes for qualifiers; we’ll break these in overnight.” She was dressed in a loungey pant with a fitted polo. Even in her retirement, her decades of muscle still showed through.

Babs grabbed two gallon-sized baggies from her suitcase. She disappeared into the bathroom as Mac watched her. Mac's confusion only grew when Babs reentered the bedroom, both baggies now half full of water.

"What in the hell are you doing, Barbara?" Mac shook her head.

Babs groaned. "You kids. You have no idea how this shit works." She snatched the new shoes from Mac's hands, untying them and placing the bags of water inside. She carefully pushed the bottom of each bag to the toe of the shoes.

Gawking, Mac could hardly find words. "Babs, seriously."

Without explaining, Babs opened the mini fridge and placed the shoes inside the freezer compartment. Groaning as she got back onto her feet, Babs rolled her eyes. "Water expands when it freezes. It stretches the shoe just enough to stop it from blistering your feet."

Mac pursed her lips. "Huh, I hadn't thought of that."

"Can't have you playing in a major Grand Slam with bleeding feet." Babs shrugged. "At least not at the start of the tournament."

With a laugh, Mac checked the time; it was already 9 am, and her first match started in just over two hours. "Shit," she murmured, "I need to get going." She breezed through the bathroom, tossed on her new outfit, and rushed to the elevator. She tried to keep her footsteps light, not wanting to disturb the peace of such a nice hotel. But just as she was a few feet from the doors, they started to slide closed.

"Hold that please!" Mac called out.

Luckily, a hand darted out to stop the sensors from closing any further.

Mac smiled as she entered, seeing another competitor inside. “Thanks.”

The woman nodded. If Mac remembered correctly, she was a Brazilian player, also heading to qualify. The ride down was silent and quick.

Before she knew it, the doors were sliding open to the lobby. It was far more bustling than it had been when Mac and Babs were checking in not long ago. Dozens of tennis stars strolled through the lobby, all of them dressed up in designer outfits likely purchased the day before in the high-end stores on the avenue. The week before the tournament began was more of a social event for the top one hundred players; it was only the newbies that had to compete for a spot on the brackets.

Mac tugged at the hem of her tight tank top, trying to swallow the anxiety building in her throat as she walked toward the dining room where breakfast was being served. The ceilings were at least twenty feet high. In classic Parisian style, the molding around the room was gilded. A wave of incredible scents filled her nose; chocolate, warm pastries, meat cooked to perfection.

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A waitress smiled at her. “Bonjour, table for one?”

Mac looked past the server confusedly. “Hi, how are you?” Scanning the room, her throat tightened. Where is the to-go section? She knew there was one – she’d looked it up in advance to avoid precisely this situation. The sitting at one of these immaculate tables in full tennis gear and shoveling down a Babs-approved breakfast was mortifying enough to turn her stomach.

“Would you like a seat?” The waitress repeated, trying to intercept Mac’s gaze.

“Um, could I see a menu?” Mac kicked herself mentally for not just asking for what she needed.

The waitress nodded. “Of course, mademoiselle.” She passed Mac a laminated menu from the hostess’s stand. Mac scanned the a la carte menu, trying to settle on something before drawing any more attention to herself.

As Mac contemplated, the server directed a nice couple to a table in the back. When she moved, Mac clicked her tongue. A display window filled with prepackaged meals revealed itself.

When the server returned, Mac smiled. “I think I’m settling on the chia pudding from the a la carte menu.” She pointed over to the display case.

“Is that all, miss?” The waitress gestured to the spread of golden brown pastries, danishes, and fruit bowls arranged down a long table. Mac’s mouth watered at the sight, having missed the entire buffet section in her scan of the place.

Shaking her head, Mac smiled. “No, thank you. This is my training diet. Can you charge this to Barbara McConnell’s room?”

The waiter’s face lit up. “Of course. Good luck in your matches.”

“Thanks!” Mac rubbed the back of her neck. With the plastic bowl in hand, she headed out of the lobby and into the streets of Paris. It would take about fifteen minutes to get to Stade Roland Garros where the courts were – just enough time to scarf down the meager breakfast while dodging impeccably dressed Parisians.

Mac swallowed her anxiety. Does anyone here just go to the grocery store in pajamas?

From the looks of it, no. But Mackenzie tried to shake off the feeling of intimidation growing in her bones as she lifted her hand to hail a taxi. Several cars zipped past her before one finally spotted her. With her racket bag slung over her shoulder, Mac jogged up the slowing cab and slid into the backseat. “Stade Roland Garros, please.”

The cab driver nodded, pulling out from the curb to the main road smoothly. As the car started moving forward, Mac turned her head to gaze out onto the streets. It wasn’t her first time in Paris, but every trip she had taken before this was bare bones. Ofcourse, taking the public transit was a great way to get to know the city, but it wasn’t great for preparing for a major match.

As the car juddered down the cobblestone streets, Mac’s heart started to race as if she was already in a match. Winning three matches in a row – what it would take for Mac to qualify for the French Open – was no easy feat. Especially considering it was just the entrance test for the rest of the Grand Slam.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to settle her mind. Just as she let out a long exhale, a text from her mom popped up on her phone.

This is what you've trained for. Don't get too in your head. Deep breaths, and if you need me, find me in the stands. Love you

Mac chuffed at the text. She always knows when I'm losing it.

The taxi ground to a halt in front of Court Suzanne Lenglen. Reaching forward, Mac passed the driver the fare and a tip. "Thank you."

She hopped out of the car with her racket in tow, only sparing a second to take in the impressive stadium before her. Lenglen was the world's first recognized No. 1 player in women's tennis, holding the title from 1921 until 1926. Over the course of her career, she won eight Grand Slam singles' titles. Hastily, Mac made her way toward the player entrance.

As she walked, a handful of black SUVs hurtled down the ramp to a private player entrance in the underground parking garage. Some players needed the private entrance for security reasons, while others simply preferred it.

But Babs had all but required Mac use the public entrance.

"It's closer to your daily routine. You don't get driven into a private garage in a cushy, black SUV. You come to practice, sweaty from your run across town. Now, I won't make you run through the streets of Paris on the morning of the most important match of your life, but you can walk in like a normal player," Babs had argued.

And as annoying as it was, Mac knew she was right.

She could still envision Babs's wink as she added, "Besides, next season, you might be too famous to take the public entrance. Enjoy it while you can."

The thought made Mac giddy, even all these weeks later. With her tennis rackets

slung over her shoulder, Mac crossed the tree-lined paths toward the heavy glass doors of the entrance. Inside, a receptionist greeted Mac. “Bonjour, how can I help you?”

Mac cleared her throat and stepped forward. “Good morning. I’m checking in for my qualifying match.”

“Name?”

“Mackenzie Bennett, USA.” Mac bit her lip, her mind already running away with anxiety. A part of her feared she’d be turned away, laughed at and forced out.

But after a moment of scanning the system, the receptionist nodded. “Very well. Ms. Bennett, you are locker number 54. If you qualify, your locker may be reassigned for the tournament.”

Mac swallowed. “Thanks.”

The receptionist pointed her in the direction of the locker rooms. Walking down the hallway, Mac tried to memorize every detail, down to the way the warm, orange wood on the walls matched the glow of the clay courts outside.

Mac’s old shoes glided across the pristine marble floors as she turned the corner to the women’s locker room. Just as she was reaching for the door, it swung open to reveal Lorena Johnson, already warmed up.

A giddy smile took over Mac’s face as she stuttered for words. “Sorry.”

Lorena winked. “No worries, good luck.”

Mac nodded. “You too, not that you need it.”

With a laugh, Lorena disappeared toward the fields. Mac could hardly figure out how to scoop her jaw off the floor. Lorena was the number one women's tennis seed in the world... until she had a baby and the tennis association took her rank. The French Open had refused to give her a Wildcard, forcing her to participate in the qualifiers like she hadn’t already had a legendary career.

Mac shook the annoyance, knowing Lorena would qualify no matter what. Grabbing the long door handle, Mac stepped inside the carpeted, bustling locker room. 128 players would compete in the qualifiers. Only sixteen of them would be admitted to the tournament.

Scanning the walls of wood lockers, Mac searched for 54. Soon enough, she clocked it in the second row and made her way over, setting her bag on a bench while she worked on the lock. A few familiar faces passed by – other regulars in each Open’s qualifying rounds. Each of them filled with hope that this would be their chance.

Maybe I’m crazy for thinking this is possible. Mac thought as she looked around the room. Everyone here was in incredible shape. Most of them had access to better training, better equipment, better schedules.

But none of them have Babs. Mac nodded to herself as she unpacked her bag into the locker. Once her gear was put away, Mac started working through her warm-up: dynamic stretching that led into form practice.

Somehow, warming up here was harder than in a public facility. Every few movements, a player would need to squeeze past to get into a locker or head into a match. But before Mac could get too worried about it, her match was announced over the intercom.

She grabbed her racket bag, slightly lighter now than it was when she arrived, and skillfully weaved her way back to the hall. Just outside the locker room, Babs stood with her arms crossed. “Ready?”

“If I win this, I’m not warming up in there for the next one.” Mac rubbed her forehead, trying to ease the stress from her face.

Babs laughed. “When you win, I will come earlier and help you warm up.”

Turning to look at her coach, Mac scoffed. “You’ll actually do your job?”

Babs rolled her eyes, a smirk playing at the corner of her lips. “You know what? You can sleep in the lobby tonight.”

Before Mac could come up with another retort, Babs wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Listen to your coach now. This is a big deal; it’s also nothing. You’ve got the form, you’ve the skill. I need you to watch your breath work, because the anxiety will get the best of you.”

Mac nodded along as she listened to Babs whispered wisdom.

“When you’re out on the clay, it’s going to feel easier on your body. Use that to harness your power. We trained on rubber and cement. This is going to feel like a cake walk. But that doesn't mean take it easy.” Babs watched Mac’s face closely as they walked out toward Court 18 on the opposite side of the grounds.

Mac nodded. “The ball bounces higher and slower.”

As soon as they walked onto the grounds, a few cameras started taking pictures. “Barbara! Barb!” the photographers called out.

Babs ducked her head after offering a simple wave to them.

After a few steps, the paparazzi were distracted by another player leaving the locker rooms.

“Sorry,” Babs shrugged.

Mac laughed. “Sorry? It’s inspiring. I’d do anything for them to care about me like that.”

With a wiggle of her eyebrows, Babs looked at Mac. “One day, you might regret saying that.”

Just as they were arriving in front of Court 18, Babs gripped Mac’s shoulders. “But

the most important thing is: I believe in you. I have since you were eighteen, and this season is yours for the taking. So take it.”

Mac clenched her jaw and nodded. It was hard to argue with Babs. Her certainty was enough to convince Mac of her own abilities.

They arrived just as Mac was being called to the court. Babs watched as Mac strode onto the court, tennis bag over her shoulder.

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As soon as her feet hit the bright orange clay, she was struck by just how bouncy the surface was. Feeling her chest swelling with concern, Mac sucked the fresh, French air into her lungs. You've got it.

As she came into view, there was a smattering of applause from around the arena. Setting her bag down by the bench to the left of the umpire, Mac scanned the sparse bleachers. Attendance at these matches was usually pretty low. All anyone really cared about was who made it past the qualifiers.

But there was one face she could always count on being there. In the front row, next to Babs, Piper Bennett smiled down at her daughter. As Mac turned toward them, Piper waved and winked. Just from the look on her mother's face, Mac got all the reassurance she needed.

With a nod, Mac refocused on unpacking her bag. She pulled out her trusty blue racket, a lighter shade that balanced well with her new tank top and skirt.

Mac's opponent, a French native named Adeline Garnier, stretched her back on the other side of the umpire's stand. Following suit, Mac tried to get her legs ready with some high-knees. With each hop, she lifted the opposite knee to her chest until blood was pumping through every vein.

The umpire called the players to the court after reading them the rules Mac had heard a thousand times before. The match was made up of three sets, and each set was comprised of at least six games. To win a set, a player needed to reach six total game wins with a two game lead. If the players tied a set at 6 - 6, a tiebreaker game would begin. The first player to ten in that game would win the set.

Striding to the baseline, Mac prepared to receive the first serve of the match. Garnier had won the coin toss. Even from on the court, Mac could feel Babs's approval. Receiving the first serve is a benefit. The opponent has all the pressure to come out strong. All I have to do is hit it right back.

Mac gulped as she squatted down, keeping her racket centered with her spine. Bouncing lightly from one foot to another, she waited for the Frenchwoman to serve. The bounce of the neon yellow ball against the clay – once, twice, three times – filled the arena. Then, with a deep breath in, Garnier lifted the arm holding the ball.

A moment of crushing silence enveloped the arena as the ball floated in a high arc above her head. Then, with the swing of her racket and a tremendous shout, Garnier shattered the silence, hurtling the ball toward Mac's side of the court.

Mac regarded the comet carefully as she tried to map its exact course. Trusting her instincts, Mac hustled toward the back left corner of the left service box and pulled her racket into a backhand. With one hand gripping the racket and the other guiding it from behind, Mac swung from below her hip and toward the net.

With a crack, the racket met its target, shooting the ball right back toward the French player. Mac kept her eye on the ball, only registering Adeline's movements within its periphery. She was in great shape, lean and strong. She had a delicate build, making it easy for her to run from each corner of the court.

Clay flew up from under Adeline's feet as she stretched and slid to send the ball back.

That's my window. Mac smirked as the ball returned to her side. From there, she used her backhand again, this time sending Adeline running to the opposite end of the court. The bouncy clay would force Adeline to slide again, ruining her chances at an accurate shot.

Sure enough, the ball hurtled to the far corner and bounced just before the baseline. Adeline slid, but by the time her racket met the tennis ball, Mac's topspin redirected its trajectory. Adeline's head dropped as the ball crashed straight into the net.

"Fifteen, love," the umpire announced from the stand.

Mac's nerves began to dissipate as she turned her back on her competitor and headed to the baseline. In the stands, Mac watched as Babs calmed her own excitement. A simple fist pump and a wink was all Mac needed to see to know her strategy was working.

Each volley was a fight. With every serve, Adeline and Mac struggled for their spot in the tournament. But Mac took the first set 6-2. The crowd cheered as the players switched court sides for the second set.

A ball boy bounced Mac three balls. The felt snagged on Mac's calloused palms. Bouncing each, Mac decided which one she wanted and rolled the discarded balls toward him. Squaring up to the baseline, Mac let the ball bounce against the court, sending up small puffs of clay with each toss. Once she had a sense of the surface's mannerisms, she bent her knees and prepared to serve.

In one swift motion, she lifted her left arm and released the ball into the air. As it reached its apex, Mac brought her racket over her head and slammed it into the felt. A sharp crack resounded through the small court as it sailed through the air and onto Adeline's side.

As Mac's eyes lowered from the sky to the court, her gaze caught on a face in the crowd. What is she doing here?

In Prada sunglasses, sleek beige trousers, and fitted polo, Taylor Young stared down at Mackenzie from the bleachers. As her heart leapt into her throat, Mac's brow

furrowed.

“Fifteen, love,” the umpire called.

Mac hadn't even heard the ball get hit back. But as she looked over her shoulder, a glimpse of yellow rolled toward the barrier behind her. Whipping her head up, Mac saw Taylor standing to leave. A part of her wondered if she had hallucinated it. But seeing her move... well, Mac would have recognized that strut anywhere.

As the ball boy bounced her another ball, Mac looked up to Babs. Confusion was plastered across her coach's face, until she followed Mac's gaze to the bleachers on the other side of the court. The glimpse of Taylor's back was all Babs needed to recognize the star.

Mac bounced the ball, trying to recenter herself. Well, now I have to qualify.

But from her periphery, Mac could help but watch as Babs smacked Piper on the arm and nodded toward Taylor's disappearing figure. Covering her mouth, Piper tried to disguise her shock.

Before she could get a time violation, Mac got into position and slammed another serve across the court. Motivated by the sight of her rival, Mackenzie pushed herself even harder in the second. She couldn't be sure why Tay had come by, but Mackenzie refused to be embarrassed by her or her family ever again.

The rest of the game passed in a blur. Mac managed to win the first set but lost the second. The third and final set sat at 5 - 4, with Mac leading by just one game. Mac could hardly believe they were already at matchpoint. With a score of 40 - 30, she just needed to nail this last volley to advance to the next round of qualifiers.

The crowd had grown slightly since the start of the match. Mac knew it was probably

because the Taylor Young was spectating, which didn't ease the growing pressure in her chest. Wiping sweat from her forehead, Mac felt burning hot under the Parisian sun. Just one more serve.

Despite her exhaustion, Mac performed her serve just as meticulously as she had over the last two hours. A deep groan escaped her lips as her racket met the ball.

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As the yellow blur zoomed across the net, Mac peeked at the Rolex speed monitor just past Adeline's body. 115 miles per hour. That's it.

A smirk took over Mac's face just as Garnier's racket connected with the tennis ball, hurtling back toward her. She zipped across the court, her shoes sliding slightly on the clay as her forehand flew right back to Adeline's side. Over the course of the match, Mac noticed a slight slump in Adeline's body as exhaustion set in.

Now's my chance! Applying some topspin, Mac returned the ball close to the net, forcing Adeline to rush into the service box. Garnier slid across the court, nearly diving to reach it. But the ball bounced just short of her racket.

The crowd erupted in cheers, Babs and Piper standing from their seats as the umpire called out, "Match, Mackenzie Bennett."

Mac keeled over, letting her hands rest on her knees for a moment as she took in the applause. After a moment, she stood up and jogged to the net where Adeline Garnier was waiting to shake her hand.

"Well done. Take it to the top." Adeline winked.

Mac smiled and grabbed her hand, shaking it before bringing her in for a hug. "Great match." Making her way to the umpire's stand, Mac shook the ump's hand before turning back to the small crowd. She waved a few times as fresh tennis balls bounced onto the court. She signed a few of them before gently hitting them into the stands for her few admirers to claim.

But Taylor's face kept flashing in her mind. She hadn't left that long ago. There was a chance she'd be lingering around the courts or the locker room, playing her match long before it ever started.

Mac ran up to the stands where her mom and Babs waited, smiles plastered on their faces. She swept her mom up in a hug. "Thanks for coming."

"Just two more, baby. Then it's all yours." Piper held Mac's shoulders with a tight squeeze.

It was, of course, an oversimplification. If Mac managed to win her next two qualifying matches, she would be admitted to the French Open. But from there, she would be facing the top players of women's tennis from around the globe. Nothing was guaranteed.

But she tried not to get caught up in the minutia as her coach pulled her in for a hug. "That was great, kid. Don't make me lose my investment."

With a shrug, Mac laughed. "I'll think about it. I'm going to run to the locker room and then we can eat."

Babs was about to fight her on it, but Mac winked and zipped out of the court, slinging her racket bag over her shoulder. Jogging across the cobblestone paths, Mac could feel the tension in her hamstrings and the sweat drying on her skin.

But she was on a mission, and there was no time to waste in catching that motherfucker.

Fuck. She wasn't supposed to see me. Taylor bit her lip as her body slammed against the wall of lockers. Mom can't know I was here – that I saw her.

It was an accident. Of course a part of Taylor hoped Mac would be here, even fantasized about what it would be like. But she wasn't stupid enough to risk her entire career on some maudlin impulse.

Not bothering to check the schedules, Taylor had chosen a random court to watch. It wasn't until she was seated that she realized just how was on the court. She watched the match longer than she meant to, unable to tear herself away from Mac's annoyingly impressive game until it happened – Mac saw her.

Shaking her head, Taylor tried to get the image of Mac out of her mind. She looked incredible. More muscle than she had when Taylor saw her last. It must have been at least a decade ago now – by design.

As Taylor paced, the slam of the locker room door jolted her from her rumination. Feeling a presence behind her, Taylor stopped in her tracks as her heart raced. Swallowing, she let her shoulders relax before turning slowly on her heels.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Mackenzie's gravelly voice made Taylor's spine tingle. She couldn't tell if it was fear or that ineffable feeling Mac always inspired in her.

Taylor shrugged. “Watching the newbies.”

Mac's jaw clenched, annoying Taylor with just how chiseled it was. “Actually, if you subtract the time your parents played, you're just as new as the rest of us.”

It took everything in Taylor to simply shake her head, to ignore the comment... to ignore the decades of history that sat on the locker room floor between them. “You

played well. Let's see if you can pull off another two. Then you'll have to play with the big girls."

A hardy chuckle erupted from Mac's broad chest. She closed the distance between them, her broad shoulders and towering height forcing Taylor to take a step back. Taylor lost her breath as her spine met the wooden lockers behind her. Up close, it was clear just how built she really was. Trying to keep her focus, Taylor glared into Mackenzie's dark eyes.

Mac smirked down at her, just inches from her face. "I've played with the big girls plenty, haven't I?" From the corner of her eye, Taylor could see Mac's chest rising and falling as rapidly as her own.

Taking another small step forward, Taylor licked her lips. "And you couldn't handle the heat then. Think you could take it now?"

Before Mackenzie could answer, Taylor willed herself to push past her. Their shoulders slammed together as Taylor breezed out of the locker room. It wasn't until she heard the slam of the door behind her and was a few paces down the narrow hallway that she let herself breathe.

Shit. How does she still have that kind of power over me?

As the week went on, Mac continued to progress through the qualifiers, and Taylor made sure to pay attention to the schedules. She couldn't afford another surprise run in – or at least, that's what she told herself. But that didn't stop her from checking in on the scores between what felt like endless press and training sessions.

By the time Mac's final match rolled around, she couldn't help herself from tuning in on her phone. As Taylor rode the elevator of Hotel George V. back to her suite, Mac used her backhand to place a shot directly down the line, an impossible hit for her opponent. "Nice..."

The elevator doors swung open to Taylor's private penthouse. Hardly looking away from her phone, she swiped the keycard and pushed the door open. She pulled off her heels with one hand and tossed them by the door. Dodging the scattered clothes on the floor, Taylor made her way to the living room and plopped down on the white leather couch.

Mac scored again, leaving the third set hanging in the balance. Her opponent, another American, was putting up a good fight, but Mac seemed like she could predict every single stroke.

Grabbing the remote, Taylor put the match on the TV. She had convinced herself that it was research – that if Mackenzie really stood a chance of making it to Roland Garros, she needed to learn this new opponent. After all, if Mac won this round, there was a chance the pair would face off.

The thought brought a lump to Taylor's throat. She watched Mac's body closely. Undeniably, Mac was a force of nature – somehow even more impressive than she had been when they were young. Unlike most players, age had made Mackenzie more nimble.

The livestream zoomed in on her face as she bounced the ball before a serve. Taylor's breath caught watching Mac's jaw tense the same way it had in the locker room. There was something so familiar about Mac's intensity.

Pulling out, the camera cut to a wider shot of Mac's serve. Her body stretched elegantly to meet the ball. Taylor eyed her grip on the blue racket, slowly letting her gaze fall down Mac's forearms to her bulging biceps. Taylor knew how difficult it was to get that kind of definition. She seethed with jealousy, having worked for muscle like that her entire career.

She tried to ignore the jolt of excitement pulsing through her center.

Leaning back into the couch cushions, Taylor bit her lip. Giving in to Mackenzie again wasn't in the cards for Taylor. Not under Kim's iron rule.

But no one would ever know if...Scanning the room, Taylor smirked to herself as she unbuttoned the navy pants she had worn all day and let her hand drift between the trousers and her lace panties.

As her fingers rubbed the space between her thighs, her clit began throbbing with excitement. At first, Taylor tried to keep her eyes off the TV. But with each volley, Mackenzie's familiar moan filled her suite. Eventually, she gave in, arching her back as she gazed up at the screen. They were replaying a slow motion shot of Mac sliding to reach a far corner ball.

Taylor groaned as she watched Mac's legs spreading as she dropped to the ground –

memories of Mac's center pressed against her own filled her mind. She closed her eyes, focusing on the image. Taylor felt as if Mac was in front of her now – riding her silicone strap as it pressed into Taylor's clit.

Peeking once more, Taylor watched Mac's muscular arms straining with all of their remaining power to score a point. As the crowd cheered, Taylor whimpered. "Yes."

Her fingers slid the lace to one side. With each stroke of her clit, Taylor's fingers grew more wet. Just the feeling of her own slick pleasure made Taylor shudder. She found herself wondering once more: how does she still have that kind of power over me?

When she looked back at the TV, a close shot of Mac's face filled her screen: panting, sweating, eyes filled with hunger. It was the final serve of her last qualifying match. If she took this point, Taylor would be stuck with her for the next two weeks.

She wanted to hate the thought, to hate that they'd run into each other at press events, in the locker rooms or hotel hallways. But even their brief encounter the other day made Taylor's body lose control. Mac was bold – unwilling to roll over like she had in the past. And it made every part of Taylor tingle.

Mac's eyes flicked to the camera.

Can she see me? Taylor whimpered as she met Mac's deep, brown eyes. The orange clay reflected in them, lightening them just a hue. Her hair was in a tight top bun, exposing a fresh undercut.

Before Taylor knew it, she was serving the last point. A loud cry escaped Mac's lips as she cracked the ball across the court. Taylor cried out in response, her fingers pressing harder and harder into her clit.

Taylor's body tensed as she neared her peak, every hair on her body rising with excitement. Forcing her eyes open, Taylor watched Mac grunt as she launched another shot. It landed just in the lines on the far corner. The crowd roared as Taylor released a scream of pleasure.

"Fuck!" Taylor shuddered under her own hands. When her body calmed and her eyes opened, Mac had collapsed to the ground. It wasn't long before she pulled herself up and stumbled to the net.

Taylor cleared her throat and sat up on her couch as she watched Mackenzie shake her opponent's hand. Running a hand over the back of her head, Taylor smoothed her silky, blonde hair before standing and buttoning her pants.

She tried to settle her breathing as she turned off the TV. Just then, a text came to her phone.

Mom: No excuses. You'll pummel her.

Rolling her eyes, Taylor tossed her phone into the couch. Fucking buzzkill.

7

Mac

Qualifying week had been a whirlwind. Every day, more and more people stopped Mac to congratulate her on her progress. But now, the real competition began.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:41 pm

Mac woke up the next morning to Babs's blaring alarm. "Dude, it's my one rest day before the first round." She rolled into her pillow, burying her head in the plush fabric. She was starting to get attached to the comfortable mattress, wondering if she could buy it off the hotel if she won the grand prize. After a week of intense matches, Mac dreamed of lounging in the pillowy duvet for days on end.

Babs shot up from her bed across the room. "No rest for future champions. We want to wipe that smug grin off Kimberly Young's face."

"Harboring some resentment?" Mac laughed as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Of course, Mac knew she was right. The longer Mac rested, the more the exhaustion and soreness would set in. Then, she'd stand no chance against the pros.

Babs stood and did a few stretches. "She's bought that kid a place in the top ten, and I think it's bullshit."

Mac opened her mouth to fight back but stopped herself. Sure, Taylor's mom accelerated her path to going pro. But Mac also saw just how hard Taylor trained. She was undeniably talented, and money alone couldn't buy her a spot as number three in the world. But if Mac knew anything about Babs, it was that she wasn't a very good listener.

Ripping herself from the cloud under her body, Mac grabbed her training clothes and headed to the bathroom. She still wasn't used to how nice the hotel was; even the cheapest room was brimming with luxury. For instance, housekeeping made sure the bathroom was pristine every time she used it. Setting her toiletries on the vanity, Mac peeled off her pajamas and tugged on a clean pair of workout shorts.

As the fabric slid up her legs, Mac examined the bruises developing on her skin. The clay certainly made it harder to avoid slamming into the ground. But at least her legs looked more toned than they had a week ago.

Mac wiggled her eyebrows. I guess that's where I can get if I manage to make it full time. Between matches, Mac was still struggling to finish her remote work. She'd even asked her mom to finish an assignment or two while she trained. So far, she was getting away with it, but worry lingered in the back of her mind.

Once she was dressed, Babs and Mackenzie took the elevator downstairs. While they walked through the lobby, Babs was too busy to chat, dealing with something on her phone.

Mac's eyes wandered up the columns that lined that lobby; even the ceiling was ornate with gilded crown molding. But when Mac looked back to the ground, Babs wasn't next to her. Turning to check behind her, Mac tilted her head when she saw Babs stuck in place. "What's wrong?"

"Brackets are out." Babs swallowed the lump in her throat.

Mac crossed the distance between them in a matter of paces. "Let me see."

Passing the phone to her, Babs crossed her arms as she scanned Mackenzie's face.

"Well, okay." Mac nodded, giving Babs her phone back. "At least we won't have to face off in the finals."

It wasn't ideal, but Mac and Taylor being on the same side of the bracket meant if all went to plan, they'd only have to face off in the semifinals... assuming both of them survived that long. It would be far less humiliating to lose to her there than in the final. At least, that's what Mac was trying to convince herself.

Babs smiled and smacked Mac's back harder than she meant to. "Let's get to work then."

Mac winced but followed Babs out of the hotel's looming, glass and wrought iron doors. As soon as they made it outside, Mac groaned. "It's pouring."

"Nice break from the relentless sun on the court." Babs eyed Mac as she hailed a cab. She hopped inside the first one that stopped, closing the door in Mac's face.

Mac raised her arms. "What the hell?"

Babs laughed. "Run to Stade. It's your cardio, and it's probably the only time you'll get to explore Paris."

Before Mac could fight her on it, the taxi was speeding down the road toward Roland Garros. It was at least a three mile run. At her best pace, Mac could be to the grounds in fifteen minutes – quick enough to catch up with her coach and give her a piece of her mind. There was no time to waste on annoyance.

Giving her back a quick stretch, Mac took in a deep breath before heading down the road. She hit her pace quickly. With each step, Mac felt a bounce in her step from the new shoes without any rubbing against her heels. I guess Babs's trick really does work.

As she ran, she heard the click of a camera from behind her. Glancing over her shoulder with furrowed brows, she noticed a paparazzi a few hundred feet behind her, struggling to keep pace as they snapped a few pictures. Mac gave them a friendly wave before turning her attention back to the run.

As she rounded the corner of Avenue Paul Doumer and Avenue Mozart, Mac couldn't help but smile. Piper had shown her a few social media posts about her

qualifying matches, and she couldn't help but enjoy the attention. There was some chatter that she could be the next big U.S. underdog.

Dodging elegantly dressed pedestrians as she made her way down the tree-lined streets, Mac was suddenly struck by the thought that any one of them could be Taylor. Her breath caught in her lungs as she pushed her body forward. It wouldn't be the craziest thing. She already showed up at my match, and the Youngs always stay in the Four Seasons.

With each pound of Mac's feet against the pavement, snapshots of Taylor flashed in her mind: the sunglasses, the crossed arms, her toned forearms, the abs peeking out of her trousers.

If Mac wasn't running so hard, her body would be begging for Taylor: a feeling she had tried to suppress for a very long time.

But as she picked up her pace, Mac tried to push it down. With any luck, she could turn this unresolved frustration into points against Taylor if they finally faced off. When, she corrected herself mentally.

Before she knew it, the Suzanne Lenglen Court was on the horizon. She kicked it down a gear as she approached the player entrance, where Babs tapped her foot against the ground. "Took you long enough."

Mac gasped for breath. "You're such a bitch."

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Babs held open the door to the player entrance and led Mac inside. Instead of heading down the warm, wood hallway toward the courts, Babs took Mac upstairs to the training room. Every piece of workout equipment imaginable sat inside. There were a few people training there, but most of the competition was spread out across multiple courts and warmup spaces. The first round started today, which meant about half of the current competitors would have a match today.

“On the floor, give me 50 crunches.” Babs wasted no time getting started. Mac dropped down obediently, moving quickly through her reps. She squeezed her tight abs with each lift, careful to protect her neck.

Satisfied with her mentee’s form, Babs crossed her arms and let her eyes wander to the TV mounted to the wall, where pundits took turns speculating on the upcoming matches.

With her back on the ground, Mac couldn’t see much. But that didn’t stop her from perking up and straining to see a corner of the screen when she heard what they were debating.

“Taylor Young is facing off in the first round today against German pro, Ida Klein. What do we think on this one?” A man in a blue blazer turned to the rest of the table. There was one woman at the table of five.

Immediately, another male anchor jumped in. “I think she’s got this entire competition in the bag. She’s got some experience winning Grand Slams now, and with Kim on her team, it’s all wrapped up.”

From the end of the table, the woman jumped in. “I think that’s an oversimplification. I mean, why else was Taylor Young watching quali’s this year? She and her team are worried about these up-and-coming players.”

Babs turned back to Mac, whose workout had slowed. “Pick up the pace.”

Mac nodded, taking a deep breath as she pushed herself. With each movement, her core burned. The fabric of her shirt clung to her tensing muscles, the definition of her light sixpack peeking through. She couldn’t stop herself from groaning on each crunch. By the time they moved onto standing calf stretches, Mac and Babs were glued to the screen.

Another male pundit laughed. “Look, you go to enough of these events and you’re going to get a little bored.”

“It’s not boredom.” The woman shook her head. “Some of the players that qualified this year, like Mackenzie Bennett, have some of the best games I’ve seen in years.”

Babs smirked. “Hey, that’s you.”

Of course, Mac knew that the anchor was an old friend of Babs’s: someone who probably hated Kimberly Young just as much as Barbara did. But nonetheless, it was a privilege to get mentioned.

More and more eyes were on Mac by the day. All she could do was try not to disappoint them all.

Mac jumped in place as she looked down the long hallway, a bright light at the end of the tunnel.

“Keep your eye on the ball. I know she’s a big name, but she’s close to retirement.

Run her across the court and wear her out.” Babs muttered.

Nodding, Mac tried to ignore the crowd's enthused cheers for her opponent, Ava Martine.

Staring blankly forward, Mac swallowed. “I grew up watching Martine.”

Babs shrugged. “So you know her moves well. It’s the first round; a lot of these players haven’t been warmed up. You played a week already. Your muscles are ready.”

That’s a generous way of looking at it. Mac knew her body was more exhausted than any opponent’s – she could see it in the way they moved. But she tried to believe that Babs was right, that there was an advantage in it. Once the crowd calmed down, Babs gave Mac a light shove to move her down the hallway.

With her racket bag on her shoulder, Mac strode forward. The light at the end grew brighter with each step forward, making it hard for Mac to see where she was heading. But after a moment, the light fanned out to reveal the bright, orange court and a packed arena. Gentle applause sounded from the stands as she walked in.

Through the crowd, Mac could hear her mom cheering. She followed the sound to the family box, where Piper waved and hollered with no regard for decorum. Just then, Babs entered the box, taking the seat next to Piper with a wink to Mac. A smile crept onto Mac’s face.

Setting her bag down at her bench, Mac laid out the black towel that was folded next to her seat. She placed it with the Eiffel Tower side up. It was a nice bonus for players: two complimentary towels per match. Mac would get to add the Roland Garros branded fabric to her very small collection.

After the players got settled, the umpire called them to the center. Smiling down at them in a white polo and dark trousers, he explained, “Miss Martine, as the senior player, you may call the coin toss.”

Ava nodded. “Tails, please.” The crowd applauded as the umpire pulled the custom Lacoste coin from his pocket. With a simple flick, the silver flew through the air, catching the French sun with each flip.

It landed with a soft thud on the clay floor. Leaning over his stand, the umpire called out. “Tails! Miss Martine, you may choose who serves first.”

Ava nodded. “I’d like to serve.” Turning to Mac, Ava held out her hand. “Good luck.”

“Good luck.” Mac shook Ava’s hand, grabbed her racket, and headed to her side of the court. With each step, Mac felt her new shoes wearing in. Despite Babs’s trick and Mac’s attempts to wear them in during training, they still had a stiff quality to them. But when Mac got to her baseline, she shook off the stiffness in her foot.

Standing just left of center court, Mac leaned forward with her knees bent. Just return one serve. She swallowed her anxiety as Ava examined the tennis balls in her hands. Once she selected a ball, Ava nodded toward Mac.

Mac tightened her grip on the racket, its worn edges definitely visible on camera. Her muscles felt cold despite warming up, and the hair on her arms rose as a light breeze swept through the stadium.

Just one serve.

Ava's arms lifted and rocketed the ball across the court. As it careened toward Mac, she ran to the left corner of the service box and smashed it back. The crowd stayed silent with each hit, their heads swiveling to follow the ball as Mac and Ava traded blows.

Even after one serve, Ava was slower than expected. After sending Ava to the far right corner, Mac sent her to the left on the next hit. The ball was just out of reach and bounced to the back wall.

"Love, fifteen." The umpire called.

The crowd cheered for Mac. It wasn't enthusiastic, but it was just enough to give Mac the boost she needed.

Ava fought like a warrior for the first two sets, pushing herself to reach for Mac's returns. But Mac was a relentless force, drawing her from side to side each hit. In the final set, with the match locked up at 5-4, Mac only needed one more point to win the game and therefore the match.

It was Ava's serve. With a pained grunt, she sent the ball over the net, managing just over a hundred miles per hour. Mac met the serve with ease, and hit it back to Ava's baseline. Ava groaned with each stride, hitting the ball back as best she could.

As the ball hurtled toward her, Mac harnessed all of her remaining energy. Squeezing her core, she let her racket fall into position and swung through.

Apopfilled the court as the ball bounced off the racket and flew back to Ava. This time, the ball was just too far away. Ava dug deep, kicking up orange dust as she dove for the ball. Just before the ball was out of reach, she swung, making contact. But she didn't have the leverage to aim it properly, and the ball slammed into the net.

"Match, Miss, Bennett," the umpire called.

Ava shook her head, disappointment washing over her face. But if Mac wasn't wrong, there was a look of pride lingering in Ava's eyes.

Jogging up to the net, Mac reached out her hand and pulled Ava into a hug. She lowered her voice, "Ava, I've watched you since I was a kid. Playing you was an honor. You're a fucking legend."

Ava patted Mac's back, lowering her head. "Thank you." They broke from their hug as Ava approached the umpire and shook his hand. Mac followed suit before turning back to the crowd whose reluctant enthusiasm rose with each set. Now, they happily cheered for Mac's first round victory.

She lifted her hand and waved as the crowd cheered. But all she really wanted was to see her mom. Finding Piper in the crowd, Mac smiled at her mom who had covered her mouth in awe. Trying to soak it in, Mac quieted the part of her mind that wanted to go back to the locker rooms and recover. Instead, Mac scanned the crowd, taking in their excited faces and listening to their applause.

One serve at a time.

“Goddamnit!” Kimberly’s voice echoed through the Eiffel Tower Suite as her hand slammed into her desk. Mac had just scored the winning point in her third round.

Taylor crossed her arms as Kim stormed around the hotel room. “It’s fine, Mom. Bennett will get out in the fourth. And if she doesn’t, I’ll kick her ass in the quarterfinals.”

Kim’s face wrinkled into a snarl. “She’s anobody. You shouldn’t even have to play her. Barbara probably bought her a spot.”

Turning away from her mom to face the Paris skyline, Taylor rolled her eyes. There was no denying that Taylor was always a better player than Mac. But that didn’t mean Mac wasn’t a strong competitor. Taylor could never point that out to Kim, though; not if she wanted to leave this room with her head attached.

Kim drummed her fingers against her crossed arm. “I’m going to have Carl dig up dirt on her.”

Taylor scoffed. “I think we’ve done that to her plenty.”

Whipping her head around, Kim glared at Taylor. As soon as she felt the heat behind that scowl, Taylor knew she should have kept her mouth shut. But her chest tightened at the thought of Mac’s personal life being ripped to shreds by the Youngs once again. She already wished she could have stopped it the first time.

Trying to recover herself, Taylor waved off her mom. “I’m just going to beat her. I know every one of her techniques, I’ve watched her matches. I can handle her.”

Kim sucked her teeth as she walked closer to Taylor. “Fine. But if you disappoint your family name and let that...” she nodded to the screen playing highlights of Mac’s match, “...beat you, we will be having a serious discussion about your future.

Understood?”

“Yes.” Taylor’s jaw twitched.

Once Kim turned away, Taylor knew she was dismissed. Eager to get away from her mother, she marched for the door, pressed the elevator button, and went down to the lobby.

The door slid open to a hectic ground floor. Each day it got busier and busier. As the players progressed through the bracket, the press began hanging around, hoping to schedule interviews.

Taylor kept her head down as she walked across the lobby into Taylor’s favorite restaurant in the hotel, L’Orangerie. As soon as the hostess saw her, Taylor was led wordlessly to her table in the far corner. Even in her more casual outfit, the staff would recognize her anywhere. And to be fair, it was obvious that even her casual jeans and t-shirt were designer.

As they weaved through the restaurant and away from the entrance, the ruckus of the bustling lobby was quickly replaced with soothing, live piano. Taylor felt her shoulders relax a bit as the round, marble table came into view. This was her favorite spot in the restaurant – right next to a wall of tall, rounded windows that overlooked a naturalistic courtyard. Back here, no one would bother Taylor.

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In a matter of seconds, a waiter appeared with a piping cup of coffee and a newspaper.

“Thank you,” Taylor smiled up at the waiter as she pulled the sports section from the paper. A quick scan showed the usual updates on the Open. But her skin prickled when she noticed it: a column about Mackenzie’s rise through the ranks.

Taylor wanted to look away, but the picture they chose for her was too perfect. She was mid-scream as she launched a perfect serve over the net. Gripping her racket, Mac’s biceps rippled as she used her body’s full force. The thought of being held between those strong arms and broad shoulders made Taylor’s chest tight.

Shifting in her seat, Taylor felt her body tense at the sight. She’d spent the last decade trying to wipe the image of Mac practicing from her mind.

But now, it all flooded back.

“Oh come on, that’s unfair!” Mac laughed as Taylor pulled her shirt over her head.

Taylor felt Mac’s eyes resisting looking down at her sports bra. “What? It’s too hot to practice in a shirt like that.” The courts in the Catskills were completely exposed to the sun, no shade shielding their bodies from its heat. And the water off the lake made the air more humid than anywhere else Taylor had practiced.

Shaking her head, Mac let her eyes flick down. “Too hot for a workout shirt? What are you going to do, rip off your clothes at a Grand Slam?”

Taylor shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe. Will you be there?” A part of Taylor loved how Mac’s eyes felt on her body.

Even though she tried to hide it, Mac’s flushed face was impossible to miss. And Taylor loved making her so flustered. It was the last summer before they would be playing together in every single Open.

“I’m surprised your mom didn’t make you compete this year.” Mac joked as she lobbed a ball over the net.

Casually hitting it back, Taylor shrugged. “I may or may not have had to beg.”

Mac laughed. “Why didn’t you? Compete, I mean.”

“Didn’t want to,” Taylor gulped, avoiding Mac’s dark eyes. It wasn’t entirely a lie. The truth was, this summer camp was the only place she could spend time with Mackenzie. It was also the only place Kimberly couldn’t be.

Letting the ball bounce out of play, Mac shook her head. “If it was me, I would’ve started in the Grand Slams years ago. I could be a millionaire by now! I guess it’s not much of an incentive for you, though.”

Taylor shrugged. “I’d like to have my own money. But we just turned eighteen, so I wouldn’t have had access to anything I earned until like two months ago.”

Mac approached the net. “I guess that’s true. I don’t know. I just feel like we have so few years to achieve our dreams that it feels like a waste to not play this year.”

Watching her closely, Taylor saw Mac’s eyes drop. Few people had Taylor’s access, the chance to start training so young, and the ability to travel the world without any guarantee of a payday. But the truth was, unlike everyone else, Taylor had even less

time to experience this.

Taylor walked up to the net, setting her hands on its white headband. Mac rested her hands next to Taylor's, their faces just a few inches away. Taylor shrugged. "I like spending summers here though."

A smile crept onto Mac's face. "I like it too."

Taylor's eyes flicked around Mac's features: her dark eyes, soft cheeks, and strong brow. Her entire being felt drawn into Mac's gravity. When her eyes landed on Mac's lips, there was no point in denying the pull.

Mac swallowed hard as she looked from Taylor's blue eyes to her plump lips.

"Taylor, I don't think it's a good idea. Your mom..." Mac started.

But Taylor lifted a hand to Mac's neck and pulled her in close. "I don't care about that."

Their lips met, electricity passing between them like two lightning rods. Just as Taylor was getting swept away...

"Your meal, madame." A waiter presented a stunning red mullet the size of Taylor's palm.

Clearing her throat, Taylor sat up and turned back to the server. "Thank you."

With a light bow, the waiter set down the perfect plate, leaving Taylor to her thoughts.

Why can't I stop thinking about her lips? Maybe it was because she had denied them

for so long. Or maybe because she knew just how angry her mother would be.

Taylor loaded up her fork with food, pretending not to know the real reason Mac was still on her mind.

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The truth was, they never finished what they'd started. And Taylor wasn't sure she'd ever rest until she found out what lay on the other side of the closet door.

The next day, Taylor sat anxiously by her TV, still aching from her fourth round match as Mac's began. She had insisted on watching the match alone, telling her mom she just wanted to recover in peace. Kim tried pushing back, but eventually relented thanks to a gentle nudge from Gerald.

Taylor sat back in her bed, a green, recovery smoothie in hand as she iced her knees. The match kicked off quickly. Mac's serves were still getting above her average speed. Her opponent returned soft balls. But Mac's exhaustion started to show quickly – by the the fourth game of the first set, sweat was already beading down her forehead

There was a massive difference between playing the ten matches that qualifiers needed to win than the seven that seeds had to play. The extra three matches really wore on a player's body. But Taylor had only experienced it once or twice before she ranked high enough to enter the Tournament without qualifying.

Honestly, a part of her was stunned by how agile Mac's movements still were. She leapt from each side of the court with relative ease, delivering forceful returns on nearly every ball that came into her court.

Taylor pulled out a journal from the night stand and jotted down a few notes about Mac's tactics. Biting her lip, Taylor started to wonder if she would still be able to defeat Mac.

When they went to camp together, Mac was way more inexperienced. In a lot of ways, Taylor mentored her, trying to share Kim's training with her...friend.

But now, Mac was bigger than Taylor and carried a force that Taylor hadn't encountered in quite some time. Her serves were averaging 125 miles per hour, even in the third set. Taylor licked her lips, distracted by Mac's bulging biceps, veins visible even through the TV.

Shaking her head, Taylor tried to focus. It's too late in the Slam to get distracted. Especially by someone who hates me.

Mac moved in to backhand a shot back to her opponent. But a lift in her racket at the last moment sent the ball flying off course. "Out," the umpire called. "Thirty, fifteen."

Checking the scores, Taylor knew Mac's victory was almost certain. She won 7-5 in the first set, 6-4 in the second, and was tied up now 6-6. Two more points, and the duo would reunite on the court for the first time in over a decade.

Taylor swallowed hard as she gripped the plush duvet in her fists. Mom must be fuming.

Back at the baseline, Mac lifted her racket and served the ball across the court. An intense volley kicked off as Mac approached the net, gently placing the ball in the no-man's land between the service box and the back of the court.

As her opponent was sliding across the far side of the court, Mac rushed the ball and slammed it into the opposite corner. The other player started toward the ball but slowed to a halt, giving up on the point before the ball even landed.

"Forty, fifteen." The umpire nodded.

Taylor sat up straighter, inching closer to the TV. Even through the screen, the crowd's energy was electric. Mac didn't just bring a great game to the table; she also had an underdog story that the crowd was eating up. The spectators at Roland Garros were watching a top seed be born before their very eyes.

The US crowd is going to adore her. Let's hope we don't face off there. Taylor felt her chest tighten. The thought of losing the audience's admiration made her heart sink. It was hard to play to a crowd who favored the opponent.

The ball was launched into action once more, Mac applying every ounce of her remaining power into the 130 mile per hour serve.

Taylor shook her head. "Maybe she'll wear herself out too much to recover." It was the best she could hope for at this point. But no matter how tired she was, Mac's strategy and execution remained the same. A lightbulb clicked in Taylor's mind as she made another note.

Before Taylor knew it, Mac's shot landed right up by the net – an impossible return for her opponent. As soon as the ball touched down in the barrier, Mac pumped her fist. The crowd erupted as the match was called in her favor.

The camera panned to Barbara McConnell and Piper Bennett, eliciting a sigh from Taylor. "Piper hasn't aged a day."

The two women leapt into the air, joyfully embracing. Taylor couldn't stop the corners of her mouth from twisting into a smile. Very few people knew just how hard Piper had worked to get her baby here.

The pundits took over the narration. "It's official. In two days, the Americans will face off. Underdog Mackenzie Bennett will play the legendary Taylor Young. This will be quite the matchup."

Taylor stood from her spot on the bed, taking the notebook with her. Kim would come knocking first thing in the morning to dissect the match, and she would only have one day to prep for the match against Mackenzie. She'd need a good strategy to get Kim off her back and to crush Mac's rising star.

The thought made her queasy. But she pushed the feeling aside because she knew she had no choice. She'd have to destroy Mac, and leave nothing behind.

9

Mac

Bang,bang, bang.

Mac startled awake to a knock at the door.

Before she could process that she was still – somehow – in her room at the Hotel George V, a voice called from the door. “Ms. Bennett, this is your wakeup call and room service.”

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Wrinkling her brow, Mac tried to understand what was happening. But Babs, already awake, was trotting toward the door, hollering over her shoulder, “Big day, big reward.”

As the door swung open, a silver cart rolled inside with a platter full of food. It was mostly fruits, vegetables, and clean proteins. But it was more luxurious than anything Mac had ever eaten.

“Thank you,” Mac smiled up at the bellhop as the cart stopped on her side of the bed.

The bellhop nodded and whispered. “Good luck today. The staff is very excited by your progress.”

Mac’s forehead wrinkled. “Really?”

With a wink, the server disappeared.

Stunned, Mac looked at Babs. “Can we afford this?”

Babs laughed. “Your win the other day guarantees you a \$400,000 prize, even if you fall on your ass and gargle Taylor’s racket in center court.”

Mac rolled her eyes. “I hate you for saying that. Besides, once you and Tommy’s cuts come out, it’s closer to \$240,000.”

“Enough to quit that dumb job of yours?” Babs raised her eyebrow. If she could quit, Mac could train full time — greatly increasing her odds of winning the rest of the

summer's Grand Slams.

Shoveling a pile of scrambled eggs into her mouth, Mac chuckled. "Ask me again when we're back in New York and the check hits my account."

Babs snickered. "Can't argue with that. Meet me at the Training Room in an hour. Your muscles must be all types of fucked up from a week straight of intense competition."

Before Mac could agree, her coach disappeared out of the hotel room door. As silence settled over the room, Mac felt like she could finally take a deep breath. She hadn't been alone in a while – there was always Babs talking strategy, Piper checking in on her, or crowded locker rooms of other athletes. But now, there was just Mac, this gorgeous hotel room, and a delicious breakfast.

She opened her phone and scrolled social media, which was littered with posts about the face-off between the former friends. She knew she shouldn't watch it, but her finger hovered over a video from Sports Central.

"Ugh, fine." Mac pressed.

An anchor's voice played over old photos of Mackenzie and Taylor practicing together. "The duo first met while attending Camp Baseline, a tennis training camp, together in the Catskill Mountains of Upstate New York. But after a few public outings, the friendship appeared to end abruptly. Speculation grew that Taylor's fame was becoming difficult for the less known player to handle."

Mac scoffed. "Fucking Kim." It was the same narrative she had spun over a decade ago. It must have cost a pretty penny to make the pundits say that shit again.

Clenching her jaw, Mac tossed her phone into the pillowy duvet and jumped out of

bed, abandoning her breakfast altogether. Her outfit had been dry cleaned and hung by the foot of the mattress. She threw it on and did a few jumps, hoping some exercise might help her kick the prickling acid in her stomach.

Her chest was already burning when another knock came from the door. Mac whipped her head around. “Who is it?”

“It’s Mom.” Piper’s voice called out.

“Come in!” Mac called as she crossed an arm over her chest to stretch her back and biceps.

Piper smiled when she saw her daughter. “You look fresh this morning. I thought you’d be a little more... doom and gloom.”

Mac shrugged, nodding her head toward the phone on the bed. “Have you heard this shit?”

“Yeah,” Piper winced as she sat on the edge of Babs’s bed. “I was hoping you hadn’t.”

Scoffing, Mac bent over and touched her toes. “It’s bullshit, they’re talking out of their asses.”

Piper nodded along as her daughter ranted. “It is. But we know the truth.” Her gentle, amber eyes held Mac’s. Closing her eyes for a second, Mac tried to steady her own breathing.

When she opened them again, Mac felt lighter. “I know. I just don’t see how Kim thinks this helps Taylor.”

Piper stood up. “Luckily, that’s not your business anymore. What you need to know is that we are all so proud of you. Win, lose, or draw. What you’ve achieved here... it’s everything you’ve dreamed of. Me and Babs just want you to be happy.”

Mac nodded, pulling Piper in for a hug. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Now, go out there and stick it to that mean, old bitch Kimberly.” Piper winked as she said goodbye to her daughter and disappeared into the hallway of the hotel.

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Once her mom left, put her hair up in a tight bun and threw a tube of SPF 100 sunscreen into her bag. This match with Taylor could go on for hours, and a sunburn would only make it worse.

With her bag packed, Mac walked down to the lobby and out of the hotel. Before she knew it, a cab was dropping her off at the players' entrance to Court Suzanne Lenglen. Inside, the typically calm hallway was bustling with life.

Reporters lined the entrance, and as soon as they noticed Mac, their cameras started flashing. Startled, Mac offered a polite wave and a smile as she navigated through the crowd.

“Ms. Bennett, how are you feeling this morning?” an American journalist called out.

Mac struggled to locate the reporter amid the incessant flash of the cameras. “Good. Ready for another match.”

A French radio host shouted over the noise. “How do you feel facing off against your former friend?”

Mac stumbled, nearly stopping in her tracks. The question felt like a knife being slowly pressed into her gut. It never stopped hurting how inaccurate the word “friend” really was. Mac pursed her lips and shrugged. “The courts will decide.”

Before they could ask anything else, Mac brushed past the reporters toward the training room. She pushed open the door to find Babs leaning against the bench press. “How’d you like the star treatment?”

“They’re pushy.” Mac tossed her bag on the ground, ready to work.

Babs spent the next two hours getting Mac stretched and warmed up. Practicing form, they talked through some strategy as they worked.

Thirty minutes before the match was set to begin, Babs stood tall. “You’re ready. Just remember, she’s young, and she’s not as tired as you; expect her to hit the balls you think she can’t.”

Mac nodded, grabbing her bag and heading toward the door. She had to secure her gear in the locker room before heading out to the court.

Just before she could walk out of the door, Babs raised a finger. “Half of this match starts in that locker room. Don’t give her a goddamn inch.”

A sly smirk crept onto Mac’s face. “You know I won’t.”

She marched out of the training room and down the hall to the locker room. The door swung open to an eerily quiet space. At this point, only one woman’s match was happening at a time. Most of the players who had entered the Open had been eliminated.

Without a word, Mac walked straight to her locker. She set her bag on the bench at the center of the aisle, checking over her shoulder as she unpacked. Pulling out the tube of sunscreen, she massaged enough onto her body to hopefully last her the match. After she was done, she walked to the bathroom and washed her hands thoroughly. She hadn’t come this far just to lose her grip on the racket.

It wasn’t until she was tossing the bottle back into her bag that she heard the squeak of sneakers on the polished cement floors behind her.

When Mac lifted her head to look, Taylor Young was striding down the aisle of lockers toward her. Without a word, Taylor brushed past Mac and began entering the code on her combination lock. Her locker was about four spots to the left on the opposite wall of Mac's, but Mac's skin burned as if Taylor was right on top of her.

Mac peeked over her shoulder, trying to get a glimpse into her opponent's locker. It was already stocked with recovery drinks, protein bars, and fresh socks.

Whipping her head around, Taylor glared at Mac. "Can I help you?"

Mac shrugged and turned back to her own locker. "Nope. Just glad to see the princess taken care of. Do you think Coach-Mommy Kim will still pack your lunch box when you lose?"

There was a second of silence before Mac heard the locker slam. Taylor moved quickly, effortlessly climbing over the center bench to tower just a few inches from Mac's face. The brim of Mac's cap nearly touched Taylor's forehead.

Her chest heaved as she stared down at Mac.

Is that pain in her eyes? Mac tried to hide her confusion as Taylor glowered down at her.

But after a moment of silence, Taylor simply laughed in Mac's face, her warm breath tickling Mac's skin. "Enjoy your seven minutes. When we're done here, everyone will remember who the true champion is."

Taylor lingered near Mac's face, her familiar vanilla scent overriding any response Mac could muster. A memory flashed through Mac's mind: Taylor, wrapped up in sheets, resting her head on Mac's chest. A knock at the door. Kim's fury. The yelling. Taylor's humiliation.

Mac's heart raced as the impulse to hide clawed its way back to the front of her mind. But she resisted, tensing her jaw and lifting her chin to meet Taylor's gaze. All she wanted to do was rub it in Taylor's face – that no matter how hard the Youngs tried to ruin her life, Mac got to be who she truly was.

But she couldn't stomach it. It would hurt Taylor too much. She was here for herself, not to tear down a trapped bird.

Taylor pulled away first, snatching her racket bag from the bench and heading to the door. Rolling her neck from side to side, Mac followed suit.

As she reached the locker room door, Mac pushed past Taylor.

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“Excuse you,” Taylor scoffed.

Mac shrugged. “They’ll call me out first.” A sly smile curled onto her face as she strode down the tunnel toward the court. This time, they were playing center court. By the quarterfinals, there was no reason to have multiple matches going at the same time. Instead, all eyes would be on Mackenzie and Taylor.

As the thought crossed her mind, Mac’s heart started to race. Even though she’d played every type of tennis pro in the last few days, Taylor Young was a fan favorite. And Mac couldn’t be sure how the crowd would receive a challenge to the crown princess.

At the end of the hallway, just before the court entrance, Babs leaned against the wall and stared out onto the clay.

“Fond memories?” Mac patted Babs’s shoulder, startling her.

Standing straight, Babs shook her head. “Complicated. This was the first match I played against a young Kimberly Parker. It was when I first realized I was going to have to retire.”

Mac nodded, not comforted by the thought. “But you did kick her ass in the next three Grand Slams.”

“Very true.” Babs smiled, turning to Mac. “Someone has to end their reign of terror. Don’t go easy on her. Don’t let those memories take you out of your game. We want that \$2.3 million.”

Taking a deep breath, Mac nodded. Just before she could reply, the announcer called her name, summoning her to the court. Mac leaned in and gave Babs a hug before stepping out of the dark, cool tunnel and into the burning sun.

Even through the thick insoles of her sneakers, Mac could feel the heat coming off the clay. After nearly two weeks of competing here, Mac's feet had grown accustomed to the soft bounce of the ground. It was nowhere near as intense as the rubber courts in New York, but that didn't make it any less exhausting to play.

As she walked to her bench, she waved to the crowd, rousing a soft, hesitant cheer in response. But through their delicate clapping, Mac's eyes and ears were drawn toward her mother. On her feet, Piper was clapping vigorously with a wide smile plastered onto her face. Just as Mac approached her seat, Babs cut into her spot next to Piper.

As the crowd quieted down, the announcer continued, "And now, please welcome to the Suzanne Lenglen Court, last year's champion: Taylor Young."

Before Mac could even process the words, the crowd was on its feet. A roar erupted that vibrated the stands and the clay under Mac's feet.

Taking in a deep breath, Mac grabbed her racket and stretched, focusing on the muscles in her arms and back. As she did, her eyes scanned the crowd until she saw it: the scowling face of Kimberly Young. Staying seated, Kim's hands tapped the sides of her chair restlessly. Her sunglasses hid her face well, making it impossible to tell what she was looking at. A part of Mac felt like Kim was glaring down at her – ignoring her daughter entirely.

Mac's jaw clenched as she stared back. The applause died down after a moment as Taylor pulled her fresh racket from her bag. Still wrapped in plastic, Taylor unsheathed it and shoved the wrapping into her bag.

While Taylor finished stretching, Mac began doing small jumps right by the sidelines. She wanted her muscles warm. In a match like this, there would be no room for a slow game.

“Ready.” The umpire activated his microphone, calling the two players to the coin toss. “Miss Young, as the previous champion, you will call the toss.”

Taylor bit the inside of her cheek. “Heads.”

With a nod, the umpire took the coin from his pocket and flipped it. Peering over his chair, the umpire pointed to Taylor. “Heads.”

Taylor nodded. “I’ll serve, please.”

Mac couldn’t be certain, but she thought she saw a sly smile play at the corners of Taylor’s mouth. Why is she excited? First serve always sucks.

Mac shook her head, getting herself back into her body as she walked to her side of the court. She approached the baseline and turned to face Taylor. Digging her sneakers into the clay for traction, Mac bent over into starting position. She bounced from side to side, rocking on the balls of her feet.

Taylor tested three balls, twirling each gracefully in her long, elegant fingers. Eventually, she tossed two back to the ball boys and held one up to her racket, signaling that she was ready. Something about the way Taylor moved felt personal, like there were years of history wrapped up in the gesture. She didn’t even look at Mac.

But when Mac twirled her racket in her hand, Taylor nodded.

Mac watched closely as Taylor sucked in a deep breath, bending at her knees at the

same time as her arms extended up. Pushing off her feet, Taylor's body floated into the air as if she was lifted by some unseeable force.

Mac forced her eyes to the ball, which was seconds away from meeting Taylor's racket.

A loud snap and a cry from Taylor launched the ball into play, sending it soaring toward Mac in the left service box. But before Mac could even process that Taylor had hit the ball, it was already over the net and landing in the very back corner of the box. It soared past Mac's head on the bounce.

There was no world in which Mac could have swung at it. Her brow furrowed as the umpire called, "Fifteen, love."

Under her breath, Mac muttered. "Fuck." She looked up at the speed sensor just past Taylor's body. 138 miles per hour. Mac's heart raced as if she'd dodged a bullet. Her eyes darted from the sensor to the sinister smirk on Taylor's face as the crowd hooted.

How could Mac have known that she was holding that kind of power? Even in the hours of footage she'd watched to prep, Taylor had never served quite like that.

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Shaking it off, Mac got into position again. Now I know what she's capable of. Mac may not have had a problem returning her serves when Taylor was a scrawny teenager. But now, she was a grown woman with the power of a champion. Mac would have no choice but to match her.

Shaking her head, Mac looked up at Taylor. This time, her eyes were plastered to the bright yellow of the ball. Taylor repeated her motion, slamming down the ball across the net.

Mac sprung into action, moving to meet the ball just as it bounced. Starting low, Mac used her backhand to propel the ball back toward Taylor. Ready to greet it, Taylor whacked it to the opposite side of the court. Mac was quick on her feet, hustling to get the ball back to Taylor.

Squeezing her core, Mac swung her forearm from her hips. The racket smacked the ball with a loud thud. It spiraled over the net and landed just before the baseline at the back of the court, catching Taylor at an awkward spot before bouncing out of play.

"Fifteen, all," the umpire called. A light cheer carried through the crowd, their confidence in either side shaken.

With each hit, Mac's body exerted more power than she knew was possible. She wouldn't relent on a single point. Unlike most things in Taylor's life, she'd have to earn every set on that court.

Sweat drenched Mac's cap. By the second set, it was dripping from the brim onto the clay at her feet. Across the court, she could see Taylor's skin glisten in the sun. At

least we're both putting in the work.

By the time the second set ended, Taylor had pulled ahead ever so slightly. Still, Mac was on her heels. If she could win the third set, she'd have a fighting chance.

But fighting for every point was harder by the second. Every time her racket met the ball, soreness from over two weeks of matches wracked Mac's body.

The sun was beginning to lower in the May sky when the umpire called, "Match point."

Mac lowered her head, mopping the sweat from her face with the towel the ballboy handed her. She looked up at Babs who nodded down at her, a grave expression on her face. Now or never.

Looking at the scoreboard, Mac let out a sigh. The third set was tied up 6-6, making this a tiebreak set. The score was 9-8. Mac needed three points in a row to win the set and the whole match, but all Taylor needed was one more point. Handing the towel back to the ballboy, Mac got into position.

Mac bounced the ball against the clay. Using her wrist to flick it toward the ground, Mac felt her forearms strain. Her body was just about ready to give up. Taking a look at the stands, Piper smiled down at Mackenzie.

Nodding to herself, Mac filled her lungs with air as she rocked on her feet. Then, with a leap into the air, she smacked the ball across the court and into the service box. 120 miles per hour. Too slow. Taylor returned it easily, hardly moving to reach it.

When the ball came back to Mac, she aimed it to the opposite side of the court. The technique had worked in every other match, so maybe it would work now. Taylor hid it well, but Mac knew she was exhausted. If she could force her to exert more energy,

it might be enough for Mac to get the upper hand.

But Taylor crossed the court easily, tapping the ball back into Mac's court with a light grunt. A return that gentle would hit its second bounce close to the net, bouncing out of play faster than Mac could bridge the distance.

"Shit." Mac gasped as she sprinted to meet the ball, fighting against the deep ache in her joints. But she was too late, and the ball bounced a second time.

Mac's body dropped to the clay.

The crowd erupted for Taylor as the umpire called the match in her favor. Mac looked up blearily, watching Taylor wave at her adoring fans. Up in the stands, Kimberly stood from her seat and left the stadium.

Mac caught her breath, lifted herself back onto her feet, and met Taylor at the net. Extending her hand first, Taylor failed to hide her satisfaction.

"Good game, Macky." Taylor smiled politely.

Mac nodded, and grabbed her hand. Her heart caught in her throat at the touch. Years of post-match handshakes flooded back to Mackenzie. Even now, through sweat and caked-on clay, Mac could still feel the electricity pulse through her skin.

Forcing herself out of the trance, Mac spoke, "Congrats, champ."

Before she could get swept up in Taylor's ocean eyes, Mac turned toward the umpire and extended her hand up. "Thanks, ump."

The umpire nodded and shook her hand. "Well played, Miss Bennett. I'm sure we'll cross paths again."

With that, she walked to her bag and packed up, the cheers of Taylor's adoring fans still swelling in her ears. As she slung the bag over her shoulders, Mac scanned the crowd where Babs and Piper politely clapped. Even in her loss, pride filled their faces.

Mac knew one thing for certain. She was going to have to train even harder to take home a Grand Slam of her own. This was just the beginning.

10

Taylor

One weekend a grueling match later, Taylor was utterly exhausted, her body covered in a terrible mixture of sunscreen and sweat. As she made her way back to her hotel room, all she wanted was to sit on the floor of her shower and let the hot water wash over her achy muscles. But as she swung open the door, she was greeted by the loud pop of a champagne bottle instead.

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“That’s my daughter!” Kimberly cheered as Taylor set her bag down by the door. From the looks of it, Kim was already a glass or two in. The only time she ever let loose like this was after Taylor won an Open.

For the second year in a row, Taylor took home the Suzanne Lenglen cup... and the \$2.3 million that came with it.

Taylor took the glass of champagne, knowing that it would get her way more tipsy than she’d like. But after weeks of avoiding anything that wasn’t kale and clean protein, a little drink was all she wanted.

“Thanks, Mom.” Taylor clinked her glass against Kim’s.

From behind her mom, Gerald stepped forward with his own glass. “You played well.” He winked at Taylor as they raised their glasses.

Just as Taylor took a sip, Kim started in. “Next Open, you’ll do it without all that nonsense from the quarterfinal. There was no reason for a third set against Mackenzie, let alone a tiebreak.”

Taylor’s jaw clenched. “I hear you. I’m actually really tired.”

Kim opened her mouth, ready to keep coaching. But Gerald placed a gentle hand on Kim’s back. “We’ll let you rest, sweetie.”

As Gerald shepherded his wife out of the suite, Kim looked back at her daughter. Taylor felt her body tense under the gaze. Her dad might have managed to get Kim

out of the room, but it was clear what waited for her back in New York.

Maybe I should stay at my place for a bit.

The next morning, Taylor was woken by a blaring alarm. The sun had barely risen, but it was time to catch her flight back to the states.

Still half asleep, Taylor tossed her clothes into her luggage before moving on to toiletries. When she landed and returned to her place, dry cleaning would be sent out and returned folded, so there was no point being precious about any of it.

Her room was cleaned up in a matter of minutes. She tore off her pajamas, stuffing them into one of the remaining suitcases. Pulling on a pair of joggers, Taylor rubbed at the bruises forming on her leg. The size of her hands, they were a marker of the hard fights she had won on the court over the last two weeks. She winced as her fingers pressed into the tender flesh.

Once she was dressed, a knock came from the door.

She opened it to reveal a cart, ready for her luggage. A bellhop loaded each case, except the tiny backpack that Taylor carried on her shoulder.

Leaving him to finish loading up, Taylor took the elevator down to the lobby. Kim and Gerald waited for her by the front door, equally unencumbered.

As Taylor passed the front desk, she waved to François. “Thanks, Frank.”

Smiling, François called out to her, “Congratulations on your victory.”

Kim crossed her arms as Taylor approached. “The flight crew told me your bags are going to your Manhattan apartment.”

Taylor nodded. “Yeah, I just want to go enjoy the city while I’m home.” The truth was, June was the only month this summer that she wouldn’t be traveling. And that wasn’t an accident. Pride in New York was unlike anything else she’d experienced.

Plus, New Yorkers knew how to mind their business. Seeing celebrities was not a rare occurrence. When the rare patron recognized Taylor, it was hardly worth any fanfare. In all the years she had snuck out for pride, not a single story ever leaked about her presence there.

It doesn’t hurt that most of them are plastered, either.

Clearing his throat, Gerald smiled. “What’s the point of owning such a gorgeous place if you never get to stay in it?”

Kim started walking toward the front doors. “It’s a smart investment.”

Before either of them could argue, Kim was halfway down the front steps.

Gerald wrapped his arm around Taylor’s shoulder. “Just be careful out and about, people can be... exploitative.”

“I know, Dad. I’m always careful. Besides, the reporters only ever see me covered in sweat. I doubt they’d recognize me anyother way.” Taylor laughed, comforted by the warmth of her dad’s side hug.

Gerald shrugged. “To be fair, I’m not sureIremember what that looks like.”

The trip home was tense and quiet. Kim kept her eyes trained out the car window and hardly uttered a word on the plant. It wasn’t until they touched down on the tarmac in JFK that Kim broke her silence. “Don’t be late to practice tomorrow. And for god’s sake, take a car. Don’t you dare step on that horrid train.”

Taylor rolled her eyes, but let her hand rest on her mom's shoulder. "I'll be on time." She was pretty sure Kim hadn't ridden any type of public transit in at least thirty years. Once Taylor stood from her seat, a flight attendant passed her the racket bag.

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With a sigh, she grabbed it and headed down the stairs. From the chain link fence, cameras flashed. Taylor let a sly smile play at her cheeks, enough to give them something to write about.

The headlines would read something like: “Champion Returns: Thrilled With Victory, Taylor Young Heads Back To Training in NYC.” Kim would be happy with that.

A driver opened the back, passenger’s door of a black SUV. “Miss Young.”

“Thanks,” Taylor said as she ducked inside. About an hour drive later and the car was pulling up outside of her building. Not waiting for the driver, Taylor thanked him again and got out of the car.

The sun was just starting to set as Taylor walked into the lobby.

“Look who it is,” A tall, curly-haired woman greeted Taylor from behind the front desk.

Taylor smirked. “Hey, Cam.”

The door attendant smiled back, her perfectly tailored suit unbuttoned around her waist. “You know, the bars were going crazy.”

“My bars?” Taylor winked.

Camilia nodded. “Yeah I stopped by Mary’s for your match against Bennett. The

crowd was wild, they didn't know who to root for."

Taylor looked around the swanky lobby, hoping to keep her blush hidden. It was a lush environment, wood floors and black marble walls. A warm orange glow filled the space at night.

"You guys used to play right?" Cam asked, leaning closer as she lowered her voice.

Taylor let her elbows rest on the desk. "Between you and me – and I will sue your ass if you ever say a word – we did more than just play."

Cam pumped her fist. "I fucking knew it. Cause she is out and proud and the sapphics at Mary's were all about it. But obviously, a lot of them have theories about you." Living in a building like this, all of the staff were experts in discretion. They had to be, especially when Taylor was bringing women home in the middle of the night.

Taylor's head dropped. "And all of them are true." Giving the desk a pat, Taylor sighed. "I have to get some rest."

"Kimberly wants you back on the courts in the morning, right?" Cam laughed. "We'll have the car waiting for you."

Reluctantly, Taylor nodded and headed upstairs. "Thanks, Cam."

The elevator was so smooth that Taylor felt her eyelids drooping with each floor. By the time the doors were swinging open to the 42nd floor, Taylor was basically snoring.

She unlocked the door to Penthouse C, her \$14 million beauty. The heavy door swung open to Taylor's gallery. Tossing her bag down by the door, Taylor let a sigh leave her chest. Seeing her art on the walls was a surprising comfort.

She slipped off her sneakers and walked past each piece. The property wasn't the only thing Taylor had spent her money on. Over the last decade, she had been collecting the works of dozens of famous artists. From Hannah Hoch to Rosa Bonheur, the work stretched centuries. Of course, when Architectural Digest visited for a piece on her apartment, Kim had made sure each piece was replaced with an equally expensive one.

The gallery opened to the open living room where a wall of windows stretched out, a view of Central Park just past the pristine glass. She headed to the kitchen and threw open her floor-to-ceiling fridge. Inside, a platter of sushi was waiting for her.

"Fuck yeah," Taylor's eyes flashed with a passion she rarely showed. She grabbed the tray and a pair of silver chopsticks, heading for the couch. Laying back on her couch, Taylor threw on the TV. She found some reruns of *The L Word: Generation Q*. She had grown up with the original show, hiding her watches from Kim.

There was a comfort of watching women her age enjoy their queerness. To date without fear.

Taking a bite of her sushi, Taylor pulled out her phone and scrolled socials. She had avoided as much of the coverage of Roland Garros as she could. But now, she needed to know what the temperature on her matches was.

She searched her name and found dozens of posts about her wins.

Taylor Young remains the GOAT of Women's Tennis.

Of course it was a comfort, but it wasn't what she needed to read. So, she tapped into the search bar and added two words: "Mackenzie Bennet".

Immediately, thousands of new results appeared. Clips of their match had trended for

a few days. Taylor bit her lip as she read.

If anyone can come for Tay's crown, it's Mac from Queens.

Can't wait to see this proud sapphic take home a trophy.

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Anyone else feel the tension between these two? Wild vibes.

Taylor swallowed the lump in her throat. Clicking into one of the clips, Taylor couldn't deny it either. Their chemistry – or whatever they wanted to call it – was palpable. The locker room fight probably didn't help.

It would be a lie to say she hadn't been a little excited the entire match. Her tight skirt rubbed against her hard clit every time she chased a shot. With hindsight, it was a wonder she managed to make it through the match at all.

But it wasn't good. If people were picking up on their history, Taylor wasn't doing a good enough job hiding it.

As if on cue, Taylor's phone dinged with a text from Kim:

Set up dates for you with Connor Garcia. You both need cover. People are catching on.

It was the most Kim would ever say about her queerness. After she had caught Taylor and Mac in Tay's room, Kim had placed strict rules on who Taylor could associate with. The words came flying back to Taylor: "It's for your own good. The world isn't kind to women player's like that. It fulfills every stereotype audiences think about us."

Taylor tried to fight her on it. At the end of the day, Kim had seen the WTA at its worst. When players like Barbara McConnell were forced to change in the hallway to not make the other women uncomfortable. At least, what few players in the league

were actually straight.

Shoving another piece of sushi into her mouth, Taylor like-reacted the text and threw her phone on the couch. She leaned back as she chewed, watching as Bette Porter confessed her feelings to Tina for about the fiftieth time.

Taylor couldn't pull her eyes away. Her heart ached as she watched. Every time she blinked, an image of Mac's face in the locker room flashed behind her lids.

Looking out the window, Taylor couldn't help but wonder what Mac was doing in this very same city.

11

Mac

The redeye flight had really taken it out of Mac. Despite losing in the quarterfinals, Mac decided to take some of her winnings and take her mom and Babs out around Paris for a few days.

They downgraded to a cheaper hotel and spent the last few days of the tournament shopping and sightseeing. Of course, Mac stole away to watch Taylor's match... for research. But now, as Mac stumbled toward her apartment as the sun rose over Astoria, all she wanted was to be in her bed and go train at the McEnroe Center.

That wouldn't be happening this morning. While waiting in the airport, Mac had received an email from Tommy. She had been invited for a racket fitting at the flagship store of a major sporting goods company. Their only available slot? 9 am the day her flight landed.

Checking her watch as she walked down 31st Avenue, Mac had just enough time to

go home, drop her things, and shower.

She barely made it up her steps, her backpack, racket bag, and suitcase all strapped to her body. But she put the key in the lock, trying to be quiet for her sleeping roommates. They usually got up to train early but Mac wasn't willing to risk getting a taste of their exhausted anger.

As soon as the door opened, a blow horn bellowed from inside.

Jazz rushed the door and wrapped Mac in a hug. In an announcer's voice, Jazz hollered, "Grand Slam quarterfinalist, Mackenzie Bennet!"

Beatriz jumped up and down on the couch. "That's our girl!"

Mac set her bags down, her shoulders dropping with relief. "You guys are sweet. But I didn't beat Taylor."

Waving off her confession, Jazz walked Mac to the couch where a stack of protein waffles waited for her. "True, but you made that old bitch Kim worry about you. Happy Pride Month, motherfucker."

The room erupted with laughter, cut short by a loud bang from the floor below.

"Shit, it's six am." Mac giggled. Cutting into the dish, Mac shoved an ungodly amount into her mouth. It wasn't a fresh Parisian pastry, but it was home and that meant a whole lot more.

Clapping her hands together, Mac wiped her mouth. "So, I got a call about a free racket fitting and I've gotta get ready to go. But..."

Before she could even get the sentence out, Beatriz pumped her fists. "Drinks on our

rich friend, Mac!”

Jazz joined in. “Rich bitch! Rich bitch!”

Mac rolled her eyes before grabbing her stuff and heading to her room. She tossed the backpack onto her bed, resting the racket bag against her cheap IKEA bed frame. After spending a couple weeks in France, the room felt shockingly bare. In the two years she’d lived in the apartment, Mac only hung up a full-length mirror and Renee Rapp poster.

Wiping the sleep from her eyes, Mac grabbed a clean towel from the closet. It wasn’t as fluffy as the ones room service would bring every morning, but they’d do. Besides, once she could do some laundry, she’d probably use the Roland Garros towels for everything.

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She headed to the bathroom, closing the door behind her. The baby blue tile wasn't what she had envisioned for her ideal bathroom but it was strangely calming. Turning the shower on, Mac slowly stripped off her clothes.

With each movement, she winced. She'd never played that hard in her life and her body was still in recovery mode. She lifted her arm over her head, taking a look at the yellowish bruise under her arm from a slide during the fourth round. It was nearly gone, but the flesh was still just as tender.

The room started to fill with steam, Mac's signal to hop in. Babs refused to let Mac shower in hot water after a training session, insisting that a cold plunge would really be ideal.

But with Wimbledon just about a month away, Mac could shower in whatever fucking temperature she wanted. She'd just made more money than she ever had in her life.

She stepped into the tub, greeted by the splatter of near boiling water. A moan escaped her lips as she felt the warmth on her skin. As she stood under the water, Mac let her head lower. Each trickle down her back made her spine tingle.

But as her eyes closed, she couldn't stop herself from seeing Taylor's crystal clear eyes. Even from across the court, they were stunning. It was almost enough to make Mac throw down her racket and just stare.

Mac washed her body, slowly as the exhaustion set in. So that's why Babs wants me to take a cold shower, hot showers put me to sleep.

Shaking her head, Mac finished off her shower, grabbed her towel, and dried off. She wrapped the towel around her waist as she combed her hair and put it up in a tight bun. The undercut was due for a fresh trim, getting longer than Mac preferred it.

She walked down the hallway to her room. Music played from the living room as Jazz and Beatriz started their morning workouts.

With her door closed, Mac scanned her closet for something nice enough for a fitting. The last thing she wanted to wear was workout clothes. All Mac had felt on her skin for the past two weeks was overly smooth nylon.

She settled on a worn out pair of jeans and a baggy t-shirt that she tucked into the front of the pants. At the very least, it was on trend. Mac checked her mirror, satisfied with her picks before heading to the living room.

Just as Mac was about to walk out the door, Babs texted her:

On my way. You better not be late.

Mac rolled her eyes. It was easy for her to say. Babs lived off Fifth Avenue in a skyscraper that was close to the flagship store of every single sporting goods company in the city. Nonetheless, Astoria was a quick 20 minute subway to Midtown.

A short commute later and Mac was strolling up to the storefront, digging her hands into her pocket. She threw open the door and was greeted by Babs, Tommy, and a fleet of company representatives.

“Miss. Bennett, congratulations on your placement. We’re so excited to get you started with a custom racket.” A woman in a jumpsuit stepped forward and held out her hand. “I’m Anne, the lead marketing rep for this humble company.”

Mac nodded and shook her hand. “Nice to meet you. And thanks for having me.”

As the crowd moved into the store, Babs yanked on Mac’s sleeve, pulling her in for a whisper. “Don’t freak out. Taylor’s here with Kim.”

Mac felt her eyes widen, looking down at the floor to avoid anyone noticing. “What do you mean?”

“We got double booked.” Babs grumbled.

Hearing whispers, Tommy dropped back to the two of them and placed her hand on Mac’s back. “Oh yeah, hope that’s okay. They could only close the store down for so many hours so they pushed us together.”

Mac nodded, trying to play it cool. And clearly failing.

“What’s going on here?” Tommy asked, sensing a vibe change. It wasn’t until Mac and Babs glared at her that it clicked. “Oh fuck. Seriously? When?”

“A million years ago. But it was bad.” Mac gritted her teeth.

With a sigh, Tommy stretched her neck. “We’ll talk. In the future, I need to know about these things. The only way I can help you is if I know what’s coming.”

Before they could discuss more, the team set them up at a bench at the center of the store. Anne gestured for Mac to sit. As she did and her eyes lifted, Mac was greeted by the icy eyes of Taylor Young.

Towering above her, with her arms crossed and jaw clenched, was Kimberly Young. Mac had met those vicious eyes before. But the last time, they were filled with shock and rage too.

Before the stare-off could last any longer, a sales representative appeared before Mac with a selection of rackets. The sales rep, Margaret, smiled at Mac. “Miss Bennett, we’ve spent quite a bit of time watching your games and analyzing how you play. From our research, these rackets are what suit your style best. But if none of them feel right, we have an even wider selection for you.”

Babs’s forehead wrinkled. “And what exactly is her play style, in your opinion?”

Margaret swallowed. “Well, Ms. McConnell, we see Mackenzie as a warrior. She isn’t there to be delicate or spare any feelings. But there’s also a love of the game itself as well.”

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“Tell me about the rackets, please,” Mac looked up at her and blushed. It was the description of her game she’d always hoped for. A combination of brute force and understanding was what Mac spent decades honing.

As Margaret launched into her speech about each racket, Mac tried to avoid looking over at Taylor. But her eyes felt drawn to her. With a racket in hand, Taylor stood from her bench and twirled it in her hand.

Even from across the room, Taylor’s eyes looked past the racket at Mac.

Averting her eyes, Mac looked back to Margaret. Once the coast was clear, Mac allowed her eyes to look at Taylor in her periphery again. She wore a delicate, white tank top that blew in the slightest breeze. It framed her toned biceps perfectly while giving her plenty of movement as she tested each racket.

Mac’s heart pounded as Taylor moved through her forearm grip before switching to her backhand.

“Ready to try it?” Margaret’s words ripped Mac from her haze, as the racket appeared before her.

Nodding, Mac tore her eyes from Taylor. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

Mac stood up, gripping the fresh piece of carbon in her hands. The overgrip was crisp, no sweat stains marking its neck. It was lighter than Mac’s current racket.

“So the Titanium is meant to absorb more of the shock, stopping your arm from

taking too much of the force.” Margaret said as she watched Mac twist the racket in her hands.

Mac shrugged. “It feels nice.” She lifted the piece up, positioning her hand in just the right spot. Turning toward Taylor and Kim, Mac got into her serving position. Without straining herself, Mac faked a swing.

Biting her lip, Babs shook her head. “It’s too light. Do you have something slightly heavier.”

“How did you know?” Mac rolled her eyes.

“That’s what you pay me for.” Babs gave Mac a pat on the back.

While Margaret returned to her cart of equipment, Mac sat back down. She looked at her shoes for a while before Kim’s voice made her look up. Across the store, Kim was bent over the back of Taylor’s bench, whispering in her ear. Mac could tell just from the purse of her lips how furious Kim was.

Taylor’s face stayed neutral. But when she felt Mac’s eyes on her, she lifted her gaze and met Mac’s.

Mac’s heart stopped as Taylor’s eyes softened. What the fuck is she thinking?

12

Taylor

“I just can’t believe they would treat us like that.” Kim shook her head as she tossed her menu down onto the table.

Taylor sighed. “To be fair, none of them know about...”

Scoffing, Kim crossed her arms. “It’s not about whoshe is to you. You’re a star and you deserve to be treated as such. Not just lumped in with some lucky quarterfinalist.”

The waiter came to the table and Taylor smiled up at him. “I think we’re ready to order.”

He took out his notebook as the duo recited their choices. While Kim gave hers, Taylor tapped her finger against the wrought iron table. A warm summer breeze blew toward the outdoor seating of the Fifth Avenue brunch spot.

Once the waiter disappeared, Kim stared off into the traffic. Her sunglasses hid her face as usual, making it hard for Taylor to figure out exactly what her mother was thinking.

“We’re going to have to train harder. Every outlet is talking about how she might come for your title at Wimbledon. We can’t let that happen.” Kim’s lip twitched as the words left her mouth.

Taylor cleared her throat. “I’ve been thinking about that, actually.”

With a chuckle, Kim leaned back. “Oh good, a bright idea from the star.”

It took everything in Taylor to suppress her eye roll. “I think I need to practice with more unknown players. Everyone in the tournaments is used to regulation rules and what the audience likes. But that isn’t conducive to winning against newbies.”

Kim shook her head. “No.”

Taylor's head dropped. "But it's also about public perception. Everyone thinks I'm too high and mighty. That's why they want Mackenzie to beat me. I'm the spoiled rich girl. In their eyes, I didn't earn it."

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Kim's face turned to a snarl. It was an allegation they had heard since Taylor was playing in the junior tournaments. There was no denying that she had talent but her ability to rise in the ranks certainly benefited from her parents's expertise.

"Just one day. We can go to McEnroe. It'll seem like I'm going back to my training roots and I can play with some kids for charity and then find a practice partner." Taylor's elbows leaned on the table, trying to intercept her mom's hidden gaze.

After a moment, Kim nodded. "One day. And I won't be there. What if Mackenzie is there?"

Taylor shrugged, swallowing a lie. "We weren't even that close. I'll just ignore her."

But the truth was, Taylor couldn't get Mac out of her mind. Decades of memories had flooded back to her over the last few weeks. And a part of her couldn't resist the pull that Mac still had on her. Maybe being around her more will help me get over it. It might stop it from feeling so forbidden.

"Fine." Kim relented just as the waiter set down a mimosa for Kim and a smoothie for Taylor.

A few days later, Taylor's private car was pulling up to the John McEnroe Center on Randall's Island. The parking lot was mostly empty, most of the players inside taking public transit to the strange island sandwiched between Manhattan and Queens.

Taylor stepped out of the car, her racket bag slung over her shoulder. Her stomach dropped as she looked up at the massive training facility. The last time she trained

here, she was in a junior league. It may have been the first time Taylor met Mac. Piper spent an entire summer driving Mac into the city to practice. If Taylor remembered correctly, it was at least a two hour drive.

Shaking herself out of it, Taylor slammed the car door and headed inside. Kim had arranged for a few paparazzi shots. So, as soon as the doors opened, a few cameras flashed as they took her picture.

“Taylor, how are you feeling after Roland Garros?” One photographer shouted.

“I’m great. Excited to be here to see what the next generation looks like.” Taylor waved to them and headed inside. She kept her sunglasses on to keep her anxiety as hidden as possible. The layout of the facility was still burned into her mind as she walked herself to the locker room. As a few young players passed, they asked for her autograph. Taylor nodded and signed each of them.

It was rare for Kim to let her do press in any real way. And she couldn’t lie, she already felt lighter without Kim towering over her the entire time.

Once she was inside the locker room, Taylor set down her things and looked around. They had renovated since she was last here. Wandering around the room, Taylor looked at the pictures of the wall of women’s tennis legends. Lenglen, Casals, Barbara McConnell, Serena. Taylor’s eyes landed on the picture of Kimberly Parker.

She cleared her throat and grabbed her racket before swinging open the locker room door and heading out.

Playing with the kids for about an hour, Taylor felt pretty warmed up and ready to find someone to practice with. She said her goodbyes, took a few pictures, and headed to the adult courts.

As soon as she entered, a silence fell over the women inside.

“You guys chosen partners yet?” Taylor called out as she walked inside.

A few women shook their heads as Taylor surveyed them. Her eyes landed on Mac. Before she could pick anyone else, Taylor watched as the women divided themselves.

Mac’s roommates, Jazz and Beatriz paired off, winking at Mac as they left. Standing on the center court, Mac and Taylor were the only two who remained.

Babs stood up from her spot in the stands. But before she could interject, Mac raised a hand. “We’re good.”

Taylor cleared her throat. “You sure you can handle getting your ass kicked again?”

Mac’s lips curled into a cheeky smile, the same one Taylor had fallen for all those years ago. “I don’t know that I’d call a tiebreak getting my ass kicked.”

“Should we find out?” Taylor smirked.

The women on the other courts made a collective, “Oooo,” as the shit-talking ramped up.

Mac and Taylor went to their opposite sides.

“Do you want to serve first or should I set the pace?” Mac called across the court.

Taylor shook her head as she laughed, her eyes wandering to Babs in the stand. She sat with her arms crossed, her elbows leaned on her knees and her body forward. It made Taylor wonder just how much she knew about them. How much do any of these women know? There had been rumors about her for years. But there were rumors

about most of these women.

“Your serve.” Taylor called out.

Mac grabbed a ball from the bucket past the baseline. Looking over her shoulder, Taylor noticed one behind her too. At her mom’s house, a ball boy was on duty every time she practiced.

Mac called out, “Ready?”

13

Mac

As soon as Taylor nodded, twirling her racket in her right hand, Mac leapt into the air and launched her first serve. It landed perfectly in the back corner of the service box, getting more force on it than she meant to.

Taylor scrambled to reach it in time. When her racket made contact, it slammed the ball directly into the net.

Mac laughed as she walked back to the baseline. “Does mommy take it easy on you?”

From the other court, Beatriz shook her head. “That’s not how we play out here.”

Licking her lips, Taylor scoffed. “I just thought you might need more time. You seem to need more than most.”

Mac shook her head, not waiting to launch her next serve. But this time, Taylor was ready. She met the ball with ease, sending it soaring back to Mac flawlessly. Their rallies went off without a hitch from there. Each of them scored some good points but no one was keeping score.

Well... Mac was in her head. And by the looks of it, so was Babs.

When they finally called the end of practice, Mac was in the lead by two points. Taylor had slowed down with each serve, the surface on these courts harsher on the

body than Taylor was used to.

Mac and Taylor came to the net, shaking hands.

Wiping sweat from her forehead, Mac lifted her chin. “Courts aren’t as cushy as your private play palace, huh?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Thanks for the practice.”

Mac nodded, her walls falling as Taylor’s exhausted eyes pierced hers. “You too.”

The locker room was lively after Taylor left, every player joking around.

“We all kept score. Mac beat her, no problem.” Jazz declared as she stepped onto one of the benches

Mac shook her head. “It was just practice.”

The crowd booed her before turning back to their business.

Beatriz slammed her locker closed as she changed into her regular clothes. “Are we going to Ginger’s for the pride event or what?”

Turning to look at her, Mac smiled. “Yeah, I’m down.” It would be enough time for Mac to go home and recover, do some research, and then head to Brooklyn.

A few hours later, Mac was jogging up the subway stairs in Park Slope. Dressed in a relaxed blue trouser and a black button down, Mac followed the street signs to Ginger’s.

From the outside, it was an unassuming bar. Like any other Irish pub, the place was

only notable because of the pride flagshanging in the windows. Mac handed her I.D. to the bouncer sitting outside.

Using a flashlight, the bouncer did a double take as she looked up from the card to Mac's face. "No way. Are you seriously Mackenzie Bennett?"

Mac's forehead wrinkled. "Yeah, why?"

"Everyone watched your match last week. We had no idea one of our regulars was such a huge star." The bouncer was giddy, reaching into her pocket for a scrap piece of paper. "Would you sign this for me?"

For a second, Mac forgot who she was. But she grabbed the pen and paper, quickly scrawling her name on the paper. "Thanks for watching."

The bouncer nodded and pulled the door open for Mac.

A flood of queer music poured out of the bar, leaking out onto the street. Mac felt an eager smile taking over her face. It felt good to be home.

Crowding the bar, a group of Mac's friends tried to flag down the bartender.

"Already causing problems?" Mac grabbed Jazz's shoulder as she joined the crowd. Before any of them could answer, Mac whistled.

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The bartender's head whipped around, and they made their way over. "What can I do for y'all?"

Mac looked around at the table. "Can we get a round of tequila shots?" She slid her card across the sticky wood. "And can you leave the tab open?"

Looking at the card, the bartender nodded. "Five shots, coming up." Once the tab was opened, the bartender came back to the group. They laid out five shot glasses and sloppily filled each of them before pulling the tray of salt and lime near the group.

Beatriz stood and raised her shot. "To Mac, our quarterfinalist and collective sugar daddy!"

The group howled with laughter as they each downed their shot. Mac licked the salt on her hand, tilted her head back, and took hers. The liquid burned her throat as it went down. Wincing, she grabbed a lime slice and slid it between her lips. With each suck, the burning sensation dissipated.

When she had sucked it dry, Mac shook her head. A warmth grew in her belly. She stacked the shot glasses and slid across the bar. The group stood from their station and headed to the back of the bar.

Warming up, Mac unbuttoned the top three buttons on her shirt. As they pushed through the crowd, Mac couldn't stop her eyes from wandering. Ginger's was filled with gorgeous sapphics. Maybe it was in her mind, but Mac felt like more eyes had fallen on her. It was probably just getting her confidence boosted.

But it felt incredible.

Back by the pool tables, Mac's group started dancing to the light pop playing in the background. A drag queen DJ stood behind the deck and spun new beats. Mac's body started rocking to the beat.

Babs would probably be pissed about the drinking... but at least it was good cardio.

As the song built up, Mac jumped along, waving her arms in the air. Other people joined them on the dance floor, much to the annoyance of the pool players. With each song, Mac's sweat started to drip down. Between songs, she rolled up her sleeves and let another button down on her shirt.

Not bothering with a bra, Mac's sternum was exposed.

As the music died down, giving the DJ a chance to take a break, Mac offered to grab drinks for the group.

She lowered her head as she made her way through the dense crowd. It had gotten more crowded since she'd arrived. As she approached the bar, Mac scanned the room.

What the fuck? Her forehead wrinkled as her eyes landed on a familiar figure. It can't be her... Maybe it was just some other blonde... with amazing legs and defined biceps. But the woman lifted her head, nonchalantly looking at the dance floor.

But when her ice blue eyes locked on Mac's, she froze.

Mac pushed her way through the crowd, trying to get closer to Taylor. It had to be her. No one else had eyes quite like that.

When Mac broke through the people in front of the bar, Taylor was downing the rest

of her vodka soda. Instead of saying anything, Mac leaned against the bar next to Taylor's stool. Her breath caught in her throat, unsure what she could even say. After a moment, Mac licked her lips and looked at the mirror behind the bar where she met Taylor's piercing eyes.

Staring through the mirror, Taylor sucked her teeth and sighed.

Mac laughed and turned toward her, no longer letting the mirror be her intermediary. "What? Are you stalking me or something?"

Taylor rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Mackenzie. After a decade, I still care so much that I'm willing to follow you around like a desperate puppy."

"It wouldn't be the first time." Mac's eyes flicked down from Taylor's eyes to her lips. She wore a bright red lipstick, daring Mac to look at her pillowy mouth... the same one she had kissed dozens of times. "Look, the fitting was one thing. But then you came to my gym. And now, you're sitting in my favorite queerbar."

Bringing her index finger to her mouth, Taylor shushed her. "Our secret?"

Mac shook her head. "You have to stop asking me to keep your secrets." Grabbing the bartender's attention, Mac looked around the bar. "How did you even get in here without being recognized?"

Taylor shrugged. "Eh, most people haven't seen me in makeup. Besides, these lovely people wouldn't dare out me."

"What about the bouncer?" Mac rubbed the back of her neck, massaging the sore muscles. When she met Taylor's eyes, her jaw dropped. "Taylor, do you use a fake ID?"

Sipping the dregs of her drink, Taylor giggled. “Maybe.”

Mac gawked at her. “That’s so high school. You have to let me see it.”

Taylor clenched her jaw. “Nope.”

When the bartender arrived before them, Mac turned to them. “Could I get five more shots, please?”

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“And I’ll take a vodka soda, on her tab.” Taylor winked at the bartender.

Before they could walk away, Mac raised her finger. “Actually, you might want to check her ID, I can’t imagine she’s older than 21.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. The bartender laughed. It was clear from the light wrinkles playing at Taylor’s temples that she was past being underaged. Even if she still looked exactly the way Mac remembered her.

Shrugging, the bartender played in. “Yeah, she’s right. Something doesn’t look right.”

Taylor grumbled under her breath, as she passed the card to the bartender. “You’re a dumbass.”

Maybe it was the lighting, but Mac could swear there was a blush on her cheeks.

“Looks legit.” They joked as they left to get the drinks, holding out the card to whoever could grab it faster. Mac snatched the card just fast enough.

She scanned the words quickly, turning it toward the brightest light in the room. Squinting, Mac raised her eyebrows. “Taylor... Bennett?”

Swallowing hard, Taylor tapped her fingers against the bar. “It’s a common last name.”

Mac sighed. “Right. No coincidence there.” Her heart was beating out of her chest.

There was no way that Taylor was pretending to have Mac's last name. They hadn't even spoken in ten years...

14

Taylor

Well, that's mortifying. Taylor looked up at the ceiling as she tried to avoid Mac's smirk.

"What were you doing at my gym?" Mac leaned on the bar and turned toward Taylor. She couldn't stop her eyes from wandering down Mac's neck. It was glistening with a light layer of sweat, leading down to her defined collar bone and bare chest.

Taylor's throat tightened at the sight. She couldn't count how many times her lips had kissed that sensitive spot, the way that Mac's skin rose under her touch.

Shaking her head, Taylor flicked her eyes back to Mac's dark gaze. "I needed a change of routine. And I can't afford to let you get that close again." She tried to harden her gaze, clenching her jaw.

The clinking of glasses next to them startled her. Pouring tequila in each glass, the bartender slid Taylor's drink over to her.

Taylor couldn't be more grateful to have a drink in her hand.

Mac laughed. "I'm sure Kim loved that."

Rolling her eyes, Taylor sipped from her glass. The bitter taste made her suck her teeth. "She wasn't crazy about it."

Mac leaned in, her shirt parting a little more as she lowered her voice. “Well, if she asks, tell her that your game is weak because your hitting partners are scared to actually play you. They’re going easy on you. You’ve forgotten what real force is. And I’m going to show it to you.”

Taylor felt her chest rising and falling as Mac’s scent wafted into her nose. The smell alone could have sent her back in time – their legs wrapped up in sheets, Mac’s skin on hers.

But Mac continued, “And tell her I said hi.”

Before Taylor could come up with a witty reply, Mac had carefully positioned each shot glass in her two hands. She carried them through the crowd with ease, the crowd moving for her without being asked.

As soon as she was gone, Taylor felt her stomach drop. Every time she came out, a part of her hoped that Mackenzie would be there –that there would be a reason for them to talk again. But it was never enough. None of it would be.

After a minute, Taylor polished off her drink and set it on the bar. She strutted across the bar and leaned against the threshold between the bar and the dance floor. At the center, Mac’s friends were partying like it was their last night on earth.

Taylor licked her lips as she watched Mac move. Her body was freer than it was when they’d last been close. There was a fluidity to her that she must have discovered in the last few years. But it didn’t carry into her game. Taylor crossed her arms, waiting for Mac to feel her eyes. It’s worth a shot.

It only took a few seconds for Mac to scan for her, their eyes meeting again.

With a slight tilt of her head, Taylor pointed toward the bathroom. Mac looked down

to the floor, trying to stay onbeat. Turning on her heel, Taylor headed toward the single stall bathroom. With each step, her stiletto stuck to the bar floor.

She closed the bathroom door behind her, leaving it unlocked as she waited.

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The song changed and Taylor sat inside the paper-mache bathroom. The walls were lined with old queer icons, news articles, and stickers.

This is stupid. She won't come. Taylor shook her head. It was a silly idea – that Mac could find a way to forgive her after what she'd done. Hell, if Mac couldn't forgive her, why would she meet Taylor for a secret bathroom rendezvous?

Just as the thought left her mind, the door swung open to a sweaty Mackenzie Bennett. Before anyone could peak inside, Mac slammed the door behind her and slid the lock into place.

For a tense second, the two stared at each other. Their chests rose and fell in sync. Until, Mac crossed the gap between them. She placed her hand behind Taylor's head, pulling her in. Their lips met with force, almost clacking their teeth together.

But the light pang of pain made Taylor whimper, "Fuck."

Mac pushed her against the wall. "For the record, I don't forgive you." She managed the words between kisses, slipping her tongue between Taylor's lips each time they met.

Taylor nodded, breathless. "That's fine. Not what I was looking for."

Mac's hand moved up her tight skirt, pulling the fabric of Taylor's blouse from inside and letting her hands move to Taylor's skin. Her calloused hands gripped Taylor's waist, pulling her closer. Mac's voice turned to a low growl. "Fuck, you feel good."

“Good,” Taylor pulled Mac’s head toward her neck as she whispered into her ear. Her fingers rubbed the freshly shaved undercut. As she shifted, Taylor could feel how wet her center had become, basically dripping.

Mac’s mouth moved off of Taylor’s lips, sloppily kissing down her chin to her jaw and neck. Taylor let her hands run through Mac’s hair, giving it a light tug as Mac sunk her teeth into Taylor’s flesh.

Taylor bit her lip as a moan escaped her lips. “You know what’s wrong with your game?”

Stopping, Mac pulled away and glared at her. “No, and I don’t want to.” Mac planted a kiss on Taylor’s lips, shutting her up.

The force of Mac’s lips against hers made Taylor whimper. Her movements were far more experienced than they had been a decade ago. Taylor clenched her jaw as she tried not to get jealous of all the women Mac must have had over the years.

Taylor’s hand moved down from Mac’s broad shoulders to her exposed chest. Pulling away from Mac’s lips, Taylor brought her mouth to the bare skin. She kissed along the space between Mac’s breasts, her clit throbbing with every tender movement.

“Oh god,” Mac groaned as she let her hand slam into the bathroom wall. Her eyes rolled back as she let Taylor’s red lipstick stain her skin.

Just as Taylor was sinking lower, nearly on her knees, Mac lifted her chin and met her gaze. She brought her fingers to Taylor’s lip.

Looking up at Mac, Taylor raised her eyebrow. It was clear what Mac wanted and Taylor was thrilled to oblige. She opened her mouth and let Mac’s finger slip inside, gently sucked on it. Mac’s head fell back as she felt Taylor’s soft lips, pulling her

finger deeper into Tay's mouth.

"Taylor..." Mac begged.

But a bang came from the door, prompting Taylor to remove Mac's soaked finger from her mouth. Whoever was outside called out, "Hurry up in there!"

Mac cleared her throat, "Just a second."

Wiping the corners of her mouth, Taylor fixed her face and hair in the small bathroom mirror. The dim lighting made it hard to clean herself up appropriately.

Taylor turned to look at Mac, her breathing still elevated. "I should..."

"You should go first... easier to not draw attention." Mac nodded.

Guilt washed over Taylor as she agreed. It wasn't a position she wanted to put Mac in again, to hide and sneak around. But she couldn't stop herself from feeling drawn to her. She might spend the rest of her life wondering what would have happened.

After a second, Taylor tucked her blouse back into her short skirt and grabbed the door handle. "My number's still the same, if you want to talk."

Mac nodded, looking from her Chelsea boots up to Taylor's crystal eyes. "Happy Pride, Taylor."

Shaking her head, Taylor winked and opened the door. She ducked her head to avoid the prying glances of the other patrons. The last thing she needed was anyone seeing her leave a bathroom with Mackenzie Bennett.

As she reached the bar's exit, Taylor turned around and saw Mac leaving the

bathroom. Even from this far away, Taylor's body responded to Mac. She was even more stunning than she had been when they were younger, stepping into her confidence in an unbelievably sexy way.

She waved goodbye to the bouncer and stepped into the hot Brooklyn night. A warm breeze hit her face, calming the pink flush that had taken over her face. Her phone buzzed from her pocket. It was a text from a contact labeled: MB

I still have yours, do you still have mine?

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Taylor's chest tightened at the text. Typing out a message to send back, Taylor bit the inside of her cheek. She settled on:

Never got rid of it. See you around, Macky.

Taylor strutted down the block, waiting a block or two before calling her car. As she stood outside a straight bar – waiting for her driver to arrive – Taylor felt the vodka wearing off. Had she really made out with Mackenzie in the bathroom of a gay bar? The question alone would have given Kim a heart attack. But everything about it felt so right.

And if Mac was still willing to text her, maybe she wasn't still furious at Taylor for how it all ended.

"What do you think?" Connor Garcia asked as he cut up his steak.

Taylor's eyes widened as she came out of her haze. She scrambled to figure out what he was talking about but eventually had no choice but to laugh. "I'm sorry, I completely spaced out."

Waving his hand, Connor giggled. "That's okay. Are you okay?"

Taylor tapped her hand against the table for a second. They were seated in the back room of a gorgeous sushi restaurant in Midtown. Kim had made a point to have paparazzi waiting for them outside. And after spending about thirty minutes with Connor, Taylor was pretty sure they were in the same situation.

“Honestly, no.” Taylor set down her chopsticks. “I’m going to be so honest with you, Because I think our managers set us up for a reason. And if they didn’t, we both signed NDAs. I can’t stop thinking about this woman...”

Connor wiped the corners of his mouth and let his shoulders drop. “Oh my god, thank god. I was so worried you were actually trying to date me. And don’t get me wrong, you’re gorgeous. But... not my type.”

“No offense taken.” Taylor laughed as she shoved a piece of sushi in her mouth.

“So, who is she?” Connor’s voice had shifted from the deeper tone Taylor had heard him use in interviews to a more natural, higher pitched one.

Taylor rubbed her forehead. “Okay, that I really can’t disclose. But we used to be really... close. And then my mom found out and she kept us apart.”

Connor raised his hands, doing air quotes. “‘For your own good’?”

Sighing, Taylor nodded. “Yep. But we reconnected.”

“Oh, did you?” Connor raised an eyebrow.

Taylor shrugged, laughing. “Not as much as I wanted to. But I can’t stop thinking about her. Do you have anyone like that?”

Checking the door of the private room, Connor nodded. “I do. My assistant coach.”

A smile crept onto Taylor’s face. “See that makes sense. He is cute.”

Connor raised an eyebrow. “Do you swing both ways?”

Taylor nodded and shrugged. “I love a beautiful person.”

“One in particular.” Connor teased as he reached across the table and stole a piece of sushi. “My manager insisted I order steak to seem more ‘manly’.”

Pushing her plate toward him, Taylor grabbed his steak. “Mine told me to get sushi because it was ‘cleaner’ and showed off my ‘feminine hands’.”

Before he could stop himself, Connor cackled. “Stop that. No tennis player has feminine hands. Those rackets are not gentle on us.”

Taylor pointed her fork at him. “Exactly. Okay, but in all seriousness, how are you hiding it?” All through her career, Taylor was shocked by how many players managed to maintain their own privacy. Even Barbara McConnell had kept her sexuality a secret for a large majority of her career.

“We’re quiet, and we don’t fool around at tournaments. Too many people there want to tear down the competition. But when we’re home, we share a two bedroom and claim we’re roommates. Most people will do anything to believe that queer celebrities are straight.” Connor shrugged.

But Taylor bit her lip. Kim made sure that Taylor was never alone. There was always a camera, always an engagement. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to Mac to force her to stay hidden again.

Connor sighed. “And I know what you’re thinking, it isn’t fair. But honestly, everyone assumes the women’s players are all lesbians anyway... if that makes you feel any better.”

Taylor leaned back in her chair. It would have been a comfort if her mom wasn’t so afraid of what that truth actually looked like.

“Do you want my opinion?” Connor put his elbows on the table and lowered his voice. When Taylor nodded, he continued, “Tennis will take up about 25% of your life. And the rest... is whatever you built with that quarter. And there’s no point living for the rest if you let the game dictate who you are.”

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Taylor felt her eyes welling with tears. She looked up at the ceiling. “Easier said than done.”

Sipping his wine, Connor smiled. “It always is. But if you really want this girl, you should show her. Let her decide if the secret is worth it.”

There was no arguing with that. As the waiters came and collected their plates, Taylor typed out a message. She hit send before she could stop herself.

I want to see you again. I don’t think we can avoid talking. Come to my place next week, I’ll cook.

The whoosh made her heart drop. Taylor hadn’t gone out on a limb like this since... well the last time she made the first move on Mackenzie. But Connor was right. She’d never know if it was worth it if she couldn’t have it.

They stood from the table and headed outside, where they were greeted by dozens of camera flashes. Connor stood up taller, sucking his cheeks in enough to make his face look slightly more toned. Reaching behind him, he grabbed Taylor’s hand. A light wink made Taylor smile. The cameras loved it, even though they didn’t understand it.

A part of Taylor liked having a secret.

As she ducked into the black SUV, her phone buzzed from her pocket. It was a text from Mac:

Game on. Send instructions.

Mac

This is fucking crazy. Mac tapped her foot in the backseat.

It had been a week since she got Taylor's cryptic text. And from her best internet sleuthing, it was sent while Taylor was on a staged PR date with male tennis star, Connor Garcia. Rumors had circulated about his identity for a long time, but he'd done a good job hiding it. Every news outlet painted him as quite the player, bouncing from woman to woman at will.

Mac watched as the car emerged from the tunnel to the dazzling lights of Manhattan. The seats were perfect, still smelling like a new car. Taylor insisted she send her driver, not wanting a random rideshare to know the private entrance of her very bougie building.

The car slowed as it approached a nondescript driveway. It led down to a private garage where dozens of other black SUVs were parked. The bright headlights of the car lit the entire place up, highlighting a woman with curly hair standing by glass doors.

She waved to the car, which pulled to a halt next to her. Grabbing the door handle, she opened the door for Mac. "Ms. Bennett, welcome to One11 Residences. I'm Camilia. Ms. Young sent me to receive you."

Mac stepped out of the car, eyeing the empty parking lot. It felt like a seedy drug deal, but she was the cargo. Stretching out her hand, Mac shook Cam's hand. "Nice to meet you."

Cam closed the car door and the SUV pulled away. Gesturing toward the door, Cam

opened the entrance for Mac who walked through.

Mac gawked at the decor. “Jesus christ, even the parking garage is lux.”

With a laugh, Cam’s true New Yorker accent slipped. “No fucking kidding.” She winked at Mac as she clicked the up button on the elevator. When the doors slid open, Cam walked inside as Mac followed. Once they were inside, Cam put a key into a lock. As soon as she did, the Elevator blinked with an S.

Following Mac’s confused gaze, Cam nodded. “Ms. Young doesn’t want to risk any other residents getting into the elevator with us.”

Mac nodded, crossing her arms. “Got it.” The knot in Mac’s stomach was doubling in size by the second. A part of her was thrilled by the secrecy, enjoying the luxurious treatment. But another part of her feared this would all end exactly the way it started.

The doors sliding closed pulled Mac out of her thoughts as Cam selected the 42nd floor, labeled: PHC.

“Jesus. So that’s what ranking first buys...” Mac watched the numbers climb faster than she ever expected an elevator to move.

Cam shrugged. “And a little help from the folks.”

Mac laughed. “I like you. You’re honest.”

“Not to them.” Cam winked.

With each floor, Mac’s breathing escalated. She had no idea what to expect. Even picking an outfit had been a struggle. She had settled on black trousers and a blue, knit button down. It was one of the nicer things in her closet but still cool enough for

a mid-June day.

Wimbledon was just two weeks away. What could Taylor possibly want to discuss with the third Grand Slam of the season around the corner?

But the elevator dinged. Cam nodded as the door swung open, putting her arm in the way of the doors. Mac swallowed her anxiety and stepped forward, into a hallway with a single doorway.

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“Good luck.” Cam winked as she sent the elevator back to the lobby.

Alone in the hallway, Mac took a deep breath as she lifted her hand to the door. She gently rapped against the door.

From inside, soft footsteps crossed the floor toward the door.

Taylor swung the door open, a sexy smile playing at her lips. “Hey, Bennett.”

Mac couldn’t stop herself from smiling when Taylor’s voice hit her ears. “Hi, Young.”

Turning back into the apartment, Taylor flung the door open for Mac to enter. Only when Taylor was walking away did Mac let her eyes scan Taylor’s outfit. She wore a slinky red, silk dress. It fell off of her hips like water off oil. Her heels clicked against the polished wood floors as she walked down the hallway. With each step, the red bottoms peeked out from the black pumps.

Mac felt wrong walking on such gorgeous floors with her city-worn dress shoes. But she wasn’t about to let Taylor have such a major height advantage.

As Taylor entered the living room, she glanced over her shoulder at Mac. Her blonde hair fell off her shoulders and down the exposed skin of her back. Mac’s throat tightened at the sight, wanting to place her lips on the tender skin.

Trying to shake herself out of it, Mac looked at the art on the walls. The hallway alone was lined with dozens of pieces.

Mac laughed. “I’m no expert, but I’m pretty sure these weren’t the pieces hung up here when Architectural Digest came by.”

Taylor chuckled as she disappeared behind a wall. “No, Kim made me put the gay sex art away for that. But I collect it.”

“Art’s a good investment.” Mac bit her lip as she looked at a Hannah Hoch piece. Three pairs of eyes collaged against the body parts of women in magazines. Although she hadn’t spent a lot of time looking at traditional art, Mac couldn’t stop herself from looking.

After a minute, Taylor reappeared from around the corner with an old fashioned hand. She held it out toward Mac, inviting her to take the benediction.

Mac laughed and sauntered down the hallway. Her dress shoes clicked against the floor as she met Taylor in the living room. But before she could grab the drink, Mac’s jaw dropped. “Holy shit, Taylor.”

She walked past the stunning blonde, looking out the massive windows instead. Outside, a private terrace opened to an endless view of Central Park and upper Manhattan.

Taylor shrugged. “I thought you saw the magazine.”

Mac shook her head. “Yeah but this is... a picture couldn’t capture this”. She couldn’t count the time she’d looked up at buildings just like this and wondered what the view from inside looked like.

Sidling up, Taylor put the cold drink in Mac’s hand. “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Make yourself at home.”

Mac nodded. The sound of Taylor's heels drew her eyes from one view to another. Taylor's ass looked incredible. Her five inch heels drew Mac's eye from her muscular calves to her toned thighs and plump ass. Mac licked her lips, her body following Taylor without being told to.

The apartment was stunning, as if no one lived there. Mac stopped in front of the wall of trophies in the dining room.

Taylor chuckled. "You'll have a wall like that soon."

Mac shook her head. "Is that so? I thought you had notes on my game."

"Well, I do." Taylor went back to the kitchen. "And if you listen, like a good girl, you'll be a champion."

Scoffing, Mac walked into the kitchen. "Seems like someone's been plenty good." The kitchen cabinets were a warm, yellowish wood. The gold handles – which might have looked tacky anywhere else – felt seamless in this space. Four pans steamed on the stove. A sweet smell filled Mac's nose.

"Jesus, I didn't know you could cook." Mac waltzed over to the food and peeked into the pots. "At camp, you barely knew how to make a PB&J."

Taylor, with a wood spatula in hand, rolled her eyes. "It's an off-season hobby."

Mac leaned on the marble island and rested her chin in her hands. "Does going to Michelin star restaurants get boring?"

Grabbing a piece of bread from beside the stove, Taylor chucked a piece at Mac. "Maybe it does, asshole." Taylor brought her attention back to the pots, simmering and splattering behind her.

“You know, I really thought you’d hire a cook and claim it was you.” Mac sat in a bar stool and crossed her arms. She knew it was one of her best poses, the muscles in her forearm flexing and creating a picturesque line for Taylor to ogle.

Taylor shook her head. “You just missed them. I’m surprised you didn’t catch the fifty person team in the elevator.”

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Mac watched Taylor delicately stir the food. “So, do you cook for every girl that sneaks in through your parking garage?”

“Do you ever stop playing around?” Taylor whipped around and eyed Mac.

Feeling a sudden tension in the room, Mac’s forehead wrinkled. “I think that would depend on what kind of dinner this is. Is it a “sorry for kissing you in a gay bar bathroom, here’s an NDA,” or an “I’m sorry I let my mom shove me back in the closet and you out of my life?”

Taylor licked her teeth. “You might have to stick around to find out.” Mac swallowed her nerves, completely unsure what the rest of the night would entail. But from what she could see, they had both dressed up – way too much for a casual dinner between old friends.

After a minute, Taylor turned off each burner on the six-burner range. “Alright, go sit at the table.”

Mac stood from her chair and saluted. “Yes, ma’am.” Walking back into the living space, Mac sat at a Mid-century walnut dining table where two place settings were positioned next to each other.

Leaving the head of the table for Taylor, Mac rubbed her hands together as plates clattered in the kitchen. Taylor appeared at the threshold, two plates in hand. She paused, long enough for Mac to take a mental picture of her like that. Her hair draped perfectly down her shoulders, the stunning red dress.

It was a picture of the future Mac had always dreamed for them.

She cleared her throat as Taylor broke the trance and set the plates down. Before she took her own seat, Taylor walked to a record player in the living room. She had already selected a record, placing it on the table and letting it crackle.

The sound came from every corner of the apartment, startling Mac.

“Built-in speakers, grandpa.” Taylor explained with a giggle. She sat back down on the table and straightened her chair.

Mac’s eyes were glued to the food. It looks unreasonably good. A beautiful steak, cooked rare, alongside crisp asparagus and sweet potatoes.

Taylor gulped, a sudden nervousness taking over her. “I hope it’s okay. I figured we were both on training diets.”

“Yeah, Babs would approve.” Mac smiled.

Before they dug in, Taylor grabbed her glass of wine and raised it toward Mac. “To old friends.”

Mac scoffed as she clinked her glass with Taylor’s, swallowing a massive sip. “Just friends, huh?”

“I didn’t say that.” Taylor’s jaw clenched. For a minute, Mac had almost forgotten why she was here. The bathroom. A part of her wanted to keep pretending that it hadn’t happened. That they could be just friends. But Mac knew that was impossible.

Letting out a sigh, Taylor set down her glass. “I do owe you an apology.”

Mac raised her hand, waving her off. “Come on, I don’t think we need to do that right now.” Of course, she had waited years to hear it – to hear Taylor apologize for ripping her heart out. But once the can of worms was open, Mac feared she’d never see Taylor again.

“Please, Mackenzie.” Taylor lowered her eyes.

“No,” Mac shook her head. “Seriously, I’d rather just enjoy this food and catch up.”

Confusion washed over Taylor’s face, but she relented. They both dug into their food.

Mac started to smile. “So, you and Connor gonna to go steady?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “You’re such a bitch. No, Kim set it up.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Mac asked. She took a bite of her steak, the tender meat melting in her mouth as she chewed. It was delicious, still warm from the stove. She lifted her eyes to meet Taylor’s.

Sipping her wine, Taylor shrugged. “He’s a nice guy and we both need cover so I don’t mind on that front. I just wish she would stop meddling. I understood it more when I was a teenager but now...”

Mac raised her eyebrows. She understood it?

Taylor waved her hands, trying to walk it back. “Not understand. But I saw where she was coming from. That old school mindset, trying to protect my fledgling career.”

“Right.” Mac nodded, pushing her vegetables around the plate. They soaked up little bits of juice.

“How’s Babs?” Taylor tried to change the subject. Even that felt like a sore topic.

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Mac laughed. “Still jealous she chose me?”

Before Taylor could reply, the song player changed over. The droning strings of a Frank Sinatra song came on. Mac dropped her fork and eyed Taylor. “Seriously?”

Taylor shrugged. “I couldn’t stop myself.” Her bare chest rose and fell quickly, wondering if Mac would take the bait. Looking at her, Mac only managed to resist the urge for a few moments. She pushed out her chair, standing and closing the distance between her and Taylor in a stride.

She held out her hand and looked down at Taylor. “Want to dance?”

Taylor nodded, grabbing Mac’s hand and standing with her. It still surprised Mac just how soft Taylor’s hands were. Considering how much she trained, her hands should have been rough. But they were tender, her long, elegant fingers, wrapping around Mac’s hand as she led her to the center of the living room.

Frank Sinatra’s voice came in just as they stepped into the open space. Mac cupped Taylor’s hand, placing her other hand on the woman’s waist. Taylor rested hers on Mac’s shoulder, their bodies beginning to sway as the song picked up.

Staring out of the window, Mac couldn’t stop herself from picturing what every day might look like – the same vision she had when she was eighteen. But now, there was a world in which it could happen.

As the song slowed, Taylor looked up at Mac. “Mackenzie, I just...”

“I know...” Mac lowered her head, resting it on Taylor’s blonde hair.

Taylor nodded. “I have to say it. I’m not coming out. Maybe ever. And if we’re... seeing each other, it can’t be serious. Because I can’t break your heart like that again.”

The familiar lump came back to Mac’s throat. She pulled her head back and met Taylor’s blue eyes. Maybe it was a terrible decision but at this moment, she didn’t really care. She would do whatever she had to to swim in those eyes.

“That’s fine.” Mac nodded, a cheeky smile taking over her face.

The song ended, the record bumping along the needle as it ended.

As they looked into each other’s eyes, the silence made Mac’s breathing escalate. After a second, she laughed. “Goddamnit.” She leaned down and kissed Taylor, whose lips were stiff as she tried to figure out whether Mac was serious or not.

Taylor softened with each kiss from Mac, letting herself unravel in Mac’s strong arms. She pulled away as Mac picked up where she left off, kissing down her neck. “Just sex, and we have to be careful.”

Mac nodded with Taylor’s skin in her mouth. “Uh-huh, Kim can’t know. Copy.”

A moan slipped out of Taylor’s throat as she laughed. She lifted Mac’s chin and pressed her lips into Mac’s. Letting her tongue slip inside her mouth, Taylor explored Mac.

Eventually, Taylor pulled away and laced her fingers with Mac’s. She guided them down the hall to the primary bedroom. Mac gawked at the second stunning view of the park, walking past Taylor and staring out the window.

In the reflection of the glass, Mac watched Taylor slip off the silk dress. The fabric fell to the floor, pooling at her pumps. Mac's body tingled at the sight of Taylor in a lace set. She whipped around and felt her heart race. "Jesus."

Taylor laughed as she crossed the bedroom, her hands like magnets to the buttons on Mac's shirt. Mac let her eyes look down at Taylor's stunning figure. In the deep purple lace, Taylor's breasts were perfectly rounded. Mac hadn't even been able to sneak a peek during tournaments, their sports bras too conservative to see a thing.

Mac wrapped her arms around Taylor's back, tracing the divet in its center down to her ass. Her hands gripped the soft cheeks, giving them a light squeeze.

"Someone's getting carried away." Taylor giggled as she slipped the shirt off Mac's shoulders.

Mac licked her lips, letting them meet the skin of Taylor's shoulder. "You're the one who stayed away from me."

Shaking her head, Taylor's hands rubbed Mac's sides slowly. She was insanely toned, the muscles were bulging from the side of her abs. Taylor pulled away and shrugged. "I mean you could put in more work."

Mac gritted her teeth and growled. "You're such a bitch." Without another word, she swept Taylor up into her arms. Like it was rehearsed, Taylor wrapped her legs around Mac's torso.

Their lips didn't miss a beat, kissing as Mac threw Taylor down on the bed.

"Fuck," Taylor gasped as she bounced on the plush mattress.

"Too rough for the princess?" Mac teased as she towered over her. "We'll have to

toughen you up, brat.”

Taylor tried to sit up, getting in Mac’s face. “You think you can handle me.”

Mac’s eyes flicked from Taylor’s eyes to her lips, feeling her center pulsing with desire. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m the only one who can handle you.” She pushed Taylor down into the mattress and leaned into her ear, letting her leg push into the space between Taylor’s legs. “Now, be a good girl.”

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With a whimper, Taylor nodded. She rocked her hips against Mac's leg, the lace of her panties adding to the friction. Even from here, Mac could smell how delicious Taylor was. After rubbing against her for a moment, Mac pulled away and stood. Towering over Taylor, Mac undid her belt.

Taylor's eyes were begging for Mac, desperate to touch her. She got onto her knees on the edge of the bed, and finished undoing Mac's belt. Planting warm kisses on Mac's abs, Taylor looked up into her dark eyes.

Mac moaned at the touch, forgetting how good Tay felt near her center. Taylor pulled the belt from the trousers loops and threw it on the floor, a loud clunk filling the room as it smacked against the wood floors. Licking Mac's stomach, Taylor undid the button on Mac's trousers, slipping them off her hips and down to the ground.

A pair of satin boxers draped around Mac's center. Taylor slipped her finger underneath the elastic, eliciting a moan from Mac whose head rolled back at the touch.

Taylor tugged at the fabric, sending them to the floor as she lowered her head to Mac's center. As her mouth hovered over Mac's clit, Mac's mind flashed with the image of Taylor sucking her finger in the Ginger's bathroom. A pulse of pleasure shot through her body. She wasn't even sure exactly how long she'd been craving this... but it felt like every second had been worth it.

"Do you think you've earned it?" Taylor teased as her hot breath blew on Mac's throbbing pearl.

Mac nodded. “Is ten years not long enough?”

Taylor laughed, letting her tongue sink into Mac’s lips. With each bob of her head, she spread Mac’s folds and peeled back her hood.

Slipping her fingers into Taylor’s hair, Mac moaned with each lick. She could feel her pleasure being lapped up by Taylor’s tongue. Mac tried not to think about how much more experienced she was – all the years of illicit affairs that Mac had missed out on.

Taylor’s hand gripped Mac’s bare ass, pulling her in as she licked her.

It was all it took for Mac’s mind to clear. Her body quaked under Taylor’s touch. Her tongue slipped deeper into Mac’s folds, slowly pushing toward her entrance.

Feeling Tay’s tongue at her center, Mac whimpered. “Oh god, Taylor. Please.”

Taylor looked up at Mac as she pulled away. “Look who’s desperate now?”

Mac gripped the blonde hair a little tighter, giving it a light yank. “Is that how you want it, brat?”

Biting her lip, Taylor shrugged. Mac’s grip on her hair loosened. Taylor got back on her knees and waited for Mac to make her move.

Watching Taylor, Mac felt like she was drooling. “Take off your bra.” Mac grumbled.

“No.” Taylor chuckled. “I want you to do it.”

Mac shook her head. “Is that right? Who said you could make demands?” She leaned

in, biting Taylor's shoulder as she unlatched the hooks on the back of the purple lace bra. Taylor let out a moan as the fabric fell off her shoulders.

She brought her lips to Mac's ear, whispering. "But look who did as I said."

Shaking her head, Mac pushed Taylor down onto the bed. "You're used to everyone doing exactly as you demand, aren't you?"

Taylor shrugged. "Maybe I am. What are you going to do about it?"

Mac laughed and bit her lip. She could feel her center dripping with excitement. She had dreamed about all the ways she would make Taylor beg for her. Now, she could finally make those fantasies a reality.

Holding her body above Taylor's, Mac used one arm to hold herself up while the other traced its way down Taylor's body. Mac watched as the sensitive skin rose under her touch. Hovering just above Taylor's panties, Mac watched her moan. She used her fingers to push the lace to one side, exposing Taylor's folds.

Mac let her fingers lightly trace the shape of the lips, her eyes never leaving Taylor's ecstatic face.

Just as Mac's fingers lingered near Taylor's clit, almost giving her the pleasure she so desperately wanted, Mac would pull away. After a few teases, Taylor's hand shot down to grip Mac's wrist. "Are you ever going to fuck me?"

Mac raised an eyebrow. "Once I start, I won't stop until I'm satisfied. Are you sure you can handle that?"

Licking her lips, Taylor nodded. The antagonism made Mac's clit throb, wanting nothing more than to put her bratty bottom in her place. But the wait was half the fun.

Once Taylor was soaking wet, Mac finally let her fingers rub against her hard clit.

“Fuck.” Taylor screamed out as the pleasure ran up her body from her center. Looking up at her, Mac watched her eyes squeeze shut as the ecstasy set in.

Mac pressed her fingers into Taylor’s folds, her fingers pushing back Taylor’s folds.

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“Mackenzie, I need you inside me.” Taylor begged, rocking her hips as she tried to get closer to Mac’s strong fingers.

Feigning indecision, Mac shrugged. “Hm. I don’t know. How can I know you really want it?”

Taylor’s eyes shot open as she propped herself up on her elbows. “Ms. Bennett, I really need you. No one else can touch me like you.”

Mac smirked at the familiar nickname. Taylor had always liked making Mac into an authority figure and Mac loved it just as much. Convinced, Mac nodded. “Good girls come when I tell them to.”

Nodding, Taylor moaned as Mac’s fingers slipped inside her. Even two fingers felt like nothing. Mac’s eyes rolled back as she felt just how wet Taylor was for her. She must have been thinking about Mac just as much.

Mac groaned as her fingers pushed deeper. With each thrust, Taylor let out a cry of pleasure. Even with all of Mac’s attention, she was desperate for more.

Mac kept her pace as Taylor’s body pressed against her fingers. When she felt like it had been long enough, Mac leaned into Taylor’s ear. “Do you think you’ve earned an orgasm?”

Taylor bit her lip as she forced her eyes open. “Yes.” Her eyes pleaded with Mac to let her finish.

Laughing, Mac nodded. Without another word, she pushed her fingers deeper inside Taylor's center. She let the tips of her fingers caress Taylor's g-spot, sending waves of pleasure up her body.

"Oh fuck," Taylor screamed. She tried to keep rhythm with Mac's hands, but as she lost control it became harder and harder. Instead, Mac came to her. Keeping pressure on the perfect spot, Mac groaned. Her forearm strained to stay inside Taylor. But after nearly a decade, all Mac really wanted was to watch Taylor scream in ecstasy under her touch.

Taylor's body shuddered as her moans turned to gasps and deep grunts. It wasn't far off from the noise she made on the courts. Mac's eyes rolled into the back of her head as she brought Taylor closer to climax.

When she reached her peak, Taylor flung her hand into Mac's hair and pulled on it.

"Oh god," Mac winced as the pain and the pleasure mixed.

Taylor giggled just as she was overcome with pleasure, her body giving a few final shakes before releasing.

Her arched back lowered to the bed as Mac pulled her fingers out.

Laying in bed next to Taylor, Mac looked up at the ceiling. Somehow, even the paint looked luxurious. Mac turned her head to meet Taylor's panting face, letting one of her hands rest on Taylor's stomach.

They laid there together for a while, catching their breaths and letting light kisses pass between them.

Taylor struggled to keep her eyes open.

Letting out a sigh, Mac bit the inside of her cheek and sat up. “I should go.”

Taylor wrapped her arm around Mac. “What? No, it’s late. Stay.”

Mac rubbed the soft skin of Taylor’s arms. “This is casual, I should go home.” Swallowing her nerves, Mac looked behind her. Something in Taylor’s gaze hardened.

But as she clenched her jaw, she nodded. “Okay. When can I see you again?”

They set up a time, knowing that Wimbledon was just around the corner. Mac got dressed and looked down at Taylor’s stunning, naked body. “God. You looked incredible.”

“So do you,” Taylor licked her lips and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Mac leaned down to the bed, planting one more kiss on Taylor’s soft lips before forcing herself to walk away. It was one thing to let herself touch Taylor again. But if she really had no intention of coming out, this was only going to be temporary. And Mac had to do everything she could to remind herself of that.

16

Taylor

“Again!” Kim’s shrill voice ripped Taylor out of her daydream.

Taylor’s practice partner soared another ball to her side of the court. Even on a slow day like this, Taylor didn’t struggle to reach the ball. Mac was right: her team was afraid of actually testing her.

With a groan, Taylor shot the ball back. It landed just inside the baseline. In a match, she may have had to challenge a judge's call on that kind of hit.

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Kim shook her head and walked onto the court. “What is wrong with you?”

Taylor shrugged, letting her racket dangle toward the grass court. “What?” Of course, Taylor knew exactly what was wrong. She was seeing Mac, way more often than she probably should have been. Even just standing there, she could feel how weak her knees were from touching each other all night.

Mac might not have wanted to sleep at her place, but they hadn’t been doing any sleeping.

Kim eyed her daughter, lowering her voice. “I don’t care what you do in private. But I have told you that seeing people before a tournament is reckless.”

Gritting her teeth, Taylor shrugged. “I’m just tired.”

“Then don’t be.” Kim snapped, spinning on her heel and heading back to her position on the sidelines. Before Taylor could process anything, another ball was being served toward her.

She hated grass courts the most. There were shorter volleys, more serving, and more playing at the net. It was hard to keep her muscles warm between plays when the play would bounce so low on serves.

Without missing a beat, Taylor ran to the ball and hit it back. This time, Tyla returned the ball and they were able to play a short rally before Taylor missed a shot.

After a few hours of this, Kim dismissed Tyla and motioned for Taylor to come

closer.

Taylor lowered her head, wiping the sweat from her face with a towel. “I just need a break. Give me an hour to eat and I’ll be ready.”

Kim shook her head, looking her daughter up and down. “If you stayed here like you normally would, you wouldn’t be so exhausted. I don’t understand why you even own that silly place.”

“Because, Mom,” Taylor eyed her, “We both know that I need my space sometimes.”

Kim sucked in her cheeks. “Not when your championships are at risk.”

Rolling her eyes, Taylor laughed. “Kim, nothing’s at risk?”

Kim checked behind herself, making sure no one was listening. “I’ve heard from my people that Mackenzie is getting a Wildcard. She won’t have to qualify and that means she’ll be fresh. If you face her again...”

“I’ll be ready.” Taylor had to disguise the smile forcing itself onto her face as a competitive one. But in reality, it was pride. Mac had already told her about the Wildcard.

“You better be. I won’t see our legacy torn down by that woman.” Kim didn’t bother to wait for Taylor’s reaction. Instead, she turned to walk away and headed toward the towering, Long Island estate.

Just as she opened the chain link fence gate, Kim stopped and hollered. “By the way, your father and I are heading to London early. Wedding anniversary surprise. So we’ll be taking our own jet.”

Taylor nodded, suppressing her desire to pump her fist. “Got it. Happy fortieth.”

Kim waved and disappeared.

Once she was out of ear shot, Taylor jumped with joy. “Fuck yes.” Taking her own plane was a luxury Kim rarely gave her the opportunity to indulge in. During tournaments, she wanted to be attached to Taylor's hip.

Maybe it was Gerald's insistence that they actually celebrate their anniversary, or maybe it was Taylor's new boundaries. But either way, Taylor was giddy.

She pulled out her phone as she walked toward the beach. Her feet met the hot sand as she typed out a message. Beaming, Taylor hit send and looked out at the water. Even through her shoes, the sand was warming her arches.

June was nearly over and once it was, Taylor would struggle to find an excuse to be away from Kim. But after seeing Mac a few times, Taylor almost didn't care.

The only thing keeping her from diving in head first, was Connor's words from their dinner. Don't do anything at a tournament.

17

Mac

Mac piled her bags by the front door.

“This is a terrible idea.” Jazz leaned against the door frame of their kitchen.

Smiling, Mac shook her head. “It'll be fine. Besides, any rest I can get will help me win and kick her ass.”

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Jazz shrugged. “It’s your funeral. How are you going to avoid the paps?”

Mac slung her bag over her shoulder as she got a text from a driver downstairs. “Apparently I’m getting there early, long before the announced boarding time. So, I’ll get on first and then she’ll come later.

Helping gather her things, Jazz laughed. “What does Babs think about all of this?”

Mac raised a finger to her lips and shushed her. “What Barbara doesn’t know, won’t hurt her.”

“Jesus Christ.” Jazz rubbed her forehead.

Pulling her in for a hug, Mac chuckled. “Just worry about your match, okay? Text me when you land and we’ll meet up for lunch or something.”

Jazz nodded. “Thanks again, for paying for me to go. It means a lot.”

Mac grabbed her bags and opened the door. “I’m just doing it so I can kick your ass on international television.” Before Jazz could retort, Mac slammed the door and hauled ass downstairs.

Having some extra money was everything Mac had dreamed of. Not only had multiple sponsors come forward to pay for her room and board in London but she was actually able to buy Jazz a plane ticket and a hotel room. With any luck, all of her friends would be able to get their start too.

Mac pushed open the rickety lobby door to the street, where a man in a three-piece, black suit stood in front of a hulking black SUV – the same kind that picked Mac up to bring her to Taylor’s place.

“Miss Bennet, let me take your bags.” The driver nodded as he held out his arms, effortlessly taking each of the bags.

Flying private also meant bringing as much of her shit as she wanted. Babs couldn’t complain about paying extra for a carryon anymore. With her bags loaded into the trunk, Mac slid into the backseat and prepared for an easy drive. The drive to JFK was a quick thirty minutes – a sharp contrast to the hour or more ride on the subway and multiple air trams.

When the driver’s door slammed shut, the car pulled out in a matter of seconds. It was the last week in June, and because of Wimbledon, Mac would miss Pride weekend in the city for the first time in a while. But it would all be worth it if she could claim her first Grand Slam win. And with the Wildcard in hand, Mac’s chances were getting higher by the moment.

She watched out of the window as the car got closer to JFK, entering a lowered highway that sat below street level. It felt like an open air tunnel, pushing Mac closer and closer to the airport. When they emerged, the driver avoided all of the signage for each Terminal. Instead, he turned down a small street that led to a chain link fence.

As soon as the car pulled up, the automatic gate swung open and the car pulled through. Mac shook her head. So this is how Taylor’s been living all these years.

When the car came to a halt on the tarmac, the driver turned to face Mac. “Miss Young has requested that you wear this.” He handed her a blonde wig and a pair of Gucci sunglasses.

Mac laughed. “What is this? A spy movie?”

The driver tried not to smile. “Even though we don’t see any paparazzi, Miss Young doesn’t want to risk it.”

Mac nodded. “Whatever she wants.” Grabbing the wig, Mac found the inside and threw it on. She didn’t need to see a mirror of herself to know how absolutely insane she must have looked. She wasn’t the most masculine sapphic in the world, but she certainly wouldn’t describe herself as femme.

Once she put on the sunglasses, Mac cleared her throat. “Ready.”

“Great. We’ll load in your luggage. Just get out of the car, keep your head down and walk up the stairs. Once you’re inside, you can take off the disguise.” The driver nodded.

Mac shrugged. “Got it.” Taking in a deep breath, Mac pushed open the door and was met by the sound of planes taking off. She slipped out of the seat and did as she was told – heading straight for the steps of the charter plane. It took everything in her to not gawk at it. She’d never even walked on a tarmac, let alone toward a private jet.

But she gripped the metal railing of the stairs and carefully ascended. The plane was surprisingly quiet.

Nearing the top of the stairs, Mac tried to peek inside the open cabin door. But the sun was too bright to see the dim space. She entered the cabin relatively blind.

A soft voice greeted her. “Welcome aboard, Miss Bennett.”

When Mac’s eyes adjusted, she looked up to see a stunning flight attendant holding a glass of champagne. Her white blouse was tucked in perfectly to the navy blue skirt

that matched.

Mac smiled at her. “Hi, nice to meet you.” It was tempting, the cold glass of bubbly drink being presented to her. She bit her lip...one glass won’t kill my game. Mac grabbed the glass and walked farther into the plane.

“You can take a seat wherever you’d like. Miss Young typically sits in the back where there is the most privacy.” The flight attendant gestured to a small doorway halfway across the plane. “You may also remove your wig and glasses now that you’re inside.”

Mac’s forehead wrinkled as she looked at the dozens of windows on every side. “Can’t they see inside?”

The flight attendant shook her head. “No, the windows have been UV treated to keep out... prying eyes.”

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With a nod, Mac laughed. Taylor was quite the rogue. Who knew how many affairs she'd had over the years, entirely hidden from the public eye? Mac clenched her jaw, a wave of jealousy washing over her. But the tension released as she realized just how pissed Kim must have been to know she couldn't stop her daughter.

Mac took her seat, a lounge in the back room with a few of the tarmac. She wanted to watch Taylor get on the plane – to see her strut across the tarmac as the paps snapped her picture. All of them were completely unaware of what waited for Taylor inside.

Over the course of the next thirty minutes, people with cameras began to line the fence across from the plane.

A loud whirring began from seemingly all over. Mac jumped at the noise as the engines turned on. The plane was going to be ready for take off as soon as Taylor stepped foot inside. It was a level of preparedness that Mac had never witnessed herself. Though, she was almost certain that someone like Babs had experienced it when she was pro.

Before Mac could get too lost in thought, a black SUV rolled onto the tarmac.

Showtime.

18

Taylor

As she gripped her racket bag in her hands, Taylor licked her lips. Her entire body pulsed with excitement, knowing what waited for her on the jet just ahead. Every message she'd received from her team told her that her plan was going off without a hitch.

As she neared the steps of the jet, Taylor gave her usual wave to the crowd of paps. The engine roared in her ear, drowning out the sound of their camera flashes.

Taylor climbed the stairs, trying to stop herself from taking two at a time. All she wanted was to be next to Mac again. At the top of the stairs, Taylor smiled at the flight attendant. "Hey, Darla."

Darla nodded. "Welcome aboard. Champagne?"

Taylor shook her head. "No, thank you. Is she onboard?"

Gesturing to the back of the plane, Darla smiled. "Can I take your racket bag?"

Taylor handed over the bag and headed to the back of the plane. Pulling back the curtain, Taylor's face lit up as soon as she laid eyes on Mac.

She snapped her fingers. "Damn, I was really hoping you would've kept the wig on."

Standing from her seat, Mac wrinkled her forehead. "God, why?"

"It would have been wildly embarrassing." Taylor laughed as she closed the curtain and strutted toward Mac. "Hi."

Mac smirked at the sound of her voice, lowering her own to a low grumble. "Hi, thanks for the ride." Taylor put her arms around Mac's neck, pulling her in for a deep kiss. As their lips met, Taylor could feel Mac's tongue teasing hers. The taste of her

sent a jolt of excitement through Taylor.

After a moment, Taylor heard the cabin door close. “Ready?”

Mac nodded, a sudden anxiety washing over her face. “What if we crash?”

“Then, we’re dead.” Taylor laughed as she settled into the plush leather seats. As soon as the plane took off and finished its ascent, she’d move to the couch on the opposite side of the plane. But for now, she had to strap in.

Rolling her eyes, Mac reached across the table and shoved Taylor. “That’s not comforting. They’d find our bodies together.”

Taylor shrugged. “At least I wouldn’t have to see Kim’s reaction.”

Before Mac could say anything else, the captain's voice rang through the intercom. “Good afternoon, ladies. We’ll be taking off here momentarily and heading to London Heathrow. Estimated arrival is just before midnight local time.”

Mac winced. “That’s late.”

“But you’ll be tired when we land, so falling asleep won’t be as hard with the time change.” Taylor explained. She had years of travel knowledge, far more than Mac could comprehend. “Besides, that’s what the extra night in the hotel is for. We aren’t competing for another two days.”

Taking a sip of her champagne as the plane taxied toward the runway, Mac looked out the window.

Taylor tilted her head. “Is that a Babs approved drink?”

Mac shook her head. “Who says I’ll be tired?”

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A wide smirk took over Taylor's face, Taylor shrugged with a wink. "I'll make sure of it."

The engines started to heat up, roaring off to the side of the plane. Darla walked back to their section with another selection of drinks. She presented the tray to Taylor and Mac. Browsing the selection, Taylor had a choice between protein shakes, water, ginger ale, or champagne.

Taylor licked her lips as she met Mac's dark, brown eyes. Reaching across the tray, Taylor pulled the glass of champagne. "You're a bad influence."

Mac raised her hands. "I didn't do shit."

Darla disappeared into the rest of the cabin, leaving the pair alone.

"You're the one making all kinds of insinuations." Mac cleared her throat, her cheeks growing rosie with each sip of her drink.

Taylor shrugged. "Not interested in the mile high club?"

Mac raised a finger. "I never said that."

The engine roared and the plane lurched forward, quickly gaining speed as it soared down the runway. Taylor closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath as she felt the wheels lift off the cement. Airborne.

Being in the air meant that they had pulled it off. Mac was on her plane, and no one –

but the five people abroad – had any idea.

From across the table, Mac gasped for air as the plane hit full throttle. Her back lightly slammed into the chair and pushed all the air out of her lungs. Reaching the top of its ascent, the plane leveled out and quieted.

“Alright, passengers. We’ve reached our peak elevation. Feel free to move about the cabin.” The captain announced.

The line went quiet and Taylor unbuckled her seat belt. Mac followed suit and looked around the room. Taylor hadn’t really noticed how nice it was until she watched Mac’s face explore.

Taylor stretched her neck. “Nicer than commercial?”

Mac laughed. “No shit. Since you don’t remember it.”

“Not sure I ever flew commercial.” Taylor scratched her eyebrows.

Standing from her seat, Mac rolled her eyes. She ran her fingers along the polished wood. The carpets under her feet were perfectly kept. She walked toward the bathroom, a disguised wall with a simple handle.

Mac laughed. “Please tell me you’ve hidden the bathroom.”

Following behind her, Taylor stood a few feet behind Mac. “To be fair, it’s a really ugly room on planes.”

“I bet it’s not on here.” Mac turned to look at Taylor. Behind her, clouds flew by their heads. They were already over water. As she thought, her face darkened. “How many times have you visited the mile high club?”

Taylor raised her eyebrows. “Do you actually want to know that?”

Mac shrugged, stepping closer. “I’m not sure. This is casual, right? Just two old friends reconnecting.”

Taylor put her hand on Mac’s waist. “Do old friends talk about things like that?” As soon as her hand met Mac’s body, Taylor felt the electricity between them. At that moment, she couldn’t remember a single other person who had ever laid hands on her.

Mac let her hands caress Taylor's biceps. “Old friends do a lot of the things we do.”

A smile took over Taylor’s face as she leaned in to Mac, letting her lips hover just a few centimeters from Mac’s.

The dark look in Mac’s eyes faded as she looked down at Taylor’s mouth.

“Besides,” Taylor peeked up into Mac’s gaze, “No one has ever touched me like you do.”

It was all Mac needed to hear. She crossed the distance between them and pressed her lips to Taylor’s, a groan coming up from her throat.

Taylor giggled. “How can you be so desperate for me when you can have me all the time?”

Mac rolled her eyes. “Desperate? You’re one to talk. I bet you’re already wet for me.”

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“Find out.” Taylor growled as her hands explored Mac’s lower back. Even through her baggy sweatshirt, it was obvious how in shape she was.

Looking around, Mac licked her lips. “Are we doing this the traditional way?”

Taylor checked over her shoulder. Just a curtain separated them from the cabin. And although Darla and the captains had signed their fair share of NDAs, it wasn’t worth the risk. Putting her hands on Mac’s hips, Taylor pushed her toward the disguised door.

Mac reached around her back and threw it open. Inside, a small bathroom with dark-stained wood walls and marble counters waited for them.

“Waaaay nicer than commercial.” Mac laughed as she went inside. There was a simple bench next to the sink, a shower faucet, and a full-sized toilet. Looking for a place to sit, Mac lowered herself onto the bench.

Taylor shook her head, gripping Mac’s sides. “Not there. It’s too easy.”

“Why are you always looking for a challenge?” Mac stood up, her lips grazing Taylor’s cheeks.

Pushing Mac against the hard countertop, Taylor shrugged. “Life’s more fun that way.”

Mac whimpered as the marble pressed into her ass. Taylor brought her hands under Mac’s ass, looking into her eyes as she lifted Mac onto the counter.

“I didn’t think you were strong enough to do that.” Mac teased with a wink.

Taylor bit her lip and pulled Mac in for another kiss. She slipped her tongue into Mac’s mouth as her hands worked around Mac’s body.

“Taylor,” Mac whimpered as she pressed her hips into Taylor’s center.

Nodding, Taylor put her hands underneath Mac’s clothes, touching the warm skin of Mackenzie’s back as she lifted the fabric over her head. When her hands returned to the bare spot, she could feel the bulging muscle on Mac’s back.

“Jesus, Mac. You know steroids are against tournament rules?” Taylor joked.

Mac shrugged. “That’s hard work, baby.” Grabbing the front of Taylor’s shirt, Mac pulled her in. Following Taylor’s lead, Mac lifted the shirt over her head. Underneath, Taylor wore an orange bra. Taylor could see Mac starting to drool at the sight. Grabbing the back of Mac’s neck, Taylor pressed Mac into her chest.

“Oh fuck.” Mac groaned as Taylor used her body to spread her legs wider. Licking Taylor’s chest, Mac felt Taylor starting to thrust her hips.

Taylor moaned as she pressed herself into Mac’s center, feeling her warmth even through the baggy joggers. Not able to stop herself, Taylor gripped the pants and pulled them down over Mac’s ass and to the ground.

Mac lifted her own hips, letting Taylor take her sweats and boxers.

“Get inside me, please.” Mac whimpered in Taylor’s ear. The warm breath on Taylor’s ear made her spine tingle with excitement. She was certain that her panties were already ruined with pleasure.

Taylor nodded and let her fingers slip inside Mac's folds. She gasped as she slid in. "Holy fuck. You're so wet."

Mac nodded as her head rolled back, slamming against the bathroom mirror. "I was alone on this plane for an hour. Just waiting for you."

"Look who's so obedient now?" Taylor teased, letting her teeth sink into the tender flesh of Mac's exposed neck. "I think you might need something bigger than just my fingers."

Biting her lip, Mac swallowed. "Mine's in my bag. I can't wait that long."

Taylor pulled Mac's ear to her lips. "I have everything we need right here."

Mac raised an eyebrow as Taylor grabbed her wrist. She pulled Mac's hand toward her own loose joggers. Placing Mac's hand right on her center, Taylor watched Mac's face as realization dawned on her.

"Taylor Young. You're such a dirty little whore." Mac gawked as she felt the silicone strap through Taylor's pants. "What if someone saw you walking around with a dick in your pants?"

Shrugging, Taylor laughed. "And yet, no one has ever noticed." She pulled down her sweats, slipping the dildo out. She pressed it gently against Mac's folds, covering it in pleasure.

Mac's jaw was still on the floor, trying to speak between moans. "How often do you do that?"

"Most tournaments, at least once." Taylor looked down at Mac's center, watching her strap tease Mackenzie's entrance. Her clit throbbed with anticipation. The entire car

ride to the airport Taylor couldn't stop thinking about how Mac would feel wrapped around the toy strapped to her waist. "Do you want to see how it feels?"

Mac bit her lip. "Please."

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Without another word, Taylor let the strap slip inside. She pushed it in with a long thrust, gripping Mac's ass on the counter as she did.

"Oh god," Mac whimpered as her eyes rolled. "Why is this so hot?"

Taylor laughed as she slowly pulled out, leaving just the tip of the strapon inside. "Because you've been daydreaming about me fucking you like this since the day we met."

Growling, Mac gripped Taylor's long, blonde hair. "I've had you like this plenty."

Watching her face, Taylor licked her lips and slid herself back inside. "And you've been desperate for more."

There was no denying that. Instead of fighting, Mac rocked her hips against Taylor's strap. She moaned with each thrust, her ass bouncing on the counter as they fucked. The counter slammed into the wall, bolts loosening as Taylor pressed harder.

Mac leaned back onto the counter, letting her body slide into Taylor.

Slipping her arm under Mac's lower back, Taylor pulled her in. "You feel so incredible." Taylor met her own gaze in the mirror, catching Mac's undercut in her view. A sly smile took over her face. This certainly hadn't been on her predictions for this year.

But fucking her summer camp crush Mackenzie Bennet on her private jet... Well, who could want anything more than that?

She watched herself bite into Mac's shoulder, hard enough to leave a mark.

Mac pulled her head back. "Easy, Young. Babs will be pissed."

Taylor raised an eyebrow and she pushed deeper into Mac's center. Her strap hit the perfect spot, ripping a moan from Mac's chest.

"Yes, Taylor." Mac gawked as she took all of Taylor. Her body slowed as it grinded against Taylor's strap. As she slowed, Taylor matched her tempo. Mac's body gave a stutter, shaking as she reached her peak.

"That's it, baby." Taylor licked her lip as she watched Mac reach her peak. As she did, Mac reached around Taylor's back and dug her fingers into the skin – desperate for something to hang on to.

Taylor cried out with pleasure. "Fuck" A part of her worried she'd break skin, leaving a mark she couldn't hide. Another part of her didn't give a fuck.

Thrusting herself deeper, Taylor let Mackenzie come on her strap. After a few seconds, Mac's grip released and her body relaxed. Mac let out a sigh as she caught her breath.

"Satisfied?" Taylor whispered as she pulled out her strap.

Mac nodded. "Thank you." She looked exhausted, like she could fall asleep right here on Taylor's shoulder.

And Taylor would have given anything to feel Mac's body rest on hers.

Snapping out of the haze, Taylor used some tissue to wipe off the strap. "Whoever wins the Wimbledon gets fucked next."

Mac rolled her eyes. “So you’re asking me to throw just so you can get some good pussy?”

Taylor pushed her shoulder and pulled Mac in for another kiss. She pulled her pants on and adjusted herself. Helping Mac off the counter, Taylor got down on her knees to help Mac step into her joggers.

Looking down at her, Mac laughed. “Look at you, on your knees for me again.”

Taylor rolled her eyes, taking just one lick of Mac’s delicious folds to tease her.

“Fuck,” Mac whimpered, sensitive from being touched.

Taylor played dumb. “Don’t like it?”

Mac shook her head, rubbing her forehead. “Not what I said. I just never want to stop.”

Pulling up Mac’s pants, Taylor shrugged. “Well the faster you get out, the faster we can fuck.”

Mac laughed. “So, we’ll both throw?”

With a wink, Taylor slid open the bathroom door. Just as the pair were walking out of the bathroom, Darla was walking back inside the private room. “Sorry, ladies.”

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Taylor waved off her concern. “No worries.”

“Dinner will be served in just a few minutes.” Darla smiled as she left the room.

Taylor polished off her room temperature champagne. “Good timing. I worked up quite the appetite.”

19

Mac

The rest of the flight was quiet and restful. Mac had even managed to get a few minutes of sleep. But she had been gently woken up by a soft kiss on her cheek and Taylor’s voice, “Macky, we’re landing soon. You don’t want to mess up your sleep schedule.”

Even now, as Mac stood at the check-in desk of the Park Plaza Westminster Bridge, all she wanted was to close her eyes and rest her head on Taylor’s soft chest.

The hotel manager behind the desk, Georgia, came out to the lobby and smiled at Mac. “Welcome to Park Plaza. Your suite is ready for you.” The British accent that came out of her mouth was still an adjustment for Mac.

Mac smiled. “Great, thank you.” She followed the manager’s lead to an elevator bank.

Clicking the up button, Georgia turned to Mac. “We hope you enjoy your stay here.

The staff is always enthused to have Wimbledon players staying with us.”

The elevator dinged just as Mac answered, “I’m sure I will. It’s a serious upgrade from my past stays.” Unlike in Paris, Mac’s bags were taken upstairs for her. Tommy had arranged all the travel with Mac’s new sponsors. All she had to do was show up and give them her name.

Quickly enough, the elevator opened to a hallway with bright red carpets. Georgia moved down the hallway without a second thought. Toward the end of the bank of rooms, she slowed and pulled a keycard from her pocket. She swiped it over the mechanism and the handle unlocked.

She held open the door, gesturing for Mac to head inside.

“Holy shit.” Mac gawked as she walked inside, a view of London stretching out before her. Once she was inside, Georgia followed behind – ready to explain the available amenities.

“Your sponsors insisted on a room with a view. They also requested that your coach and mother be just down the hall.” Georgia turned on the lights as Mac stumbled toward the view.

As she approached the windows, Mac noticed a handle. “Is this a door?”

Georgia smiled, trying not to laugh at her sweet question. “It is. This is a terrace room. Private.”

Mac nodded. “That’s awesome. Thank you.”

Taking a cue, Georgia bowed her head. “I’ll leave you to get settled. If you need anything, please call us.”

The door closed with a solid thud, leaving Mac in silence. She took a deep breath, staring out at the London Eye. It was still surreal. How she'd ended up in a luxurious suite in London was a wonder to her. But it was everything she'd dreamed of.

... Including the private jet flight with Taylor. Sneaking off the plane hadn't been quite as fun, given that there was a goodbye attached. They knew they'd have to keep to themselves for the next fourteen days. Neither Kim nor Babs would want them anywhere near each other. But Mac wasn't so sure she could actually stay away.

Setting her racket bag down in the closet, Mac walked around the room. She took a peek in the bathroom, a light wood vanity and a porcelain countertop sat opposite the shower. It was well lit and spacious.

Mac ran her hand along the counter, her ass tingling from the plane ride. She was almost certain there would be a bruise on it from her and Taylor's time together. But the thought alone made Mac's sensitive center pulse.

Just as she was getting lost in thought, her phone rang. Tommy's name appeared on the screen. She swiped to answer the call. "Hey, Tommy."

"Got there alright?" Tommy asked.

Mac's forehead wrinkled. Her timing is... impeccable.

Nodding, Mac walked back to the bedroom where just one, fluffy bed waited for her. "I did, how'd you know?"

Tommy cleared her throat. "Lucky guess. So listen, you should be all set up across the pond. If you need anything, call the hotel and if they don't answer, call me. You're the star, okay?"

“Got it.” Mac leaned back onto the bed.

“In other news,” Tommy continued, “I’m setting up a photoshoot for you here for the U.S. Open. If your streak continues at Wimbledon, we’re going to want to hype you up for U.S. Home turf and all of that.”

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Mac's eyebrows raised. "Really?"

Tommy chuckled. "Yeah, really. Mostly for socials but we also might want to shop the pictures to some magazines and see if anyone bites."

"Who's the photographer?" Mac asked, curious.

Tommy checked her notes, the silence making Mac nervous. "I'm between a few right now. I'll send you their portfolios for your opinion. I like one of them a bit. They're a queer, local artist who works in film photos. I think you'll like them."

Mac nodded. "Sounds good."

There was another silence and then Tommy cleared her throat. "There's one more thing."

"Okay." Mac swallowed the lump in her throat.

Tommy sighed. "I got a strange tip from a friend of mine. Do you know anything about Taylor Young's private jet?"

Fuck. Mac's hand slapped her forehead as she scrambled to find something to say. She sat straight up and panicked, her heart pounding.

But her lack of a response was all Tommy needed. "Enough said. Listen, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and say that you're too smart to get wrapped up in something romantic with Women's Tennis's darling. But hypothetically, if you had, I

would tell you to keep your shit locked down. And for god's sake, please tell me when you do something like this so I can help you."

Mac nodded. "Right."

Tommy tapped her hand on her desk. "I'm keeping the story quiet. No need to worry on that front. So, no funny business during Wimbledon. We'll reassess after."

"Sure thing, chief." Mac nodded. They said goodbye and hung up the phone. Of course, if anyone was going to find out, Tommy was probably the least destructive. If anything, her knowing might help.

Mac opened her texts and sent a message to Taylor.

Leak on your plane. Manager told me but has it under control. We need to stay apart.

She threw her phone into the duvet and walked around the room. The best thing Mac could do was keep herself distracted. If she thought about Taylor, she'd drive herself crazy with lust.

Unlike her double bed room in Paris, this was just hers. There was even a couch and a full wet bar. Not that she could use it until after her matches.

After she walked around the room, Mac tapped her fingers along the bar. Now what?

A ding from her phone saved her from the boredom. Leaping across the room, Mac threw herself into the bed as she grabbed her phone. It was a text from Taylor:

Crap. Got it. So, no sexting?

Mac bit her lip, the thought of seeing Taylor's body making her heart race.

No one said anything about that. Feel free to send ;)

It was going to be a long couple of weeks. Especially with matches starting in just over 24 hours.

Two days later, Mac was tossing her belongings in the tall, wood lockers in the Women's locker rooms. Unlike the lockers at Roland Garros, these were long, horizontal cabinets. They were just tall enough for racket bags.

Mac looked up at the skylight overhead and sighed. She jumped up a few times and grabbed her racket bag.

She walked down a long hallway to the training room where Babs was leaning against a squat machine. "Do you think you'll ever be on time?"

"Isn't it better that I'm late to you and not the match?" Mac questioned, setting her bag by the door.

The duo launched into her warm up routine, stretching out her arms and legs. With each stretch, Mac tried not to picture Taylor doing the same thing – how good her toned arms would look as she moved.

After a few movements, Taylor took off her sweatshirt and pants. She pulled off the hoodie revealing the tight, blue tennis shirt underneath. It was a brand new set, sent in just for her and waiting in her hotel room the morning of the match.

But as she did, the shirt shifted and revealed more of Mac's shoulder.

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Babs darted her hand out and pulled at the fabric. “What’s this?”

Mac’s heart sank. The fucking bite mark.

Stumbling, Mac shrugged. “Just some fun over Pride.”

Babs’s eyes narrowed, not buying it. “I told you none of that during the Slams.” But Babs didn’t break eye contact with Mac.

Mac laughed. “Sure, but did you follow any of those rules when you were my age?”

Waving her off, Babs walked away to Mac’s bag. She checked all the water bottles inside. “Well, no. But I was stupid and trying to hide my sexuality so I took what I could get. You can get some whenever you like... in the off season.”

Mac rubbed the back of her neck, biting the inside of her cheek as she thought. It wasn’t really true. Maybe it had been before Taylor and that night in her apartment. Now, Mac was back in the closet again. She had agreed to it. Hell, she was having fun. But it wasn’t as simple as Babs thought.

As if she was reading Mac’s mind, Babs cleared her throat. “How did you say you flew over?”

Mac shrugged, trying to play it off. “Just first class from JFK. Tommy sent a car.”

Silence filled the training room for a moment. Mac was starting to sweat and she hadn’t even walked onto the court yet.

Babs stood up abruptly. “Right, well no more of that. You’re facing a Russian today. They play just as hard as you, except they train in the cold.”

Mac listened closely as Babs laid out her strategy. After weeks of analyzing tapes, they were ready to go after whoever Mac had to face – including Taylor. Luckily, they had been placed on opposite sides of the bracket. They’d only face off if they both made it to the finals.

And if that was the case, Mac would have to find a way to win.

As if she was reading Mac’s mind, Babs patted her on the back. “There’s \$2.8 million on the table everyday this week. You win that prize. No matter what.”

Mac nodded as an usher peeked their head into the room. “Miss. Bennett, they’re ready for you.”

Taking a deep breath, Mac slung her racket back onto her shoulder and headed down the hallway. Over her shoulder, she hollered back at Babs. “Tell my mom I love her, please.”

Babs gave a thumbs up just as Mac was turning the corner into the court entrance. From inside, she heard the crowd give a gentle clap to the Mac’s Russian opponent. Mac’s heart raced as she waited to hear her name.

She closed her eyes and tried to find herself. But when she did, all she could picture was Taylor doing the same thing. Her match, on Centre Court, started a little over an hour ago.

“Miss Mackenzie Bennett.” The announcer called Mac to court.

Startled out of her meditation, Mac stumbled forward and into the light. This time,

the crowd roared for her. The British seemed to be far more enthused than the French. Mac smiled up at them, laughing as she waved.

She settled on her bench, letting her feet get used to the grass. It would be a slow match, the extra traction would minimize injury. But it also meant the ball would bounce slower. Everything about Mac's swing would have to be adjusted for a long, grueling game.

The crowd settled as the umpire performed the coin toss.

"Mackenzie Bennett, first serve." The umpire nodded. Each player shook her hand and headed to their side.

Mac got into position, catching her breath. The warm sun on her neck calmed her nerves. She met her opponent's eyes from across the court.

Bending her knees, Mac lifted the ball into the air and sent it flying with a familiar crack.

20

Taylor

"Yes!" Taylor pumped her fist.

The ice wrapped around her knees shifted as she stood. But as soon as she did, she fell back down. It had been a few days of matches and her body was starting to feel it. Just earlier that day, Taylor won her own quarterfinals match.

And now, she was watching Mac. Having just scored a point in the tiebreak, Mac was nearing another win at Wimbledon.

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Her form was near perfect. The lack of qualifying matches showed. Taylor could tell how energized she was. Hell – a part of her was even a little jealous that she couldn't enjoy it.

She shifted on her couch as Mac readied another serve. "Let's go, baby. Hit 'em where it hurts."

Just as Mac's arm was lifting into the air, Taylor's hotel door slammed shut. She whipped her head around to see Kim, jaw clenched and arms crossed.

Taylor eyed her. "Could you at least knock?"

Before Kim answered, her gaze was drawn to the TV. "Why are you watching her?"

"Because if she wins this match, there is a very high chance that we play each other in the finals. And you don't want me to lose to her in the finals." Taylor muted the TV, leaving it on.

Kim sucked her teeth. "I don't want you to lose? What about you?"

Taylor laughed and crossed her arms. "I never want to lose."

The sound of Kim's foot tapping against the laminate floors filled the room. Her nose wrinkled into a snarl. "We have a problem."

Slouching into her couch, Taylor winced as her sore body moved. "What's that?"

“I’ve gotten a tip.” Kim eyed Taylor. “A tip that you allowed that woman onto your plane and flew her here. And that it wasn’t some sweet reunion.”

Taylor shrugged, knowing that making eye contact would ruin her. If she acted like she couldn’t give a fuck, Kim might back off. Besides, Mac warned her there was a leak. If anything, this was an interesting test in timing. Whoever found out first on Mac’s team is closer with a source than Kim.

“I don’t know anything about that.” Taylor’s head bobbed as she watched the ball fly from one end of the court to another. “There’s always rumors.”

Kim’s jaw twitched. In a few paces, she crossed the room and stood in front of Taylor and the TV. “I can tolerate you fooling around with strangers when no one’s looking. But that woman...”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “My god, what is your obsession with her? Mackenzie was my friend and then a little more than that. It ended when you demanded it.”

“She threatened your career, multiple times. And here she is doing it again!” Kim exploded, her face turning red under the layer of foundation she plastered on.

Taylor’s heart pounded in her chest. She felt like it might just rip itself out and waltz down to Centre Court to watch Mac’s quarterfinals.

Steadying her breathing, Taylor met her mom’s gaze. “I don’t know what to tell you. She wasn’t on the plane.”

Kim licked her lip and walked closer to Taylor, leaning into her daughter. “Don’t risk your career over some nobody who never had the talent to stand in the same room as you.”

Taylor gritted her teeth together as Kim pulled back and walked toward the door. Just as she was reaching the hallway, Mac scored the winning tiebreak point. Taylor unmuted the TV to a tremendous cheer from the crowds. Mac collapsed down onto her knees, her head tilting back. She scanned the crowd for a moment before finding the camera. Looking into the lens, Mac smiled and winked.

Taylor felt her chest warm, a boldness taking over her being. “Hey, Kim. It looks like she had exactly the same amount of talent.”

Kim didn’t bother to look at her daughter. Instead, she slammed the door closed as she stormed out of the room.

Maybe it was reckless, letting her greatest ally walk out of the room like that. But Taylor couldn’t stand to hear another second of slander against Mac. Not when she was everything Taylor had ever needed.

She pulled out her phone and Mac a text:

Incredible match. Maybe we’ll have to fist fight for the \$2.8 mil. Congrats.

Her finger hesitated over the red heart. Every part of her being wanted to click it, to send Mac what lay deep inside herself.

But just locked her phone. It’s casual. That’s all it is.

21

Mac

Mac’s body floated in the Park Plaza pool, loose and limp. She wasn’t sure she’d ever felt so exhausted in her entire life.

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Staring at the tiled ceiling, Mac shook her head. I'm a Wimbledon semifinalist. It sent a shiver down her spine. Even if she lost tomorrow, she'd walk away with just over \$750,000. It was more than enough to sustain herself for the rest of the year.

The water in the pool was warm, enough to put Mac to sleep.

Just as her eyes drifted closed, the glass door swung open.

Mac groaned. "I know, pool's closing." Once she and Babs finished training and recovery, it was nearly 10 pm. But Mac was desperate to give her joints some relief, even if it was only going to be a few minutes before staff kicked her out.

But when no one answered, Mac opened her eyes and lifted herself upright. She tilted her head as a smile took over her face. "Someone's going to come kick me out any second."

Taylor stood at the edge of the pool, her arms crossed as she looked down at Mac in the water. "No, they won't."

Mac rolled her eyes, swimming closer to the edge. "Yes, they will. And we're not supposed to be seen together."

Taylor squatted down, her pleated skirt just barely missing the wet tile of the pool's edge. From the water, Mac could see the bottoms of Taylor's thighs. Her eyes wandered up the blonde's toned legs to her center where a bright red thong waited for her.

Mac's center throbbed.

Shaking her head, Taylor reached out her hand and used her index finger to bring Mac's eyes back to hers. "Dirty. Dog. I told the staff to keep it open and keep everyone out."

Mac raised her eyebrows. "Taylor..." Latching herself to the side of the pool, Mac rested her arms on the cool tile. She felt the tendons in her arms pull at her biceps as she held on.

"Mackenzie." Taylor licked her lips. "I couldn't stay away from you."

Feeling herself tingle with anticipation, Mac groaned before releasing her grip on the side of the pool and dunking herself in the water. All noise disappeared as her head submerged. I have to cool off.

When she ran out of breath, she emerged from the water and wiped her eyes. Opening them, Taylor was standing now.

Mac blinked at her. She wore a navy blue, knit sweater vest with white trim. It was everything teenage Mac fantasized about. And here Taylor was, glaring down at Mackenzie like she might just eat her whole.

"But seriously..." Mac started, trying to take Babs's warning to heart.

Taylor giggled, grabbing the hem of her sweater and pulling it over her head. Underneath, a bright red, matching bra waited for Mac.

"Jesus Christ, Taylor. This is just cruel." Mac whined.

Taylor shrugged, pulling off her skirt next. It dropped to the crowd in a wonderful

puff of fabric, pooling at her feet as if god herself placed it there.

Mac's eyes rolled into her head. "This is so mean."

Taylor laughed as she bit her lip. She was eating up every second of the attention.

Before Mac could say anything else, Taylor took a few running steps and dove into the pool, over Mac's head. Mac looked up at her body, soaring through the air. Is this even real? Did I drown in this pool?

Taylor's toned stomach tensed as she guided her body into the water. There was hardly a splash when she broke the water's surface.

Emerging from the water, Taylor giggled. "It's warm in here."

Mac shook her head. "I mean, did you also go pro at swim class?"

"No, but Kim would have loved that." Taylor swam closer to Mac. Her blonde hair slicked back against her head. Mac couldn't be certain she didn't accidentally stumble into a Calvin Klein swimwear ad. Taylor tilted her head toward the shallow end. "Come on."

Mac nodded, without even thinking about it. Maybe Taylor has been a siren this entire time. She swam closely behind Taylor, trying not to look at her gorgeous ass the entire time. But the red fabric around her waist and center drew Mac's eyes down.

When they reached about four and half feet deep, Taylor let her long legs touch the bottom of the pool, standing up. Deep enough to cover most of her body, Taylor looked at Mac as she stood too. "Congrats on your win."

Mac smiled at her. "Thanks, you too. It's nice being on opposite sides."

Taylor nodded. “Yeah for the most part. Unless we both win tomorrow.”

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“You know I’ll come for your ass no matter what.” Mac’s eyes flicked from Taylor’s blue eyes, to her lips, and her chest.

With a wink, Taylor shrugged. “You usually do.”

Mac splashed water toward her.

They lightly floated in the pool as silence filled the massive room.

Taylor looked around. “Our first time was in water, wasn’t it?”

Shaking her head, Mac raised her index finger out of the water. “You always say that. But it’s not true. You came onto me in the lake that summer and then we went back to our cabin. You very boldly kicked all the other girls out and then we...”

Taylor threw her head back as she laughed. Her throat vibrated a deep, sultry laugh. “God, I was not familiar with subtlety.”

“Then imagine my surprise, that the same person manages to stay so lowkey at a gay bar that she hasn’t been caught by the dozens of paparazzi that want her secret.” Mac smiled, slowly drifting closer to Taylor. Even in water, there was something magnetic about her. All Mac wanted was to be close to her.

Taylor moved closer too. “But you never would have made the first move.”

Mac nodded vigorously. “You’re goddamn right. You’re the princess of tennis, I wasn’t about to be accused of “corrupting” America’s sweetheart.”

Biting her lip, Taylor giggled. “And yet, you still were.”

Mac shoved her. “I wonder whose fault that was?”

Taylor wrapped her arms around Mac’s neck. “I don’t know, but you could make the first move now.”

Mac’s chest rose and fell quickly, making small waves in the crystal clear water. “Taylor Rose. We aren’t supposed to see each other... let alone break the golden rule of all sports.”

Rolling her eyes, Taylor mocked the phrase. “No sex before a match.” But she wrapped her legs around Mac’s waist, leaning her lips into Mac’s ear. “Who said anything about sex?”

Mac pulled back to meet her gaze. The water of the pool made Taylor’s eyes somehow even more blue than they already were. How could I possibly stay away from her? Mac licked her lips as she felt the warmth between Taylor’s legs radiate onto her stomach.

“Maybe if we don’t... finish?” Mac was desperate, biting her lip as she tried to hold back.

Taylor nodded eagerly. “Yeah, I feel like that makes sense.” The pair were already out of breath, just the act of holding back enough to wear them out.

Mac gripped Taylor’s legs, pulling her toward the steps of the pool. Taylor moaned as Mac’s arms strained to carry her. When they reached the step, Mac leaned Taylor against it and used the metal railing to steady herself. She started pressing her hips into Taylor’s center, wanting nothing more than to be inside her.

Taylor let out a groan as she felt Mac press against her hard clit.

After a moment, Mac brought her other hand down to Taylor's center. She started rubbing her over her panties, the rough fabric soaked. It was impossible to tell what had gotten the thong more wet: the water or Taylor's folds.

"You feel so good." Taylor's head fell back onto the concrete edge of the pool, making a loud thud.

Mac laughed, "Oh my god. Are you okay?"

Taylor nodded, glaring at her. "Shut the fuck up and touch me already, Mackenzie."

"Is our deal still on?" Mackenzie whispered between kisses.

Taylor's forehead wrinkled. "Our deal?"

Mac nodded. "Whoever wins gets to fucked?"

A hearty laugh erupted from Taylor's chest. "Sure, why not?"

"Just making sure before I kick your ass." Mac lightly bit into the wet skin of Taylor's neck.

"Careful," Taylor whimpered.

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Mac smirked as she met Taylor's stern gaze. "I know what I'm doing. Babs saw your bite mark by the way."

Taylor whimpered as Mac's hands continued rubbing her. "And? Now she knows you're hot shit enough to get laid, finally."

"I've had plenty." Mac quipped back, sliding Taylor's panties to the side and meeting her folds. The soft center made Mac moan.

As her finger lingered over Taylor's slick entrance, Taylor's eyes shot open. "Don't go inside."

Mac pulled her hand back, her eyebrows furrowing with confusion. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Taylor nodded, "I just can't risk getting a UTI."

Mac giggled, kissing her cheek. "Good call. Do you want more?"

Biting her lip, Taylor smiled. "I want you to take me right to the edge."

It was all the directive Mac needed, pushing her hand back under Taylor's panties and onto her clit. Her hard bead was easy to find. Making wide strokes, Mac watched Taylor's face as she enjoyed each touch.

"More." Taylor begged.

Mac smirked, bringing her mouth down Taylor's chest toward her chest. She peeled

back the bra and exposed Taylor's hard nipple to the warm water. Letting her tongue caress the nipple, Mac's eyes rolled back. Taylor's body was everything Mac could have dreamed of, and touching her felt like coming home.

A part of Mac worried someone might walk in and see Taylor Young's nipple in her mouth. But that made it even hotter, knowing that they might get caught.

Taylor's breathing picked up as her back arched into Mac's touch. With her free hand, Mac gripped Taylor's bare ass.

"Fuck, I'm close." Taylor groaned, trying to figure out where she should stop. But Mac could tell from her face that she wanted to reach climax, to finish right there in the hotel pool.

But just as Taylor's body began to tremor, Mac removed her hand from Taylor's panties.

Taylor's jaw dropped as she forced her eyes open. "You bitch."

Raising her hands in surrender, Mac laughed. "This is what you asked for. I'm just doing as I'm told."

Sitting up on the step, Taylor shook her head. "How about a little revenge?"

22

Taylor

Before Mac could answer, Taylor whipped around in the pool. Pushing Mac against the railing, Taylor started to bite her neck.

Mac groaned. “Easy.”

Taylor let up. “Sorry, baby.”

Nodding, Mac guided Taylor’s hand down to her slit. Taylor whimpered as her fingers touched Mac’s soaked folds – it definitely wasn’t just the pool. Still throbbing from Mac’s unfinished touching, Taylor’s own clit ached for more.

“I’m so desperate for you.” Taylor confessed as she slid her fingers back up toward Mac’s folds. After a few moments of massaging Mac’s hood, Taylor gripped Mac’s hips and turned her around.

Mac pushed her ass into Taylor’s center.

Just feeling Mac press against her was enough to make Taylor whimper. “Holy shit.” Clearly, all of Mac’s training was doing more than just making her game better. “Do you think you lift enough in the gym?”

Mac laughed and let her hips draw circles around Taylor’s center. “Hard to say. Does it feel like enough?”

Taylor could only nod as she gripped Mac’s hips and pushed herself closer. Reaching around her front, Taylor let her hand fall down Mac’s swim trunks.

“Oh god.” Mac’s head dropped as she gripped the railing for some stability.

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Biting her lip, Taylor watched Mac's body move. In the water, her back muscles were somehow more defined. Every curve and bump was perfectly sculpted. It was no wonder that Mac could hit so many intense serves. And in that moment, Taylor couldn't stop herself from imagining how Mac's back would look if she was thrusting into Taylor's folds. They would strain with each pump, giving Taylor plenty to grab onto.

The thought alone made Taylor feel like she could cross her peek. She refocused on how it felt to have Mac's clit under her fingers. Pressing her fingers in deeper, Taylor listened as Mac's moans bounced off the tiled room.

It wasn't long before Mac's breathing grew ragged and her moans louder.

Right when Taylor thought she might go over the line, Taylor released the pressure and pulled her hand out from the shorts.

"You fucking asshole." Mac laughed as she rubbed her face. "This was such a mean idea." Mac turned around and planted a kiss on Taylor's face.

"And?" Taylor smiled, melting in Mac's bulging arms.

Mac rolled her eyes. "It felt really good. But if it fucks with my game, you owe me like \$200,000."

Holding out her hand, Taylor winked. "Deal."

"Shit." Taylor groaned as she missed another shot.

From their stand, the umpire called the point for Sandra Osbourne.

When she got back to the baseline, Taylor stretched her legs a little. But as she did, she felt her knees loosen too far. She was wobbly today.

She rubbed her forehead as she thought about the night before. Maybe it was a bad idea. Not only did she feel slower in her semifinals match, but she also couldn't get Mac out of her mind. The last week and a half had been a decent detox. She was playing with a fair amount of mental clarity.

But today, all she could think about was Mac's straining back, the way she smelled, the way she smiled.

Sandra showed the ball as she prepared to serve.

Taylor took a peek at the scoreboard behind her head. The first set had gone 4 - 6 in Sandra's favor. This was only the second set but they were stuck at 4 - 5. Even now, the score was locked up at 40 - 40.

If Sandra managed two more points, Taylor would be out of Wimbledon.

As the ball soared over, Taylor scrambled to the service box to meet it. With a tremendous shout, Taylor glided the ball back.

Each spectator's heads swiveled as they tried to keep up.

The shot was too easy for Sandra to return. She picked up its speed, sending it to Taylor's far corner.

Crap. Taylor's body lagged behind her mind. She got to it just in time to smack it back, albeit imprecisely. As soon as it left her side, she knew what Sandra would do.

Turning on her heels, Taylor tried to make it to the opposite side of the court. But Sandra predicted her movements too well. Instead of sailing it to the far corner, Sandra gently tapped the ball across the net. It bounced on the grass just a few feet from the divider.

Taylor skidded to a halt as the point was called.

“Advantage, Ms. Osbourne.”

As she trudged to the baseline, Taylor watched Kim shake her head and leave the match. Kim hated watching Taylor’s losing points. Not because she felt bad – just because it was disappointing.

Taylor did a few bunny hops. If she couldn’t warm herself up now, the match was over. When Sandra readied her serve, Taylor bent her knees and got low. She squeezed her stomach in and prepared to send back all of her remaining power.

“Match point.” The umpire called out.

With a yelp, Sandra served the ball.

Taylor ran to meet it, giving it her best shot. But as she did, her hand slipped on her sweaty racket and pointed down a few extra degrees.

As soon as Taylor heard the thunk of the ball, she knew it would fall into the net.

Her shoulders dropped as the ball made an anti-climactic swish at the center of the court.

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“Winner, Ms. Osbourne.” The umpire called.

Hiding her eyes underneath her cap, Taylor readjusted her grip on the racket. Her hand slid up the neck and gripped the titanium. By the time she made it to the net, Taylor forced a smile onto her face. “Congratulations.”

Sandra smiled back, shook her hand, and gave Taylor a pat on the arm. “We are always in awe of you.”

Taylor nodded, humbled by the words. After shaking the umpire's hand, Taylor waved to the crowd. Despite her loss, they still cheered for her. Once her bag was packed, she saw herself off the court as Sandra's post-game interview began.

As soon as she rounded the corner into the tunnel toward the locker rooms, Taylor lifted her chin. Sure enough, Kim was waiting for her – arms crossed and sunglasses on.

When Taylor was close enough, Kim lowered her voice to a near whisper. “What the fuck happened to you out there?”

Taylor shook her head. “I don't know.” She kept walking, forcing Kim to trail behind her.

“I think I do.” Kim snarled.

Taylor whipped her head around to glare at her mother. “It's a good thing I didn't ask. I'll see you for dinner.” She slammed open the locker room door and left her

mother in the dust.

Throwing her bag down on the bench near her locker, Taylor rubbed her forehead. Maybe she should have been more calm. But honestly, all she wanted to do was tell Kim to go fuck herself and run across the courts to find Mac.

Instead, Taylor walked herself to the showers and tried to cool off.

23

Mac

“And that is the end of Taylor Young’s Wimbledon run.” A pundit announced, turning to the other dressed-up anchors stationed on the lawn outside Centre Court.

Mac shook her head, trying to watch the screen as she kept her muscles warm.

From behind her, Babs sighed. “I bet ol’ Kim Parker is going to eat her alive.”

Mac bit her lip. “No kidding.”

Maybe it was my fault. I shouldn’t have fooled around last night. Mac rubbed her forehead.

“Well, that’s good news for you.” Babs shrugged. “Your odds of taking this home just went up astronomically.”

Shaking her head, Mac took a deep breath. “No pressure.”

Babs raised a finger. “Hey, hey. Repeat after me...”

In unison, the two recited, “Pressure is a privilege.”

This was the first season Mac had really felt that was true. Today alone, she would walk away with over six hundredthousand dollars. And if she won this, that number would cross over a million.

The usher appeared in the door. “Miss Bennett, they’re ready for you.”

With a nod, Babs smacked Mac’s shoulder. “You’ve got it. Finish it quick, you need as much recovery time as possible for tomorrow. And she’s young – if she drags it out, you’ll be screwed. Deep breaths and it’s yours to take home.”

Mac was still trying to convince herself that it was true. The grass courts had proven a lot harder to play on than any others. But now wasn’t the time to doubt herself.

Instead, Mac rolled back her shoulders and walked onto the court – this time to thunderous applause. She scanned the crowd, waving to them as she walked to her bench. The coin toss landed in her favor and the game was off.

A cacophony of noise carried them through the first set. Mac served with grace and precision, forcing her younger opponent to handle trick shots she’s been unprepared for. It was almost like playing a young Taylor.

Debra Jennings was a British favorite for the next generation of tennis players and Mac could see why. But like Taylor, she was spoiled and had only played gentlemen’s tennis.

Mac took the first set with ease, snagging easy points. By the end of the first set, Debra was losing faith in herself. It was a look that Mac recognized.

When the pair switched sides, Mac caught her gaze and nodded.

Debra smiled, nodding back.

With the ball in her hands, Debra launched the first serve of the second set easily. Her small frame made it easy for Debra to get a lot of height. Mac raced for the serve but just missed it.

Even after one point, the match was still out of Debra's reach. Mac swept her way through the second set, securing the match in her favor with just one point left to score. Debra served with as much vigor as she had the first time.

Mac gripped her racket firmly, planted her feet in the grass, and put all of her force into shuttling the ball into the opposite court. A loud smack echoed off the walls of the Centre Court, a light gasp came from the crowd as the ball landed squarely in the back corner.

It was almost too close to call. But the umpire gave the point to Mac.

"Match, Miss Bennett." As soon as the words came out of the speaker, the stands erupted in applause.

Mac stuttered for words, all of the air leaving her lungs. I just made the fucking Wimbledon finals. Covering her mouth, Mac tried to push the tear welling in her eyes down. Now wasn't the time to show weakness.

Instead, she approached the net and gave her young competitor a sturdy handshake,

pulling her in for a hug. “You play magnificently. You’ll be a joy to watch in the coming seasons.”

“Thank you, congratulations.” Debra smiled.

Mac hardly noticed when she left the court, instead surrounded by the applause of a fanbase she had no idea waited in the wings for her.

After she wiped her face, an anchor in a simple blue dress approached her bench.

“Miss Bennett, congratulations on your victory. How does it feel to make it to your first Grand Slam Final?” The woman smiled as she held the anchor to Mac.

Mac shook her head. “It’s unreal. I’ve dreamed of this moment since I was a child. This is for Barbara McConnell and my mom, Piper.”

The crowd cheered as the anchor spoke over their roars. “And how are you feeling about the final just under twenty-four hours from now?”

Looking to the ground, Mac smirked. “I’m ready to take this home to Queens.”

At noon the next day, Mac was standing in the same spot on Centre Court. Dressed in a fresh outfit from her sponsor, Mac took a deep breath as she stretched out her back.

Everything about this game felt surreal. As her eyes wandered the stands, Mac’s gaze fell on the Royals in their private box. They wore their Sunday best, wearing neutral faces as they prepared for the players to walk on to the court.

Before Mac knew it, the umpire was calling the players forward. After the coin toss, Mac shook the hand of her opponent – a Canadian player named Rina Singh. She had flown through the previous rounds, having won a few Grand Slams over the past few

years.

They wished each other luck and headed to their respective sides.

Once Mac reached the baseline, she closed her eyes and stretched her neck. She dug her feet into the grass. It was clear from the dead grass and streaks of mud that two weeks of intense tennis had played out on Centre Court.

And now, Mac was a part of it.

The ball boy bounced three balls toward her. She balanced each of them on her racket, searching for the smoothest ball.

A memory flashed in her mind. Taylor's soft hands, over a decade prior, pointing to the tiny hairs dangling off the tennisballs. "If you look closely, the hairs lay flatter on the new ball. Once you've used it a bit, the hairs start to stand up."

It was a wonder Mac even remembered the words because she hadn't taken her eyes off of Taylor's face the entire time.

But as Mac stood on the courts at Wimbledon, she selected a smooth ball.Smooth ball, faster serve.

She bounced the other two back to the ball boy behind her. Showing the ball to Rina, Mac rocked on her back foot as she prepared to serve. With a long inhale, Mac tossed the ball up. Time slowed as she lifted her racket hand up and brought it down on the yellow felt.

It zipped to Rina's court, landing on the back line of the service box. With a scream, Rina smacked the ball right back. She pushed just as hard as Mac did.

Even after Mac managed to get the upper hand, sending the ball just past the net, she knew it wasn't going to be an easy victory. Rina would make her fight for every last point.

The first set felt like a war, the two of them screaming across the court – using only the primal language of grotesque tennis grunts. But when the first set was nearly up at 6 - 6, 30 - 40, Mac ran to meet a slower ball, thinking she had more time to reach it. But as it bounced off the soft grass, a curve sent it just out of arm's reach.

“Point, Miss Singh.”

Rina pumped her fist as she headed to her bench.

Mac let her head fall slightly as she wiped her face with the massive Wimbledon towel. Its signature green and purple decal would have been recognizable anywhere. Closing her eyes, Mac tried to center herself. We’re two warriors. There has to be a weakness I’m missing. Something about my own game.

The pair couldn’t keep up at this rate without burning out. Neither of them would make it to the third set if something didn’t change.

Before Mac could finish her thought, the umpire called them back to the court. They swapped sides. This time Rina prepared her serve.

It was a decent serve, similar to Mac’s. But after losing the first point, Mac shook her head. Come on. Think of something.

She looked up to the crowd as she thought, catching a glimpse of the blue sky overhead. As her brown eyes lowered back to the court, Mac’s gaze caught on a familiar face. Trying to suppress the smile that so desperately wanted to come out, Mac peeled her eyes away from Taylor. She sat in the fourth row, sunglasses covering her eyes as she watched the match.

Mac’s heart raced as she tried to recenter. Mac adjusted her baseball cap.

Then it hit her as her eyes darted back up to Taylor.

I need to play like Taylor. Like I've got all the time in the world. It was perfect, the only thing that could defeat a warrior was someone uninterested in war.

Mac got into position, squatting low and letting air fill her lungs. When Rina's serve came toward her, Mac loosened her body. She sent it back with some power but let it fall short of Rina's prediction. Taking the point, Mac smiled.

She kept it up for the rest of the set, easily winning it. Rina was never sure when Mac would drop her speed or exactly where she would place the ball in the court.

As they headed into the tiebreak set, Mac could see Rina trying to strategize a new method. But without her coach's guidance, the young player was stumped. Mac swiftly made her way to 9 of the required 10 points to win the tie break set.

Victory was so close she could almost taste the \$2.8 million.

Mac readied her final serve. I'm certainly not going to win Wimbledon on a weak serve. With her full force, much of which she still had despite three sets in July heat, Mac careened the ball across the court.

140 miles per hour. Let's fucking go. Rina shrieked as she sent the ball back. She tried to hide the shock on her face, but Mac could tell that she was stunned. 140 was no joke this late in the tournament.

Mac smacked it back to Rina, leaving it somewhere reachable. Sprinting, Rina hit it back. She was gasping for air as sweat dripped down her entire body.

With each step, Mac's own sweat fell onto the grass. They continued like that for a moment, each of them fighting for their lives.

But eventually, Mac caught Rina in no man's land, tossing a ball slightly past her

near the baseline. Rina leapt over it, desperately trying to hit the ball between her legs as she ran. But when she sent the ball flying, it only managed to snag the net.

“Match, Miss Bennett.” The umpire announced.

Mac’s heart caught in her throat. She gasped. “Holy shit.” The crowd screamed so loud that no one could hear her cursing. Now it felt impossible to keep the tears in. A few slipped out as Mac keeled over, placing her hands on her weak knees.

From the corner of her eye, Mac watched Rina shake her head.

Rina smiled through her exhaustion. “Well done, truly.”

Mac got herself together, rushed the court and shook Rina’s hand. “Thank you, you too.”

After Rina shook the umpire's hand, she started her post-match interview. She thanks her family, coaches, and the audience.

As she spoke, Mac guzzled water. She tried to clean herself up as the court was transformed into a presentation area in a matter of seconds. Grand Slams didn’t waste time giving out their trophies.

Mac waved to her mom and Babs who were still too stunned to speak in the stands. Next to them, Mac saw Tommy, beaming with joy. She had earned herself a fat check, and with the secret she was keeping for Mac – every cent felt worth it.

But there was one other person Mac needed to see. She looked back to where Taylor had been sitting. Still there, Taylor smiled down at her. Her blonde hair was in a neat bun and she wore a simple, pastel dress.

As she met Mac's gaze, Taylor mouthed her praise to Mac, "All you. Always."

Mac's hand clasped her chest as the anchor made her way over to Mac.

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The anchor smiled, “Mackenzie Bennett, here we are again just a day later. How are you feeling?”

Mac giggled. “Like a million bucks.”

“Well I think there might be a reason for that.” The anchor teased. “Yesterday, you briefly thanked your coach – the notorious Barbara McConnell. How does it feel to win the same trophy she did just forty years later.”

Mac shrugged. “There aren’t enough words for a coach like Babs. She took a risk on a kid from a small town in upstate New York, coming out of retirement to coach me. And I’m just honored to prove to her that I was worth the gamble.”

Babs smiled down at her, but tried to go back to being stoic.

The anchor waved up to Barbara. “We see your mom right there too. Any words for her?”

“Yeah, thank you for driving me every weekend to Tennis practice. And for paying for my summer camps. It changed my life... in more ways than I can count and I’ll always be grateful.” Mac felt a lump in her throat grow bigger.

Behind them, the trophy ceremony was finished being set up.

Mac was ushered over to the lineup of officials. Standing there, was the Princess of Wales along with the organizers of the Women’s tournament and the President of the Women’s Tennis Association.

They presented the second prize plate to Rina who said a few words. Then, the Princess herself approached Mac with the first prize plate in hand. She shook Mac's hand and congratulated her on the victory. "That was quite the show."

Mac couldn't stop herself from blushing. "Thank you, ma'am. It was an honor to play."

They posed together with the plate in both of their hands. Cameras flashed around them, making Mac a little dizzy as she smiled. After she was given the plate, she was presented with her prize check of a whooping \$2.8 million dollars.

Before she knew it, the moment passed and Mac was grabbing her bag to head off of the court. When the cameras cleared, Taylor had disappeared.

A smile came back to Mac's face when she realized they could finally see each other again. Just as she was walking off the court, a text came to her phone from Taylor herself.

So, when can I see you, Champion?

24

Taylor

Taylor breathed in the smell of Mac's hair, a clean and unobtrusive smell. It felt like warm laundry on a Sunday.

Mac's head rested on her bare chest as Taylor stared up at the ceilings of her Central Park apartment. Mac turned to look up at her. "Do you seriously have to go training right now? Wimbledon was like four days ago."

With a sigh, Taylor kissed Mac's forehead and started to sit up. "Unfortunately, Kim is not a fan of my loss. So she's pushing me harder."

Mac bit her lip as she sat up, wrapping the plush duvet around her chest. She opened her mouth to speak but suddenly stopped.

Taylor whipped her head around. "What? You can say it."

"I was just going to ask, do you think you'd ever fire her as your coach?" Mac winced as the words came out.

Laughing, Taylor threw her workout shirt on. "You should try comedy next, Mackenzie."

Mac rolled her eyes. "Okay, but I'm being serious. She isn't good for your game. She can't get out of her own bubble enough to see the holes in your game."

Taylor pulled her tennis skirt over a black, bikini-cut panty. "You seemed to think my moves were good enough to steal for a Finals match."

Reaching behind her, Mac grabbed a pillow and tossed it at Taylor. "Because I don't use them every match. If I tried to pull that shit again, it wouldn't work."

Checking herself out in her full-length mirror, her skirt was short and she made a point to make sure Mac saw it. As she looked over her shoulder, lifting her blonde locks into a high ponytail, Taylor winked. "You just want me to stay in bed with you and think a new coach would let you."

Mac's eyes were glued to Taylor's ass. "I mean it's not a factor. But it's just a thought. I just want to show you off, take you to dinner with my newfound wealth."

There was a moment of silence between them as their eyes met. Taylor bridged the gap between them, hopping onto Mac's lap.

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Mac moaned as Taylor set her center over Mac's. "Hi."

Looking down at Mac, Taylor bit her lip. "There's also something I meant to talk to you about."

Mac wrinkled her forehead. "Oh?"

"Well, I also would like to go out with you. But that's..."

"Impossible." Mac smiled.

Scanning her face, Taylor could see the comment wasn't entirely a joke. "More or less. But I know of a place we could go."

Mac raised her eyebrow. "Tell me more."

Taylor licked her lips. "It's an underground sapphic bar, for celebrities. Everyone signs NDAs and turns in their phones at the door."

"Sign me the fuck up." Mac leaned into Taylor, kissing her chest.

But Taylor pulled back. "Well, that's not all that it is. It's also... like a sex club."

"What?" Mac's jaw dropped. "Taylor Young, you're a sick freak." A wide smile took over Mac's face.

Taylor's face flushed, worried that Mac was completely against the idea. But as she

tried to pull away, Mac wrapped an arm around her. This time, her gaze softened and she met Taylor's cool eyes. "Have you been before?"

Sheepish, Taylor nodded. "Just once, there's a bar separate from... that part. But I just watched."

Mac shifted in her spot, licking her lips. "Did you like it?"

Taylor smoothed her hair down. "Maybe."

Taking a minute, Mac thought about the idea. "And there's never been any leaks?"

"Nope." Taylor shook her head.

"I'm in." Mac smirked.

Taylor gawked at her. "Really?"

Mac grew more enthusiastic by the second. "Fuck yeah. A room full of hot, sapphic celebrities all boning. And they'll all watch me fuck Taylor Young? Yeah, I'm in. Besides, if you like it, I'll probably like it too."

Grabbing the back of Mac's neck, Taylor brought her in for a kiss. "You're so much more of a dork than you think you are."

Taylor lifted herself off of Mac. As Mac watched her walk away, Mac laughed. "Oh I know I am. I'm just a hot dork."

Taylor rolled her eyes as she scanned the room. As she finished collecting her things, she looked back at Mac. "Also, you're welcome to stay as long as you'd like. I'll leave a driver downstairs for you."

Mac smiled. “Thanks, darling.”

Before she walked out of the bedroom, Taylor turned to look at Mac one more time. The sun had just risen over the part, a bright orange glow filled her bedroom. Mac was gorgeous, her body soft and curvy – a sharp contrast from the muscular physique that appeared when she was training.

Seeing Mac like this, vulnerable and waiting, Taylor couldn’t stop herself from picturing Mac wrapped up in sheets like that every day.

Taylor shook her head and said a final goodbye before taking the elevator downstairs.

By the time Taylor was climbing out of the SUV at Kim’s estate in Long Island, the sun had fully risen in the sky.

She was later than she meant to be, being too absorbed in Mac to leave her bed any earlier.

As soon as the courts were in her line of sight, Taylor spotted her mother. She stood at the center of the courts, barking orders at the staff. Oh god.

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Kim turned to look at the approaching footsteps, rolling her eyes under her thick sunglasses. “The princess finally decided to grace us with her presence. You know, if I ever showed up this late to practice, my father...”

Taylor raised her hand. “I know. Sorry.”

Kim stared back at her. “You’re not even going to try to come up with an excuse?”

Looking up at the clear blue sky, Mac thought for a second before shaking her head. “I’m not sure I need one.”

Kim clenched her jaw before whipping around and hollering. “Practice partner, on the court. Now.”

“Mom, I haven’t even warmed up.” Taylor tried to suppress her laugh as she watched her mother unravel into a mess of anxiety.

She simply shrugged. “If you wanted to be ready, you should have been on time.”

Closing her eyes, Taylor could feel her heart rate elevating. All she really wanted to do was storm across the court, grab her mom by the shirt, and shake her out of this. Even when Taylor was young, Kim had never been this nuts. Something about this point in Taylor’s career had set her off.

Gritting her teeth, Taylor walked across the court. “Kim. I want a new practice partner.”

“What?” Kim whipped around, her forehead wrinkling as much as the botox would allow.

Taylor nodded. “You heard me.”

Shaking her head, Kim laughed. “Nikki is the best partner we’ve had for you. She’s a great match.”

“She lets me win.” Taylor started. Kim crossed her arms as she listened. “And the U.S. Open is full of women like Mackenzie Bennett. They’re all strong, fierce players with a lot to lose. And this is their home game. The ones who were barred by finances aren’t now. I need someone to challenge me.”

Kim scoffed. “Might as well just invite your littlefriendover here and let her kick your ass for free.”

Blood boiled in Taylor’s body, a seething rage building from her gut to her throat.

Taylor leaned in closer. “I’ve told you before to keep her fucking name out of your mouth. You don’t know a goddamn thing about me.”

“I won’t do it.” Kim crossed her arms.

Laughing, Taylor licked her lips. “Yes, you will. Because your legacy is tied to me and you’re my coach. You work for me.” She stared Kim down, long enough to see her mom start to shrivel. When she was satisfied, Taylor cleared her throat and headed to the net, waving Nikki in.

“Nik, do me a favor: make me work for every point.” Taylor put her hand on Nikki’s bare shoulder.

Nikki's eyes flicked behind Taylor to Kim who stood by the fence. After a second, she nodded. "Okay, Taylor."

She headed back to her baseline and prepared for a serve. Before the play was put into play, Taylor smirked. "Oh, and Kim, I'm going to the John McEnroe center to train twice a week."

Before Kim could try to fight her, Nikki served the ball. Taylor's body was lighter, flying across the court. It was just a benefit of finally getting the training she needed.

25

Mac

"Push it. Let's go." Babs leaned into Mac's face as she increased the speed on the treadmill. "You want another Slam, you have to earn it."

Mac bobbed her head as she pushed her legs off of the mill. Too out of breath to speak, Mac just ran. She kept her body tight, her stomach squeezed in and her shoulders back. Looking down at the LED screen, Mac sighed. It was already a five mile run.

"The second title is even harder than the first. Now all of these women have clocked you. They've watched your games. They're studying you." Babs kept going, pushing her further.

Once the ticker flipped to six miles, Babs smacked the emergency stop button and Mac slowed to stop. Winded, Mac smacked Babs. "You're such a bitch."

Babs shrugged. "A bitch that gets you trophies." She handed Mac a plain white towel from a stack of clean ones. Mac ran the fabric over her face, enveloping herself in

darkness for a moment as she tried to catch her breath.

But Babs smacked the black rubber of the machine. “Alright, next. Get on the bench.”

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Mac's forehead wrinkled. "I need a second."

Babs feigned a hem and a haw. "No, you don't. Let's go."

Laughing through the breaths, Mac followed Babs to the bench press. The weights had already been set. Mac laid down on the worn fabric of the McEnroe weight room's singular bench press.

Despite winning a bunch of money so far this season, Babs insisted that Mac continue training at the facility until the season ended. And Mac couldn't agree more. There was no point changing her routine and risking an injury or a loss at the BJK Cup.

She got under the bar and placed her hands on the cold metal. The smell of iron filled her nose as she gripped it. Just as Mac lifted the bar off the rack, Babs hovered her hands underneath the bar, ready to grab it if Mac dropped.

But the weights were set lighter than Mac's personal best. After running six miles, Babs knew better than to make Mac lift heavy. Instead, the goal was to get Mac's arms used to endurance training.

Mac pushed a few reps out easily. As she did, the door to the weight room swung open. Pushing up on the bar, Mac held at the top. But a speck of blonde appeared in the corner of her eye.

No fucking way. Mac lifted her head to look at the figure. It was Taylor.

The bar dropped onto Mac, having completely lost track of herself.

Babs gripped the weight and pulled it up to the rack. “Jesus, Mac.”

Mac tried to catch her breath, leaning back on the bench. After a second, she sat up and waved at Babs. “Sorry.”

Leaning down, Babs whispered. “You’re going to have to play it cooler than that. She can’t know that she gets under your skin.”

Mac nodded, keeping her face as serious as she could. But it was funny. It was less that Taylor got under her skin, and more that they got under each other's sheets. She let her eyes wander to Taylor who walked over to the stair master, Kim following behind her.

Mac tried to suppress her laugh. Kim had never looked more miserable in her life.

“See how she likes it down here with the plebians.” Babs gave Mac a pat on the back. “Take five, get some water.” Clearing her throat, Babs walked across the gym.

Mac took a drink from her water bottle as Taylor watched Babs approach through the wall of mirrors.

Babs walked right up to Kim and shook her hand. “It’s good to see you, Parker.”

Kim nodded, a fake smile taking over her face. “You too, Barbara. Your player has done well this season.”

“We’ve waited in the wings for her time.” Babs looked back at Mac. She turned her attention to Taylor, who walked on the stair climber. “And you’re playing as strong as ever, Taylor. No one knows when you’re going to slow down.”

Taylor laughed, the sound making Mac’s heart ache. “Hopefully, never.”

Babs said her goodbyes and walked back to her player. “Let’s get to the courts.”

Mac nodded and followed her lead, watching Taylor’s ass as she passed by. She felt like she might start drooling on the spot.

Once they had left the weight room and made it into the hallway, Mac turned to Babs. “Why did you do that?”

Babs wrapped her arm around Mac’s shoulders as they walked. “The match starts in the locker room. Kimberly needs to know that we don’t fear her. It’s all fun and games for us.” They walked a few more steps before Babs continued. “Besides, that bitch outed me back in the day and I love making her be nice to me.”

Mac laughed. “Did she really? I thought you did that press conference just because”

Babs shrugged. “I was tired of hiding myself, for sure. But my team told me that Kim caught me holding my “roommate’s” hand – who was already out. We could have tried to fight it again, convince the world I was in love with some random dude. But I was close to retiring anyway.”

Just before they reached the courts, Mac bit her lip. “What happened to her?”

“Oof,” Babs wiggled her eyebrows. “Very few people can handle that kind of scrutiny, especially if they don’t live in this world.” She gestured to the facility around them. There was regret on her face, something like sadness.

Before Mac could comfort her, Babs gave her a shove onto the courts. “We have work to do.”

Mac worked out with Babs until the late afternoon. But she had somewhere to be.

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In the locker room, Mac hopped in the shower and changed into street clothes. She had to run back to Queens, put on her nicer clothes and head out for the mystery date Taylor had arranged.

But as she threw her towel down to the bench, familiar footsteps approached from behind. Immediately, Mac felt eyes scanning her body. She lifted her head and met Taylor's icy gaze.

Mac's heart pounded under her gaze. Taylor looked hungry, like she could devour Mac whole.

Taylor shook herself out of it and went back to her own locker. She pulled out her bag and collected a change of clothes. Her normally slicked back ponytail was a mess of frizz and strays.

Jazz rounded the corner and stopped in her tracks. "Oh, hey." Her eyes flicked between Mac and Taylor.

Hot on her heels, Beatriz skidded to a halt at their bank of lockers. "Look who it is, the princess of tennis, gracing us with her presence."

Taylor rolled her eyes. "Nice, haven't gotten that one before."

Jazz leaned against the wall. "We're just surprised that you would want to get your hands dirty down here."

"Sometimes, playing in the mud is fun." Taylor winked. A few of the other players in

the locker room gave a collective “oooooh.”

Mac let her back rest against the cold metal of her own locker as she watched the group.

Shaking her head, Jazz stepped forward. “You think you can handle the heat this year?”

Taylor laughed, closing the distance. “I live in it. I just want to see what you kiddos get up to.”

Jazz looked back at Mac and laughed. “I mean, we all know what you get up to.” She winked as she gave Taylor a friendly nudge.

Taking her foot off the gas, Taylor shrugged with a sly smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. “I couldn’t possibly know what you mean by that, Jazz.”

The room chuckled as all the players dispersed and got back to their own lockers. It was rare for Mac to see Taylor like this. She probably hadn’t been around so many fellow players since their time together at camp over a decade ago.

After Kim found them out, she had kept Taylor away from all the people she thought were “corrupting” her daughter.

Mac checked the time. “Shit, I’ve gotta run.” Tossing her stuff in her bag, Mac caught Taylor’s eye.

“Anything fun?” Taylor winked, licking her lips.

Mac shrugged. “Eh, we’ll see if she can pull off anything original.”

A few hours later, a car pulled up outside of Mac's building. But it wasn't the black SUV's Mac had gotten used to.

Instead, it was an Audi RS GT. Mac approached hesitantly, unsure if she was about to get kidnapped by a mystery driver. But as she walked closer, the driver window rolled down and Taylor's face was revealed.

"You know how to drive?" Mac stuttered as she looked inside the car.

Taylor shrugged. "Get in and find out."

A smile took over Mac's face. Not wanting to risk anyone seeing them, Mac trotted into the car. She'd settled on black trousers, a white button down, and a black blazer. Her new-found wealth meant she got to go on a shopping spree just for this occasion. Of course, it had been difficult to explain to the salesperson exactly what the event was.

As she slid into the leather passenger's seat, Mac gawked at the car.

But Taylor's eyes were glued to her. "You look... incredible."

Mac blushed as she looked over at Taylor, dressed in a scoop neck, burnt orange dress. The fabric dropped just under her collar bone, letting Mac peek at her cleavage. "You're one totalk." At this rate, Mac couldn't be sure they'd even make it to their destination.

Taylor shrugged. "This old thing?" Before Mac could worry about timing, Taylor stepped on the gas and her engine roared.

As Mac grabbed the oh-shit bar, she examined the interior. "You didn't mention that you would drive." It was a pristine, black leather interior with a full, panoramic

moon-roof. The engine purred as it sped down the city streets.

Taylor shrugged, letting her hand rest on Mac's thighs. "Management requests we drive ourselves. The odds of a leak are smaller if we don't have to have drivers."

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Mac raised her eyebrows, she hadn't thought about that. But it was hard to think about anything with Taylor's strong hands gripping her thighs. Her entire body responded to the touch, sending a shiver down her spine to her already excited center.

Mac looked out the window. "Isn't it kind of boring driving it here though? You can't really go that fast locally."

Smirking, Taylor nodded. "That's why you take the highways." Before Mac could question it, Taylor took the on-ramp to the Midtown Tunnel. The road was basically empty, all the commuters had already made it home and very few people were driving into the city at nine on a weeknight.

The open night sky quickly disappeared, giving way to orange lights flicking past them as they careened through the tunnel.

A few seconds of flashing lights opened to the bright lights of Midtown. Taylor navigated the city by eye, not bothering to set up any sort of navigation. It wasn't until they headed into the East Village that Mac realized she had no idea where they were heading.

"How do I know that you're not taking me to some seedy murder club?" Mac eyed Taylor.

She shrugged, taking her eye off the road just long enough to wink at Mac. "You don't. I want to take out my competition."

Mac blushed, and held her hands to her chest dramatically. "Aw, you think I'm your

competition? I'm honored."

"I mean – yes. But I am still 1 - 0 on our scorecard." Taylor stopped using her turn signal as she made her way past Tompkins Square Park. The street lights got dimmer by the block.

Eventually, Taylor turned down East 6th street and stopped in front of an inconspicuous black door. She put the car in park, threw on her hazards, and turned to Mac. "You're still down for this? We can leave whenever you'd like and we don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Mac bit her lip. "I've been looking forward to this all week. You can bet your ass that I'm going in."

A smirk took over Taylor's face as she grabbed the door handle and got out of the car. She held a finger up to Mac, making her wait inside. Not sure what was happening, Mac listened to her orders.

But instead of disappearing behind some odd door, Taylor stopped by Mac's door and pulled it open slowly. "After you."

Mac stepped out, blushing harder. "What a gentleman."

Taylor shrugged. "We're on my turf here."

A valet approached the car. "Good to see you again, Miss Bennett."

Looking around, Mac tried to figure out why he was talking to her.

But Taylor interfered as she held out her keys. "You too. You can take her to the garage, please. And if you don't mind, could you plug her in to the charging ports?"

The valet nodded and ran around the car, quickly moving it from in front of the door.

Taylor approached the door but Mac was frozen in place. Turning to check behind her, Taylor waved Mac over.

Too stunned to speak, Mac followed her. “Miss Bennett? Again?”

Knocking on the door, Taylor rolled her eyes. “Reservation for two.”

The door swung open to a woman in a tuxedo. “Miss Bennett, welcome. And your guest?”

“Miss King.” Taylor gestured to Mac.

Mac raised an eyebrow at the on the nose nickname. The tuxedoed usher nodded and opened the door for them. She quickly shut the door behind her and held out two black velvet bags. Each of them had a tag with their aliases. “Please place your phones inside. Our security guard will do a quick pat down as well.”

Taylor smiled, gleefully tossing her phone in the bag and stepping toward the towering sapphic by the red velvet curtain. She threw out her arms and spread her legs. Something about her nonchalant body language made Mac’s breathing escalate.

Mac placed her own phone in the bag and approached the guard.

“Spread, please.” Her booming voice requested.

It was a respectful search, gentle and quick. Once the guard checked them out, she grabbed the velvet curtain and pulled it back for the bar to walk inside.

Taylor ducked her head as she walked in. Mac watched her hair fall off her shoulders.

She'd curled her blonde locks into perfect ringlets. With each step, they bounced to her beat. Mac smoothed her own hair, suddenly self conscious of her simple tight bun.

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But when she lifted her head, Mac tried not to gawk. “Jesus.” The bar was nicer than any place Mac had been before. Soft Edison bulbs gave the room a warm, orange glow. Black tile and crystal clear mirrors lined the back of the bar where only top shelf liquor was stocked.

Mac looked around the room at the patrons. A smattering of A-list celebrities all intermingling. Some of them were known queer people... but others...

“Try not to stare, it makes them uneasy.” Taylor whispered.

Mac nodded.

As they walked to two empty bar stools, Taylor wrapped her arm around Mac’s waist, pulling her in close.

Mac checked around herself, worried someone would see.

Taylor giggled. “Relax, that’s why we’re here.”

Trying to get comfortable, Mac lifted her arm around Taylor’s shoulders. It felt somehow unbelievably natural and wildly scary. She almost felt like throwing up. Mac had never touched Taylor without fear of being caught.

Taylor pulled out a stool for Mac and sat on her own. Her orange dress draped down, exposing her bare legs. Mac took her seat, pulling up her trousers as she did.

“Jesus, this place is amazing.” Mac looked at the gilded ceiling, reflecting the lights

glow back down. The entire place felt sultry.

Taylor smiled at her. "I'm glad you like it."

Mac shrugged. "I kind of assumed we'd walk in and they'd be people fucking on the sofas."

Leaning in, Taylor whispered over the soft jazz music. "That's upstairs."

A bartender, wearing a simple white button down and a black tie. "What can I get for you two?"

"An old fashioned for her and I'll take a vodka soda." Taylor smiled, placing a black membership card down. A gold emblem sat at the center. But the bartender took the card before Mac could make it out.

"What's that?" Mac tilted her head toward the card.

Taylor nodded. "Right. So you have to be a member to come here. They have to pay the bills to keep it open but if you pay directly, they could be shut down for prostitution. It's a work around."

Mac laughed. "I guess that works."

The drinks were delivered to them on a gold platter. Handing the drinks to their respective party, the bartender smiled and returned the card. "Pleasure to see you, Miss. Bennett."

"Okay, so explain yourself. Once was strange enough, now I need to know." Mac took a sip. The drink was divine, probably the best she'd ever had.

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Look, you have to use a fake name here and I wasn’t about to pick some random celebrity.”

Mac scoffed. “Like Miss King?”

Shrugging, Taylor took a cheeky drink from her glass. “To be fair, it’s quite fitting.”

The two laughed and finished off their drinks as they listened to the music.

“What do you even call this place?” Mac’s chest felt warm as the drink made her relax. She couldn’t stop staring into Taylor’s blue eyes, trying to stop her gaze from falling to the cleavage peeking out from the top of her dress.

Taylor laughed. “There’s technically no name. But we’ve taken to calling it The Box after some silly rumors started.” After a moment, Taylor placed her hand on Mac’s knee. “Do you want to take a look around?”

Swallowing her nerves, Mac nodded. “Please.” Of course, it was nerve-racking. But she had fantasized about it for a long time. Even before Taylor came back into Mac’s life, she had tried to find a way into an exclusive, inclusive space like this.

Taylor stood from her stool, holding out her hand for Mac to grab. When she took Taylor’s hand in hers, a jolt of electricity spread through Mac’s nerves. It still felt forbidden to touch her like this in front of people. But from the booths across the bar, other sapphics smiled at them. Did they recognize us?

Her questions were interrupted as Taylor approached another red, velvet curtain. She pushed it aside, holding it back so Mac could walk through. Inside, a tall staircase led to a dimly lit landing.

A coat closet waited to the right of the stairs.

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Taylor pulled a string and turned on an art deco lamp overhead. “There are masks down here if you’d like to obscure your identity.”

“Do you usually wear one?” Mac eyed the wall of disguises. Simple masquerade masks hung next to leather face coverings. Mac’s breathing grew ragged as she tried to decide.

Taylor pursed her lips. “Not usually, I like being myself. And more importantly, I like when you can see me come.” She planted a gentle kiss on Mac’s cheek.

Mac nodded, suddenly confident. “No mask it is.”

With a smile, Taylor turned toward the stairs and let her hand glide along the railing. As she took each step, her hips swayed from left to right. The bottom hem of her dress swished around her legs.

Mac’s center ached for her. Just the sight of her ass made her entire body tingle with anticipation. Taylor climbed the steps effortlessly.

At the top of the stairs, Taylor stopped and looked down at Mac. “Are you sure?”

Mac nodded, liking how it felt to have Taylor tower over her like this. “Yeah. Are you?”

“Absolutely.” Taylor pushed open an oak door, letting a cacophony of whimpers and moans leak into the stairwell. Mac’s heart raced in her chest, immediately aroused by the noise. It was a shock she hadn’t heard any of this from downstairs.

Up here, it was safe to look – wherever you wanted. Mac's eyes bounced across the room. One woman laid on her back. Between her legs, another sapphic thrust a strapon inside of her while another lowered their center onto her face.

Mac turned at the loud crack of a whip from another room. Under a red light, a gorgeous red head was strapped to a St. Andrew's cross as a leather-clad figure strutted around her. In the corner, a woman held a vibrator to her clit as she watched.

Taylor reached her hand behind her, for Mac to grab. Their fingers interlaced as Taylor led her to a quieter section of the second floor.

"How have you not gotten noise complaints?" Mac shook her head as she tried to process all that she was seeing. All she could think about was her clit throbbing between her legs.

Taylor wrapped her arms around Mac's neck, leaning in and hovering just a few inches from Mackenzie's lips. "That's what you're thinking about right now?"

Mac shook her head, swallowing hard. "Well, not entirely."

Looking around, Taylor smiled. "Do you mind if I get comfortable?"

Mac shook her head more vigorously than she meant to. Right there – in the center of the room – Taylor stripped off her dress. She let it fall to the floor, stepping out of it once it fell.

"Wow." Mac's jaw dropped. She wore a mesh, strapless teddy underneath.

Taylor tucked a curl behind her ear. "You like it?"

Mac nodded. "You're stunning." As she spoke, an onlooker from the main room

peeked inside. Taylor looked over her shoulder at their guest and waved.

Without another word, Taylor put her hands on Mac's shoulder and shoved her down onto the leather bench at the center of the room. Compared to the other spaces, this room was pretty tame. There was a wall of sex toys, a bench in the middle, and some sexy instrumental music playing in the background.

Mac moaned as her back thudded against the leather.

Looking down at Mac, Taylor bit her lip. "Do you like that someone can see us?" She towered over Mac, desire filling her eyes.

"It's about time someone did." Mac licked her lips, grabbing Taylor's exposed thighs and pulled her down. Taylor followed Mac's direction and straddled her. After a moment, the woman standing in the threshold went along her way.

But Mac and Taylor hardly noticed. Taylor's hand worked down Mac's buttoned shirt. With each one, Taylor peeled back the white fabric to reveal more of Mac's skin. A Calvin Klein, heather-gray bra held up Mac's breasts.

Taylor licked Mac's chest. "I like that."

Mac smirked, pulling Taylor's chin toward her own lips. "Good, it's all for you."

In one swift motion, Taylor peeled off Mac's shirt and tossed it onto the ground next to her dress. As she did, Mac reached around Taylor's back and unclasped her lingerie.

"I'm surprised you want this off so quickly." Taylor laughed as she lifted herself off of Mac's warm center.

Mac watched her hands slip the piece off. “Well, if you’re here to be seen, we should let them really seeallof you.”

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Taylor giggled as she positioned herself back on top of Mac. With her ass completely exposed, Mac brought her hand around to Taylor's cheek and gripped it with her calloused hand. Unable to keep herself away any longer, Mac let her other hand travel down Taylor's core and rub her pink folds.

"Fuck." A moan seeped out of Taylor's lips. She rocked her hips along Mac's hand, using the extra height from her heels to position herself on Mac's hand.

Mac looked into her blue eyes, watching as they struggled to stay open. She'd relearned Taylor's slit, every curve and fold. And each stroke brought Taylor more and more pleasure. As Mac leaned her head against Taylor's shoulder, her eyes landed on a spectator.

In the doorway, two women stood shoulder-to-shoulder. They smiled at Mac as their hands caressed their own clits. The sight made Mac whimper. She had waited ten desperate years to be seen with Taylor. And despite how unconventional it was, Mac was being seen.

"I need more of you." Taylor whispered in Mac's ear.

Mac looked around the room, her eyes falling on the large glass case full of toys. She turned her attention back to Taylor, her eyebrows furrowed.

Taylor smiled. "If they're in there, it means they're brand new. No one else has used them so it's entirely sanitary."

"Got it," Mac smiled. She helped Taylor off her lap and headed for the cabinet. An

eager smile took over her face. Taylor, naked with just her heels on, watched as Mac browsed the selection.

After a moment, she grabbed a long purple dildo. Holding it in her palms, she presented it to Taylor.

“Don’t you need a harness?” Taylor questioned. Between her words, moans seeped into their space from the other rooms.

Mac laughed and undid her belt, slowly pulling the leather strap from the buckle. Taylor licked her lips as she watched Mac. Once the belt was undone, along with the trousers clasp, Mac pushed the pants off her hips and down to the floor. Underneath, Mac wore a leather and metal harness. Her gray, Calvin Klein, boy cut underwear emphasized each piece of the strap.

Nodding, Taylor bit her lip and walked to the cabinet herself, selecting a metal bullet vibrator. She handed it to Mac.

Mac smiled. She placed the vibrator inside the small pocket of her harness. Next, she slid the purple toy into the center hole. Once it was in place, Mac tightened each strap and looked back at Taylor. She stood patiently in front of the bench, her hands clasped together behind her back. Her entire body was exposed for Mac... and anyone else who walked by.

Mac’s eyes wandered her body as she thought about how she wanted to fuck Taylor. Her nipples were hard but Mac couldn’t be sure if that was from the light draft in the room or from being turned on.

Walking closer, Mac looked down at Taylor’s legs. Tensed from her high heels, Taylor’s calves were toned and muscular.

When Mac got closer, she lowered herself toward the floor into a squat. She let her hands drift up and down Taylor's long legs. "I've always loved your legs."

Taylor blushed. "Really?"

Mac nodded as she brought her lips to Taylor's inner thigh, placing a gentle kiss. "They're so strong and pretty."

A whimper came from Taylor at the light touch of Mac's lips. "I'm glad you like them."

Mac stood back up, grabbing Taylor's waist and pulled her closer. She let her mouth meet Taylor's, her tongue playing at Taylor's lips.

Between sloppy kisses, Mac gave her command. "Get on the bench."

"Yes, ma'am." Taylor smiled as she sat down."

"On your hands and knees." Mac smirked back at her.

Following orders, Taylor rested her palms on the edge of each side of the bench. She lifted her feet off of the ground, letting them dangle off the back of the piece of leather furniture. Mac watched her, clenching her jaw. Once she was in position, Taylor's face was pointing toward the entrance to their little corner of The Box.

Mac walked around to her rear, eyeing Taylor's plump ass as she did. When she arrived behind her, Mac rested her hands on Taylor's waist. Her broad, muscular shoulders created a triangle with her center. It made Mac's mouth water, just looking at her.

"Are you ready?" Mac asked.

Taylor nodded, looking over her shoulder at Mac.

Gripping the silicone in one hand, Mac rubbed its tip along Taylor's folds. She moaned as it slipped into her slit without any help. "You're so excited for me." Taylor's pleasure was already coating the strap. Reaching into the harness, Mac clicked the bullet vibrator on. Taylor groaned as she felt the vibration through the toy.

Mac, eager to please her, let the strap slide inside. Her body welcomed Mac's strap, letting her thrust in and out.

Taylor started to moan, letting her voice echo off the walls of their room. The sounds of her pleasure started to draw attention from the other members. A few of them stepped through the threshold and watched as Mac gripped Taylor's hips.

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Looking up from Taylor's ass, Mac smiled at their small crowd. Among them were a world-renowned musician and her wife; an A-list movie star with her latest co-star. They watched with eager smiles as Mac took care of Taylor.

Mac used her grip to pull Taylor closer, sending the toy deeper inside her with each smooth thrust. Taylor's head dropped as the ecstasy of the moment took over her. But Mac slid her hand up Taylor's back and onto the back of her neck. With light pressure, Mac lifted her head. "Let them see you. Let them really see you."

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Taylor

The words alone were enough to make Taylor whimper but a primal grunt came from her chest when she met the onlookers' gazes. Mac smiled as her pleasure grew. With each pump of the toy, Mac's strap slid against Taylor's g-spot. The feeling of the small bump created pressure on Mac's clit.

As she moved the strap inside of Taylor, Taylor's hips pressed the bullet right back onto Mac's clit. She knew it would send a jolt of pleasure through Mac's body.

"Oh god, you're gorgeous." Mac moaned as the pressure began to build. As Mac guided her hips, Taylor made a point to slam her ass into Mac. All she wanted was for Mac to feel the same pleasure she did.

Her body was tense with excitement. Taylor could feel her peak just around the corner. She lifted her gaze again to the sapphics who had stopped to watch them. Her

pussy pulsed with excitement. Never had she felt so seen. It was an odd place to feel it, but these people may be the only ones in the world to witness her and Mac as they truly were.

Taylor groaned as she felt Mac pushing harder and deeper. She could feel Mac's body beginning to tremble as she thrust. The thought brought Taylor even closer to her own climax. Her body shook, her moans turning to low grunts as she focused on Mac's strap inside her.

Mac moaned. "I'm close." She gripped Taylor's hips, letting her nails dig into the skin slightly.

The light pain made Taylor shutter with pleasure. She felt her center tense around the toy, holding it in place as Mac's thrusts grew smaller. Her body shook as she looked back at Mac whose mouth hung open.

Meeting her gaze, Mac's face turned to surprise as her body seized up and she moaned. "Fuck." She screamed as she came.

Taylor smiled as her own body followed. She trembled as every muscle in her body tensed against Mac. Until, it finally released and the pressure dissolved. She let out one final groan as she leaned forward, letting the strap fall out of her.

Behind her, Mac collapsed onto her back. Her face meeting Taylor's glistening back.

"Are you okay?" Mac asked, releasing her grip on Taylor's hips and planting gentle kisses on her back.

Taylor nodded, sitting up slightly. Mac wrapped her arms around Taylor's waist, letting her warm hands rest on Taylor's stomach. "Better than ever."

When they had finished holding each other, Taylor and Mac slid on their clothes and made their way downstairs to the bar. As the night wore on, more and more people headed to the second floor. But Mac indulged in one more drink before the pair headed out.

As they sat at the bar, a mysterious woman approached them. She wore a stunning, emerald pantsuit.

Taylor smiled at her. "I was wondering where you were."

The woman laughed. "It's good to see you again, Miss Bennett." She extended her hand to Mac.

"Miss King, this is the owner of the club: Mistress Lavender." Taylor gestured to the woman.

Mac took her hand and shook it, her mind beginning to place the familiar face. Unless she was mistaken, the woman was a world renowned actress who had been in dozens of roles. Mac had grown up watching her films.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. You have quite the space here." Mac smiled, blushing as her mind jumped back to the second floor.

Lavender patted Mac on the back. "Well, I'm glad you've enjoyed your stay. We'd love to see you back here. If you're interested in a membership, give me a call." She passed Mackenzie a black business card. It had the same sigil that the membership card did. Mac looked down at it and raised an eyebrow: a sprig of lavender encircled by gold.

"Thank you." Mac tucked the card into her black blazer.

Just as quickly as she appeared, the woman vanished. Mac polished off her drink and smiled at Taylor. “Take me home.”

With a giddy smile, Taylor stood from her chair and linked her arm in Mac’s. The drive to Midtown would only take a few minutes and then they could wrap themselves up in each other’s arms.

Taylor hadn’t bothered setting an alarm the night before. Sunday mornings were the only day of the week she wasn’t training and she had every intention of spending it in bed with Mackenzie.

She rolled over, her eyes half open, and pulled Mackenzie’s naked, sleeping body closer. Her skin was warm and soft. In her half-awake haze, Taylor planted a few kisses on Mac’s exposed back.

Stirring, Mac groaned and nestled her head further into the pillow. Taylor drifted back to sleep.

RING, RING, RING.

Taylor's eyes bolted open as the phone by her bed rang out. The noise startled Mac awake. She rolled onto her stomach and threw the pillow over her head. "Jesus, what is that?"

Sitting straight up, Taylor cleared her throat. "Front desk." They never called, not unless Cam saw something important. Taylor grabbed the phone. "Hello."

Cam's voice came through the other end. "Hey, Kim incoming. If your guest is still upstairs, I would... get them out."

"Copy, thanks." Taylor hung up the phone and startled out of bed. She grabbed Mac's sweats from the ground. "Sweetheart, you've gotta go."

Mac sat up on her elbow, wiping sleep from her eye. "What's up?"

"Kim is on her way up." Taylor threw on a silk robe and ran to her front door, clicking the elevator button before Kim could. From inside her apartment, Taylor saw glimpses of Mac collecting her things.

Taylor hollered down the hall, "Toss your suit in the closet, I'll send it out for dry cleaning."

Mac slammed the closet door, her feet pattering against the wood floors as she careened around the corner.

The elevator door dinged as it swung open...

Empty. Taylor thanked the universe.

Mac slipped on her sneakers with each step, her duffel bag hanging off her shoulder. “What do I do?” The panic in Mac’s voice could have been heard from space.

Taylor grabbed Mac’s face, kissing her quickly. “Go down three floors to the regular hallways. Wait until the elevator goes back up to the Penthouse and then back down again. Then click the button and go down to the garage. Cam should have called my driver.”

Mac nodded, trying to absorb the instructions as her mind woke up. “Got it. See you later?”

Taylor smiled and gave her another kiss. “Thanks for last night. Get the fuck out of here.”

Stumbling into the elevator, Mac selected a random floor. The doors slammed closed and Taylor watched as the display screen ticked down floors. It stopped on the 45th floor and then continued down to the lobby.

Once it hit L, Taylor ran back inside. She scanned her apartment, messier than usual. Mac had started leaving some things there and Taylor needed to collect all of them in the next three minutes.

She ran from room to room, tossing Mac’s things into a vase. Her toothbrush, a random sock, the sex toys on the night stands. Before she knew it, a knock came from the door. Curse those stupidly fast elevators.

Taylor closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Coming.” She steadied her breathing

as she grabbed the door handle.

When the door swung open, Kim barged past. “Morning.”

“Hi. I didn’t think we had anything going on today?” Taylor followed behind Kim as she walked inside. Her sunglasses hid her gaze, making it impossible for Taylor to know where she was really looking. With each step, Taylor scanned the room for anything she may have missed – any sign of Mackenzie’s presence.

Kim shrugged, peeking inside the primary bedroom as she walked past.

Shit. The bed wasn’t made and both sides of the bed had the covers pulled back.

Kim raised an eyebrow, her jaw clenching. “We didn’t. Which is why you should be alarmed.”

Taylor swallowed hard. “What’s going on?”

Kim shrugged. “I’m not sure exactly, Taylor. I think you might be able to help me with that.” Before Taylor could respond, Kim turned her phone around. A headline from a gossip rag plastered the top of the article:

SECRET RENDEZVOUS?: TENNIS STAR, TAYLOR YOUNG, PLAYING AT PUBLIC COURTS COULD SIGNAL SECRET AFFAIR WITH MYSTERY PLAYER

Taylor laughed. “Mom, seriously? I thought there was a real problem.”

Furrowing her brow, Kim shook her head. “Don’t play cute with me.”

“Seriously,” Taylor walked toward the coffee bar, getting two cups of espresso

brewing, “It’s a gossip rag. That’s the most vague headline in the world. And it’s not even true.”

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Kim crossed her arms. “Taylor, I know when you’re lying.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “I was literally there to practice, you were with me.”

“I don’t know what happens in those locker rooms.” Kim grimaced as she looked out the window toward the park. By all accounts, it was a beautiful Sunday in July. But Kim had a special talent for ruining perfect days.

Shrugging, Taylor brought her mom the coffee. “I mean, you actually do. We banter, we change, we shower, we leave.”

Kim reluctantly grabbed the coffee. “Why did you want to go in the first place?”

“I already explained. They’re harder players, I need to learn around them.” Taylor sipped her own espresso. She couldn’t be sure if Kim was buying it but she would sell it until Kim had irrefutable proof.

Kim let out a deep breath, setting her cup on the end table. She walked closer to Taylor, leaning in and lowering her voice. “I know you think I’m some old nobody. But I know you. And I know you’ve been seeing her. I was going to let it go because I thought you were smart enough to hide it. But I will not let you risk your legacy for some country hick on a lucky streak.”

Taylor’s jaw tensed, the words cutting too deep. But she couldn’t find the words.

“You’re going to stop seeing her – no, anyone. At least until after the Open. Then you can go back to your other women.” Kim kissed her daughter on the cheek before

heading to the front door.

Taylor tapped her foot before blurting out. “What if I don’t?”

Kim laughed, not bothering to turn around. “I know you think you’re in love, my dear. But that fades. Your career, your legacy... that won’t.”

Her mom disappeared out of the apartment before Taylor could say anything else. She tightened her fist, her knuckles turning white. A part of her refused to believe anyone was even onto her.

So she threw herself down on the couch and opened the article. There was nothing of substance in the article but the comments were riddled with conspiracy theories.

One drew her eye:

We all know Young and Bennett have had a thing for a long time. Saw the way they look at each other. Shame Young is throwing her career away for someone like her.

Taylor tossed her phone into the cushions and leaned back. Her mind swirled with possibilities, all of them terrible.

Could I really lose everything?

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Mac

Mac stared at her phone. She tapped the table next to it. It was unlike Taylor to be so unresponsive.

Everyone and their mother in the tennis world had seen the article about Taylor's mystery lover. Over the last week, it was all anyone could talk about. Of course Mac knew that Taylor had been warned by Kim – that she knew Mac was who Taylor had been seeing.

Since the morning Mac had to sneak out of Taylor's place, they hadn't been able to lock down a time to see each other. Kim was tightening the reins.

But after a minute, Mac's phone buzzed with a text from Taylor.

I'm not sure when. Might not be able to sneak away until after the Open. I might be at McEnroe this afternoon but idk if Kim will let me hang around.

Mac bit her lip, trying to figure out what to say. She typed out a message and clicked send.

I'll be there, just text me if you want to split away.

The morning sun leaked through the alley that Mac's apartment overlooked. Once the lease was up, she'd finally be able to get a better view. As she waited for Jazz, Mac wondered what it would feel like to live alone.

She stood up from the dining table and put her dirty dishes into the dishwasher. Next to the sink was a stack of shake bottles. Mac laughed to herself. I definitely won't miss the mess these two leave.

Jazz threw open her door and barged into the living room. "Sorry, my alarm didn't go off." Mac knew it was a lie, having heard the blaring through their thin walls. But it didn't really matter, they were just a few minutes late.

Jazz tossed her hair up into a messy ponytail and grabbed her workout bag from the

coat rack. “Ready?”

Mac nodded. “Let’s do it.”

They jogged down the steep stairs and started their run to Randall’s Island. As they watched the brick buildings pass by them, turning onto the bridge to the Island, Mac wondered if she’d be able to make a run like this next season. Will the paps leave me alone or will I be followed like Taylor?

She couldn’t possibly know. For now, she had a small amount of anonymity left.

The run went quickly, the early August humidity warming up their joints.

Before they knew it, Mac and Jazz were slowing down just outside the center. Babs waited outside, stretching as she sipped her coffee.

Jazz and Mac parted ways and Babs led Mac inside. They took up the rubber court they’d booked up and got to warming up. Mac left the sound on her phone at full volume, just in case Taylor happened to text her.

Every few volleys, Mac would run to the bench and check. So far, nothing.

“You’re addicted to that thing.” Babs rolled her eyes.

Mac shrugged. “Sorry, just waiting for a message.”

Babs nodded and muttered under her breath, “Clearly.”

They continued like that for a good couple hours, Mac trying to absorb her coach’s

notes but not being able to get Taylor's face out of her mind.

But as a ball came flying at Mac from across the court, the phone finally gave its familiarding. Mac missed the shot, instead running to her bag.

"Seriously?" Babs groaned.

Mac waved her off as she opened the text from Taylor.

Here. Locker room is empty if you have a second.

Swallowing her nerves, Mac set down her racket. "Babs, I have to pee. I'll be right back."

"TMI." Babs crossed her arms, immediately suspicious.

Mac shoved open the swinging doors to the hallway. She was basically running toward the locker room. Using her shoulder, Mac pushed past the locker room door.

She started peeking down each aisle, looking for Taylor.

"Down here." Taylor called from the last row, recognizing Mac's steps.

When Mac turned the corner, Taylor smiled. But something about the look made Mac's heart drop. "What's wrong?" Mac got closer, her heart pounding in her chest. She put her arm around Taylor's waist.

Taylor shook her head, trying to shake the thoughts racing in her mind. "Nothing, Kim's just relentless. She's been up my ass about seeing you."

Mac nodded. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t apologize. You didn’t do anything.” Taylor smoothed her hair.

Scanning her face, Mac could see how exhausted she was. “Are you sleeping?”

Taylor shrugged. “Not well.” She pulled away and fidgeted with her bag.

Mac watched her move for a minute. “Can I ask you something?”

Taking a deep breath in, Taylor nodded. She looked up from her bag, her blue eyes turning a light pink.

“Were you serious about never coming out?” Mac forced the words out of her mouth. It was a question she had avoided asking. But now, she’d seen what Taylor was like when she could be herself. That night, at The Box, it was all Mac needed to feel to know where she really stood.

Taylor looked up at the ceiling, her cheeks filling with air. “I don’t know. Even just the rumors are relentless. The comments are...”

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“Horrible.” Mac bit the inside of her cheek.

“Yeah.” Taylor rubbed her forehead. “Maybe I can when I retire. But I don’t think Kim would keep coaching me if I really... said it.”

Mac nodded, sitting down on the bench in the center of the aisle.

Taylor tilted her head. “What’s going on?”

Sucking her teeth, Mac rested her head in her palms. “I really thought I could handle it.”

“I knew it.” Taylor sighed, starting to pace up and down the aisle. “I knew you couldn’t handle keeping it casual.”

Mac’s forehead wrinkled. “I couldn’t handle it? You’ve been using my last name as your pseudonym for years. I can’t keep it casual?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Come on, that’s not fair.”

“I actually think it’s very fair.” Mac scoffed, her leg beginning to shake. But after a minute, she got on her knees and closer to Taylor. She looked up into her eyes, a fierceness in them. “Taylor, I saw the way you felt in that bar – how it felt to hold my hand and not worry about getting caught. I think you want that more than you’re willing to admit.”

Taylor looked away, unable to hold Mac’s gaze. “You don’t know what you’re

talking about. I know you're new to being at the top. But I'm telling you, Mackenzie, they are nasty."

Moving her head to interrupt Taylor's gaze, Mac searched for her there. But even from outside Taylor's head, Mac could see Kim working inside her mind. The years of vitriol and doubt that Kim sewed. Maybe it's too late.

Mac stood up. "Taylor... no one – not a single pundit or commenter – has been nastier than your mom. I don't know what it will take for you. But maybe you're right: I can't handle it."

Taylor snapped. "Then stop wasting my time."

Shaking her head, Mac turned her back on Taylor and walked for the door. There was training to do and no one would win the U.S. Open for her. I can't spend the rest of my life waiting for Taylor Young.

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Taylor

In her mind, Taylor was screaming for Mac to come back.

But in the cement locker room of the McEnroe Center, Taylor crossed her arms and watched as Mackenzie walked out of her life. As soon as she heard the metal door slam, Taylor's heart sank.

All she could see was Mackenzie's face, ten years ago – the way she looked when Taylor broke it off. Somehow, Taylor might have cut the knife deeper this time.

I should've known not to get her involved again.

But she shook her head. It was too late now. All she could do was prove why she had to focus on her games. Her chest rose and fell as she stared into the blue lockers. She clenched her jaw before letting a scream out of her lungs.

The slam of her fist against the metal locker sent a ricochet of clang through the room.

Licking her teeth, Taylor steeled herself. She grabbed her racket and stormed out of the room. Waiting in the hallway, Kim revealed a sinister grin. "Shall we?"

Taylor nodded. "Did you get me a new partner?"

Kim nodded as they strode down the hallway, the sound of their steps syncing. "She's waiting for you outside."

The courts were full of duos practicing. Taylor introduced herself to her new partner, Renee and quickly went to her spot at the baseline.

With a ball in her hand, Taylor wrinkled her nose. She bounced the yellow felt against the rubber as she prepared her serve. Clenching her jaw, Taylor bent her knees and leapt into the air. She released a vicious grunt as she smacked the ball across the court.

Renee did her best to reach it but she couldn't make it fast enough.

Taylor took another ball from her pocket and prepared for another shot. As she bounced the ball, she peeked at Kim. Standing at the edge of the court, Kim stood with her arms crossed and a slight smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

With each serve, the entire training center turned to look at the beast screaming across the court. There was no more time to waste. The Open was three weeks away

and she needed to win it – no matter the cost.

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“So, what did you say to her?” Connor leaned in as he took a bite of his salad.

Taylor twirled her pasta on her fork. “I just told her I knew it was coming and that it wasn’t worth my time.”

Connor winced. “Ouch.” He watched her face carefully as they talked.

Shrugging, Taylor sighed. “I know. Probably should’ve cooled it but Kim is just so on my back. And if Mac doesn’t want to do this with me, I just can’t keep getting hurt like this. I was fine with bathroom hookups and noncommitments before she came back.”

Pursing his lips, Connor almost interrupted. But he stopped short.

Lowering her gaze, Taylor glared at him. “What?”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Weren’t you the one who invited her back in?”

Taylor tried to defend herself. “Yeah but she agreed to be casual. I told her I wasn’t coming out.”

“But you knew she still had a thing for you? Hell, you still have a thing for her.” Connor pierced romaine onto his fork and took a big bite of the caesar salad. It was his manager’s turn to pick the restaurant. The only thing sexier than sushi was a deluxe Italian meal that neither of them could fully enjoy because their tournaments were two weeks away.

Taylor pushed her food around. Of course she knew he was right. It was her fear all along, that she was roping Mac back into something she hadn't even gotten over herself. But the Princess of Tennis wasn't about to disappoint her entire family and lose her career.

After a few seconds of silence, Connor shrugged. "So, where are you now?"

Taylor bit her lip. "Kim wants to attack Mackenzie in the press. Not anything... problematic. Just to say I'm the obvious winner and she doesn't stand a chance."

Connor nodded, raising his eyebrows. "What do you think about that?"

"I don't know." Taylor looked around the room. She had been to this place once or twice. It was an upscale place on the West Side with lots of privacy. She continued, "It would kill the rumors."

Connor's eyes softened. "And?"

Taylor felt her throat tighten, her eyes filling with tears. "I don't think I can stomach hurting her any more than I already have. All of this has been my fault."

"I think it's more complicated than that." Connor held his hand out on the table.

Grabbing it, Taylor sighed. "Yeah, I was basically a kid. But if I had been bold then, and just came out... it would be ten years over by now. And I could be with her."

Connor shrugged. "We can't know any of that. Did you tell Kim you won't do it?"

"I told her I'd think about it." Taylor picked up her fork, a smirk growing on her face. "She's going to be pissed."

Mac

Mac skidded across the rubber. “Shit.”

From across the court, Babs shook her head. “Bennett, you’ve got to get there.”

“I know.” Mac hung her head as she caught her breath. She rested her hands on her hips as she looked up to the clear, August sky. As her head tipped back, she could feel the sweat dripping from her hair down her back.

Babs waved her to the net. “We’ve got two weeks until your home Grand Slam. What’s happening?”

Mac shook her head. “I don’t know. My body is just on a delay.”

Babs gripped the net’s headband and leaned in. “Some people are motivated by a breakup and others... not so much.”

Mac’s forehead wrinkled before she could stop herself. “How did you know?” As far as Mac knew, Babs had no idea that she’d been seeing anyone.

Babs laughed. “Because I’ve been you.”

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Chuckling, Mac nodded and walked to her bag for water. “When did you know?”

“Private jet to Wimbledon. Tommy didn’t have a flight on your itinerary.” Babs patted Mac’s back.

But her jaw dropped. “You knew it was Taylor?”

Babs rolled her eyes. “It was incredibly obvious. Kim wasn’t going to come after another player like that unless she felt like she had to. She felt threatened, specifically by you.”

Mac shrugged. She wasn’t wrong. Whenever new players popped up, most of the older pros just kept their mouths shut or offered some cliché compliment. But Kim had wanted Mackenzie to disappear ever since she was eighteen.

“She also hated that I chose to coach you. I refused her and Taylor. I think she saw me picking you as a dig at her.” Babs smirked.

Mac looked around the court. On all of the other courts, dozens of players were training. Some of them would be competing at the Open just like Mac in a couple weeks. But most of them were just getting started.

Babs sighed. “You and me, kid, we’re a lot alike. I just came before you so you could do it younger. But women like Kim, they don’t like anyone who gets in the way of the status quo.”

Mac nodded as she listened. Babs’s years of wisdom was something she rarely

verbalized. But she had been lambasted for her sexuality – forced to come out when another player threatened to out her. The next year she retired and hid away with her partner at the time. It wasn't until Mac appeared that Babs came out of the woodwork in any real way.

Babs squared Mac's shoulders with hers. "But here's the thing about heartbreak: you have to make it work for you. I don't need to know what happened between you and her. I need you to play like it's the last time they'll ever let you walk onto that court." With a smack, Babs asked, "Got it?"

A smirk built on Mac's face. "Got it."

They headed back onto the court. At the baseline, Mac shook off her nerves. This time, when the bar careened toward her, she hustled to meet it and smashed it across the court.

That's more like it.

Mac felt the rumble of the music deep in her chest. A crowd of sapphics moved around Henrietta's, cycling between the bar, the bathroom, and the dance floor.

Jazz and Beatriz jumped to the beat, belting out the lyrics of LAWSON's latest hit. Mac bobbed along, trying to suppress the yawn in her throat. All of them were stone-cold sober, too close to the U.S. Open to take a sip of alcohol.

"When's your photoshoot?" Beatriz yelled over the music.

Mac squeezed her eyes closed as she thought about the question. "Next week. We settled on the film photographer."

Beatriz nodded. "That's going to be fucking sick. You're gonna look fucking hot in

those, dude.”

Shaking her head, Mac just laughed. Mac was in better shape than she had been in years, despite her breakup making her feel like she wasn’t making any progress.

A group of women came closer to Mac’s circle, one of them kept eyeing Mac. Beatriz slapped Mac’s bicep, “Yo, you want me to wingman?”

Before Mac could say no, Jazz and Beatriz were moving toward the short brunette.

“Have you met Mac?” Jazz shouted over the music.

The woman shook her head as Jazz pushed Mac closer.

“Hey.” Mac waved as she stood next to the woman.

Once Jazz and Beatriz went back to their song, the woman laughed and leaned closer to Mac. “I actually do know you. I watched your match.”

Mac put her hand in her palms. “Oh god, that makes this so embarrassing.”

She waved off Mac’s concern, “I’m Victoria.”

“Mackenzie, obviously.” Mac shook her hand. But when she held the beautiful woman’s hand, all Mac could think about was Taylor’s soft grip. “I’m going to grab a drink, I’ll be back. It was nice meeting you!”

Pushing her way through the crowd, Mac felt her chest tightening. She was furious at Taylor. It took Mac nearly a decade to feel like she had gotten over the heartbreak, years of searching for that feeling in other people to accept that she might never feel that electricity again. And it had faded enough that Mac could convince herself that it

was just a dull flicker.

But Taylor had pulled her back, forced her to feel the heat of their fire all over again.
And now, Mac could only picture her when her eyelids closed.

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When her eyes opened, just a few feet from the bar, Mac's eye was drawn up to the TVs above the bar. Right there, like the ghost of gay bars, Taylor Young's face was plastered to Sports Central. She was leaving an Italian place with Connor Garcia.

Luckily, the subtitles were off. Mac might have to run out of the bar if she had to stomach a word of those misogynistic pundits. Rumors had already been swirling that Taylor's team would come after Mac with some bad press. Mac couldn't imagine what they would bother with

She ordered a ginger ale, tipping extra for the simple drink.

The only comfort Mac could find was knowing that in a few weeks, when the Tennis season was over, she wouldn't have to see Taylor's stunning face plastered all over this city. Maybe then Mac could find some peace.

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Taylor

"Thanks." Taylor grabbed the towel from the ball boy. Her chest was red from practicing.

Kim shook her head. "We're not done."

Rolling her eyes, Taylor threw the towel over her shoulder. "I'm done. We've been at it for three hours."

“You’re still dropping your racket too low. You cannot keep doing that, you’ll hit the net.” Kim’s nose wrinkled into a sneer.

Taylor chuckled. “Yeah, I got it. Thanks.” Before she could insist on doing more, Taylor started walking toward the rubber courts exit. A warm breeze blew off the ocean water, relaxing Taylor’s weak muscles. She knew that her body was about to fail. And if she pushed past that point now, she’d risk an injury before a major tournament.

As she walked up the gravel path toward the pool, Taylor heard Kim’s rushed footsteps trailing behind. “Taylor Ann, wait for your mother.”

“Are you mom or coach right now?” Taylor quipped, clenching her jaw.

Kim gripped her shoulder and turned her around just as Taylor reached the crest of the hill to the infinity pool. “I am always both. Have you thought about the PR campaign?”

Taylor bit her lip. The last few weeks, she’d been unable to hide her frustration with Kim. But she also knew that Kim held her career in the palm of her hand. But Connor’s questions echoed in her head. I reopened the door.

Taking in a deep breath, Taylor rolled back her shoulders and glared at her mom. “I did. I want you to leave her alone.”

“Taylor...” Kim stammered.

Taylor raised a finger. “I have done enough to Mackenzie. If I’m going to beat her, I’ll do it fair and square. There’s no need to give her more of a complex than I already have.”

“But does it hurt to have insurance that you’ll win?” Kim’s jaw was clenched tighter than Taylor had ever seen it. It was hard to imagine she had any teeth left with all the jaw grinding she did.

Taylor shook her head. “No. I’ll beat her. And if I don’t, she’ll earn it.” Before turning back toward the pool, Taylor leaned closer to her mother and lowered her voice to a whisper. “If I catch even a whiff of this in the press, we’re through. Do you understand?”

Kim crossed her arms. “You can’t fire your mother.”

Looking up to the sky, Taylor nodded. “I can fire my coach.” She turned on her heels and headed to the pool. Without looking back at her mother, Taylor tossed her towel on the lounge – followed by her shirt and shorts.

In two graceful strides, Taylor leapt off the edge of the tiled pool’s edge. She dove into the water, letting her body sink to the bottom. When her feet made contact with the cool stone, Taylor’s eyes closed. Darkness enveloped her as her joints cooled in the water.

But behind her eyelids, a world of plush sheets, soft limbs, and delicate kisses waited for her. It was the closest to Mac that she could get. Now it felt less about protecting her career and more about protecting Mac’s heart.

Taylor’s mind flashed to images of the two running through the Catskill woods together. Twigs snapped under their feet. Giggles echoed through the trees. The leaves overhead covered the glaring sun, creating a cool oasis from the relentless summer sun. When they broke through the treeline, they’d grab each other’s hands and leap into the water.

The splash in her mind jolted Taylor’s eyes open. She bent her knees and propelled

herself to the top of the pool.

She gasped for air as she broke the water's surface. "Fuck." Taylor's hand clasped her chest. The tension for the coming Open felt like it was bubbling inside her. If she and Mac ended up in a match together, Taylor couldn't know what the outcome would be.

Can I really stand across the court from her and play like she's meant nothing to me?

She had a feeling the answer wouldn't come to her until she walked out onto the rubber – until they shook hands and took their positions. Until that moment, Taylor had to believe that she could pull it off.

Mac

Mac arrived at the Billie Jean King Tennis Center early in the morning. It had been just under a year since the last time she pulled into this parking lot. Last time, she hadn't even made it past the qualifiers.

But this time, she was a seed in the first round. She got out of the car, slinging her racket bag over her shoulder. As soon as she walked toward the entrance, Mac spotted a tall person, holding a few black bags.

Mac smiled at them and extended her hand. "Hey, you must be Drew. I'm Mackenzie."

Drew smiled and shook her hand. "It's great to meet you. You know, they've been playing your matches at Mary's and all of us have been watching."

Guiding them into Arthur Ashe Stadium, Mac blushed. "That's very sweet of you. It's nice to know my community has my back."

Drew nodded. "I've already set up most of my stuff on the court so we should be good to go." As they walked down the player hallways – which were completely desolate just a week ahead of the Open – Drew fell back and started taking pictures of Mac.

Mac whipped her head around. "Should I, like, pose?"

Drew shook their head. "No, act like I'm not here. I want to capture how you feel

here.”

“So... like throwing up?” Mac laughed, her head tilted slightly over her shoulder. Drew snapped the picture.

Before long, Mac was emerging from the player tunnels and onto the bright blue court. She stopped in her tracks as she looked up into the stands.

“Have you ever been here?” Drew asked as they walked around Mac and captured her gawking. The light caught her eyes and lit them up into a fantastic amber.

Mac shook her head. “Just in the stands.” Scanning the rows of seats in the nose bleeds, Mac pointed up to the top deck. “My mom took me one year to watch the finals. It cost her an arm and a leg just to sit all the way up there. But man... watching those women fight it out on the court. It was over for me then. One of the two great loves of my life.”

Drew smiled at the story, their heart strangely warmed. “One of two?”

Licking her lips, Mac shrugged. “Maybe I’ll buy you a drink sometime and we can talk about the other.”

Taking the hint, Drew got to work. They started to pose Mac all across the court, asking her to run through her serve, forehand, and backhand.

“That’s perfect.” Drew hollered across the court of Arthur Ashe as Mackenzie took another swing.

Sweat was dripping down Mac’s temples – just enough to show her hard work but not so much to be gross. After a minute, Drew’s camera made a strange click and they yelled again. “Alright, let’s take five?”

Mac nodded and watched as they jogged back to their equipment bags. She hadn't realized just how much gear went along with being a photographer. While she waited, Mac took another look at the stadium. It was probably a good thing that Tommy had booked this at the BJK Center. This way, Mac wouldn't be as nervous coming on to the court in a week.

As she waited, more press and players started to funnel through the stands. Mac jogged to her bag and took some water, hoping to steady her breathing and calm down her sweating. After she caught her breath, Mac watched Drew's gaze wander off into the stands. It was a look Mac was all too familiar with these days.

She came up behind them and smiled. "You good?"

Tilting their head, Drew squinted. "I'm good, why?"

With a shrug, Mackenzie laughed. "You're definitely not."

Drew rolled their eyes. "Why do you care?"

"Look, when you play out there, you start to read people. You have to. You need to take advantage of their bad days, of their overconfident days. Of their heartbroken days." Mac's voice trailed off as her gaze caught on something. Her heart rate escalated within seconds as she watched Taylor Young walk onto the Court, a string of paparazzi following behind her.

Trailing even further behind, was none other than Kimberly Parker.

Noticing her gaze caught on something behind them, Drew turned to look. After a moment of staring, Taylor's head tilted down toward the court. Her thick sunglasses stopped Mac from being able to see much.

But her eyes lingered on Mac... longer than they should have. Mac felt a smile teasing the corners of her own lips. How can I still want her?

“What’s your point?” Drew tried to bring her back to the court, recognizing something in her gaze.

She needed these photos to be just right. Because she may never know what was really going through Taylor’s mind. All she could do was win this match. Mac nodded, centering herself. “My point is: I can tell you’re missing someone. And as much as I feel you, I need you here with me. So if we gotta talk about it, let’s do it.”

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Drew hemmed and hawed for a second before relenting. “The truth is, I fell for this woman that I didn’t think I had anything in common with. And I screwed it up to take this job.” Drew lifted their camera and grabbed a few shots of the court. Mac could only assume it was some sort of B-roll.

With a nod, Mac scrunched up her face. “I... get that.” Her eyes looked back to Taylor, who whipped her own head back to Kim and the press following behind her. “And the thing is, I’m not sure any job is worth losing someone like that.”

“Me either.” Drew clenched their jaw. “What do we do?”

Laughing, Mac shrugged. “I’d be lying if I said I had the answer. But I think we have to make it right, at any cost. The fuck is the point of winning if no one’s in your court at the end of the day?”

They only took a few more shots as Taylor disappeared behind them. As soon as Drew got what they needed, Mac shook their hand and said goodbye. She slung her racket bag over her shoulder and ran into the locker room. Looking over her shoulder, Drew was making a call.

She better be there. Mac jogged down the slight slope of the tunnel, gaining speed faster than she meant to. A few seconds later, she skidded to a halt outside the women’s locker room. She pushed open the door and scanned the aisles for Taylor.

“Come on,” she muttered under her breath. By the time she reached the last aisle, Mac assumed she must have missed her.

Until she saw the flowing blonde hair and thick sunglasses.

She stopped in her tracks, chuckling. “Sunglasses inside is a choice.”

Taylor swallowed hard. She put her hands in the back pockets of her linen trousers.
“Hi, Mackenzie.”

“We’re back to the full name, are we?” Mac smirked as she walked closer.

Taylor shook her head. “What do you want?”

Mackenzie shrugged. “I just wanted to tell you that I don’t believe you.”

“What?”

Mac nodded. “Yeah I think you’re full of shit.”

Taylor pulled off her sunglasses. “Do you want to explain yourself or are you just going to be nasty?”

Catching her breath, Mac stared into Taylor blue eyes. They were a little puffy and red. Mac pursed her lips. “I think you will come out. I don’t believe that you’re satisfied with your life looking like this.”

Taylor scoffed. “Okay, Mac. You are welcome to believe whatever you’d like.”

Mac took another step closer. “The thing is, I told myself that I was crazy to believe you still wanted me. For years, I convinced myself that it was really over. And then you walked right back into my life.”

“That’s not...” Taylor tried to deny it.

“But the thing is, I saw you at the bar. I watched your face when you felt safe enough to hold my hand and kiss me in front of people you trust.” Mac shook her head. “And I know that you can’t walk away from the way that feels.”

Taylor crossed her arms. “Mac, I told you: I’m not coming out. And it’s okay that you’re not okay with it. But we have to let it go.”

Mac nodded, raising a finger. “Right. You’re welcome to. I’ve just decided I’m going to wait for you. I won’t date you while you’re in the closet. But I know there will be a day where you change your mind. And when that happens, I’m going to be waiting on the other end of the line.”

Taylor clenched her jaw, tears welling at the corners of her eyes. “Mac, that’s insane. There are plenty of other women who are ready for you. Beautiful, outpeople who you deserve to love.”

Sighing, Mac sucked her teeth. “But that’s the thing. I’ve tried that. And none of them are you.”

She took one final step, leaving just a few inches between them. Even there, in the locker room, Mac could feel the electricity between them. How could I go the rest of my life and never feel this again?

Looking down into Taylor’s eyes, Mac’s gaze softened. “So, whenever you’re ready, give me a call. I know you’ll keep my number.”

Taylor opened her mouth to speak but stopped herself as Mac smiled at her. Taking a few steps back, Mac kept her eyes on Taylor until she turned her back and walked out of the locker room.

Maybe it was crazy – to put all of her cards on Taylor Young – but Mac couldn’t stop

herself. She couldn't risk missing out on the other great love of her life.

Taylor

Mac's words rang in Taylor's ears for the following week. Even as she was moving into her hotel room at the InterContinental Barclay. A part of her always felt ridiculous, taking a room at a hotel just a few blocks from her actual apartment.

But there was something about the atmosphere of the hotels during an Open that prepared Taylor for her matches. There was no relief from the competition.

And this year, Taylor was looking around every pillar and corner. She knew it was a bad idea, but she just wanted one more look at Mac.

Her bags were loaded onto a cart and shuttled up to her room.

The manager at the front desk, Simone, smiled at Taylor. "You've been booked into the Vanderbilt Penthouse with a private terrace. Shall I show you to your room?"

Taylor nodded as she came around the desk and walked Taylor to the elevators. While they waited, Taylor closed her eyes and listened to the buzzing of the lobby. Dozens of players and their teams bustled through the lobby. Most of them were from out of the country, enjoying New York City between matches.

The ding of the elevator startled her out of her meditation. "This way, Ms. Young."

Taylor followed her lead, riding the elevator up to the penthouse. Simone opened the door of the Suite for her and gave a quick tour. But Taylor was familiar with the unit, having stayed here most years.

After Simone left, Taylor started moving her bags around the place. She placed her suitcase inside the primary bedroom, with its slightly garish gray wallpaper. But it had a stunning view of Manhattan.

After she settled in, Taylor sat down on the couch. She turned on the TV and flipped to Sports Central.

“Exciting start to the U.S. Open here as the brackets have been released.” One anchor announced.

The screen was taken over by a bracket sheet. Scanning for her name, Taylor found herself on it and sighed. Mackenzie was on the other side.

“Shit.” Taylor rubbed her temples as a headache dared to rear its head.

Another pundit smiled. “This could mean that we finally end up with a Young vs. Bennett showdown.”

“Well, a rematch.” Another pundit interjected. “Young took care of the underdog pretty easily in France. Can Bennett handle the heat?”

Taylor leaned back on the couch, letting the plush cushions absorb her. They’d both won at least one Open this season. But Taylor knew more than the pundits did. Mac had been training harder than ever, gaining access to more and more resources as the money from her previous wins finally hit her bank account.

Biting her lip, Taylor shrugged. She’d also changed up her training routine. At this point, she couldn’t be sure who would come out on top in their matchup.

The worst part was, Taylor felt guilty even considering the match. A part of her hoped one of them wouldn’t make it to the Finals, so they’d never have to find out

who would win. But she knew what that win would do for Mackenzie.

And honestly, Taylor needed the win too. Retirement wasn't too far at this point in her career. Her confidence had been shaken this season and she needed something to build herself back up.

Taylor swallowed the lump in her throat, turning the TV to mute.

After pacing around the room for a while, Taylor walked out of the Suite and went down to the lobby. Kim never bothered to stay at the InterContinental, instead opting for the commute from their place in Long Island to Queens.

But Gerald did decide to stay there, hoping to be a support for Mac.

As Taylor moved through the lobby, she looked for a place to sit. She settled on a spot at the bar, which had a nice view of the lobby.

With a coffee in hand, she watched for Mackenzie. Eventually, she came strolling into the tiled lobby. Babs walked behind her, typing on her phone. They started checking in. As the receptionist moved along the process, Mac's eyes wandered around the lobby.

Her head stopped swiveling when her dark eyes landed on Taylor. Shifting in her seat, Taylor lifted her chin toward Mac. All she wanted to do was run across the lobby and hold her. But now wasn't the time.

She still wasn't sure how she felt about Mac's words in the locker room. By all accounts, Mac deserved a whole lot better than Taylor could give her.

Babs followed Mac's gaze, glaring at Taylor. She gripped Mac's shoulders and redirected her toward the elevators. Before Taylor knew it, Mac disappeared into the

elevators.

Taylor bit her lip. Just wait until the tournament is over. Then you can reevaluate.

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Mac

The first three rounds of the U.S. Open sped by. And as Mac sat in her cold plunge, she shook off the fourth round.

“Mackenzie Bennett is overperforming all of her previous metrics.” A pundit shook her head.

Another commentator scoffed. “I mean her unforced errors are down by massive percentages. I can’t say I’ve seen a player perform like this in quite some time.”

Babs smiled as she watched the TV in the locker room.

Submerged in a cold plunge, Mac eyed her. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I’ve just made it to the quarterfinals, I still have to win two more times before I’m even in the Finals.”

“I just want to watch you kick her ass.” Babs crossed her arms. “Mostly to stick it to Kim. Taylor is nice enough.”

Mac laughed, sinking deeper into the tub. Her joints ached from the cold but it was a welcome relief from the direct, late August sun. She’d played mostly in the Louis Armstrong Stadium and the Grandstand. Her rank was still too low for the organizers to justify letting her take the Arthur Ashe spot.

Babs’s timer sounded and Mac lifted her sore body out of the tub. Mac grabbed the towel from the rack next to the tub and wiped herself off.

“Look, if I face Taylor, I will kick her ass. But I won’t be happy about it.” Mac shrugged. “I’ll be happy about Kim though.”

Babs patted her back and nodded. “Are you going back to the hotel?”

Mac nodded. “I’m going to order a stupid amount of room service and pass out.”

“That’s what I like to hear. See you tomorrow for training.” Babs headed out of the locker room and disappeared.

Mac collected her things and took another look around the locker room. As she thought, Mac had an idea. She opened her phone and typed out a message:

My room, one hour. Room service and TV?

She sent the text while leaving the locker room and going to her car.

A little over an hour later, Mac heard a knock at her hotel door. She ran to go answer it, a giddy smile on her face as her robe pillowed in the gust of wind.

She swung the door open and hugged her mom, who stood on the threshold. “Hi, Mama.”

Piper wrapped her arms around her daughter and smiled. “You did so well today.”

Mac released her tight grip and held the door open for her mom. “Come on in.”

Stepping inside, Piper gawked at the Suite. “Holy shit.” The entrance opened up to a small living room, a dining table, and a view of Lexington Avenue.

“I know, right?” Mac smiled. It was the nicest room she’d been put up in yet.

“Weirdly, there’s only TVs in the bedrooms so we’ll have to have dinner there if we want to watch something.”

Piper waved her off, staring at the silk rugs scattered throughout the Suite. “It feels like it should be against the law to eat something here. It feels like a museum.”

Another knock came from the door, this time an unfamiliar voice called out, “Room service.”

“Eee!” Piper squealed as she ran to open the door. As soon as she did, a cart full of food was wheeled inside and set up next to the bed.

“Thank you.” Mac smiled, handing the bellhop a fifty dollar bill. She grabbed the TV remote and climbed on top of the duvet. “Real Housewives or Under The Sea?”

Piper rubbed her chin. “Housewives. I want to feel like a glamorous divorcee.”

Mac laughed as she selected the channel and opened up the food. Most of what she’d ordered for herself wasn’t all that fun, trying to stick to her tournament diet as much as possible. Instead, while she ate, she eyed Piper’s dishes.

Each bite was more delicious than the last. Mac dug into a salmon filet that melted in her mouth.

When the plates were empty, Mac leaned back into the mountain of pillows. The TV went to a commercial break.

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“How are you feeling about all of this?” Piper asked.

Mac shrugged, trying to hide her hesitations. “Good, it couldn’t be going better.”

Piper nodded, staring at the screen. “Taylor’s still in.”

Whipping her head around, Mac eyed her mom. “How’d you know?”

Piper shrugged. “Well, I always knew about you two but Babs told me about the whole situation.” She gestured to the entire room.

Mac rolled her eyes. “She’s got a big mouth.” Biting her lip, Mac’s forehead wrinkled. “You always knew? Even before the whole first breakup?”

Piper smiled. “Of course I did. You two... it was very clear the first time you introduced me to her. But I am a little surprised that you went back there after everything that happened.”

“I just never stopped thinking about her.” Mac shrugged, grabbing a pillow and holding it to her chest.

“I felt that way about your dad.” Piper’s eyes stared off wistfully. “It’s a once in a lifetime feeling.”

Mac debated how much to say, squeezing her eyes together. “I told her I’d wait for her.”

Piper turned to look at her daughter. “What do you mean?”

Sighing, Mac rolled onto her side. “A week ago, I ran into her at the Arthur Ashe and I told her in the locker room that I knew she wasn’t happy in the closet. I told her there wasn’t anyone else for me and whenever she decided to take the leap, I would be here.”

“Wow.” Piper raised her eyebrows, blinking quickly. “That’s quite the confession.”

Mac nodded. “Yeah.”

Piper patted her daughter’s arm. “So, the ball’s in her court, so to speak.”

Shaking her head, Mac couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “Very funny.”

Silence washed over them as their show continued. But after a minute, Piper bit her lip. “I know this might be a silly thing to ask. But you’re sure you want to wait for her?”

Mac shrugged. “I don’t feel like I have much of a choice. I’ve dated around for years and no one makes me feel like she does.”

Piper nodded. “And you can get over her not choosing you... twice?”

Laying back in the cushy bed, Mac sighed. “Unfortunately, yeah.” Even if it was hurtful, Mac knew exactly why Taylor had behaved the way she had.

Piper reached across the bed and rubbed her daughter’s hair. “Then, I’ve got your back as long as you promise not to go easy on her.”

Mac laughed. “I won’t.”

Sweat dripped down Mac's face as she slammed the ball across the court, screaming out a grunt. With precision, the ball fell just before the line. It was nearly impossible for Mac's opponent, Sonia Novak, to return it.

The umpire made the call, "Point, Miss Bennett. Match Point."

Each player returned to their baselines. Mac couldn't stop herself from smiling. The audience in the Louis Armstrong Stadium was ecstatic. Between shots, they cheered with fervor for Mac. All they wanted was for their local underdog to take home the championship. And if Mac could pull off this victory, she'd have just one more match until the U.S. Women's Tennis trophy was in her hands.

Sonia bounced the ball against the rubber court, preparing for what could be her last serve of the Open.

Mac bounced back and forth on her feet, keeping her knees warm between shots. The crowd settled as Sonia signaled she was ready to serve. A heavy silence fell over the Stadium. Mac narrowed her eyes, gluing them to the yellow felt 78 feet away.

Leaping into the air, Sonia yelped as she sent the ball toward Mac. Before the ball landed, Mac was already in position. The serve had just passed 115 miles per hour. Mac gripped her racket, lowering it below her hip and followed the shot through toward the net.

A pop resounded off the racket as the ball went flying back where it came from.

Sonia gave another grunt as she raced to reach the ball, inaccurately placing it close to Mac. Easily, Mac hit the ball over the net. She forced Sonia to run from end to end. With each volley, Novak's returns grew weaker and more accurate.

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Back corner. Mac eyes the spot as she aligned her body to smack the ball to the very edges of the court. It was a risk, just a fraction of extra speed or one degree of inaccuracy on her form could make the ball pop outside the lines.

But if Mac wanted to have any energy left to play the Championships the next day, she had to end this match now.

She watched the ball with baited breath as it soared toward the desired spot. As it landed, the audience gasped, assuming it would land outside the lines.

Even from across the court, Mac could tell she'd pulled it off.

"Game, Miss Bennett." The umpire called. The crowd erupted with excitement as Sonia shrugged her confusion. With the game called, a close up of the shot appeared on the display courtside. The ball had landed just a few millimeters from the lines.

Mac pumped her fist, looking up at the roaring crowd. Jogging to the center of the court, she shook Sonia and the umpire's hands. Before turning back to the cheering crowd and waving.

The Sports Central anchor walked onto the rubber and waved to Mac. Anna smiled as she held the mic to her own mouth. "Congratulations Mackenzie, you've just made it to the U.S. Open Final. How are you feeling?"

Mac shook her head. "Unbelievable. This crowd is unreal."

"What do you think of your two potential opponents for tomorrow's Final?" Anna

looked up to the crowd as they cheered their excitement.

Mac put her hands on her hips, letting the moment wash over her. She'd just guaranteed herself a \$1.5 million payout. Even if she fumbled the bag the following morning, Mac was more or less set for life. The sponsorship deals that would come from this run would secure her future.

Nodding, Mac smirked. "I'd be happy to face either of them."

The anchor gave Mac a pat on the back. "We're excited to watch. Good luck!" Anna left the court and Mac ran back to her bag. She took a few of the match balls and signed them, the felt tip of the marker snagging against the ball's.

She grabbed her racket from her bag and hit a few balls into the stands. Spotting a little girl in the nosebleeds, Mac pointed her out and aimed the last ball right at her. The girl's mom helped her catch it.

Mac waved up to her and took in the last chants of the crowd before disappearing into the tunnel. All she could do now was watch Taylor's match and hope they didn't end up facing off.

When she entered the locker room, it was mostly silent. In one aisle, Taylor's opponent was putting on her sneakers. Mac clenched her jaw when they made eye contact. The match starts in the locker room.

Turning down her aisle, Mac stopped in her tracks. Standing in the center, Taylor stretched her neck. But she was startled to meet Mac's brown eyes. Neither of them could find the words.

Wrinkling her nose, Mac headed to her bag. She cleared her throat as she tossed her things into the racket bag.

“Well played.” Taylor mumbled.

Mac nodded. Without looking at her, Mac could feel the tension between them. All she wanted to do was turn around and pull Taylor into a deep embrace – to smell her sweet hair and let it all wash away. But now wasn’t the time.

Instead, Mac zipped up her bag. “Thanks. Good luck.” Walking away, Mac heard Taylor open her mouth to say more. But Mac raised her hand. “Don’t. I don’t want you to risk a leak.”

She didn’t wait for a response, instead leaving the locker rooms.

34

Taylor

Taylor bounced on the balls of her feet. What the fuck did that mean? Did Kim let something slip to the press?

She stood in the player tunnel, awaiting her entrance to the semifinal’s match. Her mind was cluttered with Mac’s words. Taking a deep breath, she tried to push it away. There would be time for all of that later.

Right now, she needed to go out there and kick her opponent’s ass.

“Mackenzie Bennett.” The announcer called out over the intercom.

Nodding, Taylor walked herself onto the court. Kim hadn’t bothered to send her off this time. Keeping her face neutral, Taylor waved to the crowd. They cheered but there was something... obligatory about it. Their usual excitement had already been assigned to Mackenzie.

Taylor licked her lips, annoyance taking over her.

She took her bench and got into position.

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The match flew by with little fanfare. Akira was tired, mostly likely from the insanely difficult jet lag and two weeks of tough matches. But her forehand was killer, still making Taylor fight for her place in the finals.

Under the glaring August sun, Taylor served the final point. She gave it everything she had, launching it at 125 miles per hour.

Akira stretched her arms out as far as she could but just missed the bounce.

“Game, Miss Young.” The umpire called out.

Taylor’s face was taken over by a beaming smile, waving her racket to the crowd. But the celebration faded quickly, her smile dropping. Now I have to face Mac. In the U.S. Open final.

The thought repeated in her mind as she shook hands and packed her bag.

Only the anchor’s words shook her out of it. Anna smiled. “So, Taylor, you’ve done it again. This is your third Final of the Grand Slam season. How are you feeling?”

Taylor swallowed the lump in her throat. “Good. The competition is steep but who doesn’t love a good match?”

Anna nodded, her face turning more serious as the crowd died down. “You’ll be facing Mackenzie Bennett tomorrow. We’re told that the two of you were quite close at summer camp when you were kids. Is that true?”

Trying not to stammer, Taylor shrugged. “We went to camp together for some time.”

“A source told us that the two of you had a nasty falling out, how do you see that playing out on the court?” Anna held the mic in Taylor’s face.

Taylor looked up to the stands, scanning for Kim. Her eyes landed on her mom, in her familiar Gucci sunglasses. That fucking bitch. She leaked it. Clenching her jaw, Taylor looked at her feet. In the stands, Kim lowered her glasses enough for Taylor to see her eyes.

She knew exactly what Kim wanted her to say.

Steeling herself, Taylor exhaled. “I think Mackenzie is an incredible player. We faced off earlier this season and I’m excited to see how this one plays out. Nothing but the best for her and her team.”

Anna raised her eyebrows. She quickly disguised her surprise with a smile. “We are all looking forward to tomorrow at noon, to watch these two Americans duke it out on the courts.”

Taylor shook Anna’s hand and headed back to her bag. She signed her game balls and hit them into the audience. It took all of her self control to finish out the game with dignity. All she wanted to do was run into the stands and give Kim a piece of her mind.

Clenching her fists, Taylor slung her bag over her shoulder and walked off the court. It wasn’t until she got to the locker room that she let her rage out.

She checked each aisle, ensuring that it was empty. Once she knew it was, Taylor threw her bag on the ground and released a blood-curdling scream. “Fucking bitch!”

Hours later, Taylor stood in her hotel room and tossed her tennis ball at the wall.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

She couldn't think straight. All she could picture was Mac, disappointed that her heartbreak could be public knowledge.

A ding from Taylor's phone stopped her methodical unraveling. It was a text from the hotel manager, Simone.

Food coming up.

Taylor licked her lips and typed out a quick "thank you." While she waited for a knock at her hotel door, Taylor twirled the felt ball in her hands. A part of her couldn't believe that Kim was stoking the fire. I thought she wanted all of this to be quiet.

But Taylor laughed to herself. She wants good viewer ratings more.

The knock at the door stopped her from spiraling any harder. Taylor knew she needed to calm down. The Final was just over twelve hours away and she needed to recenter herself before she walked onto the court at Arthur Ashe.

She swung open the door, tilting her head at the familiar face. "Dad?"

In his hands, a paper bag full of fast food was presented to her. "Delivery."

Taylor facepalmed. "No one is supposed to know about this."

Gerald pushed past his daughter and into the room. "I hope you know I'm stealing some fries."

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Other than her affair with Mac, Taylor's Finals match ritual was potentially her most shameful secret. After months of watching every single morsel of food that entered her body, Taylor could never stop herself from a bag of juicy hamburgers the night before the Championship game.

Taylor shut the door and followed him to the couch.

As Gerald tossed the bag on the glass coffee table, Taylor shook her head. "How did you find out?"

"Oh sweetie, I've always known. Your mom hates the accounting part of this, but I check every credit card statement." Gerald laughed, flopping onto the couch.

Taylor sat down next to him, peeling open the warm bag. There was no point hiding it now. She pulled out each item and laid it out on the table. All in all, there were four burgers, a large fry, some chicken nuggets, and one large soda.

The massive, 72 inch TV was playing the Sports Central. Gerald watched it for a second. Two pictures of Mac and Taylor popped onto the screen. Taylor raised an eyebrow at the new promo photo of Mac. From the outfit, Taylor could tell it was from the photoshoot she had walked in on last week.

Mac looked undeniably gorgeous, a light sweat glistening over her bulging muscles. It made Taylor's stomach flip.

Grabbing a fry, Gerald shrugged. "You make a beautiful couple."

Taylor punched his arm. “Cut it out.”

Gerald shrugged. “Look, my job is to tell you the truth. And that’s the truth. You’d have stunning kids.”

Glaring at him, Taylor scoffed. “You know that’s not... like... possible? Right?”

“Duh.” Gerald stole the burger from Taylor’s hands. “My coach would have beaten my ass if he found me with stuff like this.”

Taylor smirked. “So would mine.”

The two of them could picture Kim’s beet-red face as she yelled at not just Taylor, but Gerald too. After a moment of laughter passed, the two sat in silence.

Gerald sat up. “I hate to break the peace here, but I have to ask. What happened there?”

Shoving a burger into her mouth, Taylor rolled her eyes. “I suck, that’s what happened.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me what really happened.” Gerald wiped his hands on a napkin, turning to face his daughter.

Taylor’s head dropped. “I have loved Mackenzie since the day I met her, and Mom will never let me be with her. And I’m scared she’s right. What if it does ruin my career?”

Gerald sighed. “Yeah. It could.” He paused. “But what if it doesn’t?”

She felt her heart drop into her stomach. It was the question no one – herself included

– had bothered to ask. She had been afraid to indulge that thought at all.

“Dad, be serious.”

Gerald waved her off. “I am being serious. Your mom and I... we played in this league at a very different time. People did get blackballed for being queer back then. Someone like Barbara McConnell was a real once in a blue moon occurrence. And Kim... she was part of it.”

Taylor eyed her dad. Was he being serious?

“I know she regrets it now.” Gerald sighed. “But I think she’s worried someone will do to you what she did to Barbara.”

Taylor’s gaze darted back to the TV, clips of Mackenzie training flashed across the screen.

Gerald pointed to it. “Besides, everyone knows Mac’s a lesbian and no one has a problem with it.”

“But she’s not the ‘Princess of Tennis’”. It’s different for me.” Taylor shoves a handful of fries into her mouth, washing it down with the cool dark soda.

Patting her back, Gerald nodded. “You’re not wrong there. But maybe you could make it easier for the next girl like you.” He wiped his hands together and stood from the couch, releasing an obnoxiously loud dad groan. “It’s just a thought. I love you and I’m begging you to drink some water before bed so you don’t lose tomorrow.”

Taylor stood and gave her father a hug. “Thanks, Dad.” She walked him to the door, her bare feet padding across the tile floors.

“Oh,” Gerald spun around before closing the door behind himself. “Don’t worry about Kim. I’ll handle her, okay? It shouldn’t be your job to appease her fantasies.”

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Nodding, Taylor waved goodbye as the door shut. It was easier said than done. But maybe now was the best time to find out.

The sun was beating down on New York City the next morning. Even in the car to the Billie Jean King Center, Taylor could feel the heat radiating in. It wasn't going to let up anytime soon.

When the SUV pulled up to the Center, the driver came around the side and opened Taylor's door.

"Thanks." Taylor muttered over the camera flashes of the paparazzi waiting outside. She gripped her racket bag in her hands, her knuckles turning white. From the moment her eyes had opened that morning, Taylor was a ball of nerves. Facing off against Mac wasn't going to be fun. One way or another, one of them would come off that court having lost the U.S. Open.

A cacophony of people called out her name, hoping to ask a question before the big match. But Taylor simply waved to them and headed into the player entrance. Inside, an entourage of people stood to say hello.

She greeted each of them – some of them organizers, others sponsors. When she was finished, Kim stood in the hallway leading to the locker rooms.

"Hi." Taylor nodded, clenching her jaw.

Kim sighed. "Get changed, meet me in the training room. Barbara and Mackenzie are already here."

With about an hour before the match, Taylor had enough time to get dressed, warm-up for thirty minutes, and walk onto the court. Already in a bad mood, Taylor ignored Kim and walked to the locker room.

Taylor's heart pounded at the thought of seeing Mac. Will we speak? Should I ignore her? I can't deal with any of this until after the match.

She arrived before the locker room door. Swallowing her nerves, Taylor pushed the door open. Immediately, she heard Mac rifling through her bag.

It felt like a cruel trick that the organizers of the tournament had put their lockers in the same aisle, forcing them to be within a few feet of each other during the prep for their final match.

Taylor clenched her jaw and walked to her locker. Mac's head whipped up when she turned. Not a single word was uttered for the first few minutes. But after a while, Taylor's leg shook with anxiety.

She turned to face Mac, leaning against her locker.

Noticing the silence, Mac turned around and furrowed her brow. "What?"

Taylor bit her lip. "Maybe I should like... start the match here or whatever. But honestly, you're not just any other opponent."

"Taylor, really this isn't..." Mac shook her head.

Taylor nodded. "It is necessary, actually. I owe you an apology and I won't walk onto that court without saying it."

Rolling her eyes, Mac tossed her bag on the ground. "Go ahead."

“I’m sorry. I never should have reopened this wound for either of us. I knew you still had feelings for me and that I still had them for you. I’m sorry for the way I dropped you when we were teenagers. It was cruel and unfair to you.” Taylor’s lips twitched as her eyes grew pink. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Mac stared at her for a long minute, trying to figure out what was going on. “Are you going to throw this match?”

Taylor scoffed. “Can’t I just apologize with no ulterior motive?”

Mac shook her head. “Not historically.”

Taylor grabbed her bag and finished packing it. “No, I’m not going to throw this match. Kim would kill me. And it wouldn’t be as fun.”

Stepping closer to the center of the bench, Mac nodded. “Good. Because I want to kick your ass fair and square.”

With a laugh, Mac gripped her bag and headed for the door. But she stopped in her tracks and looked back at Taylor. “By the way, I forgive you. I did a long time ago. And my offer still stands.”

Before Taylor could find a response, Mac pushed open the locker room door and disappeared into the hallway.

Like the weight of a thousand suns was lifted off her chest, Taylor gulped in air. She shook her head and tried to find herself. The next thirty minutes of warm up made Taylor’s mind clear up. With each inhale, she felt her body aligning.

By the time she was standing in the dark tunnel leading to the court at the center of Arthur Ashe Stadium, a smile was playing on her cheeks.

Kim walked up beside her, “Ready?”

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Taylor nodded, staring ahead. The announcer called Mac to the court. From the tunnel, Taylor watched Mac walk in, applause becoming the soundtrack to her entrance. A smile took over her cheeks, a light laugh rising from her chest.

“How could you possibly be laughing?” Kim sneered as she eyed her daughter.

Taylor shrugged. “It’s just never been that serious has it?”

Kim scoffed. “It’s always been that serious. This is the most important match of your life.”

Nodding, Taylor sighed. “You might be right about that.” She turned toward her mom. “But not for the reason you think.”

“What does that mean?” Kim met her daughter’s gaze, the same blue eyes staring back at her.

Taylor’s eyes softened. “Mom, I’m in love with Mackenzie. And I can’t promise that you’ll be happy with what I do about that.”

Kim shook her head. “Taylor Ann, what are you talking about?”

“Miss Taylor Young.” The announcer’s voice rang out in the stadium, bouncing off the walls of the player entrance.

“Gotta go.” Taylor patted her mom’s shoulder and started walking out, she turned around. “And I think we should talk about your role as my coach.” Without waiting

for Kim's reaction, Taylor floated to the court. Every step felt like walking on a cloud.

Sitting on her bench, waiting for Taylor, Mac turned in her seat to look at her opponent.

Taylor winked at Mac as she took her seat.

35

Mac

The fuck is that about? Mac put her cap into place as the umpire summoned the two players to the net.

"As the top seed, Miss Young will call the coin."

Mac and Taylor nodded.

Taylor smiled. "I'll take heads please."

The umpire flipped the coin, it landed on tails. "First serve will go to Miss Bennett." The umpire leaned back into her chair.

Taylor reached out her hand. "Good luck, Macky."

Mac's forehead wrinkled at the nickname. "You too, Tay."

What kind of strategy is this? Mac walked to the baseline, trying to wipe the wink from her mind. A part of her wondered if Taylor was trying to soften her for the game, to slow her down.

But nothing was going to get in Mackenzie's way. This match was too important.

The ballgirl behind Mac's baseline nodded and bounced three balls to her. Between each bounce, she would raise the ball, showing it to Mac.

Once Mac had all three on her racket, she examined each of them. They were fresh from their boxes, nearly straight from the factory. Mac tossed one back to the edge of the arena. Selecting her first serve ball, Mac clenched her jaw and prepared to start the match.

The audience was rowdy, chattering even as she selected her balls.

"Quiet, please." The umpire urged as Mac began to twirl her racket.

Bouncing the ball against the rubber, Mac looked up at Taylor. Her icy blue eyes were impossible to miss, even across the nearly 80 foot court. Taylor nodded slightly, letting Mac know she was ready to begin with a twirl of her own racket.

Is she fucking smiling? Mac shook her head.

Bending her knees, Mac allowed air into her lungs before pushing off the rubber and leapt into the air. In one fluid motion, the ball flew into the air and was met by Mac's racket in her other hand.

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A crack resounded through Arthur Ashe Stadium, signaling the match's official start.

Mac knew her placement was perfect. Her eyes darted to the speedometer behind Taylor. Smiling to herself, Mac was thrilled to see a whooping 140 miles per hour serve. It was a great way to start off the match.

Now Taylor knows, I'm not playing around.

But with a swiftness Mac hadn't seen from her in over a decade, Taylor met the ball and smacked it back across the court with a light grunt.

Mac clenched her jaw as the ball came hurtling back toward her. Taylor managed to keep most of the ball's speed on the return.

Pushing off her knees, Mac raced across the court to hit the ball. She was lighter this time around. The week prior to the match, Babs redirected Mac's training to help her drop some extra weight. Taylor was small, she could run around the court easily.

She gripped her racket, like it was all that stood between her and annihilation. She lowered it just below her hip. Her hands guided the racket to the ball, meeting it just as the yellow felt reached the peak of its arch.

Growling, Mac followed through the shot with all her force. The racket could only handle so much of the reverberation from the hit.

A light tingle ran up Mac's arms to her elbow. But she had placed the ball well. It landed in no man's land, making it difficult for Taylor to even make it to the ball. She

tried anyway, lightly hitting it into the net.

The crowd roared at Mac's first point. Knowing the crowd was on her side brought Mac a strange amount of confidence. Over the course of one season, they had shifted from Taylor to Mac. Of course, part of Mac felt bad that Taylor would feel iced out.

Mac wrinkled her nose, wiping the first drops of sweat from her face as she turned back toward her baseline.

"Fifteen, love." The umpire announced.

Mac felt like she could hear the Sports Central commentators between points.

"Vicious first point in this highly anticipated match." One pundit remarked.

Another anchor nodded. "We're really witnessing a once in a lifetime showdown. These two not only have the skill, they have history. And we all want to watch this drama play out."

The first set was a relentless war. Neither Mac nor Taylor would cede any ground. After 12 games, the first set was tied 6 -6.

Mac looked at the scoreboard. 8 - 9, Taylor's advantage. It was too important a point for Mac to back off. All bets pointed to a third set for this matchup. But Mac wasn't willing to give up one of her three sets.

They were already over an hour into the match.

Trying to catch her breath, Mac bounced a ball on the rubber court. Taylor's cheeky smile had faded, the reality of their game setting in from both of them. The sun beat down on them the entire time, sweat collecting on their clothes.

Mac looked down at the ground and then to Taylor who was in position. If her smile hadn't faded, Mac would have assumed she was unaffected by the last hour of gameplay. But she was obviously tired.

Come on, Mac. Get the point. Shaking her head, Mac served the ball as hard as she could. But as it soared over the net, it landed just outside the service box.

"Out." The umpire called.

Mac's head dropped, taking a new ball from the ball girl. It would have to be slower – she couldn't risk the ball falling out of line and losing the first set on an out ball.

Pushing air out of her mouth, Mac looked at her racket. She launched another serve, this time with less force.

It landed in the service box. But without serious speed, it was all too easy for Taylor to return. She sent Mac running to the opposite side of the court, a light moan escaping her lungs as her racket made contact.

Mac blinked away the thoughts that came with the familiar noise. She refocused on the ball and ran to meet it. But she just missed it.

"Set, Miss Young." The umpire called. The crowd clapped lightly, a little disappointed to not see their underdog take the first set.

Taylor pumped her fist as she walked to her bench. A ball boy handed her a towel as she sat down.

Mac did the same, her head drooping as she walked.

Now she had no choice, she had to win the next set or her chances at winning the

U.S. Open would disappear.

36

Taylor

Taylor's head leaned back,tilting toward the sky as she caught her breath. She didn't want Mac to know how tired she was but Mac had played harder than she expected.

Every chance Taylor had, she would force Mac into a full on sprint. But unlike the last time they played, Mac crossed the court with ease.I'm going to have to reevaluate on the second set.

Taylor took a drink of water, swishing it around in her mouth as she thought. She let herself take a peek at Mac through the umpire's stand. Mac leaned forward, resting her head in her hands. A flash of an 18 year old Mac came to Taylor's mind. Her frustration looked exactly as it had all those years ago. Taylor's heart ached in her chest.

"Players, ready." The umpire nodded.

As Taylor walked back to the court, she shook off her sympathy. It wasn't the time for that. She had to win, even if it meant destroying Mac's game.

At the baseline, Taylor examined her three tennis balls. She was quick in selecting her favorite for the first serve. Taylor knew that Mac would likely be able to return every serve she sent over. Her serve was at least 5 miles per hour slower than Mac's.

Pursing her lips, Taylor inhaled and lifted her body into the air. She released a primal

“ha” as she brought her racket down on the ball. It landed in the box but Mac sent it back to her easily, sending the ball to the back corner of Taylor’s court.

Taylor’s heart pounded as she raced to reach it. She was more exhausted than she thought, her body feeling heavier by the second. But she hit the ball back to Mac.

“Out.” The umpire called.

She could have sworn it was in. Opening her mouth, she debated challenging it. But she shook it off. With only three for the entire match, Taylor might need them in the tiebreaker. One point at the start of the set wasn’t worth it.

With each serve, Taylor tried to conceal her exhaustion. But it was getting progressively more difficult to hide as her serve speeds steadily decreased.

Noticing, Mac used her energy to send Taylor from one end of the court to the other. She was able to stay at the center of her baseline. Every point was more competitive than the last, each one becoming more valuable than the previous.

Taylor shook her head, her blonde hair soaked in sweat. Thank god I played at McEnroe. I wouldn’t have been ready for this play style.

In the back of her mind, Taylor knew exactly what the pundits were saying.

“This is a war between a gladiator and a ballerina.” One pundit joked.

Another shrugged. “The winner isn’t as obvious as it sounds. Young is only ceding points she knows she can afford. Meanwhile, Bennett is putting all of her force into hitting points that Taylor can’t reach.”

An anchor shook her head. “I can’t imagine the level of exhaustion these two must be

feeling as we approach what could be the end of the second set.”

Mac smashed the second set.

Standing at her baseline, Taylor rubbed her chin. The score sat at 4 - 5, 40 - 15. If she lost this point, they would be heading to a tiebreaker. And if she managed to pull it out, she'd have to win the next four points to walk away with this game. Then it would be a race to 7 games.

Taylor licked her lips, preparing to serve. She took a deep breath. I've won this before. I can do it again. Mackenzie doesn't have the stamina.

Nodding to herself, Taylor leapt into the air. She squeezed her core tightly as she sent the ball over the net.

Mac grunted as she sent it back. The sound made Taylor's hair stand up. Her mind flooded with the images of the two of them wrapped up in the sheets together. Even now, it was all Taylor wanted.

The final point of the set felt neverending, each of them smashing the ball with all the force they had.

But when Taylor hit it as hard as she could, Mac surprised her. Taylor ran to the corner of the court she assumed Mac would aim the ball. Instead, Mac lightly tapped the ball over the net and into the front service boxes.

“Shit.” Taylor murmured as she hustled to the ball. But it was too late.

“Set, Miss Bennett.” The umpire pointed in Mac's direction.

Taylor's head dropped as she came back to the center bench. She collected her things,

preparing to swap sides with Mac. Wiping her face with the towel, Taylor tried to calm her breathing. Her inhales were ragged.

The umpire motioned for them to swap benches before the new set began.

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Taylor tried to avoid Mac's stunning brown eyes. But as their bodies moved past each other, she couldn't stop herself from looking up to meet them.

There was a softness in Mac's gaze, something that said you're going to be okay. And in that moment, Taylor felt truly seen.

Taking her seat, Taylor drank more water. They would both be desperate to win this set. A \$3 million prize waited on the other end of the match along with the adoration of this audience.

"Players, ready." The umpire nodded to both of them.

Grabbing a fresh racket from her bag, Taylor stood and nodded to Mac.

Mac jogged to the net before heading to her side. "Tay."

Taylor stopped in her tracks, her forehead wrinkling.

"Can we have some fun... like we used to?" Mac's eyes lit up at the thought, a smile playing at her cheeks.

It was infectious. And who was Taylor to say no?

Nodding, Taylor shrugged. "If you can handle it, Macky."

Mac

A smile took over Mac's face as she turned her back to Taylor and walked back to her baseline.

Tied up and entering the third set, Taylor and Mac would have to fight for their victories. To walk away with the Championship, Mac would need to subvert all of Taylor's expectations of her gameplay. Both of them were more familiar with each other's style than they had been in the last ten years.

Mac licked her teeth as she chose her first serve ball. It was clear to Mac that Taylor's time at the McEnroe center had been good for her game. She was fighting harder than she had in a long time. Her old school tennis had been replaced with Mac's more familiar guerrilla still play.

Bouncing the ball against the rubber, Mac knew this meant she'd have to find a way to surprise Taylor.

Not wanting to waste any time, Mac raised her arm and the felt ball in sync. Letting a primal scream escape her lungs, Mac soared the ball over the net. It made a slight whistle as it passed over the net, landing in the service box.

Whimpering, Taylor smacked the ball back.

Mac beamed with excitement as the game zipped off to a fiery start. With each hit, the duo spoke to each other through forehands and tennis grunts. Every issue they had with each other, unraveling on the court in front of them.

After Mac sent a shot straight to Taylor, she rushed up to the net. Taylor's forehead wrinkled with confusion as she watched Mac make an unorthodox move. Taylor hit the ball back with as much fervor as she could. But as soon as the ball crossed the net,

Mac hit it back from the service box.

Mac kept her racket up near her face as she faced a fast volley with Taylor.

With no other choice, Taylor closed the distance between them and met Mac at the net. There, the ball bounced off their rackets in rapid succession. At this distance, the ball didn't bounce on the court. Instead, it simply flew over the net from one racket to the next.

In the zone, Mac's brain no longer thought of strategy. Her body was in complete control, moving wherever the ball went. With each volley, Mac slowly forced Taylor to the edge of her arm's range.

Taylor lobbed the ball over the net, desperate to keep it on Mac's side. But Mac smirked at the slow moving felt. With all the force she could muster, Mac launched the ball to the back corner of the court. It zipped over Taylor's head and landed just inside the lines.

"Fifteen, love."

Mac pumped her fist. "Let's go!" Some spectators rose from their seats as the tension released. Looking into the stands, Mac nodded to Piper and Babs who cheered her on.

Taylor laughed, shaking her head as she walked back to her baseline.

Winking at Taylor, Mac shrugged. Now she knew just how fun this was going to be.

With each serve and volley, Mac let go of the technical. She embraced the chaos of their match, of the energy that flew between them. Unable to touch each other, their rackets expressed everything they couldn't – the lust, the pain, the love.

It was all right there, written in the skid marks on the rubber courts of Arthur Ashe.

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Mac looked down at the court, a bead of sweat dripping off the brim of her cap and onto the court. The next time she looked down, the same droplet had evaporated.

As the set wore on, Taylor's movements grew heavy. Mac could tell the weight of a potential loss was holding her down.

Mac bit her lip as she smacked the ball back across the court. The last thing she wanted was for Taylor to have to endure any more of Kim's training. But she couldn't give this opportunity up. Not even for Taylor.

Before their very eyes, the second set score landed at 5 - 6. Their current game held strong at 40 - 40 with Mac's advantage. If she scored this point, the Championship would be hers.

"Match Point." The umpire called out as Mac bounced the ball.

One more serve. Mac's chest rose and fell as she tried to steady her shaking arms. It was a wonder her hands hadn't dropped the racket over three hours into their merciless match. But something kept her fingers clasped to the rubber wrapped around the racket's handle.

Mac lifted her head, meeting Taylor's gaze. From across the court, Mac knew that Taylor had no intention of handing this point over. Mac felt like she could read Taylor's mind: If you want this Championship, you're going to pry it from my cold dead hands.

Mac laughed as she got into her serve position. Nodding to Taylor, Mac bent her

knees and lifted her arms. She tossed the ball up, letting the felt float into the air. Leaping into the air, Mac let her racket beat down on the tennis ball.

Smack.

Like a choreographed dance, the duo zipped across the court. The audience's heads swiveled from side to side as the ball flew back and forth.

Once they had hit a steady rhythm, Mac slowed herself down. She'd watched hours of Taylor's old training partner. Mimicking Nikki's movements, Mac lulled Taylor into a familiar easy pattern.

Taylor hadn't even noticed she had slowed down by the time Mac had her right where she wanted her. Mac let the ball float across the net to Taylor, right at center court.

It wasn't until Taylor hit the ball back, letting it graze over the net, that she realized what was happening.

Mac watched her mutter, "shit," under her breath. A light smile played at Mac's lips as the ball came back to her. But this time, Mac gripped her racket as firmly as she could. She lowered it below her hip, twisting her back into position. Just as the ball hit the ground and bounced toward her, Mac swung her racket up toward the ball.

Follow through. Mac reminded herself as she let her arms complete the swing. Her eyes were peeled on the back left corner where Taylor was already scrambling to reach. But her muscles had tensed up from the lighter play, too sore to hit her full speed.

The ball spun through the air, diving toward the ground where the two lines met. Taylor was too late and the ball bounced out of her range.

Mac skidded to a halt as she waited for the refs call. The stadium fell silent. All that remained was the thud, thud, thud of Mac's racing heart beat.

"Match, Mackenzie Bennett."

The crowd erupted as Mac's jaw dropped. She clasped her hand to her mouth, keeling over as she listened to the thunderous applause. Looking up, Mac watched Taylor's head drop for a moment. But when she lifted her head to meet Mac's gaze, her face was lit up by a smile.

Mac stood tall, letting the moment wash over her. But all she wanted to do was look back at Taylor's stunning face. When she did, the pair just stared as they caught their breath. Taylor's leg shook for a moment before she strode across the court.

But something about the way she moved told Mac not to move. In one fluid motion, Taylor hopped the net. The audience died down for a moment as they tried to understand what Taylor could possibly be doing.

In the stands, Kim stood from her seat.

Taylor jogged to Mac, laughing as she got closer.

Mac's forehead wrinkled. But before she could ask what in the hell Taylor was up to, Taylor wrapped her arms around Mac.

Taylor's chest heaved as a sob hit her. "You fucking did it, Mackenzie."

Mac felt her breath hitch in her throat. She let her sore arms raise and hold Taylor back, pulling her body closer.

Pulling away, Taylor placed her hands on Mac's face. "I love you."

“I lo...”

Before Mac could get the words out, Taylor pulled Mac’s lips into hers. The audience was stunned into silence. Mac brought her hands to Taylor’s neck and kissed her harder.

The world fell away. As the two of them stood on the court and held each other. When their lips pulled apart, Mac rested her forehead on Taylor’s as the crowd burst into applause. Hoots and hollers interspersed the screams of joy.

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“What about your mom?” Mac giggled.

Taylor shook her head. “She already had her chance.”

Pulling apart, Mac grabbed Taylor’s hand and raised their intertwined hands to the crowd.

But Taylor let her fingers slip free, beaming with pride. Instead, she held out her arms toward Mac, directing all of this glory to her.

“You earned it. Soak it in.” Taylor winked as she watched tears well in Mac’s eyes.

Mac looked around the audience. Piper’s hands clasped her chest. When her eyes met her daughter’s, she blew a kiss down to her. Babs winked as she clapped for Mac.

Mac turned to look back at Taylor. It was a long shot that Taylor would ever walk back into Mackenzie’s life. But it was one shot Mac would take every damn time.